# *The Canadian Experience in Conceptualizing and Evaluating Child Welfare Workload: A Moving Target*

**Deborah Goodman, MSW, RSW, PhD**
**Howard Hurwitz, MSW, RSW**

Dr. Goodman is the manager of research and program evaluation at the Child Welfare Institute, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, and is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. She has over 25 years of frontline, management, research, evaluation, and teaching experience in the child welfare and child and family fields. She was principal investigator for the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies Workload Measurement Project (Phase 3).

Mr. Hurwitz is the director of children's services at Jewish Family and Child Service in Toronto, Ontario. He is responsible for all child welfare services and programs related to child protection services. Mr. Hurwitz is a senior manager with 29 years' experience in various child welfare and children's mental health agencies. He was the project manager for the 1997-2003 Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies Workload Measurement Project (Phases 1, 2, 3).

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## Background

At the start of the millennium child welfare practitioners in Ontario, Canada, felt a compelling need to tackle the issue of workload in children's aid societies (CASs). *The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* had found substantial increases in families served by CASs, coupled with a doubling of the rate of substantiated child maltreatment from 9.64 to 21.71 per 1,000 children (Trocmé, Fallon, Maclaurin, & Copp, 2002). In 2000, most of Ontario's 50 CASs (up to 53 CASs in 2008), although publicly funded with a combined line budget of $1 billion, still had deficits along with burgeoning caseloads. While the provincial funder of child welfare in Ontario, the Ministry of Child and Youth Services (MCYS), revised the CAS funding framework under its 1997 Child Welfare Reform Initiative, the reality was a significant amount of child welfare work either had no benchmarks or benchmarks that had never been tested.

To address this issue, a three-phase, 4-year (1999-2003) Workload Measurement Project (WMP) was undertaken by the field. It was led by the Ontario Association for Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), the provincial umbrella organization for the 50 CASs (OACAS, 2001, 2003).

- Phase 1, which took place between 1999 and 2000 (OACAS, 2001), entailed a review of the literature, detailing study conceptualization and outlining the methodological approach.
- Phase 2, which took place between 2000 and 2001 (OACAS, 2001), involved developing a taxonomy of tasks that reflected current MCYS standards for all frontline service areas: investigation, family service, child-in-care placement, foster and adoption services,

and worker court and travel time. The workload survey tools developed were tested with a total of 251 frontline child welfare workers from 32 of 50 CASs, and workload data on 5,436 cases were collected over a 2-week period in 2000 in the aforementioned areas. Study recommendations included extending data collection in Phase 3 with specific surveys to a 1-month period to better capture the breadth of workload requirements for certain services (i.e., court, travel, admission to care).

- Phase 3, which took place between 2001 and 2003 (OACAS, 2003), entailed collecting "real-time" workload data from 38 of 50 CASs on 3,188 cases handled by 692 workers in fall 2001 in the areas of admission to care, adoption services, and foster services (some workers contributed data in more than one service area). Additionally, 731 workers contributed matched court and travel survey data (only surveys for which workers provided both court workload data and travel workload data for the 4-week survey period were used), 76 workers provided data on foster care recruitment and training, and 44 workers supplied workload data on adoption recruitment and training. WMP Phase 3 (WMP-3) outcomes showed that where MCYS benchmarks existed, the average time to perform services exceeded every MCYS benchmark; WMP-3 also established benchmarks in areas where none had existed, such as in admission to care of a child and in most of the adoption services and foster services areas.

**Measuring Child Welfare Workload—A 'Moving Target'**

Ensuring that funding benchmarks accurately reflect current realities of frontline CAS work is an ongoing challenge and a "moving target." Like many other jurisdictions across Canada, the province of Ontario (with a population in excess of 11 million in 2005) saw its child welfare services significantly expand during the 1990s. In child welfare, change truly is a constant.

For example, in less than a decade (1997 to 2005), the Ontario CAS field has been engaged in two major reformation initiatives. Currently, the field is in the early stages of implementing a new MCYS child welfare strategy—the 2005 "Transformation Agenda" (TA). This initiative, embraced by the field, is very broad and comprehensive in its intent. TA involves expanding services (e.g., open adoption, permanency options) as well as new CAS services (e.g., community link services, formalized kinship services). As a result, TA has led to new and/or enhanced standards, a stronger focus on client outcomes and accountability, more attention to benchmark attainment, a multiple-year funding methodology, and a no-deficit budget expectation. Financial remuneration for agencies is now tied more closely to maintaining "corridor adherence," which is based on the alignment of forecasted-to-actual service numbers.

It is commonly recognized that workload is and always will be a topic of high relevance for child welfare. As aptly noted by the American Humane Association, "Workload influences service excellence" (2000). However the status of workload as the most concerning field issue appears to cycle in and out of field importance when viewed across time periods. An agency, state, or province's drive to examine workload tends to be a site- and time-specific "must do"

item. Therefore, outcomes of various workload studies are often unique to the standards and contexts examined. This, in turn, has made the ability to generalize about workload results seem more method-driven and tool-based than focused on metrics or outcomes. The American Humane Association's Workload Analysis and Resource Management (WARM) model (2000) used in child welfare workload examinations in Texas, Maryland, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Ohio underscores this point.

Without question workload in child welfare is a significant concern for agencies, staff, clients, and funders in the field. Yet, evaluating child welfare workload has proven to be a complicated endeavor—another "moving target." How can we measure CAS services when they seem to be constantly changing? When standards, best practices, and knowledge are not static within—let alone across—states/provinces? Can workload be examined when there is high workforce turnover (which is usually when the call to examine workload is made)? How should we accommodate issues related to agency context, such as socio-economic variance, specialized versus generalized service, and language differences? How can we address methodological issues inherent in measuring workload? Do we measure how long it actually takes to do a task, how long it should take if all resources are available, or how long it will take with new standards in place? What is "sufficient time"? Should a new worker have a different metric from a seasoned worker? Is work performed in rural settings to be judged differently from that performed in urban settings? Should caseload mix (e.g., more court time versus less court time, more complex cases versus those that are less complex) be measured differently? Is a time log the best approach for data collection, or are tracking estimates preferred? And what is a reasonable length of time to track CAS workload—2 weeks, 1 month, or an even longer period that might better capture the work, such as the time to fully complete an adoption home study? Identifying key workload questions like these is critical to assessing and determining the preferred methods that will yield answers.

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A review of the North American literature indicates that the approach to measuring child welfare workload has been quite varied (American Humane Association, 2000; Harvey, Mandell, Stalker, & Frensch, 2003; New York Office of Children and Family Services, 2006; OACAS, 2003; Ministry of Alberta Children and Youth Services, 1992; British Columbia Ministry of Children and Families, 1997; Child and Family Services of Western Manitoba, 1989; California Department of Social Services, 2000; Idaho Legislative Office of Performance Evaluations, 2006; Oregon Department of Human Services, 2008; Vermont Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, 1988; Washington State Children's Administration, Department of Social and Health Services, 2007). It also indicates that the preponderance of the learning, in particular more recent examinations of child welfare workload, has been American-led.

The unique contribution of this paper is its examination of child welfare workload through a Canadian lens, using a study based on a sufficiently large sample of cases drawn from across the province. This paper begins by summarizing study methodology and highlighting key WMP-3 study results (OACAS, 2003). What emerged regarding best practices in conducting a successful study on workload is noted, along with a critique of the advantages and

| SAMPLE CORE TASK: ADMISSION TO CARE |
|---|
| 1. Decision made to admit child. Consultation with supervisor regarding placement options. |
| 2. Assess the availability and appropriateness of extended family and community support options for placement. |
| 3. If child is at immediate risk, locate most appropriate emergency placement to meet needs of child in a safe place. |
| 4. Notify the band (First Nations) where necessary. |
| 5. Notify other agency personnel regarding the need for placement and legal action. |
| 6. Complete child care data form within 24 hours. |

disadvantages of the approach taken. Finally, the challenges and benefits in transforming workload data into caseload data and caseload data into workload data are discussed. Suggestions are offered on how agencies might gather workload/caseload data on an ongoing basis to assist in the workload management effort.

**WMP-3: Summary**

## Methodology

WMP-3 was completed over a 2-year period (2001-2003). It was guided by a field-led Steering Committee that had broad representation from the various types of child welfare agencies across the province (e.g., urban versus rural, generic versus culture-specific, single-service or child protection-only versus multi-service). The lead project manager had extensive CAS field, management, and project experience, and the principal investigator selected had spent 20 years in child welfare doing field work, management, teaching, and research.

## Conceptual Framework and the WMP-3 Study Tool

The study's conceptual framework included an examination of all aspects of CAS work, not just areas that had MCYS benchmarks. Workload survey tools were developed in WMP-2 and refined and updated for WMP-3. These tools had standardized formatting but were specific to each area; each tool reflected a comprehensive list of all tasks specific to the relevant service unit (e.g., intake and family services, children in care, foster care and adoption, court and travel). The comprehensiveness of each workload survey tool was validated by field review (consensus-based review); where standards existed, tasks were matched to current standards (see example above from the Admission to Care WMP-3 Survey Tool with six of the tool's 44 areas noted).

## Sampling and Data Collection

A convenience sample—in other words, one for which cases and workers could be easily accessed—was employed. All sample size requirements for each area (e.g., intake and family services, children in care, foster care and adoption, court and travel) were set prior to the data collection. All survey areas met or exceeded sample size requirements with the exception of the Post-Adoption Survey, for which a minimum sample of 85 cases was required and 62 were obtained.

The data collection period was from October to December 2001. The length of data collection varied between a minimum of 4 weeks (e.g., court, travel, admission to care) to a maximum of 3 months (e.g., foster and adoption home studies). In other words, the time required to track the survey data was dependent on the

**Table 1: WMP-3 Study Findings**

| Survey module | Service unit | MCYS benchmark [funder] | WMP-3 number of cases | WMP-3 number of workers | WMP-3 number of CASs | WMP-3 results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Admission** | Admission to Care | None | 177 | 242 | 23 | 25.9 hours per child |
| **Court** | Court | Included in direct service | Not a caseload | 731 | 20 | 2.65 hours per week or 111 hours per year, per worker |
| **Travel** | Travel | None | Not a caseload | 731 | 20 | 3.94 hours per week or 166 hours per year, per worker |
| **Foster care** | Recruitment | None | Not a caseload | 73 | 28 | 29.9 hours per month, per worker |
| | Training | None | Not a caseload | 76 | 26 | 20.5 hours per month, per worker |
| | Approval & Assessment | 20 hours [includes recruitment] | 187 | 40 | 16 | 25.7 hours to complete a foster home study |
| | Matching & Placement | None | 513 | 51 | 20 | 3.85 hours to match & place a foster care |
| | Evaluation & Annual Review | None | 323 | 61 | 19 | 3.1 hours per foster home, per year |
| | Support | 3 hours per month per foster home | 957 | 77 | 20 | 4.92 hours per month, per foster home |
| **Adoption** | Recruitment-General | None | Not a caseload | 44 | 19 | 12.6 hours per month, per worker |
| | Recruitment-Child Specific | None | Not a caseload | 40 | 18 | 18.2 hours per month, per worker |
| | Training | None | Not a caseload | 35 | 16 | 11.3 hours per month, per worker |
| | Assessment & Approval | 20 hours [include recruitment] | 147 | 36 | 17 | 19.75 hours to complete an adoption home study |
| | Maintain Contact Approved Homes | None | 96 | 27 | 15 | 2.35 hours per month, per adoptive home |
| | Matching & Placement | None | 185 | 42 | 18 | 15.7 hours to match & place an adoptive home |
| | Support | None | 237 | 44 | 18 | 4.6 hours per month, per adoptive home |
| | Finalization | None | 72 | 33 | 16 | 2.6 hours per adoptive home |
| | Post-Adoption | None | 62 | 18 | 12 | 2.8 hours per month, per adoptive home |
| | Disclosure | None | 232 | 21 | 14 | 4.48 hours per case for adoption disclosure |

actual completion of the preponderance of the work within that time period. Most surveys used a caseload tracking/time log method, where workers collected actual time on each case for an entire caseload.

Exceptions to the caseload tracking approach included the Admission to Care Survey, which tracked each of 177 children at the time they entered care during the set 30-day period across 23 CASs participating in this survey type. The Admission to Care WMP-3 Survey Tool followed each child's file for the first 30 days to ensure all possible worker time (e.g., night-duty worker, intake worker, children's service worker, family worker) was tracked and captured during that initial 30-day period. Also, court and travel standalone surveys tracked all worker time in those areas over a 4-week period. Only surveys that had worker-matched court and travel data were used. Work related to foster care and adoption recruitment, and foster care and adoption training also did not follow a caseload tracking approach. As well, workload related to both foster assessment (foster home study) and adoption assessment (adoption home study) was tracked over a longer period of time (3 months) to account for a realistic timespan of work related to completing all tasks.

### Results

Data were inputted into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 10.1. Not including the Court and Travel Survey data, a total of 251 frontline child welfare workers from 38 of 50 CASs provided information on the time it takes to complete tasks in the survey areas. Data were collected on 5,436 cases. Extreme/outlier scores were removed and average or mean times to completion were reported. See Table 1 for a summary of survey results.

### Summary: WMP-3 Limitations and Findings

WMP study findings were seminal in that this evidence-based approach to workload measurement informed both the field and the funder, MCYS, on actual time for service by job type and area. WMP examined areas that had MCYS benchmarks and established that in each area actual work took longer than the funder's benchmark, suggesting that the area was underfunded (e.g., foster care assessment, foster care support, adoption assessment). WMP also shed important light on workload demands in service areas that had no MCYS benchmarks (e.g., admission to care, most foster services, adoption services).

WMP was instrumental in establishing that a significant gap existed between the funder's determination of how much time a full-time equivalent (FTE) child welfare worker could devote to work each year (34.2 weeks, minus vacation and travel time), and what WMP determined it was: 29.9 weeks. The difference of 4.3 weeks per worker means the funder is anticipating an additional month of work available from each FTE frontline staff across the province, when in fact at least 1 day per week is consumed with just court and travel duties. This variance goes directly to understanding, at least in part, CAS's budget deficit (Table 2).

WMP limitations in using a convenience sample were somewhat countered by the large, representative agency and case sample sizes. A recommendation for subsequent studies is to stratify the agencies by size, randomly sample the agencies, and randomly sample the workers within those agencies. Additional limitations were found in the preferred methodology in capturing workload associated with recruitment and training of foster and adoptive parents. WMP-3 documented the amount of time per task related to overall workload since recruitment and training are not case-specific services. While this

**Table 2: Time Available for Work (per FTE, per Year)**

| | MCYS funding framework | WMP-2 (2001) & WMP-3 (2002) | Difference between MCYS & WMP |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Total days available per year (52 weeks @ 5 days per week)** | 261.0 | 261.0 | 0 |
| **Days unavailable for work** | | | |
| Statutory holidays | 11.0 | 11.0 | |
| Vacation | 20.0 | 20.0 | |
| Sick leave | 6.0 | 6.0 | |
| Other leave | 0.0 | 0.0 | |
| Training and staff development | 14.0 | 14.0 | |
| Subtotal | 51 days | 51 days | |
| **Potential days available for work per year (42 weeks @ 5 days per week)** | 210 days | 210 days | 0 |
| **Hours available for work** | | | |
| Per day | 6.5 | 6.5 | |
| Per year (days times hours available | 1,365 hours | 1,365 hours | |
| **Hours not available for work** | | | |
| Travel | 136.0 | 166.0 | |
| Non-direct casework | 117.0 | 117.0 | |
| Hygiene breaks | 0.0 | 0.0 | |
| Subtotal per year | 253 hours | 283 hours | |
| **Hours available per FTE, per year (available hours minus unavailable hours)** | 1,112 hours | 1,082 hours | [30 hours] |
| **Court time per year** | **Included in direct services** | **111 hours** | |
| **Hours available per FTE, per year** | 1,112 hours | 971 hours | [141 hours] |
| **Days available per FTE, per year (total hours/hours per day)** | 171 days | 149.4 days | [21.6 days] |
| **Weeks available per FTE, per year** | 34.2 weeks | 29.9 weeks | [4.3 weeks] |

**NOTE:** MCYS Funding Framework Staffing Benchmarks include court activities; WMP separates the time spent in court activity from time available for work.

methodology proved effective in more accurately measuring the average time spent on recruitment and training activities, the WMP-3 finding is in hours per month, and as such is not comparable to or compatible with MCYS benchmark measurements, which are in hours per case. Another study recommendation is for MCYS to change this benchmark to more accurately reflect the reality of recruitment and training workload activities.

For the Ontario child welfare field, the WMP study represented a substantial undertaking by the CASs in effort, time, commitment, and financial underwriting. Without question there are workload implications in conducting a workload study. However, the benefits reaped from WMP were significant for the field in that new learning about workload was generated (e.g., the amount of worker time spent in court and travel), as well as findings that both affirmed and imploded practice beliefs (e.g., CASs not being funded at the level of the work provided). Of great interest and importance was the learning that occurred regarding the preferred process of undertaking such a study. In fact, the process was as important as the product; the positive aspects and ramifications of the process most certainly had a direct impact on the ability to efficiently and effectively complete this large workload study. The following section notes "lessons learned" and highlights the assessment of the necessary ingredients for successful future workload measurement endeavors in child welfare.

## WMP Lessons Learned

WMP took a field-based, participatory approach to learning about child welfare workload. All 50 CASs were invited and encouraged to participate. The three phases of the WMP also allowed learning from one phase to inform subsequent phases. A retrospective examination of the 4-year study process identified the following key "takeaways."

### *Participatory Approach Essential*

WMP was structured in a manner that used a broad, field-based Steering Committee. The role of the Steering Committee was to provide support and advice to the principal researcher and project manager. The Steering Committee was also used effectively to make recommendations around areas that required problem solving (e.g., extending the length of survey time regarding data collection on foster and adoption assessments or home studies).

WMP's participatory approach strategically included representatives from the two large trade unions, which represented thousands of staff from various child welfare agencies in Ontario. Including each labor union was an important validation of the unions' broad concerns about workload issues for their membership. Including union staff in this committee had the added benefit of recognizing the unions' "voice." This ensured that their views on a provincial level were given ample weight. As a result, the labor unions were strong supporters of participating in the WMP project and communicated this regularly to their membership locals.

The 17-member Steering Committee was also composed of a cross-section of staff from all levels within the CASs. These included frontline, supervisory, and senior management staff from the 50 Ontario CASs. Agency representation was based on variables such as size of agency, geographic location, and multi-service function. Consequently, the committee ensured broad representation and signaled a high level of collaboration across CASs. The lessons learned for future studies on workload suggest that participation must be inclusive of all child welfare's various stakeholders.

***Clear Study Focus, Aggregate Approach***

From the onset of WMP, the Steering Committee clearly defined the purpose of the project by crafting the WMP terms of reference. The study's primary purpose was to develop a workload methodology to respond to and quantify a major service issue/problem in child welfare. In addition, the WMP's stated goal was to measure workload so that adequate caseloads can be achieved, which will lead to better service for clients. WMP was never intended as an effort to measure productivity of staff. This point was repeatedly made throughout WMP communications to reassure staff that the data would not be used to determine individual staff efficiency.

The Steering Committee also ensured that when WMP data were produced and shared with agencies it was always in an aggregate, non-identifying manner. As a result of these safeguards, results were never used to target marginal employees or individual agencies. Additionally, WMP did provide opportunities for agencies to analyze their own data and compare them with provincial data—but no identifying information (e.g., worker names) was included, and the data were provided independent of other agencies' data. A number of agencies availed themselves of this option, particularly in the areas of court and travel.

***Incorporated Agency Issue Response***

Despite the uniformity of the provincial child welfare mandate and legislation, there are, not surprisingly, differing service concerns and priorities across individual CASs. Differences could be based on a number of factors, including rural versus urban agencies; northern remote CASs versus southern urban CASs; Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal agencies; multi-service (e.g., child welfare and children's mental health) versus single-function (e.g., only child welfare) agencies; sectarian (religious-based) versus non-sectarian agencies; and large (e.g., over 100 staff) versus small (under 40 staff) agencies. As a result, an individual CAS and/or similar groups of CASs placed different priorities on various elements of the WMP. For example, agencies in Northern Ontario were concerned about the amount of travel time their workers expended. This issue was of a lesser concern for southern agencies located in large urban areas.

During WMP-1 and WMP-2 planning it was determined that the study would have to be responsive to the many issues at an agency, sector, and field level. This approach netted greater agency buy-in and participation. The high participation rate, particularly in WMP-3 (76%), reflects study relevance for agencies. It also demanded that the tool have considerable capability and flexibility to achieve inter-agency relevance. The Steering Committee was particularly useful in vetting these issues and determining which concerns raised by agencies were significant and would need to be built into the instrument's capability.

***Mixed-Method Approach***

WMP methodology used a mixed-method approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The large amounts of quantitative survey data were informed by the rich qualitative, focus-group data. For example, when analysis of the WMP-2 court and travel data seemed to suggest that just 2 weeks of data collection would be inadequate, the focus group data identified and confirmed the problem—4 weeks were needed. WMP-3 then used a month-long data collection period, which yielded more accurate results.

***Strategic Focus Groups***

The WMP used focus groups at various stages throughout the development of the tool. During the initial phase, staff from various selected agencies participated in the development of task lists for many service units within child welfare. Task list development provided a comprehensive taxonomy of tasks to define work in child welfare. Each focus group consisted of 10 to 25 staff who

demonstrated expertise in a particular area (e.g., admission to care, foster care assessments). At a later stage in the tool development, different focus groups were employed to confirm the accuracy of each task list in relation to describing all the work associated with completing each service unit. Finally, at the analysis stage, focus groups were used again, but this time from a "member checking" standpoint that entailed checking in with the field regarding early data results. Survey-specific focus groups reviewed preliminary data results from the workload time surveys to identify "ideal" and "realistic" amounts of time required to complete each service unit as part of a best-practice approach. This step was particularly instrumental in obtaining more accurate data for the Foster and Adoption Assessment surveys. The 1-month data collection period was determined to be inadequate for accurately capturing the breadth of these services, as they tend to occur over a much longer timeframe. The focus group recommended that data collection be extended to a 3-month period for these two surveys, and the research was adjusted accordingly.

The use of focus groups at various junctures of the WMP enabled project staff to obtain valuable input from a broad range of staff on the suitability of the task lists and to comment on the results from the time surveys. Consequently, 68 staff from 25 agencies participated in these groups. It became widely recognized in the child welfare field that this project was actively soliciting input from staff during the development of the workload measurement tool. Strategic use of focus groups allowed the research team to actively engage the field in a "bottom-up" process, which considerably enhanced the project's credibility.

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***Regular Communication***

The WMP research team took extra steps on a regular basis to communicate with all CASs about WMP. This communication on the study's status took the form of frequent memoranda, articles in various journals, and presentations at provincial training sessions. These efforts ensured that staff were engaged throughout the entire WMP study (4 years) and remained aware and committed to data collection requirements.

## WMP Challenges

The "lessons learned" highlight the many process elements that were instrumental to achieving overall success with the WMP study. While all studies have areas that present trials in application or struggles in methodology, the WMP faced specific challenges. Given the high degree of hope the CASs pinned on the study and the considerable field costs associated with conducting it over 4 years, the first challenge was making sure WMP had project management and investigator expertise—in other words, credible leadership. Other major problems included developing a strategy to ensure the WMP findings were effectively distributed to stakeholders and to accrue positive outcomes and benefits for the field on the issue of workload. Other concerns centered on the non-participation of a key stakeholder, challenges for the field in financing the 4-year study, and a wrinkle common in many studies: data collection.

***A Strong Research Team***

The project manager (PM) was instrumental in WMP's success, as the role required an in-depth understanding of child welfare issues and concerns regarding workload. The PM challenge was met by nominating and seconding a senior manager from within the Ontario CAS field. Similarly, the principal investigator (PI) was well known in the field as an experienced child welfare practitioner with considerable research experience. As both were child welfare personnel, well-versed with the Ontario child welfare field, the expertise of the PM and PI enhanced the project's credibility, at least at the field level. In addition, having a lead hand from OACAS (the umbrella organization representing all CASs in the province) as the third member of the research team provided the study with needed partnership links to both the senior child welfare executive and the funder.

Despite all efforts to address credibility through the expertise and independence of the project leads, and desite the study's rigor, in the end MCYS remained critical of the WMP's methodology, positing that the inquiry was "internal," and therefore not objective. Discrediting studies with significant political and financial implications is not unexpected; workload studies should anticipate this positioning. Subsequent workload studies will need to recognize that the "impartial" investigator has heightened requirements and that the research team's perceived neutrality will ultimately underpin the study's credibility.

***Effective Dissemination Strategy***

The WMP Steering Committee wanted to make certain that dissemination of the study's findings back to the government funder (MCYS) went beyond simply reporting it; the committee and the field wanted WMP to be the springboard for improving understanding, management, and funding of the workload issue in Ontario's child welfare system. The Steering Committee was very cognizant of the inherent tension between the significant hope held by the field that the WMP would rapidly change the workload landscape and the reality that government response to study recommendations in general is notoriously slow, as well as frequently quite selective. The Steering Committee's strategy was to have planned special meetings with government representatives as WMP final results were generated. Additionally, WMP was continually referenced by other OACAS committees (e.g., the Funding Framework Task Force).

Going beyond simply submitting the final study report as the key dissemination strategy was critical to the overall success of the WMP study. The planned, face-to-face meetings with funding officials fostered considerable back-and-forth communication on the topic of workload. This more prolonged and personal engagement on WMP findings furthered understanding of workload issues from both perspectives—the service provider and the service funder. Child welfare workload studies need to recognize the significant political nature and implications of study findings at the policy, practice, and research levels. Recommendations for future workload studies include having planned strategies for engagement well in advance of final study results to ensure optimal study penetration, dissemination, and impact.

The strategic presentation of WMP findings and engagement of the funder on service implications resulted in a consistent message that the existing funding and staffing benchmarks were not reasonable. The end result was that government did both create and revise benchmarks in service areas where previously such benchmarks had not existed.

***Government Non-Participation***

One of the greatest threats to the WMP study was that MCYS, the funder of child welfare in the province, did not want to participate. Despite efforts to engage MCYS through an invitation to participate on the Steering Committee, in the end, MCYS did not become a partner in the WMP study. Essentially, MCYS distanced itself from the workload inquiry. Was it because, as a funding agent, the government has considerable discomfort with the topic—given the financial implications that child welfare workload studies inherently represent? Despite MCYS's message of refusal, the Steering Committee's strategy with MCYS was persistent engagement. As noted, the study team did meet with senior government representatives at critical intervals throughout the project. The WMP goal was to ensure the preliminary results of the findings were understood and accurately relayed regarding the impact of the data on the inadequate funding of child welfare.

***Funding Challenges***

No monies were provided by MCYS or any other research or foundation funding agencies. The CASs had to underwrite all study costs. Workload studies typically do not meet the interests of academic partners; nor do workload studies tend to meet the qualification criteria of traditional research funding organizations, which posit that workload falls within the purview of quality assurance/quality improvement rather than research; nor is there provincial or federal funding for child welfare workload studies in Canada. The fact that the 4-year study endured speaks to the value the field placed on the WMP project. Child welfare agencies and associations may want to consider building workload evaluation costs into their budgets to ensure money is set aside to conduct ongoing evaluation.

***Participant Burden***

The labor-intensive nature of workload examination is a known challenge. Specific to WMP was the worker burden in completing the survey data and the agency burden in allowing for focus group participation, encouraging survey data completion (1 to 3 months of data collection), and fostering the member-checking segments of the data analysis phase. The surveys took more time to complete and data analyses were more complicated than initially anticipated. Together, this extended the project's timelines for deliverables, which also added to study costs. Additionally, challenges were faced by some agencies in collecting data due to unexpected departures of staff due to illness and employment terminations. WMP-2 and WMP-3 data were obtained manually as there was an inability to collect data electronically.

Employing technology to assist in an easier data collection process should be a priority for future workload studies. The costs incurred in conducting a comprehensive workload study are often prohibitive, which explains why the costs and challenges in collecting workload data often cause workload examinations to be one-time, cross-sectional events. The goal is to embed workload data collection into regular data collection methods so it becomes part of practice on an ongoing basis, thus allowing the field to measure and manage the issue of workload more readily and effectively. In short, there is a critical need to gather workload data via regular caseload data. The struggle for most CASs stems from the fact that their information system capability was developed long ago, and created to serve the financial side of the operation (dates, dollars, and activities); it was not constructed to produce outcome-based, case-level data to inform workload questions. As CASs begin to tackle, either individually or as a field, the mammoth task of giving their systems outcome-based

capabilities, a paramount consideration should be ensuring there are efficient and effective ways to collect workload data so that ongoing and current caseload data can be transformed into workload data.

***Managing Staff Expectations***

Despite the overall provincial support for the project by the CASs, there remained some cynicism by individual staff at different agencies. As was already stated, great efforts were made to engage staff at all agencies through the focus groups and the data collection stage. WMP had ongoing communication and publications regarding WMP-1, WMP-2, and final WMP-3 results. As project results became known, some unrealistic expectations by staff emerged, such as one that the government would fund agencies based on the study results. When this did not happen, some staff and agencies were disappointed, which needed to be both understood and managed. Child welfare workload studies often carry much hope with one stakeholder and much fear with another. Both elements should be expected, and plans should be put in place in advance of the hope and the hype to effectively manage these reactions.

## Summary

Measuring workload in child welfare is not an option—it is a necessity for many reasons. Examples include, but are not limited to, child welfare's accountability to taxpayers regarding the use of public dollars, a better understanding of optimal workload levels, and an opportunity to examine the link between workload and client outcomes. Workload studies should also be conducted as a required function of good management practices; as an old quality assurance saying aptly notes, "You can't manage what you don't measure."

As this paper has highlighted, there are numerous challenges and approaches to examining child welfare workload as well as clear benefits and positive ramifications. One of the most significant challenges facing the Canadian child welfare field regarding workload will be its ability to move beyond the cross-sectional study approach in measuring workload through the traditional transformation of workload data into caseload data. Investigation into child welfare workload in the 21st century will need to shift and optimize available case-level data. Child welfare expends considerable resources in collecting an inordinate amount of data. And while it may be reported, it is typically not effectively analyzed. Improvement in the mining of available data is a must if more efficient and effective examination of workload is to occur. Child welfare in the 21st century will need to be able to convert ongoing and current caseload data into workload data. The ultimate destination is to transition the examination of workload in child welfare from a "moving target" to a "target that is moved upon."

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