



Umbrella Summary

Workload

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is workload?

There is no one, universally accepted definition of workload. A broad definition is that it is “an all-encompassing term that includes any variable reflecting the amount or difficulty of one’s work” (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012, p. 222). Quantitative workload is the label for the amount of work done, and qualitative workload is the label for the difficulty of work (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Further, there is a distinction between mental and physical workload and between objective and perceived workload (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012).

A variety of approaches have been used to measure objective workload. A common one focuses on the number of hours worked in a week, either gathered via self-report or timesheet records (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Perceived workload measures, on the other hand, ask for employee perceptions about the volume and difficulty of their work. A variety of measures have been used for this type of workload as well. Example items include “How often does your job require you to work very hard?” (Spector & Jex, 1988) and “Today I have too much work to do for my job” (Ilies et al., 2007).

A related concept is role overload, which is the experience when “role demands create the perception that available resources are inadequate to deal with them, resulting in distraction and stress” (Kahn et al., 1964, cited in Brown et al., 2005). A clear distinction has not been made between role overload and high perceived workload, and they are often measured in similar ways. Example role overload items include “The amount of work I am expected to do is too great” (Bolino & Turnley, 2005) and “How often does the amount of work you do interfere with how well the work gets done?” (Brown et al., 2005).

In child welfare, caseload is a common indicator of workload, though it has obvious limitations, given the varied demands of different cases. Whereas caseload metrics include counts of the number of children or families assigned to workers, workload refers to “the amount of work required to successfully manage assigned cases and bring them to resolution” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Both of these are objective measures of workload; thus, they are distinct from perceptions of workload or role overload, which offer an additional perspective on work demands. Though meta-analytic research has not been done on child welfare caseload or workload studies, further information on those topics can be found in the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s (2016) [Caseload and Workload Management](#) issue brief.

Why is workload important?

The meta-analytic research on workload has a) focused on employee perceptions and b) included measures of role overload. Defined as such, it is associated with several job attitudes and stress indicators. Specifically, workload is moderately related to lower job satisfaction, higher burnout, higher psychological strain, and higher turnover intentions (Bowling et al., 2015). It is only modestly associated with lower organizational commitment and is, surprisingly, not associated with job performance (Bowling et al., 2015). The connection between workload and actual employee turnover is unknown.

Can workload be improved?

Though there are many strategies that have the potential to improve actual or perceived workload, research is limited. In some cases, the strategies have been studied very little or not at all, and in other cases, empirical work has been done but workload has not been measured as an outcome. Instead, the focus has been on other indicators of effectiveness, such as job attitudes and employee behaviors. For example, there are many ways of ensuring that employees have the required knowledge and skills to meet job demands (e.g., hiring, onboarding, training), but the extensive research on those processes has not specifically focused on perceived workload, which is likely to be affected by employees' capacity to manage the volume and difficulty of their job duties.

Reduced-load work arrangements are not uncommon, but they are often customized to individual employees on an ad hoc basis, making them harder to study systematically. Nonetheless, rich qualitative data have been gathered that describe an array of strategies and contextual factors that could be implemented in a more systematic and formalized fashion (see [Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020](#); [Lee et al., 2000](#), & [Lee et al., 2002](#)).

A well-established process for systematically restructuring jobs is known as job redesign (Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Though job redesign is not usually focused specifically on reducing workload (indeed, it was developed in response to efforts that focused on simplifying jobs, often at the expense of employee satisfaction and motivation; for a review of five key work design perspectives see [Parker et al., 2017](#)), the process can still take workload factors into account, and changes to perceived workload may be a natural byproduct. Again, most job design studies do not examine the effects on workload or workload perceptions, so this is speculative. One noteworthy exception is the QIC-WD's partnership with the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services on a [job redesign effort](#) that has involved developing and implementing a team approach to child welfare case management.

Other promising possibilities for decreasing either or both objective or subjective workload in child welfare fall into the following categories: a) enhancing work processes and supports, b) implementing program, practice, and system changes, c) staffing, and d) improving worker effectiveness. For further details, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway's (2016) [Caseload and Workload Management](#) issue brief.

Some of the potential arrangements described above may seem unlikely or unsuitable for a child welfare agency, but with creativity, flexibility, a partnership with human resources and other stakeholders (e.g., workforce, management, union), and careful monitoring of outcomes, innovative strategies have the potential to change the landscape of jobs that are widely known for excessive workload.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ The meta-analytic research on workload has a) focused on employee perceptions and b) included measures of role overload.
- ▶ Workload is moderately related to lower job satisfaction, higher burnout, higher psychological strain, and higher turnover intentions.
- ▶ Workload is only modestly associated with lower organizational commitment and is not associated with job performance.
- ▶ The connection between workload and actual employee turnover is unknown.
- ▶ Though there are many strategies that have the potential to improve actual or perceived workload, research is limited.
- ▶ For rich qualitative data on an array of strategies and contextual factors for reducing workload, see [Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020](#); [Lee et al., 2000](#), & [Lee et al., 2002](#).
- ▶ A well-established process for systematically restructuring jobs is known as job redesign. Though job redesign is not usually focused on specifically reducing workload the process can still take workload factors into account, and changes to perceived workload may be a natural byproduct.
- ▶ The QIC-WD has partnered with the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services on a [job redesign effort](#) that has involved developing and implementing a team approach to child welfare case management.
- ▶ For a host of other promising possibilities for decreasing either or both objective or subjective workload, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Caseload and Workload Management](#) issue brief.

References

Bolino, M. C., & Turnley, W. H. (2005). The personal costs of citizenship behavior: The relationship between individual initiative and role overload, job stress, and work–family conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*, 740–748.

Bowling, N. A., Alarcon, G. M., Bragg, C. B., and Hartman, M. J. (2015). A meta-analytic examination of the potential correlates and consequences of workload. *Work Stress, 29*, 95–113.

Bowling, N. A., & Kirkendall, C. (2012). Workload: A review of causes, consequences, and potential interventions. In J. Houdmont, S. Leka, & R. R. Sinclair (Eds.), *Contemporary occupational health psychology: Global perspectives on research and practice* (Vol. 2, pp. 221–238). Wiley.

Brown S. P., Jones E., & Leigh, T. W. (2005). The attenuating effect of role overload on relationships linking self-efficacy and goal level to work performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*, 972–979.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Caseload and workload management*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau.

Hackman, J. R., & Lawler, E. E., III (1971). Employee reactions to job characteristics. *Journal of Applied Psychology Monograph, 55*, 259–286.

Ilies, R., Schwind, K. M., Wagner, D. T., Johnson, M. D., DeRue, D. S., & Ilgen, D. R. (2007). When can employees have a family life? The effects of daily workload and affect on work–family conflict and social behavior at work. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 92*, 1368–1379.

Kossek, E. E., & Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2020). Desperately seeking sustainable careers: Redesigning professional jobs for the collaborative crafting of reduced-load work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 117*, Article 103315.

Lee, M. D., MacDermid, S. M., & Buck, M. L. (2000). Organizational paradigms of reduced-load work: Accommodation, elaboration, & transformation. *Academy of Management Journal, 43*, 1211–1226.

Lee, M. D., MacDermid, S. M., Williams, M. L., Buck, M. L., & Leiba-O’Sullivan, S. (2002). Contextual factors in the success of reduced-load work arrangements among managers and professionals. *Human Resource Management, 41*, 209–223.

Parker, S. K., Morgeson, F. P., & Johns, G. (2017). One hundred years of work design research: Looking back and looking forward. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 102*, 403–420.

Spector, P. E., & Jex, S. M. (1998). Development of four self-report measures of job stressors and strain: Interpersonal conflict at work scale, organizational constraints scale, quantitative workload inventory, and physical symptoms inventory. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 3*, 356–367.

Author(s)

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Suggested Citation

Paul, M. (2021, August 4). *Umbrella summary: Workload*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/workload>

For general information about Umbrella Summaries, visit <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summaries-faq>

For more information about the QIC-WD, visit qic-wd.org or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at mgraef1@unl.edu.

This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016-ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.