

Implications of workforce turnover in child protection social work: The 'CARERS framework' conceptualized by the voice of those with lived experience

Care leavers

Foster care

Workforce turnover

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Key takeaway Care leavers, parents and foster carers described social worker turnover as a relational and emotional loss rather than an administrative matter, with consequences for trust, the timeliness of decisions and access to support. The authors argue turnover should be treated as a safeguarding concern. The evidence is qualitative, retrospective and drawn from one jurisdiction.

About the study Multi-method qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, analysed with reflexive thematic analysis and a hermeneutic phenomenological theory. Care leavers were at least 24 months post-care and parents at least three years past child protection involvement. An advisory group of care leavers, parents, carers and advocacy representatives contributed to design and interpretation.

The CARERS framework: six domains developed from participant accounts

Consistency

C

Continuity was linked to safety and progress; repeated changes to confusion and disengagement.

Access and fairness

A

Support was described as depending on whether a worker was in post rather than on assessed need.

Relationships and trust

R

Retelling histories to each new worker was described as retraumatising and led some to withhold information.

Endings and system gaps

E

Departures were often unexplained; others stepped in informally when cases went unallocated.

Records and communication

R

File errors, lost case knowledge and stalled life-story work left histories incomplete.

Safety and thresholds

S

Participants linked instability to higher intervention thresholds and crisis-led responses.

Key findings:

- Findings draw on 18 interviews (8 care leavers, 6 foster carers and 4 parents with prior child protection contact) and three focus groups with advocacy and supported living organisations in Northern Ireland.
- Participants described frequent, often unannounced changes of worker. One care leaver reported having had more than twenty social workers, and foster carers described six to eight months as the longest period they typically expected with the same worker.
- Turnover was linked to practical consequences as well as emotional ones, including delayed assessments and reviews, revisited decisions, and inconsistent access to items such as transport, clothing and education support.
- Endings were commonly described as abrupt and unexplained. Where cases were unallocated, foster carers, family members and third sector staff took on tasks outside their role.
- Records were reported as containing errors or omissions, and life-story work was described as repeatedly started and abandoned, leaving some young people without a coherent account of their own history.
- Where continuity was maintained, participants described earlier identification of concerns, more timely decisions and greater willingness to engage. Planned handovers, joint visits and clear explanations were identified as mitigating the effects of change.

Summary The study addresses a gap in turnover research, which has largely reported organisational and practitioner outcomes rather than the experience of service users. Applying an ecological systems lens, it argues that workforce instability at the system level is carried as a relational and psychological burden at the level of the individual child or family, and connects this to epistemic injustice where people's accounts of their own lives are displaced by fragmented records. The policy implication drawn is that workforce stability be treated as an indicator of service quality and a safeguarding matter.