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## **Impact of the new welfare policies on the morale of selected public sector social workers**

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IMPACT OF THE NEW WELFARE POLICIES ON THE MORALE  
OF SELECTED PUBLIC SECTOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Dora Murillo  
September 1998

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by


Dora Murillo


September 1998

Approved by:

  
Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Advisor,  
Social Work

8/23/98  
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Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Chair of  
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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the impact of the new welfare policies on the morale of public sector social workers. Twenty-three out of thirty replied, and answered demographic and open-ended questions related to the potential impact of the new welfare policies on social worker'morale. The findings of this study substantiated previous findings in respect to direct practice social workers having lower morale due to having overly heavy caseloads. Another finding was that the longer the worker was in direct practice profession the less creative they became.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The welfare reform debate in this country reflects a dilemma identified as long ago as the 16th century English Poor Laws: Is it possible to assist poor people without, by that very act, giving them incentives for behavior that perpetuates poverty and dependency? In particular, is it possible to support employable people without discouraging work? (Gueron, 1995).

This reform dilemma arises because, as a nation, we have conflicting goals for welfare. Since Americans do not want children to be poor, our first goal is to reduce child poverty. The most direct way to do this is to provide the parents of poor children with money. Second, Americans also think that parents should be working and supporting their children. One way to encourage this is to reduce welfare benefits so that work is the only reliable alternative to starvation. Children and their parents are a tied sale (package deal), however; you cannot help one without helping the other (Gueron, 1995). Gueron (1995) further states, "it is hard to get tough on parents and yet continue to provide a safety net for the children."

In recent years California has made important changes to the Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program to move recipients more quickly into employment.



Key reforms include the establishment of enhanced work incentives and improvements the Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) program. Even with these changes, approximately 80 percent of welfare recipients are still not working, even part time (Besharov and Fowler, 1993). This, however, is in the context of a welfare system that did not require work as a condition of aid, had no time limits on aid, and did not provide adequate financial incentives for recipients to increase earning to the equivalent of a full time minimum wage (CDSS, Memo, 1997).

On August 22, 1996, the President signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which eliminated the 60-year-old welfare program. The new federal welfare legislation gave block grant funds to the states to provide time-limited benefits to families (CDSS Memo, 1997). The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) provisions eliminated Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as the federal entitlement and repealed most federal-prescribed eligibility.

In its place, TANF provided states with broad flexibility to design replacement programs and mandated work participation expected in which specified percentages of families must participate in work activities or states will face severe financial sanctions (CDSS, Memo 1997). It is

further stated in the memo (1997) that within this new federal program there will be flexibility. California is now able to restructure welfare to focus on work, a response to public concern regarding long-term welfare dependency, and promote parental responsibility. The California Temporary Assistance Program (CalTAP), reflects fundamental changes to the existing system in its underlying philosophy and structure. Under this new approach, work, personal responsibility, and self sufficiency for able-bodied recipients will be encouraged while aid will continue for those unable to care for themselves,

Block grants are seen as the wave of the future. Loss of the concept and scope of basic entitlement programs seems inevitable. Dollars will devolve to the states--but far fewer dollars--with the real risk of losses of federal protection, fair hearing procedures, and basic effort to develop equity in programs and benefits, and equal access across states (Katz & Hosansky, 1995).

Block grants mean that the states would receive the funds in predetermined lump sums that would give them broad authority to determine who gets the benefits and how services are provided. The law eliminates federal entitlement for many programs. Poor people who applied for benefits such as welfare checks and free school lunches will

no longer automatically receive them (even) if they meet the eligibility criteria (Katz & Hosansky, 1995).

#### FOCUS OF INQUIRY

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the new welfare reform policies on the morale of direct practice social workers in the public sector agencies most affected by the changes. Morale, in this research, pertained to the mental and emotional condition of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand (Websters Dictionary, 1988). A social worker having high morale regarding their work would have a positive feeling which would indicate job satisfaction.

This study addressed the various changes that are presently being implemented in the social welfare system and the impact they might have on direct practice social workers. The study researched how the new policies affected the morale of the public sector social worker and their interactions with their clients, especially the Child Protective Service social worker. It was reasoned that welfare reform might especially affect the Child Protective Service social worker because a majority of their clients were on government assistance. Child Protective Service (CPS) may be affected by changes that put more restrictions on qualifying for welfare assistance and time limits on

clients' financial assistance. The clients' attitude toward the social worker could become hostile due to the changes, and place direct practice social workers on the front end of the venting of negative attitudes.

Previous changes that have been made in an effort to correct the welfare system, as well as the present changes in welfare programs and system, were reviewed to explore some the changes social workers have experienced.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

It comes as no surprise that the social work profession is known to be stressful and that many social workers suffer from burnout. There has been much concern and many articles written about the nature of stress in social work, as well as the emotional and behavioral effects of practicing under such conditions (Rauktis and Koseske, 1994). Although the notion that social workers' heavy work loads lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction seems conceptually correct, this relationship has been difficult to substantiate. From the various studies which have been done, one of the conclusions is that work load is a complex variable (Raukis and Koseske, 1994). Rauktis and Koseske also state that the work load, as well as satisfaction, may vary as a function of age and work experience.

Koeske and Kirk (1995) did research on the effect of characteristics of human service workers on subsequent morale and turnover. The study explored which, if any, personal stable attributes or sociopsychological characteristics measured at the time the workers were hired predicted subsequent perceptions and morale. Eighty two newly hired intensive case workers were invited to participate, 68 completed the initial questionnaire, three months later 66 completed the second, 55 responded at 12 month period and 51 responded at 18 months period. Forty two completed the instruments all four times. Of the 82, 18 left their jobs so one of the outcomes examined was turnover. Only three general background characteristics and salary were correlated significantly with outcome: older workers had a higher morale/outcome score at 12 months ( $r=.35, p<.01$ ), workers from higher SES background were more likely to have quit their jobs (point biserial  $r=.31, p<.01$ ), and those with higher starting salaries were less likely to have quit (point biserial  $r=.24, p<.05$ ). By far, the most consistent and largest relationships involved the general well-being of the worker when they were hired. Well-being correlated .44, .48, and .37 with the composite outcome measure at 3, 12, 18 months respectively. The better adjusted the worker was at the start of the job, the better the later

work outcomes. The relationship of age to favorable work outcomes may be attributable to older worker's acquisition of more experience. Greater experience is a personal attribute that may act as an internal resource enabling the worker to cope more effectively with his or her work demands. Psychological well being was substantially and significantly related to outcome measures that included job stress, burnout, work attributes, and job satisfaction measured from three to eighteen months after entry to the job.

That there is much stress in direct practice social work appears to be an accepted given. One of the difficulties in research seems to be in defining stress and how to measure it in the work place. Considerable variation exists in the definition and measurement of stress. Eva Kahana and colleagues cite that a common definition and measurement of stress eludes researches despite the need to define terms in systematic research (Zed Hare, 1988). Hare (1988) states that stress is a complex condition consisting of many interrelated variables, rather than a simple variable that can be readily measured and correlated with adaptation outcomes. The measuring of morale also is difficult and several instruments have been utilized, some in the form of survey interviews, and others in the form of

questionnaires. How the results are interpreted using the interview method is more subjective than the questionnaires, but number of response categories found usually are anywhere from two to eleven, and it is a time worn assumption of information theory that a greater number of categories conveys more information about the underlying variables of interest (Alwin,1997).

Commonly identified stressors and their sources, according to Jayaratne and Chess (1984), were role ambiguity, role conflict, and work load which related to organizational structure, and client's presenting problems, and hostile clients, which relate to worker-client interaction.

Bureaucration, controls introduced by funding sources, and limits on autonomy are becoming more characteristic of the social services work place (Arches, 1991). Arches' study examined whether workers's perceptions of their work place autonomy and bureaucratization are related to burn out and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction has been defined in more than one study. Arches (1991) defines job satisfaction as an affective state describing feelings about one's work. Glisson and Durick (1988) quote Locke's (1986) definition that job satisfaction is the "positive" emotional state

resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experience."

Hugh Crago (1988) asked: How do staff in low morale/high burnout organizations (social service workers) perceive their own situations? His conclusion was that over and over again the same complaints were heard, voiced in similar words: the clients were demanding and difficult, the work was exhausting and draining, success was rare and failures were many, pre-service training (if any) was inadequate, funding was insufficient, administrators and management committees failed to understand what it is like "at the front line" and the community as a whole does not appreciate the organization's work. Crago defined low morale as "low estimation of its own success, low trust in its administration, low trust between staff members." He stated that certain institutions can maintain low morale for years without frequent resignation occasioned by feeling of cynicism, emptiness, and desperation.

A qualitative research study was done of nine agencies by Motenko, et al. (1995) to determine social worker and client impressions of the effects of federal cutbacks on agency policy and service delivery. The findings included increased demands on social workers for higher productivity levels and more documentation, a deterioration of



collaborative work environments, an inability to meet treatment goals, more severe client conditions on entering and leaving the system, and demands for inappropriate service delivery. The progress achieved by expanded community services was being reversed by a system paralyzed by too many cuts.

The Motenko, et al. (1995) study examined whether using participant observation and interviewing would corroborate the descriptions in the literature of the ways social workers experience cutbacks (and change). Agencies began requiring more monitoring of social workers' time and requiring more documentation. This was done so the agency was able to stay afloat during the changing times, and when figures of expenditure were needed to show cost effectiveness, figures could be readily pulled.

When agencies began requiring higher productivity ratios for social workers, this changed the way services were provided. Findings of the Motenko, et al studies indicated that social workers' frustrations were qualitatively different from low morale as suggested in the(ir) literature review. Social workers were not just overworked by new agency policies; their work environments violated the basic tenets of professional ethics. Admitting clients to agencies unable to serve them and meet their

needs in a responsible manner created a profound professional conflict for the social worker - a conflict that was not personal but societal (Motenko, et al. 1995).

#### REVIEW OF RECENT WELFARE POLICY CHANGES

The stress that past research has documented in social work positions is likely to be exacerbated by recent changes in welfare policy. The new laws have changed from the AFDC eligibility criteria for receiving aid. Many single mothers will not be receiving the usual welfare checks without some commitment and it may be the child protection social worker who will have to monitor that the client keeps the commitment in order to continue to receive aid. It is possible that with lack of funding there will be more cases referred to Child Protective Services since it is these social workers who investigate when children are reported neglected due to lack of proper environment, supervision, nourishment, and health care. The social worker will need to have enough resources to assist the parent(s) or caretaker in finding suitable day care so that the clients will be able to either get training or a job. The implementation of laws can only be met if there are enough resources to meet them.

According to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity reconciliation Act of 1996, in order for a

client to continue getting a TANF grant a commitment to attend school, obtain job training, or become gainfully employed will be mandatory. The social worker that interacts with these welfare clients and assists in procuring the services may be affected since the added requirements will compel more time and documentation. Finding more resources such as approved child care, job training programs and suitable employment may be another task that the social worker may need to develop.

Eliminating income support for young unwed mothers could have an enormous impact on the foster care caseloads if such policies do not result in a rapid decline in out-of-wedlock births (Gueron, 1995). The new welfare reform act has incorporated conditions for teenage unwed mothers and single parents to control the out-of-wedlock births. The new reform act places a time limit for clients to receive aid and stipulates what commitment must be met during that time in order to continue receiving aid. Another stipulation is that there will be no increase in the dollar amount of aid if the client has more children while on aid. The possibilities that there will be a decline in births is hoped for, however; if there is no decline of births there may be more single mothers referred to the social workers with a variety of crisis.

Another factor which may contribute to heavier caseloads is that if there are cuts in welfare grants, there may be more poverty. Courtney (1995) states that poverty is the best predictor of child neglect, as well as a strong predictor of other forms of child maltreatment. Cuts in economic support for low-income families could lead to an increased demand for direct practice services, including substitute care. Most children in substitute care come from single-parent homes, and about half come from AFDC-eligible families. Most of these children are in foster care because of neglect or parental incapacity such as chronic substance abuse, either alcohol or drugs, or mental illness rather than physical or sexual abuse. Thus, many of the families who are most likely to be unable or unwilling to find work or make use of education and training programs are, by and large, the types of families already at relatively high risk of neglecting or abusing their children (Courtney, 1995).

One of the characterizations of the social worker has been that of a person who is always there to assist clients who need help, for example persons experiencing financial, medical, or emotional crisis. It is important to remember what happens in government policy and programs directly affects the social worker's role and sets limits and conditions as to who and how the clients in crisis can be

assisted. The social worker must follow government codes and regulations which at times hinders being accessible and providing all the services a family or individual may need or want. Trying to meet all needs of the clients is a very demanding responsibility.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question that was asked in this study was: Will the new welfare reform policies negatively affect worker morale because they limit services to recipients, and thereby put pressure on recipients which will be felt by workers as clients suffer increased dysfunction?

#### METHODOLOGY

This being an exploratory and descriptive study to gather data and make initial inferences, there was no hypothesis or overall theory to test. Questionnaires were given to 30 direct practice social workers from the two Coachella Valley offices of the Department of Public Social Services. These participants were chosen because they fit the criteria of being direct practice workers who will be able to provide subjective answers, and they were accessible to the researcher. Out of the 30, 23 replies were returned.

The instrument, Appendix C, was a questionnaire consisting of 15 questions. The instrument was revised from two previous studies. There were both open ended and closed

ended questions. The closed ended questions dealt with demographics including age, length of employment, gender, education, and had two or more coded categorical responses.

Nine closed ended questions asked for workers' opinions about their current job satisfaction. These were measured as either dichotomous (yes or no) or ordinal (likert) responses.

Six open ended questions asked respondents to expand on the issues raised about job satisfaction and to give their view of the impact welfare reform might have on their job.

The closed-ended quantitative answers were statistically analyzed. The open-ended questions, or questions to which the participant provided their own subjective answer were relevant to the research question on morale/job satisfaction. (An example of an open-ended question is: Are you happy with your job? yes no What would make you happier?)

Data for this study were gathered by the researcher from the two Coachella Valley offices of public social services, however; any of the social workers that participated in this study were accommodated when they chose to meet someplace else which was more convenient for their schedule. The time needed to fill out the questionnaire was 10-15 minutes.

## PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

An informed consent form, Appendix A, was given to each worker who responded to the questionnaire. If there were any questions about the interpretation of questions asked, the researcher was available to assist and help clarify question without intentionally imposing bias.

This study had no impact upon the participants, strict confidentiality was enforced and the questions were not threatening to the person. There was no tracking system in this study which would connect data with participant. This assured participants that their answers had no impact upon their job security or professional status. Participation was voluntary with no negative consequences. Along with the Informed Consent form the participants also received a Debriefing Statement, Appendix B.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The average age of the 23 responding workers was 46.4 years. The majority (52.2%) were between the age of 45 and 54. The sample was 43.5% male and 56.5% female. The ethnicity of the workers was 69.6% white, 21.7% Hispanic/Latino, and Asian and American Indian were 4.3% each. The degree/major of workers were Bachelors degree 39.1%, Master of Social Work 17.4%, and other Masters 43.5%.

On the closed ended questions, there were 30.1% that felt their salaries were not fair in consideration of the education and work they do. Only 13.0% felt that their salary was fair. In answer to the question about the creativeness of the work, 56.3% thought it was creative, and 43.5% did not believe it was creative. When asked if they as a direct social worker, could make it more creative, 78.3% thought they could not and 21.7% thought that they could.

In the open-ended questions, which were answered more subjectively, 91.3% believed their caseloads were too heavy and 60.9% thought that opportunity for promotion was not there. When asked what would make the opportunity for promotion more satisfying the replies were: there should be more administrative training (39.1%), administrative office for the Coachella Valley should be local rather than in



Riverside (17.4%), a small percentage (13.0%) believed higher salaries would make opportunity for promotion more satisfying, and (30.4%) didn't know what would help.

The social workers were asked if they were happy with their job and 69.6% replied they were, while 30% were not. When asked what would make them happier, lower caseloads were cited by 43.5%, extra clerical help was mentioned by 17.4%, more money by 13.0%, no opinion was offered by 21.7%.

In regard to the impact welfare reform would have on their jobs 34.8% were not sure, need for better resources would be a concern for 26.1%, and 26.1% stated that there would be more neglect cases. There were 69.6% that said presently there were not sufficient resources to address increased caseloads, while 30.4% believed the present resources were sufficient. When asked how welfare reform would affect direct social worker's morale, 56.5% cited that they believed there would be more poverty which would have a negative affect on morale. Both adverse family impact and more neglect were cited by 17.4% as negatively affecting morale. When social worker participants were asked if they wished to continue in direct practice , 87.0% replied yes , 8.7% replied no, and 4.3% didn't know.

When bi-variate associations among two variables were examined, only one significant result emerged that had

substantive meaning. There was a significant correlation between years in social work and the worker being less likely to think they could be more creative in their job ( $r=.0541, p=0.07>$ ).

#### CONCLUSION

Thus study was to ask direct practice social workers what impact welfare reform would have on their morale and the effect on their worker client interactions.

The findings supported previous studies that direct practice social workers have a stressful profession, and that the two main reasons cited are that caseloads are too heavy, and the increased documentation is numerous and time consuming. Some of the solutions given by the direct practice participants are to hire more qualified social workers (M.S.W.'s), and to utilize the help of the clerical staff to do the forms which do not require social work expertise.

There was only one significant result, this correlation was between the number of years the social worker had been in direct practice service work, and their belief that they could make their job more creative. The longer the social worker had been employed the less they were to believe they could make their job more creative. This may be due to the fact that they have decided to stay within the policy and

procedures set down by the agency and feel their input for change would not be heard or appreciated.

Participants also stated that having a better administrative training program in their area, and also having an administrative office locally and accessible to them would help in making promotions more feasible. Since the Coachella Valley is geographically quite isolated from the rest of Riverside County, it could possibly save time, money, and make the desert social workers feel more a "part of" the overall agency if they participated on the local level.

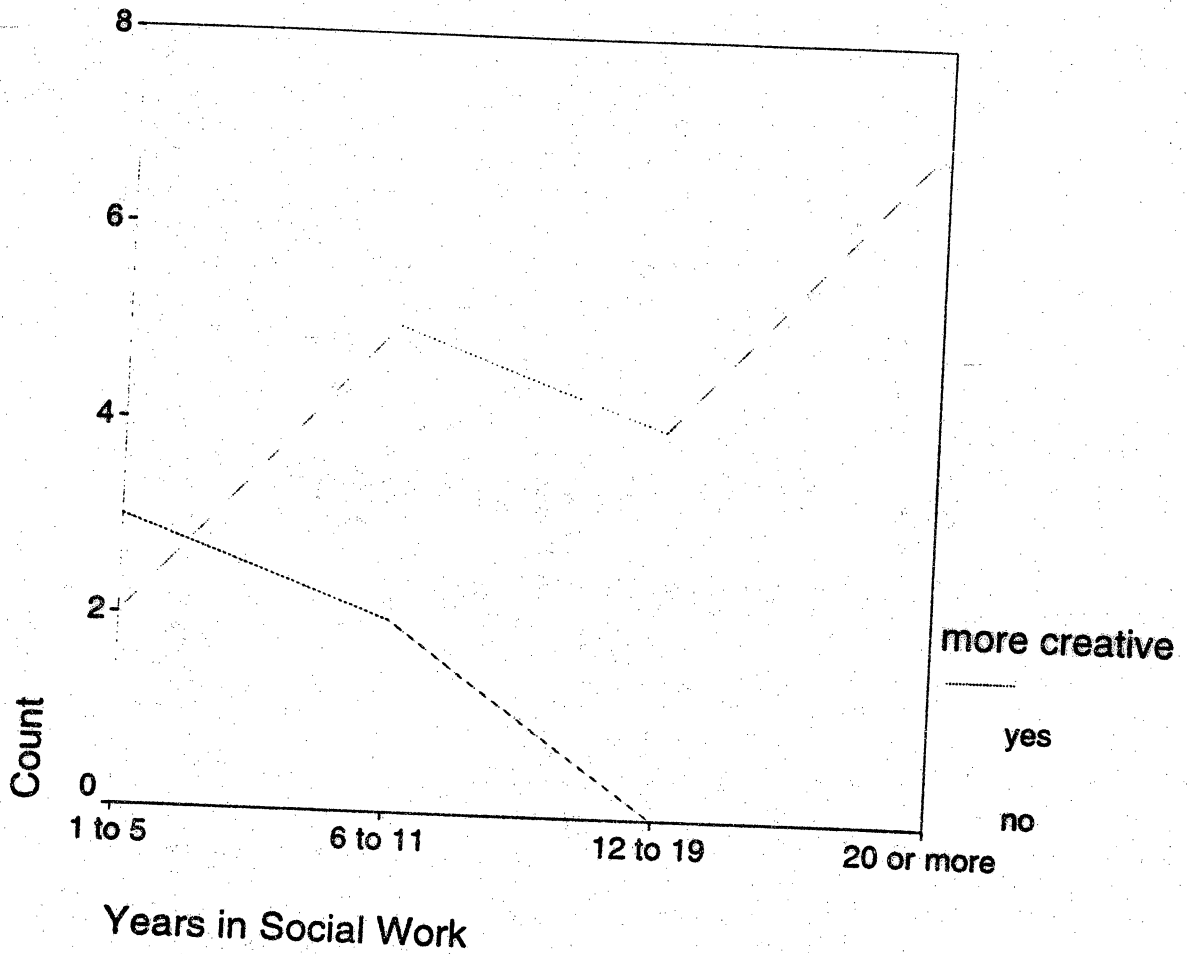
The open-ended questions that were subjectively answered by the participants in regard to how the welfare reform would affect their overall work picture was mostly negative. Most social workers felt that there would be more neglect and poverty, not enough resources to assist clients' new conditional contracts, and creation of even heavier work loads. Other participants were not sure how welfare reform would affect them, and a few felt that it was a positive way to have more clients employed.

Although the study was done in a confined area and the participants were few, the findings did coincide in many areas. The findings that age and experience were two characteristics that contribute to social workers ability to

cope with the frustrations and stress were reiterated. Since the age of participants in this study was 46.4, previous findings were once again substantiated.

There appears to be a need to be able to monitor actual changes in client loads and worker morale as TANF is implemented. Being able to track this would assist in preventing some overloading of cases and assist in maintaining better work morale.

TABLE 1  
LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT TO CREATIVITY



APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

I am a graduate research student at California State University, San Bernardino in the Department of Social Work. I am studying what the perceptions of direct practice social workers may be toward the new welfare reform laws and what affect they have on social workers morale..

You are asked to participate by answering a questionnaire with 15 questions. The questionnaire asks both open-ended and closed-ended questions and should take 10-15 minutes to complete. This participation is completely voluntary and will have no negative consequences upon your relationship with the Department of Public Social Services. Your identity will be held in strictest confidence and you are free to withdraw at any time. Thank you for your time and participation.

Please check below that you have read and understand this informed consent and agree to freely participate. Please mark either and "X" or check mark in space provided.

-----

## APPENDIX B: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

California State University, San Bernardino, and the researcher conducting this study have a responsibility for the insuring that participation in any research sponsored by this university causes no harm or injury to its participants. There is no hoax or sensitive matter that should cause the participant harm in any way. There are no consequences to the response of this research, and there is no undesirable influence that this study would have on participants. Any participant who has further questions about his or her participation may contact either Dora Murillo or Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at the Department of Social Work, California State University Campus, San Bernardino (909) 880-5501.





10. Is your work load too heavy? 1 2  
yes no

What would make it more manageable?

---

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11. Are you satisfied with opportunity for promotion?  
1 2  
yes no

What would provide more satisfying opportunities for promotion?

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12. Most of the time are you happy with your job? 1 2  
yes no

What would make you happier?

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---

---

13. What impact do you think the new welfare reform laws will have with services we (social workers) provide our clients?

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---

14. Do you think the new welfare reform will affect morale?  
morale?

How? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

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15. Do you wish to continue in direct practice of social work?     1          2    
                        yes                  no

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