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Anita Barbee

University of Louisville – Kent School of Social Work and Family Science

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More Research is Needed on the Impact of Workplace Violence, Bullying and Sexual Harassment in Child Welfare (Blog Post)

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Many employees working in social services are exposed to workplace violence (described in [Andersen, et al., 2018](#)) and bullying (discussed in [Whitaker, 2012](#)). The workplace violence paper showed not only that up to three-fourths of social workers are exposed to violence at work, but that organizational structures and dynamics set the stage for violence to occur. Settings where staff lacked role clarity and predictability, and where emotional demands, role conflict, and work family conflict were high, also were associated with more threats and violence among employees and by clients. These findings, in addition to studies on bullying, seem to point to a need for changes in organizational culture and climate to lower the incidence of both problems. Another challenge facing the workforce is sexual harassment, however, few studies have examined sexual harassment in social work and the ones that do focus mostly on students. One study in Ireland ([O'Reilly and Garrett, 2019](#)) found that most female social workers had experienced sexual harassment on the job. While the study of the effects of interacting with traumatized clients and managing staff trauma histories, mental health issues, and secondary trauma is increasing, more attention needs to be paid to the other workplace hazards (e.g., bullying, violence, and sexual harassment) that could exacerbate secondary trauma and exits from the child welfare workforce.

The QIC-WD needs assessment process did not specifically ask about workplace violence, bullying or harassment in our sites. Yet some of our sites are working to address primary and secondary traumatic stress and organizational culture, all of which could impact negative workplace behaviors. In our research, we are exploring how people behave and if that differs from more normal operations. One of our research questions is how staff behave towards colleagues during challenging workforce events to better understand how that impacts overall organizational culture and climate, morale, interpersonal relationships and work with families.

The following studies examined workplace violence, bullying, and sexual harassment in human services settings. We provide a brief synopsis of each article below.

[Andersen, L. P., Hogh, A., Biering, K., & Gaadegaard, C. A. \(2018\). Work-related threats and violence in human service sectors: The importance of the psycho-social work environment examined in a multi-level prospective study. *Work*, 59, 141–154.](#)

Since 61–76 percent of employees in human services reported exposure to work-related violence in the past year (health, mental health, prison, and school settings), this study with 3,011 participants sought to better understand why some employees experience violence while others don't. Across all sectors, the

more emotional demands, role conflict, and work-family conflict, and the less predictability and role clarity there was, the more threats and violence there were.

O'Reilly, A., & Garrett, P. M. (2019). Playing the game? The sexual harassment of female social workers across professional workplaces. *International Social Work* 62.1: 105–118.

To date, the six studies that focus on sexual harassment in social work focus on student experiences. This study, by contrast, is a qualitative study of female social workers in Ireland regarding experiences of sexual harassment at work. Eighty-three percent experienced sexual harassment. Most was in the form of “humor,” but some reports were more serious. Most respondents reported using passive forms of coping (e.g., avoiding the perpetrator) rather than confronting the harassment.

Whitaker, T. 2012. Social workers and workplace bullying: Perceptions, responses and implications. *Work*, 42,115–123.

A non-experimental, cross-sectional study of 111 social workers in many settings (e.g., government, mental health, child welfare) assessed workforce harassment and coping. Fifty-eight percent were targets of bullying more than once over the past year. All levels experienced bullying, and most perpetrators were women and/or supervisors. The most troubling forms of bullying were gossip, being talked down to, screamed at, humiliated, and evaluated as less good than they really are, and having work contributions ignored.