

After Hours:

Analyzing the Impact of On-Call Duties
On Social Workers' Work-life Balance,
Physical and Mental Health, and
Service Delivery in Child Welfare

A Mixed-Methods Study

Cecilia Reyes, MSW

About Me

- Fresno State Graduate
- Title IV-E
 - Bachelors 2010
 - Masters 2025
- Tulare County Child Welfare Services
Social Worker since 2010



Why Examine On-Call Duties?

- On-call coverage is legally and ethically required
- Child Welfare Services operate 24/7
- Limited research focuses specifically on on-call services in Child Welfare
- Understanding impact is critical to workforce sustainability

Purpose of the Study

- Examine the impact of on-call duties on social workers
- Assess work-life balance outcomes
- Explore physical and mental health impacts
- Understand service delivery implications and coping

Gaps in the Literature

- Limited Child Welfare specific research on on-call duties
- Few studies center on the workers' voice and lived experience
- Minimal integration of service delivery outcomes
- Limited focus on organizational policy implications

Literature Review

- On-Call and extended work hours disrupt work-life balance
- Long and unpredictable hours increase stress and burnout
- Sleep disruption and fatigue are common among on-call workers
- Non-standard hours strain family relationships and recovery time

(A QR code with full references is provided at the end of the presentation.)

Literature Review (continued)

- Sleep disruption linked to fatigue and physical health concerns
- Long work hours associated with cardiovascular and inflammatory risks
- Fatigue impairs cognitive functioning and decision-making
- Service quality may be affected under conditions of exhaustion

(A QR code with full references is provided at the end of the presentation.)

Research Design

- Mixed-method study
- Survey responses (n = 44)
- In-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 9)
- Focus on work-life balance, health, service delivery, and coping
- Data triangulation to strengthen validity

Participant Characteristics

- All survey participants were from Tulare County
- Child Welfare Social Workers with on-call experience
- Range of experience: 1 year to 10+ years
- Majority caregivers and parents
- Multiple program areas represented

Work-Life Balance Findings

- 52.2% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with work-life balance
- 61.3% usually or always felt overwhelmed
- 79.5% sometimes to always missed personal commitments
- Feeling overwhelmed significantly predicted lower satisfaction ($p = .004$)

Physical Health Findings

- 65.9% reported sleep was always disrupted while on-call
- 52.3% usually or always felt physically fatigued
- Exhaustion reported during and after on-call shifts
- Limited recovery time between shifts

Mental Health Findings

- High levels of stress and emotional fatigue are reported
- 56.8% usually or always felt anxious or stressed
- 59.1% usually or always felt overwhelmed by on-call duties
- 50% rated their mental health as “fair.”
- Anticipatory anxiety reported prior to on-call shifts (interviews)
- Indicators consistent with burnout emerged across experience levels

Service Delivery Implications

- Fatigue impacted concentration and decision-making
- Reduced confidence in service quality reported
- Feeling overwhelmed predicted reduced service confidence ($p = .005$)
- Participants described ethical concerns related to fatigue and safety
- High-stakes decisions occurred during periods of exhaustion and limited recovery

Coping Strategies Used by Workers

- Peer and family support were most commonly used
- Exercise, routines, and self-care practices assisted with stress management
- Experience improved coping efficiency over time
- Coping strategies were helpful, but were insufficient without recovery and organizational support

Interpreting Findings Through a Systems Lens

- On-call stress is structurally produced
- Staffing, scheduling, and recovery time are key drivers
- Individual resilience has limits
- Organizational conditions shape experience

Organizational Considerations

- Voluntary on-call scheduling
- Flexible scheduling options
- Formal recovery time following on-call shifts
- Role-specific on-call training
- Consistent supervisory and peer support
- Supports do not eliminate on-call; they support sustainability over time

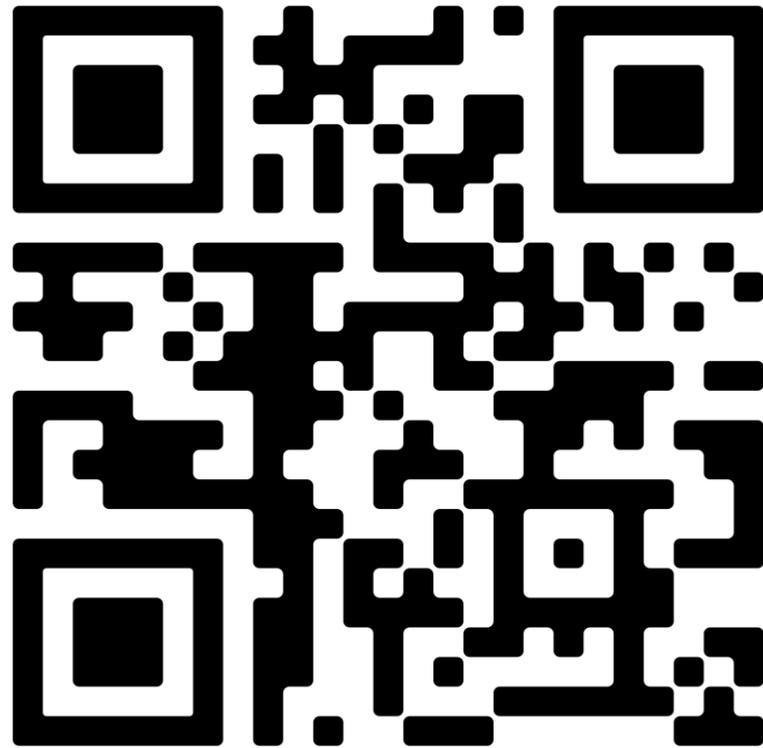
Key Takeaways tied to Participant Responses

- On-call duties significantly strain workers' well-being
- Chronic strain may affect retention and service quality over time
- System-level supports contribute to sustainability

Closing Reflections and Future Directions

- On-call is essential to timely response and child safety
- A sustainable on-call structure benefits children & families, workers, and county agencies
- Understanding these dynamics supports informed planning, continuity, and decision-making
- Sustainability is not about eliminating on-call, but about maintaining capacity over time
- Literature on child welfare-specific on-call models is limited; additional study is needed
- Comparative research across counties and states could inform workforce and service delivery approaches
- Exploring alternative models can help identify practices that benefit both county operations and the workforce
- Thank you for your time and leadership

Sources



SCAN ME