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In the macro-level classes, there is talk about social work turnover as an administrative headache or a budget problem. We look at charts showing how much it costs to recruit, onboard, and train new staff when people leave due to burn out. But the actual human cost and what happens to the clients left behind, usually gets pushed to the sidelines. Researchers Emma McGinnis, Dominic McSherry, Gillian Martin, and John Mallett wanted to change that focus. As social policy experts at Ulster University, they published a scoping review in, “The British Journal of Social Work” titled "Effects of Child Protection Social Worker Turnover on Children and Families: A Scoping Review Addressing a Critical Gap in Social Work Turnover Research" (2026). They looked at how constant caseworker shuffling changes the lives of vulnerable clients, shifting the conversation from simple agency management to our actual ethical duties under the NASW Code of Ethics.

The big question driving their study is pretty straightforward and at the forefront with, “How does high turnover among child protection social workers directly impact the safety, emotional well-being, and case progress of the kids and families they serve?” Front-line workers already know the answer to this intuitively because they see it every day, but the authors wanted to put hard data behind it so we can actually prove it to state funders and legislators.

This study responds to a massive gap in existing social work research. For decades, researchers have focused entirely on “why” workers quit by looking at things like low pay, huge caseloads, and secondary traumatic stress. While that research is incredibly important for protecting workers, it doesn't tell us what happens to the families who are left to pick up the pieces. McGinnis and other researchers argue that this lack of data is a major issue because high turnover isn't just an inconvenience for an agency. If constant staffing changes are delaying permanent homes for foster kids or making family trauma worse, then turnover is a direct threat to client welfare.

To find solutions to this on-going issue, a thorough scoping review was done for a better look. Over a thousand potential studies in behavioral science databases were studied and filtered down to eleven high-impact articles that looked specifically at child welfare turnover and client outcomes. A strict, transparent screening process called the PRISMA-ScR protocol was used to make sure their data collection was reliable across both qualitative and quantitative studies.

What they found paints a really frustrating picture of what families experience when their worker leaves. The research broke these negative effects down into three focal areas. First,

everything breaks down to administrative inactivity. Every time a worker quits, the case hits a standstill while a new, overworked employee spends months digging through files just to catch up. This delay directly correlates with kids spending longer periods in foster care and waiting longer to safely reunite with their parents. Second, it causes deep relationship trauma. For kids who have already been through abuse or neglect, having their worker disappear feels like another abandonment. Parents and kids both reported feeling completely exhausted by having to repeat their deepest traumas to a rotating door of strangers, which completely breaks down the trust needed for any real progress. Finally, it ruins safety metrics. The data showed that high turnover messes up risk assessments. New workers simply don't know the family history or dynamics well enough, meaning they might miss warning signs of danger or, on the flip side, overreact and perform unnecessary interventions out of fear causing more harm than good.

This article hits home for me because it bridges the gap between macro policy and micro practice. It is easy to get caught up in data points or clinical theory, but this study proves that retention really is a clinical intervention. When an agency loses a third of its staff every year, it is destroying the relationships that make clinical work possible.

As future practitioners, we can use this research as a massive tool for policy advocacy. Instead of just asking for better pay or smaller caseloads for our own sake, this data lets us argue for those changes on behalf of client safety. When we can prove to a state legislature that lower turnover means shorter foster care stays and less re-entry into the system, we have the exact leverage we need to fight for mandatory caseload caps. This study forces us to face an uncomfortable truth, we cannot build a stable, trauma-informed environment for families if our own agencies are completely unstable.

McGinnis, Emma, et al. "Effects of Child Protection Social Worker Turnover on Children and Families: A Scoping Review Addressing a Critical Gap in Social Work Turnover Research." *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 56, no. 3, Jan. 2026, pp. 1240–1262.