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Rural Social Work: Recruitment, Job Satisfaction, Burnout, and Turnover

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Abstract. Rural agencies have unique challenges related to recruitment and retention of social workers. A systematic literature review was conducted to examine job satisfaction, burnout and turnover among rural social workers. Based on 28 included articles, results indicate: (a) rural social workers tend to be from rural areas or have completed training in rural settings; (b) poor job satisfaction predicts turnover among rural social workers; (c) rural vs. urban differences for satisfaction, burnout, intention to leave, and turnover are mixed; and (d) greater work-life balance and supervisory support increase retention among rural social workers. This study provides recommendations for informing education, policy and future research in social work practice in rural locations in the United States.

Keywords: rural, social work, recruitment, burnout, retention, job satisfaction

The rural population in America has undergone drastic changes over the last centuries. In 1800, 94% of all Americans lived in rural areas (Garkovich, 1989). The proportion of the rural population in the United States has fallen drastically since then, with 60% of Americans living in rural areas by 1900 (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005). Today, there are approximately 46 million rural Americans making up 14% of U.S. residents spread across 72% of the nation's land area (USDA Economic Research Service, 2016).

As more and more individuals have moved to suburban and urban areas, rural areas have often lacked the professionals needed to provide health and social services (Ricketts, 1999). About 106 million Americans live in an area designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area for mental health, of which 76% live in rural or partially rural locations (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2017). Rural populations can experience high rates of poverty, co-occurring disorders, mental illness, and substance abuse conditions, but without needed services available nearby, outcomes can be much worse than in urban areas (Battista-Frazee, 2015; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Daley, 2015).

Working in rural areas often requires social workers to take on a more generalist approach, providing a wide variety of services with few resources to draw from (Humble, Lewis, Scott, & Herzog, 2013; Riebschleger, 2007). Many social workers have indicated feeling unprepared for practice in rural areas due to the wide variety of mental health and social service issues that they encounter (Rohland & Rohrer, 1998). Social work practice in rural areas is also challenging because it often means having to balance being not only a practitioner but also a community member (Humble et al., 2013).

Recruitment and retention of rural social workers has been determined to be a major problem for the profession (Whitaker, Weismiller, Clark, & Wilson, 2006). About 80% of social workers are employed in urban areas, and for those with specialization or graduate-level education, the proportion is even higher (Battista-Frazee, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2006). With a larger proportion of individuals living in non-rural areas, successful recruitment for rural areas may necessitate drawing applicants from urban and suburban areas in addition to those from

rural communities. However, this may be problematic as rural social workers must understand rural culture and the problems that are unique to rural practice locations, which can be difficult for social workers who have grown up in or been trained in non-rural settings (Daley, 2015).

Social work is commonly regarded as a stressful occupation, and burnout has been a popular topic among researchers (Schwartz, Tiamiyu, & Dwyer, 2007; Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, & Warg, 1995). Burnout refers to a syndrome of emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from stressful working conditions, secondary trauma, and/or a lack of sufficient coping resources (Baum, 2016; Cocker & Joss, 2016; Freudenberger, 1974; Leiter & Maslach, 1988). Burnout is especially serious among social workers as it often results in depersonalization and compassion fatigue which adversely affect client interactions and relationships. Social workers in both rural and urban areas experience burnout at high rates (Mackie, 2008). Job satisfaction is a concept related to burnout, and there is some evidence that social workers practicing in rural settings may experience less job satisfaction than those in other settings (Whitaker et al., 2006).

While some amount of turnover is functional and can contribute to innovation within an agency, high levels of turnover in rural areas can make it more difficult for agencies to provide needed services by depleting the already minimal resources available. When turnover is high, cases are often passed from one social worker to another, making it difficult for agencies to retain clients, difficult for clients to form a therapeutic alliance, and difficult for clients to access the services they need (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Government Accountability Office, 2003). Turnover can also contribute to higher caseloads for remaining social workers, adding stress which may compound the problem (Government Accountability Office, 2003; Graef & Hill, 2000).

Given the challenges our profession faces in recruiting and retaining social workers in rural areas, the purpose of this systematic review is to gather available knowledge on rural social work practice to inform recommendations for agencies, administrators, educators, and researchers. What is known about recruiting and retaining rural social workers? What is known about factors related to job satisfaction and burnout among rural social workers?

For the purposes of this review, a *social worker* is defined as someone practicing social work with an undergraduate or graduate degree in social work. *Urban social workers* are those working in large metropolitan areas. *Rural social workers* are those working in remote and sparsely populated areas. *Non-rural* is used to denote areas of practice which are either urban or suburban.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted to determine what is known about factors related to recruitment, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover among rural social workers.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

- studies published in the English language;
- studies conducted in at least one of the following geographical areas: North America, Australia, and Europe;
- studies included in at least one of the following databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, PsychINFO, Academic Search Complete, Social Work Abstracts;
- studies published on or after January 1, 1997 and before June 23, 2017;
- studies published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals;
- studies that sampled professional social workers, exclusively or in part;
- studies that collected data related to recruitment, job satisfaction, burn-out, retention, or turnover.

Articles were excluded from this study based on the following criteria:
- studies that did not collect any qualitative or quantitative data.

Rationale for Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only articles published in English were included due to the limitation of having only English-speaking reviewers. The geographic areas of North America, Europe, and Australia were chosen to include articles that would be somewhat generalizable to the United States. Several relevant databases were chosen to decrease odds of excluding relevant articles. This review was confined to studies published within the last two decades to narrow focus on research findings that were relatively recent and thus more relevant to today's experiences of social work practice. Only those articles which were published in peer-reviewed journals were considered to avoid including overly biased or poor-quality studies. Finally, we confined our review to the population of rural social workers and only those studies that collected data for the outcomes of interest for this review.

Search and Distillation

Using the stated inclusion and exclusion criteria, a search was conducted in three phases (see Figure 1). Phase I utilized Boolean terms to identify articles in any of the included databases. The following Boolean terms were used for topic search: ("social work" OR "social worker" OR "social workers") AND (Rural OR non-urban OR "non urban") AND (Satisfaction OR "burn-out" OR "burnout" OR "burn out" OR "leave profession" OR "intention to leave" OR "plan to leave" OR "plans to leave" OR "intent to leave" OR "turnover" OR "turn-over" OR recruit* OR retention). Phase I captured a total of 234 articles from Academic Search Complete (n = 38), PscychINFO (n = 31), SCOPUS (n = 87), Social Work Abstracts (n = 20), and Web of Science (n = 58).

Phases II and III implemented distillation per inclusion and exclusion criteria (see figure 1). In phase II, duplicates (n = 97) were excluded from the results, and then the authors reviewed titles and abstracts separately and redundantly to exclude studies that did not meet criteria. After conducting reviews of titles and abstracts, the authors met to discuss results and came to full agreement on which studies should be included for the next phase of distillation. Studies outside of the included geographical area (n = 6), studies that did not collect any qualitative or

quantitative data (n = 2), and studies that did not sample rural social workers or did not measure the outcome variables of interest to this review (n = 103) were excluded.

In phase III, the first two authors read the 26 remaining articles and coded them separately and redundantly. Afterwards, the first two authors met and agreed to exclude six of these articles which did not meet criteria due to being the wrong topic and one article for not collecting any data. After distillation, 20 articles were included from the search. The first two authors reviewed citations from all the included articles and agreed to include another eight articles that had not been captured in the search. The total number of included articles for this systematic review was 28.

Findings

Of the 28 articles included in this review, child welfare workers were the most common type of social worker sampled, represented in ten of the included studies (see Table 1). Several studies included a heterogeneous sample of different professions including social workers working in a variety of settings (see Table 2). Only a few studies sampled solely social workers (see Table 3).

Most of the studies included in this review were cross-sectional survey studies; however, two studies used pre-post survey designs (Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Yankeelov et al., 2009). Only one included study conducted a randomized controlled trail with pre-post measures (Glisson et al., 2006). Several other included studies collected primarily qualitative data (Allan et al., 2008; Allan et al., 2007; Gifford et al., 2010; Gillham & Ristevski, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2009; Manahan et al., 2009; O'Toole et al., 2010; Schuller et al., 2017; Westbrook et al., 2006).

The articles included in this study represent several geographical areas in which rural social workers are employed. Most of the included studies were conducted in the United States, representing 17 individual states. Only one included study analyzed data representing the entire United States (Barth et al., 2008). Several other studies were conducted in Canada and Australia (Allan et al., 2008; Allan et al., 2007; Chisholm et al., 2011; Gillham & Ristevski, 2007; Graham et al., 2013; Keane et al., 2011; Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Manahan et al., 2009; O'Toole et al., 2010; Whitford et al., 2012).

Recruitment

Mackie and Lips (2010) interviewed 183 social service supervisors in Minnesota to investigate problems associated with recruiting rural social service staff. Findings indicated that supervisors are not always able to hire their preferred choice of degree holder (Mackie & Lips, 2010). Most supervisors (86%) preferred hiring those with social work degrees because they felt such applicants were most prepared, but findings indicated that they often had trouble doing so and instead hired those with other degrees (Mackie & Lips, 2010). Further indicating the difficulties of hiring social workers in rural areas, Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2007) found that there were significantly more caseworkers with social work degrees in urban and suburban settings (32% and 23% respectively) than in rural settings (10%).

Among the small sample of social workers studied by Allan et al. (2007), many of them expressed living in a rural area as being a key part of their identity. Mackie (2007) found that significantly more rural social workers had grown up in rural areas than urban social workers. Significantly more rural social workers had completed practicums in a rural area than urban social workers (Mackie, 2007). Rural social workers were significantly more likely to have received rural-focused education and training (Mackie, 2007). Whitford et al. (2012), Keane et al. (2011), and Manahan et al. (2009) reached similar findings to Mackie (2007).

Some of the allied health workers sampled in a qualitative study conducted in rural Australia felt there was risk of becoming underemployed or not meeting their career potential if they took jobs in rural areas (Gillham & Ristevski, 2007). Participants in the study indicated that professional development opportunities and recognition of advanced skills are important ways to recruit and retain staff in rural areas (Gillham & Ristevski, 2007). Having access to professional support and supervision was also highlighted as a factor (Gillham & Ristevski, 2007).

Job Satisfaction & Burnout

Sprang et al. (2007) surveyed mental health providers including social workers to examine the relationships between compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout among providers from different settings. They found that 13% of the sample was at high risk for compassion fatigue or burnout (Sprang et al., 2007). Rural clinicians in the sample were significantly more likely to suffer burnout than those in urban areas (Sprang et al., 2007). A significant finding was that specialized trauma training enhanced compassion satisfaction and reduced levels of compassion fatigue and burnout (Sprang et al., 2007). The study also found that caseload percentage of clients with PTSD predicted levels of compassion fatigue and burnout for clinicians (Sprang et al., 2007).

A study which sampled solely social workers found that both rural and urban social workers displayed moderate levels of burnout on a subscale for emotional exhaustion and low levels of burnout on subscales for personal achievement and personalization (Mackie, 2008). Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were found to increase with greater length of time in employment and more hours worked per week (Mackie, 2008). The study found no significant differences in levels of burnout between rural and urban social workers (Mackie, 2008).

Barth et al. (2008) found that quality of supervision was strongly related to job satisfaction for both rural and urban child welfare workers. Working in a rural setting was associated with increased satisfaction when controlling for other factors (Barth et al., 2008). For rural workers, having a social work degree was associated with increased job satisfaction. For both rural and urban workers, Barth et al. (2008) found that receiving at least two hours per week of supervision and having at least two years of experience were significantly associated with increased satisfaction.

Several studies found significant relationships between job satisfaction and turnover. Graham et al. (2013) found that location, whether urban or rural, was not a significant predictor of satisfaction in work or profession among registered social workers in northern Canada. Turnover and job satisfaction were found to have a negative relationship, with lower rates of

satisfaction being predictive of intention to leave (Graham et al., 2013). Griffiths et al. (2017) studied satisfaction and intention to leave among child welfare workers in rural Kentucky, of whom half held degrees in social work. Negative correlations were observed between measures of satisfaction and intention to leave (Griffiths et al., 2017).

McGowan et al. (2009) surveyed child welfare workers from different agencies in New York to measure job satisfaction and intention to leave. There were significantly more urban respondents with social work degrees among their sample (McGowan et al., 2009). McGowan et al. (2009) found that paperwork was a significant source of dissatisfaction.

Allan et al. (2008) sampled social workers working in rural areas to determine factors related to access to rural health care. Rural social workers in their sample expressed concerns about availability of services and access to healthcare, and they often described their clients as having problems that were not able to be addressed through existing local resources (Allan et al., 2008). Social workers felt compelled to treat all persons who presented for treatment, no matter the type of emotional, behavior, or substance abuse problem (Allan et al., 2008).

Intention to Leave & Turnover

Lonne and Cheers (2004) conducted a two-year longitudinal study of recently appointed rural social workers to better understand the personal, occupational, and rural factors that affect retention and turnover. Lonne and Cheers (2004) found that social workers in smaller communities tended to stay for shorter periods than those in larger ones. Social workers who had limited community involvement and friendships in the community were more likely to stay (Lonne & Cheers, 2004). Employer-related variables accounted for the majority of the variance in length of stay, with employer-provided training, autonomy, and variety (number of fields of work) being predictive of increased length of stay (Lonne & Cheers, 2004).

Fulcher and Smith (2010) sampled public child welfare agencies for all 58 counties in California to determine which county-level and environmental factors affected turnover. Rural agencies were found to have turnover rates significantly higher than those in non-rural areas (Fulcher & Smith, 2010). "The degree of rurality that characterizes a county was the primary, most clearly defined predictor of child welfare social worker turnover rates by county in the state of California" (Fulcher & Smith, 2010, p. 455).

In their sample of child welfare workers in New York, Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2007) found that rural workers had the highest degree of intention to leave. Efficacy, job satisfaction, and work-life fit were found to be the most influential factors for reducing intention to leave. Two organizational characteristics were found to differ significantly between type of locality: job support and relationships; and salary and benefits (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). For each of these, rural respondents on average reported higher levels than urban respondents but lower than suburban respondents (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007).

Aguiniga et al. (2013) measured intention to leave among child welfare workers and found no significant differences for intention to leave for rural vs. non-rural respondents. However, Aguiniga et al. (2013) did find other significant differences between rural and non-

rural social workers; rural social workers tended to be older, have longer tenure at their agencies, and have a more positive attitude towards their compensation.

Griffiths et al. (2017) looked at intention to leave among child welfare workers in Kentucky and found that the odds of leaving the agency for those who worked in urban areas were 2.75 times higher than those who worked in rural areas. Griffiths et al. (2017) also found that older workers were significantly less likely to leave the agency. Similarly, Whitford et al. (2012) found significant generational differences for intention to leave.

Chisholm et al. (2011) studied health professionals including social workers to determine patterns and determinants of turnover. Differences for length of stay between rural and non-rural professionals were not significant (Chisholm et al., 2011). One conclusion Chisholm et al. (2011) did reach was that lack of opportunity for advancement is an issue that can contribute to turnover for rural and remote agencies.

Glisson et al. (2006) studied the effectiveness of an organizational intervention on caseworker turnover, organizational climate, and organizational culture among case managers from both rural and non-rural locations. Glisson et al. (2006) found that those workers in urban areas reported more positive climates that the teams in rural areas. There were no other significant differences reported for urban vs. rural in this study.

Smith (2005) studied factors related to turnover among rural child welfare workers and found a strong relationship between intention to leave and actual turnover. Intention to leave decreased the odds of staying by over half (Smith, 2005). Higher average organizational caseload size was found to predict turnover, while greater work-life balance was predictive of retention (Smith, 2005). Increased supervisory support was strongly associated with job retention (Smith, 2005).

Westbrook et al. (2006) interviewed child welfare supervisors and caseworkers in rural areas of Georgia with a minimum of eight years of public child welfare work experience to better understand factors related to retention. A few core themes emerged including the need to take time off from work to recharge and to achieve work variety by moving from one program to another within the agency (Westbrook et al., 2006). Participants spoke about the importance personal and professional support from supervisors and administrators (Westbrook et al., 2006).

Yankeelov et al. (2009) sampled recently hired child welfare workers in Kentucky for a longitudinal study to examine factors which differentiate leavers from stayers in child welfare. Attachment to supervisor was predictive of staying, with rural workers indicating greater support from their supervisors than urban workers (Yankeelov et al., 2009).

Discussion and Implications

Education

Findings suggested that individuals who were raised in a non-urban setting or had ties to a rural area were more likely to practice and stay employed in a rural agency (Allan et al., 2007;

Mackie, 2007; Manahan et al., 2009; Whitford et al., 2012). Thus, schools of social work might consider actively recruiting individuals in rural areas with the idea that they are likely to remain in their current communities or relocate to one that is similar. Participating in incentive-based programs, like Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program and National Health Service Corps, may also help universities to entice students to become social workers *and* practice in rural and remote areas to meet the needs of underserved populations (Smith-Campbell, 2005; Thomas, Ellis, Konrad, & Morrissey, 2012).

The studies included in this systematic review suggest that there is a lack of information related to rural practice integrated in social work curricula at any level (Mackie, 2007; Schuller et al., 2017; Whitford et al., 2012). When students are exposed to content about rural practices, not only are they are more inclined to consider a position in a rural agency, they are also more prepared to work with clients from these environments and more likely to have a longer tenure in their positions (Mackie, 2007; Schuller et al., 2017; Whitford et al., 2012). For example, confidentiality, privacy, dual relationships, and conflicts of interests are issues that take on a different meaning in a rural context, and equipping students with tools to deal with these challenges is imperative to avoid mistakes.

As noted by Mackie (2007), infusing existing curricula with rural content will require faculty to be knowledgeable about social work practice in rural areas – or at the very least be willing to recognize there are differences in rural and urban clients and communities and learn about best practices in serving them to better inform students. For institutions of higher education located in rural settings or near rural settings, an opportunity exists to capitalize on the expertise of local practitioners in revising curriculum and to serve as adjunct instructors if qualified.

Service learning, volunteering, and practicums in rural settings provide students with opportunities to gain first-hand knowledge, skills, and values by working with clients and communities directly (Keane et al., 2011; Mackie, 2007; Schuller et al., 2017; Whitford et al., 2012). Whitford et al. (2012) found that for practitioners "undertaking part of their education in a rural location was also a strong predictor of their likelihood to pursue a rural career" (p. 239). What this means for directors of field education in schools of social work is that it is vital to develop and maintain relationships with rural agencies that employ social workers so that opportunities exist for students interested in working in those settings.

Practice

Findings from some of the studies suggest that employees in rural settings who were most satisfied with their positions, experienced less burnout, and/or had longer tenures had previous connections to a rural environment: raised in a small town; have family in the community of practice; or sought out higher education or completed a practicum in a rural area (Barth et al., 2008; Manahan et al., 2009). Subsequently, their personal values often reflected and aligned with a rural-life culture, and they *wanted* to practice there (Allan et al., 2007; Gifford et al., 2010).

Job satisfaction and turnover appeared to be strongly related for rural social workers, with higher job satisfaction contributing to less intention to leave and lower turnover (Graham et al.,

2013; Griffiths et al., 2017; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). Similarly, greater work-life balance was found to be associated with retention in more than one study (Smith, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007).

For the rural practitioners who expressed intent to leave or left rural agencies in the studies cited, perceived lack of opportunities for training and career advancement were common factors for moving on to other agencies, potentially in urban areas (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Chisholm et al., 2011; Gillham & Ristevski, 2007; Lonne & Cheers, 2004; Whitford et al., 2012). Job seekers often avoid positions in rural areas because of perceived lack of opportunities for advancement (Gillham & Ristevski, 2007). When practitioners obtain advanced degrees (i.e. master of social work), they expect to receive promotions and be compensated accordingly which can lead to turnover when opportunities for advancement are lacking or poorly communicated (Mackie & Lips, 2010; Yankeelov et al., 2009). In some cases, rural agencies are viewed as "stepping stones" which allow new practitioners to gain experience needed to obtain positions in urban settings that may provide more opportunities for professional growth (Mackie & Lips, 2010).

Based on these findings, hiring managers should be encouraged to ascertain whether social workers are accepting of community norms, equipped to handle the idiosyncrasies of rural practice, and desire a long-term tenure with the agency. Asking direct questions related to professional qualifications and intentions provide valuable insight that might thwart an incompatible relationship leading to turnover. Hiring managers should be well-versed in the opportunities for advancement and training that exist in rural agencies and surrounding communities; these opportunities should be clearly communicated to applicants and existing employees.

Further exacerbating the recruitment and retention issue in rural agencies are varied pay scales, less professional development and networking, nominal opportunities for external social relationships and leisure, lack of diversity in the community, and minimal privacy (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Gifford et al., 2010; Manahan et al., 2009). Some individuals are attracted to this type of environment, but for those candidates who are not, the strengths of rural practice could be communicated: greater autonomy, greater decision-making authority, and greater agency support and teamwork are a few key benefits (Mathias & Benton, 2011, p. 283).

Agencies may consider developing innovative solutions and incentives to address the downsides of being a rural practitioner. Examples include developing a professional peer support group conducted via video chat (Humble et al., 2013; Nickson, Gair, & Miles, 2016); encouraging the use of social media during breaks to build outside peer network; providing monthly incentives and giveaways to events and attractions in nearby cities; planning group activities with other local agencies; budgeting for all staff members (regardless of level) to attend trainings at least annually; or locating online professional development opportunities. Investing in employees and making their personal and professional lives less stressful and more satisfactory may be the difference between a social worker accepting or declining and staying in or leaving a position (Smith, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). Addressing and minimizing these weaknesses may also assist in recruiting minorities and individuals with diverse backgrounds – a major trial for rural agencies (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Griffiths et al., 2017).

For social workers who taken posts in rural areas, it is essential that agency leaders first acknowledge the challenges that practitioners face and then put forth effort to increase job satisfaction and reduce burnout. Previous findings indicated that burnout may be minimized by certain leadership styles. Wilcoxon (1989) looked at burnout among rural social workers and found that those with the lowest levels of burnout worked under supervision that was structured and individualized. Supervisory support can be an important moderator of the relationship between employment-related stress and burnout (Himle, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1989). Our findings from this review further support the importance of supervisory support as a factor in the retention of rural social workers. The participants in many studies included in this review noted that actions of supervisors and managers was critical in the success of practitioners in rural settings (Barth et al., 2008; Gillham & Ristevski, 2007; Smith, 2005; Westbrook et al., 2006; Yankeelov et al., 2009). Employees who were satisfied with the managers and supervisors were more satisfied in their positions overall (Barth et al., 2008; Smith, 2005; Yankeelov et al., 2009). Individuals in leadership roles must be willing to provide support to their employees regarding professional and personal matters. Creating a culture of positivity, collaboration, and alliance helps employees feel like they are part of a team or a family. In two studies, participants mentioned that environments that were more family friendly, flexible, and attuned to personal needs were benefits of working in rural agencies (Mackie & Lips, 2010; Manahan et al., 2009).

Another critical task for leaders is regular supervision of employees (Barth et al., 2008; Westbrook et al., 2006). Because colleague interaction and professional development opportunities are often limited in rural settings, social workers must have a way to process challenges in a safe, supportive environment where they will receive quality guidance (Allan et al., 2008; Allan et al., 2007; Gifford et al., 2010; Gillham & Ristevski, 2007). It is critical that supervision is being scheduled, and appointments are kept. Video conference tools can be utilized to complete supervision when necessary (Humble et al., 2013; Nickson et al., 2016).

Supervision should not take the place of professional development. One study noted that specialized training for issues impacting rural clients allowed practitioners to be more effective in their positions (Sprang et al., 2007). Rural practitioners are often expected to be true generalists, but it is up to agency leadership to identify trending challenges in communities served and provide targeted education to employees (Humble et al., 2013; Riebschleger, 2007). Additionally, regular training on complex situations that are unique to rural practice may provide guidance, improve decision-making skills, and minimize preventable errors (Humble et al., 2013; Parrish & Trawver, 2013; Riebschleger, 2007).

Consistent recognition of employees by supervisors and managers was also identified as an important factor in job satisfaction, burnout, and retention (Gillham & Ristevski, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2017; Manahan et al., 2009; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007; Westbrook et al., 2006; Whitford et al., 2012). When employees were recognized for the achievements and felt like a valued asset to the organization, they were more content in their positions. Individuals in leadership roles can make this part of their daily agendas by sending emails or writing thank you cards to express gratitude to employees for their service or recognizing a specific accomplishment. Other ideas include providing a small token each month to identify a person who went above and beyond the call of service; giving out employee of the month or year

awards; and stopping by employees' offices to say, "Thank you," and engage in conversation beyond the demands of the job.

Policy

The included studies of the systematic review had mixed results related to the salaries, benefits, and incentives of rural social workers. Some practitioners were satisfied with earnings (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Manahan et al., 2009; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007; Westbrook et al., 2006), while others felt slighted compared to their urban peers (Griffiths et al., 2017; Mackie & Lips, 2010). The cost of living in rural areas is often dramatically less than that of urban areas, which may be one reason that many were content with their income. However, overall, social workers are underpaid compared to other fields that require similar education (Newman, 2013; Welbourne, 2011)– this despite social work being one of the most in-demand and fastest growing professions in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Agency leaders, academics, and professional associations need to continue advocating for increased salaries, better benefits, and improved working conditions.

McGowan et al. (2009) reported that increased dissatisfaction with paperwork is associated with reduced job satisfaction and higher rates of intention to leave among child welfare workers. This finding is parallel to other studies from that have demonstrated the frustration with high volumes and often redundant paperwork in helping fields (Kantorowski, 1992; Rupert & Baird, 2004). Griffiths et al. (2017) discussed the use of laptops and tablets in the field to improve efficiency and reduce time spent later in the day completing paperwork. Within agencies linked to state and federal governments, laws have been passed within the past two years to allow the use of improved technology for case management that will be more individualized, reduce physical paperwork, and encourage effective collaboration internally and externally (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). However, outdated technology procurement policies, existing contracts with providers, and resistance to change are barriers to moving forward (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

Limitations

This study should be considered within the context of its limitations. This study set out to better understand retention and recruitment of social workers specifically. All studies included in this review sampled social workers but most were not limited to only social workers. Studies did not always provide a comparison between rural and non-rural settings for the variables of interest. Additionally, studies were often segmented to specific areas, regions or states and therefore are not generalizable to the wider United States. Only one study included was representative of the entire United States. Other limitations include the decision to examine articles from both Canada and Australia where health care delivery varies greatly from that of health care delivery in the United States. While the authors approached this review in the most systematic way possible, the potential is there for the exclusion of relevant articles due to the chosen search criteria. Despite these limitations, the current study adds to the body of literature that currently exists related to social workers' professional experiences in rural settings.

Conclusion

This review provides a starting point in understanding the plight of rural social work providers. Results indicated several factors predictive of job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover amongst rural social workers. While many researchers have drawn attention to rural social workers, further research is still needed to better understand the experiences of rural social workers, the challenges of recruiting rural social workers, and the barriers to retaining rural social workers.

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Table 1
Studies on Social Workers in Child Welfare

Authors	Location	Study Purpose	Study Design & Sample
Aguiniga, Madden, Faulkner, & Salehin (2013)	Texas	To compare the influence of personal and organizational factors on intention to leave among public child welfare workers residing in urban, small-town, and rural counties.	N = 2,903* Cross-sectional survey
Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson (2008)	The United States	To conduct a national study about the child welfare workforce in order to detail relationships between the characteristics and satisfaction of active child welfare workers in a geographic context.	N = 1729 (40% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Fulcher & Smith (2010)	California	To investigate relationships between turnover in child welfare agencies and environmental factors by surveying an agency representative from each county.	N = 58 (100% social workers) cross-sectional survey
Gonzalez ,Faller, Ortega & Tropman (2009)	The United States (Midwestern state)	To determine child welfare workers' reasons for leaving their positions by interviewing recently departed workers.	N = 69* Semi-Structured Interviews - Qualitative & Quantitative
Griffiths, Royseb, Culvera, Piescherc, & Zhang (2017)	The United State (southern state)	To understand turnover within the child welfare industry to inform retention strategies.	N = 511 (62.9% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman (2009)	New York	To determine which organizational, personal, and supervisory variables are most associated with intent to leave among employees in urban and rural child welfare settings.	N = 447 (21% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Smith (2005)	New York	To investigate factors related to turnover among rural child welfare workers.	N = 296 (8% social workers) Cross-sectional survey matched with turnover data 15-17 months later

*information about proportion of social workers unavailable

Table 1 continued

Authors	Location	Study Purpose	Study Design & Sample
Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, & McCarthy (2007)	New York	To analyze factors related to intention to leave among rural, urban, and suburban child welfare workers.	N = 820 (19% social workers) Cross-sectional survey

Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellet (2006)	Georgia	To expand understanding of personal and organizational factors related to retention among public child welfare workers and supervisors with a minimum of eight years of experience.	N = 21 (14% social workers) Focus groups – Qualitative
Yankleelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antle (2009)	Kentucky	To examine a variety of individual and organizational factors that differentiate leavers from the stayers in child welfare.	N = 723 (48% social workers) Longitudinal survey matched with turnover data

Table 2
Studies that Sampled Social Workers in Part

Authors	Location	Study Purpose	Study Design & Sample
Allan, Ball, & Alston (2008)	New South Wales, Australia	To explore the personal and professional experiences of pharmacists and social workers and how they inform recruitment and retention.	N = 11 (45% social workers) Interviews – Qualitative
Allan, Crockett, Ball, Alston, & Whittenbury (2007)	New South Wales, Australia	To identify personal and professional factors that influence health workers' commitment to remaining in rural practice location.	N = 11 (45% social workers) Interviews - Qualitative
Chisholm, Russell, & Humphreys (2011)	Western Victoria, Australia	To assess patterns, factors, and costs related to turnover, retention and recruitment in rural healthcare professionals.	N = 901 (19% social workers) cross-sectional survey
Gifford, Koverola & Rivkin (2010)	Alaska	To determine reasons behind successfully retention of behavioral health professionals in a rural setting.	N = 6 (60% social workers) Semi-structured interviews - Qualitative
Gillham & Ristevski (2007)	Central Eastern Victoria, Australia	To assess factors related to recruitment and retention for rural health practitioners.	N = 43* Semi-structured interviews -Qualitative
Glisson, Dukes, & Green (2006)	The United States (Southeastern state)	To assess the effectiveness of an organizational intervention (ARC) on turnover, climate, and culture within child welfare and juvenile justice agencies.	N = 235* RCT with pre-post measurements over one year
Keane, Smith, Lincoln, & Fisher (2011)	New South Wales, Australia	To explore the characteristics of rural healthcare workers and environmental factors impacting recruitment and retention.	N = 1,879 (6.1 % social workers) Cross-sectional survey

*information about proportion of social workers unavailable

Table 2 continued

Authors	Location	Study Purpose	Study Design & Sample
Mackie & Lips (2010)	Minnesota	To investigate factors associated with hiring and retaining rural social service staff by surveying social service supervisors.	N = 183 (28% social workers) Cross-sectional survey

Manahan, Hardy, & MacLeod (2009)	British Columbia, Canada	To identify the personal characteristics and experiences of long-term rural allied health professionals.	N = 26 (31% social workers) Interviews – Qualitative
O'Toole, Schoo, & Hernan (2010).	Victoria, Australia	To explore the lack of retention of rural allied health professionals by interviewing those who had resigned within the previous three years.	N = 32 (9% social workers) Interview – Qualitative
Rohland (2000)	Iowa	To determine the relationship between work environment and job burnout among rural mental health center directors.	N = 29 (59% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Schuller, Amundson, McPherson, & Halaas (2017)	North Dakota	To evaluate a program implemented to address recruitment and retention problems and stereotypes associated with practicing in rural areas.	N = 181 (9% social workers) Retrospective content analysis – Qualitative
Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley (2007)	Rural southern state, United States	To examine the relationship between compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout, and provider and setting characteristics in a sample of mental health clinicians.	N = 1,121 (6% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Whitford, Smith, & Newbury (2012)	South Australia	To gather information about the allied health workforce to inform proposed health care reforms.	N = 1539 (15% social workers) Cross-sectional survey

Table 3
Studies Which Sampled Solely Social Workers

Authors	Location	Study Purpose	Study Design & Sample
Graham, Fukuda, Shier, Kline, Brownlee, & Novik (2013)	Ontario & Northwest Territories, Canada	To investigate factors which contribute to work satisfaction among rural social workers in Canada.	N = 91 (100% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Lonne & Cheers (2004)	Australia	To explore the traits, roles, environments, and causes impacting tenure for recently appointed rural social workers.	N = 194 (100% social workers) Longitudinal survey (administered twice over two years)
Mackie (2007)	The United States: Alaska, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, West Virginia, & Wyoming	To understand the educational and demographic differences between rural and urban social workers.	N = 876 (100% social workers) Cross-sectional survey
Mackie (2008)	The United States: Alaska, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, West Virginia, & Wyoming	To assess levels of burnout among rural and urban social workers.	N = 876 (100% social workers) Cross-sectional survey

Figure 1. Search and distillation

Phase I: Search
Academic Search Complete (38), PsychINFO (31), SCOPUS (87), Social Work Abstracts (20), Web of Science (58);
Total (234)

Phase II: Titles & Abstracts
Duplicates (97)
Outside Area (6)
No Data Collection (2)
Wrong Topic (103)
Articles Excluded: 208
Articles Remaining: 26

Phase III: Full Review
Wrong Topic (5)
No Data Collection (1)
Articles Included: 20

Phase IV: Citation Reviews
Previously Included: 20
From Citation Reviews: 8
Total Included: 28