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Employment mobility or turnover? An analysis of child welfare and protection employee retention

Abstract (150-200 words long)

This article challenges the commonly held assumption that there is a high level of occupational turnover of social workers in all child protection and welfare agencies. By analysing occupational mobility patterns (turnover, retention and attrition) in five child protection social work teams, the article demonstrates how occupational mobility is a complex phenomenon and needs to be understood within wider shifts in employment patterns and the gendering of professions. In this paper we argue that it is important to distinguish between employee turnover and employee mobility, and that an examination of the posts taken up after leaving, at least in Ireland, may provide a different perspective on the narrative of high turnover of workers in this sector. Within the five teams, it is estimated that there was a turnover rate of 8 percent in 2006 and 11 percent in 2010, with 72 percent of child protection workers in post at the end of 2005 being retained and still in post at the end of 2010. While this should not lead to complacency, or a failure to recognise and respond to the stressful nature of child protection, it does raise questions for employers about how they might plan for occupational mobility within a stable workforce made up of largely women, aged between 25 and 35, frequently newly-qualified, who are often the main carers for children and adults outside the workplace.

Keywords
Job retention, turnover, child protection and welfare, social workers, social work, gender and employment, Ireland

1. Introduction

In the last decade, research has increasingly identified high workforce turnover as a significant issue for child welfare and protection agencies in a number of countries (Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez & Schwab, 2010; Healy, Meagher & Cullin, 2009; Healy & Oltedal, 2010; Lee, Forster & Rehner, 2011). The stability of a workforce in any social service agency is important, but perhaps even more so in child welfare and protection agencies, where workforce instability has been linked directly to failures to protect children and increased stress on social workers (Gomez *et al*., 2010; Healy *et al*., 2009). A search of peer-reviewed journal articles in the English language across leading academic journal databases (using the following broad keywords: *child welfare, child protection, retention,* and *turnover*) identified 85 eligible studies published between January 2001 and December 2011. The vast majority of these studies were undertaken in counties or states in North America, with a few published original studies outside of the USA (see, for example, Burns, 2011; Tham, 2007). The American studies include a broad range of topics including student retention once in the field (Barbee *et al*., 2009), longitudinal studies of worker retention (Dickinson & Painter, 2009), and larger-scale studies examining the issue across 17 US states (Cyphers *et al*., 2005). A diverse range of methodological approaches were deployed in these studies, which makes it difficult to compare the findings. Literature is often cited by researchers without acknowledgement of specific methodological, contextual and definitional nuances in data collection and analysis. This can lead to a misinterpretation of research findings. For example, a number of articles cited the National Council on Crime and Delinquency study (2006), which identified a maximum turnover rate for one team of 27.3 percent; however, it was not always highlighted that the lowest turnover rate for a team was 6.2 percent and the collective median turnover rate for teams was 12.85 percent.

It is also difficult to interpret the turnover figure in some studies without greater definition of what is meant by turnover in these studies, and what types of staff mobility are counted in the calculation - an issue previously highlighted in a meta-analysis of this literature over a decade ago (Mor Barak, Nissly & Levin, 2001). In the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) the Minister for Health and Children and a senior Health Service Executive manager (RTÉ, 2006, 2008) claimed that turnover of child welfare and protection workers was high and the retention rate was low.

However, on closer examination, while the turnover may have been high, this reflected a period of rapid expansion in social work posts, so that social workers were moving between different types of child welfare and protection posts, or moving between child protection posts in other parts of the country to move closer to family or to take up a promotion. As such the attrition rate – the percentage of people who leave the profession - remained low as the majority of social workers were staying within the profession and often within the same agency (Burns, 2009; Guerin, Devitt & Redmond, 2010; National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006).

In the United Kingdom (UK), inaccurate assumptions have been made about changing patterns of recruitment and retention and the comparative size of the 'retention problem'. For example, in *Building a Safe and Confident Future: Implementing the Recommendations of the Social Work Task Force* (HM Government, 2010, p. 23) it is stated: 'Local authorities find social workers with children and families their most difficult recruitment and retention challenge'. However, an analysis of the data on retention for social workers with children and families in England (Cauvain, 2010; Children's Workforce Development Council, 2008; Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2006) shows that turnover has fallen from a rate of 15.3 percent in 2000 to 9.6 percent in 2006 (most recent available data), where a rate of 10 percent or under is considered exceptionally low (Phillips & O'Connell, 2003).

This is not to say that there are many teams in Ireland, the UK, and elsewhere with both high turnover and low retention rates; rather we are suggesting that an automatic link should not be assumed. Furthermore, published findings on turnover and retention from, for example the United States (Ellet, Ellis, Westbrook & Dews, 2006; National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2006; United States General Accounting Office, 2003) and Australia (Department of Child Safety, 2007; Gibbs & Keating, 1999), cannot be compared to turnover and retention elsewhere because, as we demonstrate in this article, turnover and retention are highly dependant on national and regional factors. In addition, the absence of research into employment where turnover is low and retention is high may skew our understanding of the overall picture of job mobility/immobility. In the absence of region-specific and team-specific data on turnover and retention, it is possible that policy makers (as in the

above Irish example) often assume that turnover is high and retention is low across all child welfare and protection teams.

It is in this context that the study presented here was undertaken to examine the issue of workforce turnover and retention in child welfare and protection in a particular region of Ireland in order to identify the factors impacting on the retention of social workers. Our research analyses the turnover and employee mobility rates of child protection and welfare social workers, specifically in one Health Service Executive (HSE) area in Ireland in two periods: March 2005 to December 2006 and January 2010 to December 2010. The analysis of these data provides important insights into the employment mobility of child welfare and protection workers and provides a possible framework for comparative research. We argue that it is important to distinguish between employee turnover and employee mobility, and that an examination of posts taken up after leaving, at least in Ireland, may provide a more comprehensive perspective on the narrative of high turnover of workers in this sector. The next section sets the context for child welfare and protection in Ireland, before moving on to a discussion and analysis of our study findings.

2. Child welfare and protection social work in Ireland

The Republic of Ireland has a population of 4.59 million spread across 26 counties, of which just over 1 million of the population are children (Central Statistics Office, 2012). In 2011, 32 Local Health Offices employed approximately 860 child welfare and protection social workers[1] with responsibility for 6,208 children in the care of the State, the majority of whom were in foster care (Clarke, 2011). Up-to-date data is not publically available on the gender of child welfare and protection social workers; however, in 2005, it was estimated that 83 percent of social workers in Ireland were

[1] This is an approximate number as the Health Service Executive was unable to provide the authors with the number of social workers working in child welfare and protection in Ireland. The estimate of 860 social workers is based on the 700 social workers working in the sector identified in the 2005 workforce study, minus 110 for the posts left vacant in 2006-2007, plus the 270 new posts created as part of the Ryan Report implementation plan. The recently published *Review of Adequacy for HSE Children and Families Services 2010* (Health Service Executive, 2012, p. 12) noted: "The cost coding inherited from the former Health Boards is complex, with staff being categorised in different ways in different parts of the country, so HSE Children and Families was unable to obtain routinely and easily figures on its workforce, either as a total figure or broken down into staff types".

female (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006). In 2010 (latest available figures), social workers worked on 29,277 new child welfare and protection reports (referrals) (Health Service Executive, 2012). On average, social workers carried a caseload of 18 families each although this varied, with social workers in one area being allocated up to 40 families per social worker (Health Service Executive, 2009; PA Consulting, 2009). However, these caseload figures should be treated with caution as there are known issues with the accuracy of these data due a lack of standardisation regarding definitions and data-collection methodologies, and poor IT infrastructural support (Burns & MacCarthy, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2011). To provide some comparisons, in 2006-7, Norway and the State of Queensland, Australia, had similar population sizes to Ireland in 2011 with similar numbers of child protection referrals and children in care. However, Norway had 3,040 staff in 'front-line' child welfare services and an additional 3,333 workers in 26 regional 'response and consultation teams'. In Queensland, approximately 1,585 workers were employed in its child protection and family support services (Healy & Oltedal, 2010, p. 266). Although the roles of social workers may vary between the three countries, it is clear that Ireland has relatively few child protection workers per head of population and in relation to the total number of children in care. On this basis, it might be argued that social workers in Ireland – at least in the area of workforce strength - have a potentially more demanding job than in other countries.

While the Irish child care system has been reasonably well served in the area of progressive policies and legislation, there continue to be concerns regarding the number of social workers employed in child welfare and protection services, and the under-investment in child and family support services. In addition, there is concern over the lack of specialised care placements and therapeutic services available, and the number of children in foster care without an allocated social worker raises questions about the adequacy of resources in the system (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2011; Lynch & Burns, 2012).

Irish child care services have developed in response to a number of child care inquiries/reports (see, for example, Brosnan, 2009; McGuinness, 1993; Murphy, Mangan & O'Neill, 2009; Murphy, Mangan & O'Neill, 2010), the latest of which, the Ryan Report (2009), documents the physical and sexual abuse of children in

reformatory and industrial schools run by the Catholic religious between 1940 and 1999. This report prompted a major reform of the child welfare and protection system (see Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). And, in 2011, for the first time in the history of the State, a full Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was appointed. Work is currently underway to establish a new body called the Child and Family Support Agency that by 2013 will bring, for the first time, children's services together within one management structure *outside* of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The present location of children's services in the HSE, which is largely health-focused, has been much criticised (see Burns & Lynch, 2012). Some of the other debates and developments regarding child protection and welfare matters in Ireland are centred on the long-overdue Children's Rights Referendum which was held in November 2012, whereby the people of Ireland voted - amid fractious debates - to amend the Irish Constitution to provide children with some rights independent of their parents (Carr, 2012; O'Mahony, Shore, Burns, & Parkes, 2012). Other systemic and legislative changes will introduce a mandatory obligation on professionals to report suspected child abuse, establish a 24-hour child protection service (Shannon, 2011; Shannon & Gibbons, 2012) and result in the national child protection and welfare guidelines being made a statutory requirement (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012).

Since 2008, the provision of personal social services in Ireland, either by the state or civil society organisations, has been set against a backdrop of the Irish state pursuing a policy of severe fiscal austerity and retrenchment. Ireland lost its fiscal sovereignty in 2010 and is, until 2014, a 'programme country' under the supervision of the *Troika* (IMF, ECB and EU). Ireland shifted from a country with close to full labour force participation to a country with an unemployment rate in September 2012 of 15.1% (Eurostat, 2012), and emigration has returned as a feature of Irish life. This has meant that children's services have faced budget cutbacks and strict controls have been placed on public sector recruitment. For a period, child protection and welfare in the HSE were exempt from these strict employment controls (see below), but these controls have now been reintroduced.

In the midst of all these changes, relatively little is known about the gender or age of the child welfare and protection workforce or the number of social workers employed.

The only published workforce surveys of social workers in Ireland have been undertaken by the National Social Qualifications Board and the last report published in 2006 is now well out of date. Furthermore, this dataset does not provide specific information on turnover/retention of child protection and welfare social workers. The data presented in the more recently published study of retention of social workers employed by the Health Service Executive (Redmond, Guerin & Nolan, 2011) are insufficient with regard to the questions posed in this article. Redmond *et al*. (2011) commented that the HSE datasets on social workers were limited and inadequate to determine the difference between social workers moving within the HSE and those leaving the organisation. Anecdotal accounts from child protection social work managers suggested that turnover is high; however, there are limited data to support or interpret these accounts of turnover. The study presented in this article seeks to address this gap by examining retention, turnover, and mobility of social workers in five child protection and welfare teams over two time periods. The next section outlines the design of our study, which is followed by the presentation of our data and a discussion of the implications of the findings for research in this area.

3. Researching child protection and welfare social workers' retention in Ireland

This section of the article analyses data from a study on the employment turnover and mobility for social workers in five child welfare and protection teams over two time periods: March 2005-December 2006, and January 2010-December 2010. Permission was provided by the HSE to access and analyse nine 'raw' datasets on staff complements in these five teams and to publish the results.

3.1 Research Sample

The five child welfare and protection teams include teams in both rural and urban settings. The social workers included were principal social workers, social work team leaders, senior social work practitioners and social workers. Table 1 presents the total staff numbers for each time period by grade and sex and the totals refer to the numbers of people, rather than the whole-time equivalent strengths.

Table 1: Combined five child protection and welfare social work staff by grade and sex (2005 and 2010)

Grade	Women (2005)	Men (2005)	Women (2010)	Men (2010)	Totals (2005)	Totals (2010)
Principal Social Workers	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	***7***	***6***
Team Leaders	14 (88%)	2 (13%)	19 (95%)	1 (5%)	***16***	***20***
Senior Social Work Practitioners	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	***8***	***10***
Social Workers	68 (93%)	5 (7%)	99 (95%)	5 (5%)	***73***	***104***
	91 (87.5%)	**13 (12.5%)**	**127 (91%)**	**13 (9%)**	***104***	***140***

The growth in the number of social workers on these teams between 2005 and 2010 evident in Table 1 was in part the result of the implementation of the recommendations of the Ryan Report (2009). The table also demonstrates the gender stratifications, with men being under-represented as social workers and over-represented at all other management grades.

During both data collection periods, the social work manager for each of the five teams was interviewed by telephone twice. The five managers were asked about the reasons for changes in employees' employment status where this was not obvious from the datasets, to double-check our interpretations of the data, to clarify and minimise administrative errors in the datasets, to gather data on the next destination post for staff that had resigned from the team, and managers' understandings of employment push and pull factors in social work and child protection and welfare. In this way it was possible to establish which staff permanently left the HSE, which staff were on temporary leave, which staff were retained in child protection and welfare but on a different team, and the new employment location of staff that had permanently separated from these five teams. In discussion with these managers it became clear that the terms turnover and retention do not always adequately describe the employment mobility of staff. Therefore, in the next section, we consider the definition of these terms and our usage of them in this study.

3.2 Defining and making sense of employee turnover and mobility

In this study, turnover is defined as social workers employed in child welfare and protection by the HSE on either a permanent or locum contract who voluntarily, but permanently, ceased their employment with their team (Mobley, 1982). Maternity

leaves, secondments and career breaks are not included in the turnover calculation as the separation of the workers from the organisation was temporary, with most returning to their posts in child welfare and protection (see findings below). Employment 'mobility' on the other hand, refers to such changes in employment status where a person may leave their post temporarily, for example, as a result of a maternity leave. A 'turnover rate' is a percentage calculation of the number of employees who permanently leave the organisation each month, or over a 12-month period, divided by the total number of employees. For this study the turnover rate was calculated over a 12-month period. For the 2010 turnover calculation, the significant number of newly-created posts meant that the total staff number was higher at the end of the period than at the start. The total staff number at the end of the period (December 2010) was used in the turnover calculation. In Mor Barak *et al*.'s (2001) analysis of 25 articles identifying the causes of turnover and retention among child welfare, social work and other human service employees, some used the term turnover to describe workers who leave not just their job, but also the profession. In this article the term 'attrition' is used to describe a situation where a person leaves the social work profession.

3.3 Limitations of the Methodology

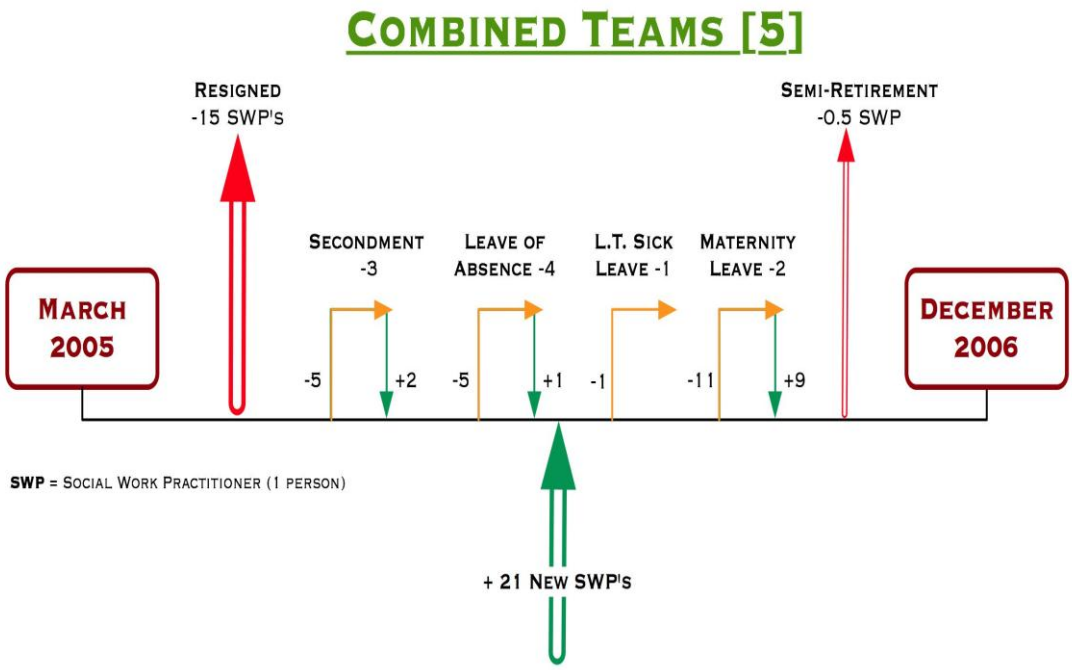
There are a number of limitations to the methodology used in this study. The study is limited to one HSE area so it does not claim to be a national representative sample. However, from discussions with social workers in other HSE areas, there are no reasons to believe that this study's findings are specific to only one area. During interviews with key social work managers, it became clear that there were some errors in the HSE datasets. These errors were corrected prior to undertaking the analysis. Every effort was made to ensure that the datasets were accurate; however, without speaking to each social worker individually - which was beyond the scope of this research - minor inaccuracies in the datasets are possible. The limitations of this study indicate the need for a larger-scale in-depth study of staff mobility that can distinguish between turnover, retention and attrition.

4. Employee retention and mobility findings

The datasets collected during the research enabled three types of analysis: first, an analysis of the levels and types of turnover and mobility in the five teams during the two time periods; second, an analysis of how many social workers who were employed in these teams at the end of December 2005 were still working in their team at the end of December 2010 (retention rates); and third, an analysis of how many social workers that were interviewed in an earlier study covering 2005-2007 (Burns, 2009) were still working in their child welfare and protection posts at the end of December 2010. Two-thirds of the social workers in the 2005-2007 study had indicated their intention to stay, at least in the short to medium term, in child protection and welfare.

The first datasets relate to a 22-month period between March 2005 and December 2006, whereby data collected by the HSE on a quarterly basis for all social work grades on five child protection and welfare teams (104 people) were analysed. The analysis presented in Diagram 1 charts the resignations, secondments, leaves of absence, long-term sick leave, maternity leaves and retirements over this period:

Diagram 1:



Using the definition of turnover and turnover rate outlined earlier, the combined turnover rate adjusted for a 12-month period for the five child welfare and protection teams was 8 percent. All of the five teams had similar turnover rates of below 10 percent. This rate is significantly lower than expected from our review of the literature and from conversations with practitioners in the area. While turnover was low, Diagram 1 indicates that there was still a significant level of staff *mobility* through secondment, career breaks and maternity leave in particular. Due to a large number of newly-qualified female social workers under 35 working in this sector (Christie, 2008), the number of maternity leaves is in line with demographic trends whereby the average age of mothers at maternity is 31.7 years (Central Statistics Office, 2011). Also, the low number of retirements is not unexpected given the relatively young age profile of social workers in Ireland (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006). Taking maternity leaves and resignations (see analysis of resignations below in Table 2) together with other staff movements, and some internal promotions to management grades which were discernible in the datasets, it is unsurprising that service users and social workers perceived considerable staff changes on teams, but these changes refer to staff *mobility* rather than *turnover.* As illustrated in Diagram 1, most staff returned to their post: their departure was not a *permanent* cessation of employment and, therefore, cannot be seen as turnover.

The 8 percent turnover rate refers to staff who permanently left their post in child protection and welfare in these five teams. However, Table 2 indicates that leaving a child protection and welfare post in one area does not mean that individual social workers have left child protection and welfare work, the profession and/or decided to work abroad.

Table 2: Subsequent occupations following resignation from child welfare and protection post 2005-2006

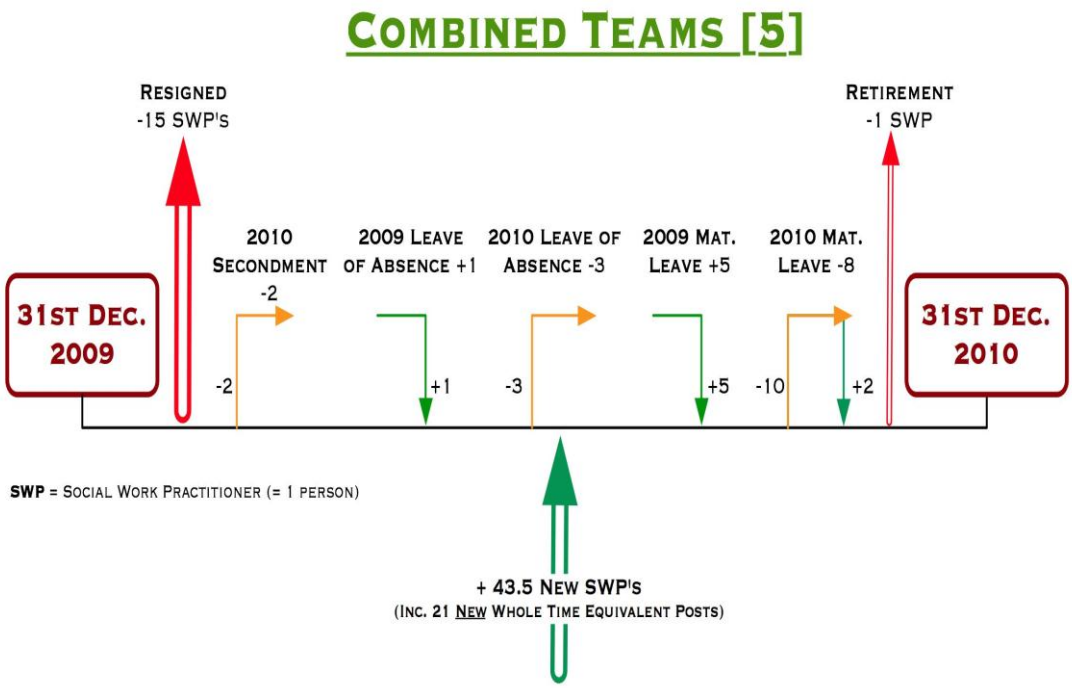
Posts moved to after leaving the five HSE teams	No.
Child Welfare and Protection (Ireland 2 (HSE) & International 1)	3
Fostering (Ireland 2 (HSE) & International 1)	3
Disability (HSE = 2)	3
Mental Health (HSE)	1
Older Adults - Social Work Post (Ireland 1 (HSE) & International 1)	2
Hospital-based (HSE)	1
Social Work Education	1
Not working in social work	1
Sub Total: Social Work Posts (Republic of Ireland)	11
Sub Total: Social Work Posts (International)	3
Sub Total: Not Working in Social Work	1
Total Resigned	**15**

Nine of the 15 social workers did not leave the HSE permanently, but moved internally to another social work post within the HSE. For example, two were retained in the wider HSE child welfare and protection service and two moved to the related area of fostering. Therefore, whilst an 8 percent turnover rate was quoted earlier, this rate refers to turnover from these five teams *only*, whereas the HSE as an employer retained slightly over half of all those leaving the five teams. We can also see that the *attrition* rate of this group (i.e. those who left the social work profession) is very low - 1 out of 15). Ten out of 15 who resigned from their post in the social work teams in this time period were interviewed in the earlier study (Burns, 2009). The majority attributed their decision to leave mainly to 'unavoidable' personal factors such as having children, wanting to move closer to home and family and/or being able to obtain a social work post within a preferred setting or service-user group. There is evidence from the interviews that some social workers considered work in the area of children protection and welfare as a necessary 'transient' career stage through which newly-qualified workers need to pass in order to achieve their preferred career choice within the profession (Burns, 2011). While there was much dissatisfaction expressed

with the HSE as an employer, this was not the primary reason given by social workers for changing post.

This analysis was repeated for the *same* five child protection and welfare teams for the 12 months from 1st January 2010 through to 31st December 2010, and these data are presented in Diagram 2:

Diagram 2:



The 2010 data record a significant growth in the social work labour-force strength in these five teams. A total of 21 new whole-time equivalent social work posts were allocated to these teams under a national initiative by the government to strengthen the capacity of the child protection and welfare system arising out of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009; Ryan, 2009).

The turnover rate for social workers on these five teams was 11 percent (15 out of 140 social workers). A slightly higher rate of maternity leaves was evident in 2010. Overall, the data presented in Diagram 2 confirm the trend in the earlier dataset of a significant amount of mobility amongst social workers on these teams, largely through maternity leave, secondments and leaves of absence, with the turnover rate

continuing to remain low, although there is an increase of 3 percent from the earlier period. The data for the 15 social workers that left their post in child protection and welfare in 2010 are presented in Table 3:

Table 3: Subsequent occupations following resignation from child welfare and protection post in 2010

New Post	**No.**
Child Welfare and Protection	5.5
Primary Care	2.5
Fostering	2
Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS)	1
Hospital Social Work Post	1
Child Protection Training	1
Youth Work	1
Older Adults	1
Total resigned	**15**
Of the 15 that resigned, how many were still working in social work in the HSE in the Republic of Ireland?	*15*
Number and % still working in child welfare and protection in the HSE?	*5.5 (37%)*

Again, the turnover rate of 11 percent for 2010 reported above is potentially misleading as *all* of the social workers moved to other HSE posts: social workers moved internally either to child welfare and protection in another part of the country (5.5 of 15), or to a non-child protection and welfare post within the HSE (9.5 of 15). The likely explanation for this high retention rate for the HSE is that other social work employers (e.g. the probation service) were not employing during this period and other employers were subject to budget cutbacks due to the economic crisis. The government's general moratorium on recruitment and promotions in the public sector meant that social workers were avoiding the risk of leaving their secure posts in what was, and continues to be, a very uncertain employment market. HSE social work posts in child protection and welfare were exempted from the recruitment moratorium during the second, 2010, data collection period.

A more detailed analysis of the datasets (see Table 4) allows us to explore how many of the social workers from the December 2005 dataset were still working in the same child protection and welfare teams at the end of 2010.

Table 4: Retention by team, December 2005 – December 2010

Team name	*No of child protection and welfare social workers on 31.12.2005*	*No of same social workers still in post on 31.12.2010*	*% retained*
Team 1	41	32	78%
Team 2	23	18	78%
Team 3	13	10	77%
Team 4	10	6	60%
Team 5	19	10	53%
Totals	**106**	**76**	

In Table 4, 73 percent (76 out of 104) of all social workers working in these five teams at the end of 2005 were still working in the *same* child welfare and protection team at the end of 2010. Retention was particularly high amongst social work management grades, indicating few possibilities for promotion during this period. These high retention rates are partly explained by the employment market for social work in Ireland described above. However, the qualitative data collected between 2005 and 2007 also suggested that such high retention rates were likely. Of the 35 social workers/senior social work practitioners interviewed on these five teams, two thirds indicated that they wanted to *stay* in their job in the short to medium term and were not looking for alternative employment at the end of December 2010, and the 75 percent of the 35 social workers interviewed between 2005 and 2007 were still in post. The interviews with social workers identified that a good proportion wanted to stay, due, amongst other reasons, to high job satisfaction, relatively good levels of autonomy, commitment to child welfare and protection work, excellent levels of social supports from peers, and a sense of making enough of a difference with children and families (see Burns, 2009).

A further round of interviews was not undertaken in 2011. Therefore, it is not possible to say whether social workers on these teams at the end of 2010 wanted to remain working in this sector, or wanted to leave, but were constrained from doing so due to

HSE and governmental employment policies such as the Employment Control Framework, and/or because of the lack of alternative employment opportunities in the wider labour market due to the economic crisis.

5. Concluding comments

The importance of a stable and experienced workforce in child welfare and protection was reiterated in a recent Irish child abuse inquiry report which stated: 'Children in care should have a consistent professional figure with overall responsibility' (Ryan, 2009, p. 464). A key finding from this research is that not all child protection and welfare teams have high employment turnover; in fact, turnover was relatively low in the five teams participating in this study. Second, the research shows the importance of distinguishing between employee turnover and employee mobility. Employment mobility such as maternity leave, secondments and internal promotions should be excluded from calculations of staff turnover. The current approach to the monitoring of employment mobility adopts a male 'norm' of workforce participation in which maternity leaves, and leaves to care for children and vulnerable adults - care activities which are still predominately undertaken by women - are not distinguished from other employment status changes. In a profession in which over 80 percent of the workers are women, it is predictable that there will be types of mobility, such as maternity leaves, that employers can plan for. However, policies such as the Employment Control Framework, which restricts cover for maternity leaves, can disproportionately impact female-led professions such as social work and nursing. Third, where possible, it is important to highlight in datasets those who wish to continue to be employed in child protection and welfare work, but move to a management post and/or another child protection and welfare team. During the two periods of data collection, few social workers were promoted and only a relatively small number (five in 2005-2006 and two in 2009,) of social workers were seconded. However, quite a few social workers moved post and continued to work in child protection and welfare in another geographical area. Regarding promotions, it would be interesting to consider whether promotions are defined by researchers and employers as 'turnover', particularly if promotions are to child protection and welfare in another geographical location and involve a move away from front-line practice. Fourth, turnover and mobility rates need to be interpreted within an analysis of wider changes in employment markets and practices in specific national locations. For example, the economic environment

in Ireland was very different during the two periods. While child protection and welfare in the HSE was exempt during the 2010 period from the Employment Control Framework and new posts were created in child protection and welfare, the Employment Control Framework and the severe economic crisis in Ireland impacted on the availability of employment opportunities for social workers in other parts of the public sector and in civil society organisations. Fifth, national and local contexts vary considerably in terms of the differences in the organisational, social and political factors that impact on the turnover and mobility of staff.

In this article, we have been able to show how a detailed study can challenge dominant understandings of staff turnover and mobility. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain how and why these dominant understandings, common in both professional and media discussion, are reproduced. However, there is research that indicates that social workers in training and newly-qualified staff expect turnover to be inevitably high in child protection and welfare social work (Burns, 2009, 2011), even though this is unsupported by the data presented here.

However, as argued here and by Cauvain (2010), low turnover does not mean that users of child protection and welfare services experience no significant disruptions in services due to staff mobility changes and staff shortages. Staff mobility and its impact on service provision is another area in need of more detailed study. While the turnover in the teams taking part in this research is relatively low, it would be important to replicate this study in other geographical locations in Ireland and elsewhere, in order to interrogate the commonly held assumption that all child protection and welfare teams suffer from particularly high turnover rates. By tracking the career trajectory of those who leave child protection and welfare, it might be possible to establish if turnover could be avoided, and whether it is related to general patterns in career advancement, to preferred employers, to service-user groups, or to other factors.

This article, through an in-depth, small-scale study, has highlighted the complexity of researching staff turnover and mobility both within and between organisations. In organisational planning, care needs to be taken to question common assumptions regarding high staff turnover in child protection and welfare teams. The gender and

age of the social work workforce, as well as the general and local employment conditions, clearly impact on social workers' motivations and their employment choices and in-job mobility. The challenge for employers and the profession is to ensure that patterns of mobility and turnover are differentiated and that they can be accommodated to ensure a positive work environment for social workers while maintaining a high standard of service to the public.

Acknowledgements

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