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HOW LONG ARE YOU STAYING? RETENTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NORTHERN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

by

© Glen G. Schmidt

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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St. John's **Newfoundland**

ABSTRACT

Retention of social workers in the field of child welfare is poor. The problem is made even more difficult in northern and remote regions of Canada. This exploratory research examines the factors that contribute to retention and turnover at work sites in the western part of Canada. A purposive sample of 12 northern sites was developed in the Yukon, northern British Columbia, northern Alberta, northern Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba. Four urban sites in the lower mainland of British Columbia were developed for contrast. A total of 86 social workers at the various sites completed survey questionnaires and 101 social workers participated in focus group interviews. A total of 27 supervisors from the same site locations participated in individual structured interviews. The questionnaires and interviews were organized using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) format. This also provided a convenient way to organize the results. The SWOT format required participants to consider positive as well negative elements related to the question of retention. The data was analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The use of different data sources allowed for triangulation in analysis of the results. The findings suggest that workers and supervisors are attracted to such factors as living and working in a small town, the opportunities associated with generalist, northern practice, opportunities for quick career advancement, and the appeal of the northern environment. The northern location, high cost of living, visibility, safety issues, travel, and lack of amenities and resources contribute negatively to the issue of retention. The results of the research are discussed in terms of their significance for retention strategies, social work education, and the development of a model of northern social work practice. More community involvement in recruitment and hiring, changes in the employment interview, and increases in employee benefits are suggested as possible strategies for improving retention of child welfare workers in remote northern work locations. Social work educators need to pay more attention to the challenges faced by northern practitioners. Generalist practice, independence, multidisciplinary practice, personal-professional tension, and factors associated with geography are seen to be key dimensions of a model of northern social work practice.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Burntwood Region includes most of Manitoba lying North of the 53rd parallel, approximately 210,000 square miles. The region is sparsely populated and great distances separate the various communities. Mining, hydro-electric development, forestry, commercial fishing, trapping, transportation, and tourism are the major industries in Burntwood Region.

The preceding description of the Burntwood Region is taken from a recent advertisement looking for social workers and other allied health professionals such as nurses and physicians (http://www.medhunters.com/employers/11850.html). The ad is interesting in that it attempts to reflect a little of what it is like to live and work in the north. Vast geographic areas, sparse population and settlement patterns, and communities that rely upon single resource-based industries are characteristics of Canada's north. There is a sense of living on the edge or on the frontier. The list of major industries conjures up images of rough and ready camps and hardy lifestyle. The ad is perhaps designed to appeal to the adventurous and those who consider themselves modern day pioneers.

This thesis examines a question that is often a cause for concern when it comes to human resource considerations in northern and remote parts of Canada, namely, how can professional staff be retained? The research explores the issues that affect retention and turnover of child welfare social workers employed in isolated, northern communities.

The Personal Context

Like many Canadians who consider themselves part of the post-war baby boom, I was raised in an urban environment. The urban environment in my case was Winnipeg, which until oil fueled rapid population growth in Alberta, was the largest Canadian city between Toronto and Vancouver. During my formal social work education I assumed that I would spend my career working in an urban environment, or at least in the rural south close to an urban centre. However, when I graduated with my Bachelor of Social Work degree from the University of Manitoba, the prospects for employment were very bleak. It was the late 1970s and the policies of the provincial government focused on reducing the size of the civil service and cutting funds for health and social welfare programs. Social work jobs were difficult to find.

Fortunately, the provincial government freeze on hiring did not extend to all parts of the province. Some of the communities in northern Manitoba experienced notoriously high rates of staff turnover and were exempt from the effects of government restraint, especially in the areas of social work and nursing. As a result, I was able to find employment as a social worker in the child welfare program in the mining community of Thompson. Thompson was the office base for my work and served as home, but the actual field work required considerable travel that involved flying in small bush planes into remote communities accessible only by air; or traveling by vehicle over rough gravel roads, winter roads, and seasonal ice bridges that crossed rivers and lakes. In the winter, travel within a community was by snowmobile and in the summer it was often by boat.

While an undergraduate student I deliberately avoided child welfare and hadn't ever thought of working in the north. I had never travelled more than several hours north of Winnipeg and the prospect of moving to Thompson, 765 kilometres north of the city, was somewhat daunting. However, my meager financial resources were exhausted and I needed to work. I couldn't afford to wait for a "city" job and I had to take what I could get.

At the time Thompson was a depressed community, reeling from government cuts and a massive layoff of workers by the International Nickel Corporation, the community's main employer. When I saw Thompson for the first time I was struck by the number of apartments and houses that were vacant and boarded up. I later learned that homeowners and landlords had been unable to pay their mortgages with the rapid economic downturn and the federal government's Central Mortgage and Housing Authority had become the community's largest landlord. It is the sort of thing that happens when a community's population drops very rapidly from just over 20,000 people to under 11,000.

When I met my new colleagues I noticed that many asked a similar question: " How long are you staying?" In many work environments this type of question might be considered a little unusual or even impolite but it didn't take me long to realize that employee turnover in the north was rapid and it was a fact of life.

In the Thompson office the child welfare program was small and comprised 8 social worker positions and a social work supervisor position. Although the person in the supervisor position had worked there for 10 years, the experience levels of the other workers were far more limited. Two of the positions were vacant. Two workers, including me, were brand new graduates. One worker had 10 months of experience and the remaining three workers had been in their jobs for less than three years. It was not surprising then that my new colleagues wondered how long I'd be staying.

The challenge of retaining social workers in a remote northern setting was one that I later struggled with as a supervisor and a manager during the 15 years that I worked for the provincial government in northern Manitoba. However, the daily pressures of the work seldom gave me the opportunity to think about the issues of retention and turnover in a systematic and critical way. These were serious challenges but they were often dismissed by senior management as a normal part of social work practice in the north. Like my colleagues I tended to reluctantly accept this reality without seriously considering how it might be changed. Now, 23 years after I first moved north, I have the opportunity to examine some aspects of northern practice and seriously consider how retention of social workers might be improved.

The research presented in this dissertation invited northern social workers and supervisors to talk about what they liked and what they didn't like concerning their work and the community in which they lived. Gathering this information required a considerable amount of travel to various northern locations across the Canadian west. Rather than being arduous this was an opportunity to take in a variety of spectacular northern landscapes and a fairly representative sampling of northern communities. More importantly, I was able to meet with workers and supervisors in their environments to hear them talk about issues that I have found both challenging and interesting throughout my social work career. In a certain sense this was a personal journey as I met with workers and supervisors whose views and opinions reminded me of various stations I had crossed during the period of time I lived and worked in the north. I hope that the findings will be useful in understanding the issues associated with social work retention in isolated northern communities.

Thesis Organization

The thesis is organized under 6 chapter headings beginning with this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature relevant to the area of research. The researcher asked questions about retention and turnover of social workers, specifically those who deliver child welfare services in remote, northern locations. Given this topic, the literature review addresses material in a number of areas. To begin with there is the question of "north" and what this concept meant or might mean within a Canadian context. The definition of north is examined from a number of different perspectives such as history, geography, economics and politics. These perspectives are important as they relate to social work in various ways.

Human service delivery in the north faces particular challenges that are related to social organization and a history of division among ethnic and racial groups. Some of these challenges are also examined in Chapter 2. For example, the idea of northern social work practice is discussed. There is no distinct definition of northern practice or even agreement on whether a unique northern practice even exists. However, a number of Canadian social work educators and practitioners have attempted to develop ideas about what constitutes a northern practice model. Ethical considerations and professional role adaptation are important aspects of this discussion.

The literature review also looks at research and the issues concerning social worker turnover and retention in the field of child welfare. The problem is not by any means unique to the north and appears to be widespread through North America. In a number of jurisdictions the problems with turnover are at a crisis level. Social workers are aging and as retirement becomes more of a factor the difficulties with turnover are bound to become even more serious.

In Chapter 3 an overview of the research design is presented. The research questions explore the factors that promote retention as well as the factors that promote attrition among social workers employed in child welfare programs in northern and remote locations. Data was gathered at 16 different sites and the research used three different methods for gathering information: focus group interviews, survey questionnaires, and individual interviews. The idea of approaching a question by using a number of different methods was developed to add depth and breadth to the findings, a process that is often referred to as triangulation. The different methods were linked through a SWOT analysis. This form of asking questions and organizing data uses four categories: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It is an approach that is usually associated with strategic planning exercises and it fit the needs of this research. The research design included 4 urban sites developed for the purpose of comparing urban data with the findings from the north. The northern sites represented a number of distinct organizational structures that deliver child welfare services. These included large centrally controlled government ministries as well as a First Nations child welfare agency and a semi-privatized community based agency.

The research findings are presented in Chapter 4. Presentation and organization of the findings follows the SWOT format. Additional categories that fell outside of the SWOT questions are also included in the findings. Tables are used to provide a quick view of the frequency and rank order of the various themes and categories. Presentation of the findings includes information from the urban sites as well as the northern sites.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the findings. Multiple sites, the urban and northern comparison, worker and supervisor views, different organizational structures, and the three methods of gathering data create the context for triangulation. As noted, triangulation is a way to add rigour, breadth, and depth to research by approaching the research questions from multiple perspectives.

The findings are considered in terms of what they mean for the question of retention of child welfare workers in northern and remote locations. The results have possible implications for recruitment and retention strategies that might be used by employing authorities. The research results may be of use in thinking about social work education. It is proposed that the focus in social work education is distinctly urban but northern practice has certain unique attributes that need to be more clearly addressed in the education process. Finally, the idea of a northern model of practice is discussed. The initial intent of this research is not directed toward developing or considering a model of northern social work practice. However, the responses of participants provide material that deserved some consideration and discussion of northern social work practice.

In Chapter 6 the limitations of this study are discussed. The chapter also contains concluding comments and reflections on ideas for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Social work is a demanding profession and social workers throughout the world face challenges that are often intimidating and discouraging. Structural issues as well as personal and environmental concerns influence the quality of social work and the general well being of social workers. Burnout, erosion of the welfare state, deinstitutionalization, and violence are but a few of the concerns affecting today's practitioners.

Within this global context it is clear that the contemporary landscape for Canadian social workers is not positive. The national sector study of the social work profession (Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud, & Fiddler, 2000b) noted that erosion of the Canadian social welfare system had a negative impact on the environment in which social workers perform their work. Funding constraints, increasing poverty of vulnerable population groups, restructuring of services, deinstitutionalization, and intensified service needs have contributed to higher levels of reported stress and dissatisfaction (Stephenson, et al.). Of special interest the document states: "The additional toll on workers in rural or northern settings, often serving high proportions of very high need clients, is of particular concern." (Stephenson, et al., p. 11)

Retention and support of many professionals in isolated northern settings is difficult and represents a challenge to various health and social service organizations. Studies of nurses and physicians indicate that turnover may be rapid, recruitment is often difficult, and people tend not to remain in northern, rural, and isolated locations for long periods of time (British Columbia, 1995; MacLeod, Browne, & Leipert, 1998; Thommasen, 2000). Given that this situation may also be true for social workers, an understanding of the factors that support retention of social workers as well as the factors that encourage attrition or turnover is important.

There are several reasons for this. First, the knowledge can be used to inform social work employers and social work educators regarding recruitment, training, preparation, and support strategies for workers engaged in northern practice. Second, retention of experienced social workers has the potential to lead to an improved level of service in northern Canadian communities in that workers have more time to develop relationships with communities and apply the experience they gain. Workers can become part of communities rather than transient professionals who limit their investment and time in northern locations.

This research attempts to identify positive and negative characteristics of northern social work practice pertaining to the retention of social workers involved in the delivery of child welfare services. The research may provide ideas for educators and employers that enable them to better prepare and retain social work practitioners in the northern environment. Before addressing these specific issues there are a number of research areas and concepts that need to be considered within the literature. These include topics such as social worker retention and factors that may influence human service programs and social work practice in the north. The concept of "north" itself requires discussion particularly as it pertains to the Canadian context. This concept can be examined from a number of different perspectives.

The Concept of "North"

In any examination of attrition and retention in the work place there is an important concern that pertains to job satisfaction. Egan and Kadushin (1993) state that job satisfaction for social workers is a function of the work environment and the specific characteristics of the job. Work environment might include such factors as the physical office space, the politics of the agency, benefits, and the nature of the work itself.

The question of job satisfaction for northern social workers introduces an additional factor, that of specific geographic context. This is related, yet different from the work environment. This environmental context of north is a difficult concept to define. However, in considering the question of retention and attrition of social workers in northern Canadian communities, it is important to develop a sense of what is meant by the concept of "north".

We tend to define ourselves as a northern people, and Canada, Scandinavia, Iceland, Greenland, Russia, and Alaska are frequently described as northern countries or territories. International links around common issues such as health care, economic development, indigenous people, environment, social services, and education have been developed through various circumpolar associations, conferences, and unions. The impetus for this type of international exchange and cooperative activity stems in part from a view that northern concerns are distinct and require special understanding and treatment. Yet there is a degree of irony when Canadians regard themselves as a northern people. The contemporary reality is that 75% of Canadians live in large urban centres in a narrow band of land that clings to the American border (McVey & Kalbach, 1995). By contrast, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut account for 24.5% of Canada's total land area but a mere .23% of the country's population live in this region (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Similar characteristics are found in the northern parts of the provinces. For example, only 45,000 people live in the Thompson Region of Manitoba, a region that comprises one-third of the provincial land area in a province with over one million people (Thompson Regional Mental Health Council, 1993). Canadians who live and work in the north often feel marginalized and forgotten by the majority of Canadians who regard the rapidly growing cities as home.

So what does the concept of "north" mean today? Might the northern environment create special consideration for the delivery of human services and the application of social work practice? If in fact the northern requirements are unique, does that necessarily lead to a different model of social work or is northern social work simply a variation of what currently exists in urban centres? The concept of north has been defined from a variety of different perspectives. Among these, geography, history, culture, economics, and politics are especially important. Each of these perspectives need to be examined before considering human services and social work practice in the north.

Geographic definitions

The geographical perspective of "north" assumes a number of different forms. There is the idea of region (Westfall, 1980), where the north is a defined unit like the prairies or Atlantic Canada. People who live within the defined unit develop a sense of identity connected to the region.

Another geographic form is that of climate. Within the context of environmental geography there are climatic considerations. For example, French and Slaymaker (1993) noted that the image of coldness is a highly pervasive characteristic that has become an integral part of Canadian history and culture. This perspective emphasizes the snow, the cold, the wind, and the dark winters as defining characteristics of what it means to be in the "north." However, the concept of north has also been defined from a quantitative and empirical perspective. In this regard Louis-Edmond Hamelin (1979) has made the greatest contribution.

Hamelin attempted to define the concept of north through a process known as "indexing" (Graham, 1990). Hamelin's scale or index is known as the "valeurs polaires" or "VAPO." Using the criteria of latitude, summer heat, annual cold, types of ice, precipitation, natural vegetation cover, accessibility, air services, resident population, and degree of economic activity, Hamelin developed a system of assigned values that would enable the calculation of nordicity or the degree of being north.

In practical terms this would mean that Rankin Inlet in Nunavut has a higher degree of nordicity than Fort St. John in northern British Columbia. Rankin Inlet is above the tree line, accessible only by air, subject to permafrost and various other characteristics. On the other hand, Fort St. John is not in an area of permafrost, the economy is somewhat diversified (forestry, petroleum and agriculture) and it is road accessible. This way of defining north allows for definitions to change over time. For example, Hamelin examined various communities that would have had high scores on his scale during the nineteenth century, but today, the same communities are not considered northern or remote.

Another important aspect of Hamelin's work relates to the construction of northern zones with assigned terms like middle north, far north and extreme north. These constructions have in turn led others to talk in terms like "provincial north" versus the "northern territories" (Coates & Morrison, 1992). While Hamelin's work is important, he suggests that a meaningful definition of north may conform more closely to a particular state of mind than any scientific system of organization.

More recently McNiven and Puderer (2000) have revisited the idea of geographic delineation of north. They argue that delineation is important from a statistical perspective, the implication being that this better enables delivery of appropriate services. They use many of the same criteria as Hamelin (1979) but they also incorporate criteria from the 1989 Task Force on Tax benefits for Northern and Isolated Areas and they introduce a number of their own criteria that include factors like price index. Using 16 criteria (north/south indicators) they have delineated particular geographic zones that include north, northern transition zone, southern transition zone, and south.

Geographers defined the concept of north from the perspectives of region, climate, and statistical indexing that combine a wide range of factors that lend themselves to quantification. The geographical definitions strongly suggest that there is a distinct concept that might be called "north." However, geographers do not monopolize the ideas and definitions. The concept of "north" also receives consideration from other disciplines including history.

Historical definitions

Although he was a geographer, Hamelin (1979) demonstrated that the concept of north shifted through Canadian history. The "northwest", "les pays d'en haut", and the "arctic" are all terms used to describe this somewhat elusive idea. Prior to the turn of the eighteenth century, everything west of the Ottawa River was regarded as being "north" (Hamelin, 1979). Before Saskatchewan and Alberta became provinces in 1905 they were referred to as the "northwest territory." This historical conception of north had more to do with European settlement patterns and forms of economic activity than empirical definition. The north was any part of Canada that was unsettled by Europeans and it was associated with wilderness, the fur trade, isolation and, by association, First Nations people. Europeans constructed the written records and within those records they defined the north. These definitions were closely linked to economic development, settlement, transportation, and colonization that was both political and economic.

During his 1958 election campaign Prime Minister John Diefenbaker talked about a new vision for Canada – "A Canada of the north." In his vision the north was regarded as a land of vast opportunity (Marcus, 1995). The north was a treasure chest of resources waiting to be opened. Peter Newman (1963) stated that Canadian voters were caught up in Diefenbaker's persuasive oratory about this vision and shared the optimism that Diefenbaker generated through his election campaigns. This vision imagined a north with a vast network of roads that would open up the minerals and oil waiting to be discovered and extracted.

By the end of his tenure in office Diefenbaker had managed to finance completion of 6400 kilometres of roads in the Yukon and Northwest Territories but new resource extraction was minimal. For all the talk and enthusiasm about economic growth and activity, little changed and very little was produced. Nonetheless, the Diefenbaker political era marked the first time that the north prominently entered political discourse at the federal level.

The enthusiasm of the late 1950s and early 1960s led to what Coates and Powell (1989) referred to as the watershed decade of the 1970s. Oil and gas reserves, mineral deposits, and development proposals such as the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline confirmed that the north continued to be regarded as a colony of the south. However, this view came under challenge with the emergence of strong leaders, both aboriginal and non-aboriginal. These leaders sought greater independence and autonomy for northern territories. George Erasmus and Erik Neilson were on different ends of the political spectrum but they shared a common desire to see the north become more autonomous in its dealings with southern Canada. Erasmus and Neilson were outspoken in their views opposing ideas that regarded the north as a minor appendage of southern urban centres and power. This trend continued to the present and recently the north has gained greater independence particularly with territorial reorganization and the creation of Nunavut. Nunavut is in some ways a bold experiment and, if successful, may provide a blueprint for future organization and development in Canada's north.

Cultural definitions

Not only has the concept of north shifted with successive waves of history, but it is defined differently by various people. Hamelin (1979) as well as Collier (1993), Usher (1987), and Coates and Powell (1989) described two broadly different conceptions of north that are a product of culture, race, and ethnicity. These authors argue that indigenous aboriginal people have an entirely different view of north than do the more recent settlers who are predominantly European in origin. Chatwin and Low (1974) suggested that for the Inuit and the First Nations, the north is home; a place to make your living; a place that is welcoming and familiar; and a place that must be respectfully nurtured. The idea of north is a fundamental part of aboriginal identity and defines people and communities.

This aboriginal view of north as “home” has strong roots that link to the troubled history of aboriginal and European contact. For example, when the Métis government of Red River was ousted in 1870 the leaders and many of the people fled “north” to what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. They sought seclusion and safety where they could pursue a traditional lifestyle; hunt the buffalo, tend small gardens and live off the land away from the Europeans of eastern Canada. The Métis wished to retain a sense of autonomy that was linked to the land and the idea of north.

The different understanding of what defines north continues today with opposing views related to issues of development and economic activity. Historically, Europeans have tended to see the north as something wild to be tamed and harnessed for purposes of generating economic activity and wealth. The poetry of Robert Service and the prose of the American Jack London defined this popular view of the north. It was a view shared by Canadians of European origin. However, aboriginal people have a different view of the north. This view was first heard during the Berger Commission and echoes in the continued concern and opposition to the various northern mega projects (Page, 1986; Robinson & Ghostkeeper, 1987). The north is rich in resources but the north is home to various aboriginal groups who seek economic opportunities but not at any cost. The dynamics surrounding economic development led to economic and political definitions of "north."

Economic and political definitions

A number of authors have used the theory of hinterland-metropolis to define an important aspect of what it means to live in the north (Brewis, 1969; Zapf, 1991; Dickerson, 1992; Duerden, 1992; Collier, 1993). The idea of hinterland-metropolis has its roots in the historical analysis of the economic development of Canada as a nation (Careless, 1954). This particular approach to understanding political and economic relationships suggests that the rural, northern, and remote regions serve as a source of raw materials to support the growth and prosperity of an urban centre or metropolis. For example, the James Bay hydroelectric project in Quebec brought some benefits to the James Bay Cree, but also provided revenue for Quebec City and ensured a higher standard of living for people along the St. Lawrence River in cities like Montreal. The same pattern repeats itself across the country with different resources and different urban centres as beneficiaries. This relationship also necessitates governance from the metropolis and delivery of services from a metropolitan base. This is an exploitive type of relationship where northerners are the hewers of wood and the drawers of water to the benefit of distant urbanites whose standard of living is maintained through the vast exploitation of raw resources. Resources are often exported for processing in distant urban centres. Attempts to add value by doing more processing at northern sites often run into barriers.

Clearly the concept of "north" is somewhat complex and even imprecise. Geographers defined the concept of "north" but noted that this idea changes through history. The north is also regarded in different ways through different cultures that may have varied or opposing economic and political interests. However, the definitions of "north" tend toward an idea of marginalization that is cast within relative isolation and remoteness. The northern environment is sometimes seen as harsh yet it can also be hospitable. Definitions of north also depend on social construction and the source of this construction may influence understanding of the concept. These are all important considerations when turning the focus toward understanding the nature of human services in the northern environment, particularly social services and social work.

Northern Populations and Challenges for Human Services

The provision of human services in the north has always been difficult. Widely dispersed and sparse populations, together with the challenges of climate and transportation, create large obstacles to service provision. Service provision is further complicated by the nature of the northern economy and resulting economic considerations that might be seen as liabilities (McKay, 1987a). In the north there are also particular issues related to women and children as well as race and ethnicity of northern populations.

Economic liabilities

Northern communities that have an industrial economic base tend to be single industry resource-based communities. A single industry resource-based community is one that depends primarily upon the economic activity generated by one industry such as a mine, a pulp mill, or oil drilling. Everitt and Gill (1996) defined resource towns as communities that revolve around renewable resources such as forestry and fishing as well as non-renewable resources such as mining. The towns involved in this type of economic activity are vulnerable to factors and events that affect the single industry function. Many communities of this nature are subject to boom and bust cycles inherent to the contemporary global economy. For example, the economic downturn in heavy industrial manufacturing in Japan in the early 1990s resulted in the closure of the coalmine in Tumbler Ridge and several thousand people lost their jobs.

Many northern communities have a history of rapid growth in a short period of time followed by massive downsizing or even outright disappearance over an equally short period of time. This pattern has been repeated frequently in northern Canadian single industry resource-based towns. From Schefferville, to Uranium City, to Cassiar, the northern landscape is dotted with the remnants of once thriving communities (McBride, McKay & Hill, 1983; Wolfe, 1983; McKay, 1987b; Bray & Thompson, 1992). This is by no means unique to Canada as other countries that have similar types of regional economies struggle with the same issue (Neil, Tykklaïnen, & Bradbury, 1992;

Nygren, 1992). The economic costs of building infrastructure and delivering services to isolated population create major challenges for governments.

Until the mid 1970s economic development and production in single industry resource-based towns followed a "Fordist" model meaning that the role of the industry was to provide low value commodities to distant urban markets (Barnes, Hayter, & Haye, 1999). This mode of production resulted in sharp class divisions within the single industry towns. The single industry resource-based communities were seen as expendable should market demand change or should industrial actions such as strikes disrupt predictable production.

Recent strategies to use long distance commuting for resource extraction, as opposed to building new resource towns, solve some of the problems related to industry shutdown and the constant concern about economic liability. However, long distance commuting arrangements create other types of challenges, particularly in the delivery of human services.

Shrimpton (1994) described this strategy in the implementation of rotational work systems for Newfoundland's offshore oil project. Instead of living close to the place of work, employees are transported long distances from their families and home communities. Mining corporations located throughout northern Canada and Australia, as well European North Sea Oil Companies have employed this method. Shrimpton suggested that the nature of this economic organization socially separates the families from their communities and creates a degree of internal family struggle. Families that are subject to commuting separation arrangements, or even constant shift work, may also develop a system where the father withdraws from the role of parent because of his lack of physical availability to the children. The emerging family structure is not unlike the classic middle class family of the Victorian era when fathers were somewhat disengaged from their families leaving mothers with almost all responsibility for parenting. The situation can be especially difficult for women in the isolated resource-based communities that dot Canada's north.

Women and children

The resource towns and boomtowns scattered across the northern parts of this country have particular needs when it comes to human services (Enzi, 1979). Many of the communities are relatively new and many have been carefully planned (Roberts, 1984). Yet the planning has generally been around the work to be performed and not the people who live in the communities.

The social and economic organization of northern communities creates particular challenges for women. Krepps (1979) and Gill (1985, 1990a, 1990b) characterized northern single industry resource based towns as inhospitable to women. Hayter (2000) noted that single industry based towns often exhibit unbalanced gender structures and limited work opportunities for women. This is because the main work performed in these isolated communities is work that has traditionally been associated with men: mining, heavy equipment operation, and construction. As a result, women are largely excluded from the labour force and obligated to concentrate on child rearing and household management. Wall (1993) suggested that women in northern single industry resource communities are not only shut out of employment, but they are also excluded from political decision making at the local municipal level.

Rural women are generally more isolated than their urban counterparts (Geissinger, Lazzari, Porter, & Tungate, 1993) but the problem may be more severe for northern women. Wage employment outside the main industry tends to be part-time and situated in the service sector (Baker & Kotarski, 1977). Through much of the year it may be difficult to spend time outdoors as a result of climate. The lack of leisure opportunities in many northern communities does not promote social contact with other women. The limited literature on women in northern and remote communities also suggests that women who are abused in relationships tend to be even more isolated than their urban counterparts who experience similar abuse (Hymers, 1993).

Resources to support families are sparse (Waite, 1985) and are often situated in the residual end of the service spectrum. This is problematic in and of itself as residents of newer resource towns tend to come from other communities, provinces and countries (Lucas, 1971). Research in population geography suggests that the primary motivator for northern "immigrants" is the employment opportunity and not the community or what it may have to offer (Halseth, 1999). This means that residual support systems, like the extended family, are hard to contact and may not be available when needed. For example, throughout many northern, single industry towns in western Canada, there are large numbers of Newfoundlanders who have relocated to obtain employment. The distance and cost of visiting family back home is prohibitive for many of these workers.

It is a further point of interest that the literature on families in the north has little to say about children although many resource-based communities have high birth rates and a relatively youthful population (Krepps, 1979). Research into northern populations tends to focus on adult men and women, despite the predominance of children. Among First Nations communities, birth rates are high and the birth rates have also tended to be high within non-First Nations resource-based communities during the early years of growth.

Race and ethnicity

Resource extraction in northern remote locations is also associated with a history of racial and ethnic separation and segregation. Lucas (1971) first described this characteristic in northern Ontario mining communities. The legacy of street names like "Finland Street" may suggest pride in race and ethnicity but it also points to the segregation of living arrangements that tended to accompany development of natural resources in isolated northern communities. Location of many settlements created a degree of tension between indigenous aboriginal people and the predominantly European "newcomers." Only recently have companies, governments and the media seriously considered the social impact of economic development on aboriginal people (Weaver & Cunningham, 1984).

The relationship between resource extraction and aboriginal people is not positive as traditional aboriginal life styles were disrupted by the arrival of non-aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have not always been able to make a smooth transition to the wage economy and when they do they may face difficult work environments (Hobart, 1986; McKay, 1987a). Hydro development projects are an example of this difficulty.

In northern Quebec, northern Manitoba, and northern British Columbia hydro development resulted in rapid change. Aboriginal hunters, trappers, and commercial fishermen based their lives on activities governed by the seasons. Hydro projects provided short-term opportunities in a wage economy but severely disrupted traditional ways of gaining a livelihood. Individuals accustomed to the relatively solitary life of the trapper or hunter were faced with living in large construction camps where they worked set daily hours and lived with hundreds of other men in tight quarters. Exposure to recreational use of drugs, alcohol, and gambling eroded traditional values.

Clearly northern development has not pursued an "econo-ecological approach," meaning a development approach which respects traditional economies and aims to harmonize modern development with the culture and economy that have existed for centuries (Rees, 1986). Frideres (1988) has noted that aboriginal people are set apart from other Canadians in regard to their economy and land utilization. The idea of the land as a common resource base and the emphasis on cooperation and kinship/reciprocity systems are some features that characterize the aboriginal view.

Unfortunately in some instances aboriginal people were deliberately used to further particular strategic ends. The 1950s relocation of Inuit to the high arctic is illustrative of this process (Tester & Kulchyski, P., 1994; Marcus, 1995). Alan Marcus documented a series of events leading to relocation of Inuit people for the specific purpose of preserving sovereignty in the Canadian High Arctic. Although some of the officials involved in this process might have thought that they were acting in the best interests of the Inuit, historical hindsight reveals the opposite. Rather than provide the Inuit with a realistic opportunity to pursue a traditional lifestyle, the relocation sentenced them to scratch out a living in an inhospitable environment. They became pawns in cold war politics.

The release of the Berger Report in 1977 served as a watershed for aboriginal people. This report was testimony to a successful Dene challenge of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline proposal. It marked the first time that aboriginal people began to speak more boldly about their rights and entitlement (Page, 1986; Hamilton, 1994). This action resulted in the emergence of new approaches to northern development. Many of these approaches are more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of indigenous people. Consultation is an integral part of the process and aboriginal title to resources is recognized.

Clearly the nature of northern populations is changing. The construction of new resource based communities has ground to a halt and aboriginal people may no longer be viewed as passive observers of an internal colonization process. The relationship between people of European origin and the indigenous aboriginal people has also become more equal. The politics and the social characteristics of the north are changing, though the nature of the physical environment remains the same.

These various shifts create new challenges for social workers and reinforce those challenges that already existed. Like the concept of "north" there is not a clear precise definition of what constitutes northern social work practice.

Social Work Practice in the North

The north is characterized by the relative isolation of communities, the economic liability of uncertainty that arises from single industry economies, and divisions that are a function of role and gender as well as race and ethnicity. These factors are important in thinking about social work practice.

Francis Turner identified 6 realities that influence the development of social work practice in Canada (Turner, 1999). Canadian history, open immigration policies that create diversity, the nature of population distribution, geography, the several-tiered system of government, and Canadian values all play a role. Among these realities, population distribution and geography, are especially important for northern social work practice. Ideas about northern practice have also been influenced to some degree by American views of rural social work practice.

Rural social work

Rural social work in the United States gained prominence through the 1960s and 1970s and in the literature northern Canadian social work research and commentary draws heavily on American research ideas. Some of these sources such as material on social services in "impact" or "boom town communities" are consistent with the realities of northern social work (Davenport & Davenport, 1982). For example northern social work practice often occurs within a context that includes rapid development of natural resources and disruption to traditional community values and norms. However, much of the American research and literature may not represent a good fit. Even in the United States there is a debate about whether there is such a thing as a rural social work practice that is distinct from urban practice. Improved transportation as well as rapid population growth in the United States has resulted in higher density rural populations and a reduction of areas and regions that might be considered isolated and remote. Mermelstein and Sundet (1995) point out that social planners and policy makers in the United States no longer refer to rural and urban, but rather metropolitan and non-metropolitan.

The concept of "rurality" is associated with particular characteristics that represent more than geography (Weinert & Boik, 1998). Discussion of the personal and ethical conflicts associated with practice in a small community (Miller, 1994) and factors like isolation, extended family, religion, and mutual aid were important parts of this consideration. However, the notion of the uniqueness of rural social work has been eroded through changing roles and the linkages created by modern technological innovation. The internet, interactive video, and various other new technologies are changing the nature of social work education and practice in relationship to isolated rural communities (Kelly & Lauderdale, 1996; Watt & Kelly, 1996). The gulf between rural and urban practice is not as pronounced with the advent and applied use of the new technologies. Formerly, rural social workers were generalists out of necessity as access to specialist service was difficult or even non-existent. The same considerations can be applied to northern social work. However, northern practitioners continue to struggle with some of the issues that may no longer be as evident in rural social work practice.

Northern social work

A number of writers have suggested that social work in northern environments is subject to high staff turnover and a poor fit between the urban educated social workers and their northern communities (Callahan & Cossom, 1983; Zapf, 1993; Peterson, 1996). In his 1985 study of social workers in the Yukon, Kim Zapf proposed that new social work graduates experience a form of culture shock, meaning that they struggle with issues of professional values and personal integration into the community. Culture shock and integration into the community require new social workers to go through a process of role adaptation. This is not a unique challenge for social workers as other groups of professionals and workers also experience difficulty associated with living and working in the north. It is a challenge to recruit and retain a range of human service workers who are willing to remain in isolated locations over the longer term (Kuz, 1984; British Columbia, 1995). Nurses, doctors, and to a lesser extent teachers have all been difficult to recruit and retain in northern communities.

Although he did not specifically address the issue of retention of social workers Ken Collier (1993) did attempt to develop an explanation for the poor fit between social work and rural and urban environments. Collier (1993) suggested that a large part of the difficulty relates to the industrial and urban origins of social work itself. Social work evolved from religious and philanthropic organizations that provided relief and advocacy for people who were displaced and marginalized through the process of rapid urbanization and industrialization. Collier regarded this as peculiar to the capitalist social and economic organization of nineteenth century cities. Social work education and social work models of practice developed to fit this environment and milieu. Consequently, the models of instruction and practice do not fit very well with rural and northern populations. Collier does not propose a model of practice so much as he is critical of current practice approaches. His analysis is from a Marxist perspective and by implication this leads toward a structural or conflict model of social work practice.

Like Collier, Delaney (1995) did not specifically address the issue of retention but he acknowledged Collier's concerns regarding the fit between social work and northern, remote environments. Delaney believed that the current dominant paradigm, the ecological model, is suited to northern social work practice. However, Delaney regards the ecological approach as a perspective rather than a model. As such he suggests it is context sensitive and context focused. Unlike Collier, Delaney presents a view of social work practice that might be construed as ideologically neutral. This position, at least in relationship to general systems theory, was criticised on the grounds that ideological neutrality is not a realistic possibility (Drover, G. & Shragge, E., 1977). Drover and Shragge suggest that social work is founded in ideology and is inherently political in terms of how it deals with human problems.

More recently non-expert, context driven approaches are being used in social work practice. Instead of fitting clients into pre-existing paradigms, either political/ideological or clinical/therapeutic, social workers consider the options that will meet the client's most pressing needs in a manner that is respectful and collaborative. This model or approach is postmodernist and paradoxically it does not see any one model or belief system as having universal applicability (Borg, Brownlee & Delaney, 1995). Within this context Brownlee (1992) views constructivist approaches as particularly respectful and suitable for northern social work practice. Constructivism, as an approach, tailors intervention to meet the client's needs within the context of the client's reality.

Existing strengths and worldviews are used in a manner that emphasizes a future orientation (Hoyt, 1994).

Zapf (2000) takes the view that there is not a precisely defined model of northern social work practice. However, he suggests that there are possibilities of understanding northern practice when we consider the marriage of geography and social work. He is critical of much of social welfare theory as it acknowledges contributions from psychology, sociology, anthropology and social psychology yet fails to refer to the significance of geography (Zapf, 2001). Geography requires thinking about the influence of place. The defining features of northern practice are in large part a function of place. As a result, the geographic environment in all its contexts, demographic, political, economic, cultural and phenomenological, bears consideration (Zapf, 2000).

Finally, Hart (2002) writes about an aboriginal approach to helping and social work. He does not situate this in the geographic area of north and the ideas he presents are not specific to northern social work practice. However, it might be argued that there is potential application to the north given the large numbers of aboriginal people who live in the northern environment. Hart eschews any association with what he calls "Amer-European" models but like Collier he suggests that models of social work practice do not fit with indigenous populations. Traditional approaches to helping people need to be understood as unique and important in their own right. Hart believes that attempts to quantify these models and somehow fit them into an "Amer-European" education system serve to perpetuate a form of colonization. He suggests an examination and recognition of traditional helping systems within aboriginal communities.

Social work educators are slowly coming to the realization that practice in remote, isolated communities requires specific knowledge and a level of awareness that is not usually a requirement in an urban environment (O'Sullivan, Dyann, & Young, 1997). This requirement partly relates to the special considerations in working with aboriginal people (Hart, 2002; Zapf, 1995), but it is also broader and affects both aboriginal and non-aboriginal residents of northern communities (Ballard-Kent & Cromwell, 1985).

Social work education, even when located in northern communities, has tended to replicate the hinterland-metropolis organization of the economy and social service delivery (DeMontigny, 1992). This may be due to the fact that social work programs which emphasize northern practice are either small or operate as satellites of larger urban based universities. For example, social work at Lakehead University and the University of Northern British Columbia are both very small programs. Other northern-focused programs like Yukon College or the Thompson campus of the University of Manitoba are affiliated with large urban programs in Regina and Winnipeg respectively.

Education programs, employment policies, and professional organizations that are solidly entrenched within urban settings may miss aspects of northern social work practice that confront social workers on a daily basis. A sense of understanding the context of the northern environment may not be present. This occurs because educators, personnel administrators, and professional organizations may not have any experience of work in the northern context. An example of the unique quality of work in the northern context involves the issue of professional ethics and the related boundary considerations.

Certainly ethical rules and standards are challenged or tested in novel ways when applied to social work practice in isolated northern communities.

Ethical considerations in northern social work

Beginning in the 1990s a number of Canadian social workers and Canadian social work educators began discussion of issues related to ethical and boundary considerations associated with northern practice (Ingebrigston, 1992; Brownlee & Taylor, 1995). These issues exert an influence on retention of social workers in northern practice settings. They involve the professional role and the capacity of social workers to fit into the community.

Karen Ingebrigtson (1992), a social worker in Churchill Manitoba, made the following observation:

> Workers must be prepared to give up some of their privacy. High visibility is inescapable. With shared social, commercial and cultural activities, workers have to be comfortable with the fact that they will interact with the community in a more personal way than would their urban counterparts. (p.11)

Ingebrigtson was referring to dual relationships, a reality of northern practice that is often very trying for social workers who live in isolated small communities. A dual relationship can be defined as any relationship between a social worker and a client that is something other than the professional helping relationship. For example, a social worker entering into a business relationship with a client or a social worker entering into a sexual relationship with a client would be involved in a dual relationship. Such relationships are regarded as violations of professional ethical practice. Chapter 4 of the Canadian Association of Social Workers *Social work code of ethics* describes these limitations (CASW, 1994). Furthermore, the code quite clearly states that a client remains a client for two years post-termination with a worker or agency. This aspect of the code is fairly standard for other related professions such as psychology.

The general prohibitions against dual relationships are difficult to apply in northern social work practice. Brownlee and Taylor (1995) argued that the current code requires clarification in relationship to northern and remote social work practice. The current interpretation puts social workers in an impossible position. Contact with clients outside the work setting is inevitable. The only mechanic in town might require the social worker's help as might the manager of the Northern Store. These are business relationships involving financial transactions and, as such, might be interpreted as a violation of the Code of Ethics.

The nature of this dilemma is even more intense when social workers struggle with having to provide services for friends or even family. Clearly these are dual relationships but they are unavoidable in remote, isolated communities. The result for the individual worker is an intense struggle between personal and professional roles. The new graduate quickly learns that the ethics learned in the urban, university-based setting do not translate well into the tiny northern community where they might be the only social worker in town. This can create a crisis for workers who are torn between maintaining professional standards and being part of a community.

Delaney, Brownlee, Sellick and Tranter (1997) attempted to address this issue by developing a series of guidelines for ethical decision-making. They argued that northern social work practitioners face ethical problems in relationship to dilemmas of application, interpretation, and context. The general thrust of their argument is that a clear understanding of the northern work environment and sensitivity to the realities of northern social workers are not factored into the development of a code of ethics. The code is essentially an urban construct that does not fit comfortably when applied to a northern environment. Furthermore, the code is framed in language that acknowledges the requirements of clinical work, but fails to adequately address the nature of community work. This argument is not unlike Collier's (1993) point of view, when he suggests that social work as a profession is really an alien construct in the northern environment.

These arguments have validity and ring true to the northern social work practitioner. However, there is a sense in which some of the discussion regarding ethics and professionalism misses an important point. Social workers have a degree of power in relationship to their clients, whether their client is an individual or a community. Part of the rationale for professionalizing social work and developing a code of ethics has to do with protecting clients from this imbalance of power (Peterson, 1992). Neither Collier or Delaney address this particular issue of power imbalance in a direct fashion. Understanding ethical dilemmas in northern practice and understanding the professional role in northern communities requires social workers to carefully consider issues of power and trust. These are important in all areas of social work practice including northern social work.

The professional role

Professional power and the integration of the social worker into the community are critical challenges in northern social work practice and in a sense relate to the issue of turnover. Social workers who are uncomfortable in their roles and social workers that believe they are in an adversarial position in relation to the community are not likely to be happy in their work. The small size and isolation of many northern communities means that personal anonymity is impossible and separation between the personal and professional roles is very difficult. Social workers must be prepared to have their actions scrutinized and they need to come to terms with perceived community pressure relative to visibility, accessibility, professional ethics, and lifestyle issues. The personal self and the professional self are difficult to separate within the northern context.

Delaney and Brownlee (1995) described some of these issues related to professional role as ethical considerations. They developed a list of factors that included limited access to supervision, issues resulting from practice beyond competence, dual relationships, access to too much information, professional drift, and community integration as ethical challenges for northern practitioners.

These dilemmas frequently have an ethical component, but they involve what Zapf (1984) has called "role integration." Social workers in remote isolated communities experience high visibility and frequently feel that they are living in a fish bowl where each and every aspect of their behaviour is observed, recorded, and measured by a critical community. As Campbell and Findlay (1980) said, "one's private life is in any case public property" (p. 85). This reality is not unique to social workers. Police officers, clergy, teachers and physicians are placed under the same microscope. A mistake made in a large urban practice will not necessarily affect a social worker's credibility and ability to carry out their responsibilities. However, the same mistake made in a smaller, isolated, northern community can have immediate repercussions. A good example of this is the controversy and fallout surrounding the *Gove Report* (Gove, 1995).

This report concerned the life and death of five and a half year old Matthew Vaudreuil who died in Vancouver as a result of injuries inflicted by his mother. The government responded to this tragedy by launching the Gove Inquiry which was to investigate, report and make recommendations regarding the policies and practices of the Ministry of Social Services as they related to Matthew's death. However, the scope of the inquiry expanded and Judge Gove embarked on a more comprehensive systemic examination of child welfare practice in British Columbia. Subsequent investigation revealed that during the course of his brief life he had contact with a total of 21 different Ministry of Social Services social workers and 24 different physicians (Gove, 1995). There were at least 60 reports made to the Ministry regarding Matthew's safety and he had been taken to doctors 75 times (Gove, 1995).

Because Matthew lived most of his life in the north, the report drew particular attention to the practice of northern social workers. The public hearings, the media reports, and the final published report named and criticized individual social work practitioners. The impact on workers was much more pronounced in a northern community like Fort St. John than it was on the workers in Vancouver. One worker described being accosted in the local grocery store by an irate community member who was incensed by reports of the inquiry in the local media (S. Apsassin, personal communication, April 24, 1997). This type of situation would be unlikely to occur in a large urban centre.

Social workers in child welfare have authority under the specific provincial or territorial legislation. This authority allows them to intervene in sensitive situations that are often highly charged emotionally. Even with the power that derives from the legislation and in the role, these workers are subject to scrutiny and intense criticism. It can be difficult to fit into the community as both a social worker and a community resident. The dual role creates a challenge that is seldom experienced in large urban centres.

Fitting into the community

How does a social worker fit into the community and how does a social worker comfortably carry out the professional role while remaining a part of the community? These are difficult questions but they are critically important for northern social work practice. Peterson (1996) chose to focus on these questions from a positive perspective by trying to understand how experienced social workers enjoyed their work and their northern community. This differed from much of the research and commentary regarding northern and rural social work. For example, Sundet and Cowger (1990) saw the rural community as primarily responsible for the high levels of stress experienced by rural social workers. Peterson's findings suggest that the ability to connect with and fit into the community is the critical component governing whether a social worker will stay or leave the isolated northern, practice location. Her study further suggested that it does not matter a great deal whether the social worker was raised in a small community or whether they originated from a large urban centre. It is the attitude that they bring to their practice and life in a small community that really counts.

A key component that facilitates the process of integration has to do with the construction of partnerships between the social worker and other individuals and groups within the community (Delaney & Boersma-Fieber, 1995). While Delaney and Boersma-Fieber discuss this process as a formal process in regard to First Nations communities, the idea of partnership can also be applied to non-First Nations communities and it can be understood in a less formal fashion. Collier (1993) points to the educational value of informal face to face contacts between the social workers and others in social situations at the community level.

The point is that partnerships can only develop when the social worker is seen to be a part of the community. These partnerships are crucial for good practice in northern communities and clearly they involve dual relationships. It is important then to develop relationships and partnerships in a way that is sensitive to differences of power and the multiple understandings of this reality. Northern social workers must become allies with their communities and not agents who enforce the metropolitan requirements on the hinterland.

Understanding the nature of the professional role can enable the social worker to fit into the community. This involves understanding ethical considerations as well as developing an awareness of the awkward fit that may occur between the social worker's personal life and professional life. Northern communities tend to be small and residents live in close proximity to one another. Daily events that affect an individual can quickly become a communal concern and a subject of talk or information by members of the whole community.

In addition to the challenges associated with the professional role and the associated ethical considerations, northern practice can also pose barriers associated with the organizational structures that deliver services. Organizational structures can be incongruent with the realities of the northern environment and context.

The organization and development of northern social services

Northern services are generally organized in a hierarchical and vertical fashion. This is consistent with the idea of hinterland and metropolis seen in economic relationships and systems. Control and planning originates from the urban centre while the periphery or hinterland operates like a puppet on a string, responding to the direction of the urban master. The degree and intensity of this relationship varies according to political and bureaucratic organization.

Various models of northern governance have emerged but they all represent an organizing theme characterized by some degree of centralized control (Weller, 1982). Some governments, like the Province of Saskatchewan and the Federal Government of Canada created separate Ministries to deliver northern services. The Department of Northern Saskatchewan and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development were examples of this arrangement. However, most provinces preferred to create some kind of coordinating mechanism to ensure that northern needs are addressed within the larger provincial bureaucracy. Coordinating mechanisms did not form separate ministries but acted as links between the north and specific government ministries.

Centralized planning has generally been applied to the northern economy as well as the educational, health, and social service systems. Stokes (1996) has described the organization of services as a vertical rather than a horizontal arrangement. Vertical arrangements involve centralized decision-making that is usually removed from the northern community in both a geographic and symbolic sense. On the other hand horizontal arrangements allow a greater degree of flexibility regarding issues like developing local partnerships and encouraging community involvement and consultation. Horizontal planning involves a large degree of local governance versus a centralized planning and administrative structure that is indicative of vertical planning.

This is important because horizontal development draws on organizational tendencies that are characteristic of northern communities and resource-based communities. Isolation helps to create local social networks, services, and institutions in a place that might otherwise be transient and unstable. Saarinen (1999) described this type of development in an examination of Finnish communities that existed in the mining towns of northern Ontario in the late 1800s.

In developing a model for northern services to a psychogeriatric population in isolated communities, Staff (1997) used this method of horizontal planning and consultation. Local providers and users of the service were consulted in the development of programs in order to create a service that made sense for northern communities and northern people. This enabled recognition and use of local networks that already existed.

The service model included informal caregivers as well as those who represented the formal system.

The developments of local control through regional boards and systems of service delivery are a form of horizontal organization. This approach is more responsive to consumers and communities; it is becoming an important characteristic of health and social service systems. The change is reflected in administrative approaches like total quality management (Gunther & Hawkins, 1999; Moore & Kelly, 1996). Total quality management (TQM) does not drive the change but it has a better fit with redefined administrative parameters. Martin (1993) argues that management and planning approaches like TQM are better suited to social work than other management systems. The quality driven, consumer focused, and consultative nature of this approach should, in theory, facilitate greater community input and the development of horizontal rather than vertical structures of service delivery.

Decentralization and increased local control allow for the development of other new approaches to social work. This is very important in northern communities where social work services are delivered to aboriginal people. Many aboriginal people have a different worldview and a different approach to healing or problem resolution (Hart, 1996). This is not to suggest that aboriginal people have rejected social work as a legitimate discipline, but they are clearly working to find ways in which social work might be integrated with traditional views, beliefs, and practices. For example, in the area of alcohol and drug treatment, European approaches like Alcoholics Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics are integrated with traditional healing methods to produce interventions that are unique hybrids of European and aboriginal understanding (Hart, 1992). This is an example of partnership in the development of new knowledge.

Various developments such as horizontal decision-making, new management approaches, and innovations within aboriginal communities result in new approaches to social work within northern communities. However, social work has strong urban origins and there is a continued debate about the need for a distinct brand of northern social work practice.

The Debate About What Constitutes a Northern Social Work Practice

The northern environment and the history of settlement and economic development in Canada's north have resulted in unique needs and demands. Social work, like the northern economy, has a history of branch plant operation. The dominant practice models and the methods of organization tended to be urban designed and urban driven. This has led to a view of the social worker as a colonial agent, a further symptom of the problems associated with northern living and northern development. Social work has been seen to represent an alien idea associated with cities and urban industrial development. However, attempts have been made to reshape and redefine the profession of social work in order to create a better fit with the northern environment.

Three views have emerged. One, as represented by Delaney (1995), adopts the ecological perspective of social work practice and emphasizes the importance of context in defining and developing northern social work. This approach is not uniquely northern as the principles could be applied to any location or any society (Greene, 1991). In fact Delaney emphasizes that it is a perspective rather than a model that he attempts to develop. Context and understanding of the unique attributes of the north are emphasized and these considerations are factored into the nature and style that governs northern social work practice. The process is largely interactive and the needs are defined within the particular environment.

The second approach to practice is the conflict model suggested by Collier. Like Delaney, Collier (1993) states that he is not proposing a practice model, though he does argue that the generalist approach is the most sensible within a rural or northern context. Rather than provide a specific perspective on practice, he develops a critical analysis that builds on the idea of social work as alien and representative of the hinterland-metropolis relationship. Social workers must strive to become allies with communities as they struggle with political and economic forces that perpetuate northern community marginalization. Collier is critical of social work as an urban industrial construct but the Marxist analysis that he uses had its origins in the urban industrial environment. Nonetheless, Marxist analysis has been employed to critically assess the relationship between the rural poor and the urban capitalist classes. The liberation theology of Latin America stands as an example of one form of this type of analysis (Gorman, 1990; Evans, 1992). The relative isolation of rural Latin American communities and the exploitive nature of the relationship between these communities and urban centres have some parallel to the situation existing in communities of northern Canada.

However, neither Delaney's or Collier's approach is entirely adequate for the purpose of constructing a northern model of practice. Delaney lacks a critical analysis while Collier is primarily materialist in his views. In fact a well-defined model of northern social work practice does not exist. Analysis of the literature suggests that the characteristics of social work practice in the north are unique and require a specialized approach.

Zapf (2000) presents a third approach that integrates principles of geography with social work practice. This approach differs from the ecological model in that people and social issues are viewed not only in terms of how they interact with a particular environment, but also how they are formed and shaped by that environment. Zapf incorporates aspects of conflict theory but argues that geography is the most powerful consideration when it comes to understanding the north and northern social work practice.

One characteristic that emerges through much of the limited literature on northern social work has to do with integration of the social worker into the community. This theme is found through much of Zapf's work (Zapf, 1985, 1993, 1995) and it is also apparent in the writings of Delaney (1995) and Collier (1993) and to some extent in Barter's (1997) discussion of child protection practice in north communities. Integration of the social worker into the community is also a factor in rural social work (Martinez Brawley, 1990; Wharf, 1985), but it is perhaps even more important in northern practice. Much of the rural social work literature concentrates on non-metropolitan environments that have fairly dense population distribution. This means that a social worker can live in one community and practise in another, often enjoying the same separation of the personal and professional roles that workers experience in urban settings. However, most northern social workers live and work in the same community. Community is client, community is home to clients, and community is home for the social worker. This reality requires workers to successfully integrate their personal and professional lives. It requires a very clear understanding of boundaries and the nature of the power expressed across those boundaries.

Northern social work practice requires an understanding of the interaction between economic-political considerations and the nature of human, personal, and social problems. Economic and political forces exert a powerful influence on northern communities. This reality seems to suggest the need for a social development approach to northern social work practice. The concept of social development is defined by Midgley (1995), "as a process of planned social change designed to promote the well being of the population as a whole together with a dynamic process of economic development" (p.25). Values such as community, equality, and mutual responsibility are important considerations within this concept. On the surface, these values appear to be consistent with the profession of social work and certainly they are consistent with the expressed needs of northern residents.

The work of developing a model of northern social work practice is in its infancy. The requirements of living and practising in the north serve to mark out the boundaries of this model, but its exact form remains to be defined. Like other models of social work, a northern model of practice is likely to draw upon the knowledge of other disciplines. This ability to use and adapt is social work's strength and clearly practice in the northern environment requires a large degree of flexibility and the capacity for innovation. Social workers can learn from other disciplines. This is true especially of child welfare practice where issues of retention are problematic not only for northern social workers but also those who practice within an urban base.

Northern Social Work: Child Welfare Practice and the Issue of Retention

Social work has a long history in the field of child welfare and unlike medical social work or psychiatric social work, social workers play the predominant role. Child welfare is a difficult and challenging field of social work practice. McMahon (1998) states that, "the nature of child welfare work does not endear clients to their workers." (p. 24) This is partly because the work involves a social control function and worker client relationships are often adversarial as a result of legislation and the investigative requirements of child protection. These characteristics may create some difficulty for social workers who value advocacy and empowerment strategies.

Social workers in child welfare are also concerned about violence given well-publicized reports of workers who experienced injury or even death as a result of assaults by their clients (Dillon, 1992). American research by Newhill and Wexler (1997) found that violence and the fear of violence exacted a toll on youth services or child welfare workers. Closer to home a Canadian study involving 171 social workers across various fields of practice found that 87.8% of respondents had experienced some form of verbal harassment and 7.8% were physically assaulted and injured (Macdonald and Sirotich, 2001). While the researchers did not look at child welfare specifically, they indicated that 38.8% of their respondents were involved in child welfare related social work.

An increase in the severity of special needs children entering the foster care system adds to the difficulty in child welfare (Helfgott, 1991). In some northern regions of Canada this change is reflected in high numbers of children coming into care who exhibit symptoms of fetal alcohol syndrome or fetal alcohol effects (Turpin, 1996). These "severe needs children" coming into care are symptomatic of complex issues that are largely rooted in poverty. Increases in the number of women of child bearing age who use drugs that affect fetal development as well as factors such as family violence and crime contribute to the severity of the needs (Ellet & Ellet, 1997).

The public perception of child welfare workers is worsened by media images and commentary. Social workers in this field of practice are often singled out for criticism of what they do and what they don't do. Press coverage may vilify or blame social workers and this influences perception and support (Callahan & Callahan, 1997). The general public doesn't understand the complexity of child welfare issues and quickly condemn individual workers based on limited facts reported in the media. Social workers and social service agencies are restricted by confidentiality and may not be able to explain their actions in the face of public and media criticism.

Challenges as described here contribute to burnout among child welfare workers. McFadden (1985) studied burnout among child protection workers in Toronto and found that youth, inexperience, lower levels of education, limited supervisory time, and lack of perceived "success" in the work all contributed to burnout. Several American studies of burnout and coping strategies found a mixture of personal characteristics and organizational/structural problems that contribute to burnout (Anderson, 2000; Shapiro, Dorman, Burkey, & Welker, 1999). Given the landscape it is hardly surprising that job turnover is high and recruitment and retention problems are widespread in the field of child welfare. Studies in the United States over the past two decades describe alarming rates of turnover. Salovitz and Keys (1988) found that annual turnover rates for New York City child protection workers were as high as 75%. Kammerman and Kahn (1989) surveyed 25 representative child protection units across the United States and found that annual turnover rates ranged from 14% to 51%. Baumann, Kern, McFadden and Law (1997) completed a study for the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services that found a 30% annual turnover of child protection workers.

Other American studies have examined this issue with a view to understanding the reasons behind recruitment and retention issues. Ellet and Ellet (1997) used a combination of a survey and focus group methods to study retention and recruitment issues affecting child welfare workers in the state of Louisiana. Their research found that workers most likely to stay were those who had a strong professional commitment to the work and who felt there was a reasonable opportunity for growth in their career and the possibility of advancement. Those most likely to leave were the workers with a weak level of professional commitment and a negative view of career advancement possibilities. They made a number of recommendations for recruitment and retention. Key among these were: the need to provide better support and mentoring; the need to pay more attention to personal characteristics when hiring; the need to create more opportunity for career movement; and the need to create better communication within organizations that will enhance relationships both external and internal.

Another American study by Rycraft (1990) used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore job retention factors affecting 23 child welfare workers in an unnamed American state. She focused on retention as opposed to turnover. Her findings suggested that there are actions that agencies and organizations could take to promote retention of social workers in the field of child welfare. Workers can be deployed more effectively; skilled supervision needs to be provided; and compensation and benefits need to be at a level that will make the work attractive.

Vinokur-Kaplan (1991) conducted a national survey of child welfare-oriented social workers one year after graduation. Workers who had found employment completed a survey designed to assess factors contributing to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Work with clients, work with colleagues, and feelings of accomplishment were the top ranked factors contributing to satisfaction. Salary, working conditions and feelings of accomplishment were the main factors that contributed to dissatisfaction.

Harrison (1995) used a survey to identify the factors that were most strongly correlated with a caseworker's intent to leave. Her study site was a government agency in Columbus Ohio that employed 300 child welfare caseworkers. Results from the study might be described as self-evident. For example, the strongest correlation was between low commitment to the organization and intent to leave, while low commitment to career was the second strongest correlation with intent to leave. However, her survey included some open-ended questions that generated additional information. Workers reported that unrealistic demands in terms of work, hierarchical controls, and lack of professional status were very likely to cause them to consider leaving.

Research related to job satisfaction and worker retention issues is overwhelmingly of American origin. However, these issues are concerns in other national jurisdictions. In

Australia for example, child welfare services have come under criticism similar to that experienced in Canada. The government response was also similar and involved demands for higher qualifications from workers as well as extensive reorganization and restructuring (Wagner, van Reyk & Spence, 2001). Wagner et al. using narrative data from workers in three different child welfare agencies found that job satisfaction was strongly related to achieving positive outcomes for clients while job dissatisfaction was strongly related to organizational constraints. The research also identified that organizational constraints can be counterbalanced by strong team identification.

Collectively, the wide range of studies pertaining to attrition and retention contribute to an understanding of the factors that might encourage social worker retention in the field of child welfare. The various research studies provide evidence and ideas about how social workers might feel reasonably satisfied or dissatisfied in their roles as child welfare workers. However, none of these studies examined the question of retention or satisfaction as it related to geographic location. This research study is interested in factors related to retention of child welfare social workers employed in northern and remote locations. The research also examines the retention issue within a diverse range of agency organizational structures. As such, the research recognizes the influence and importance of location and seeks to understand how it might play a role in retention.

Summary

Retention of child welfare workers is clearly a problem in North America. Within the context of northern Canada and northern social work practice, the problem of retention is compounded by a number of considerations. These have been identified in this review as the nature of the environment, geography, racism, structural issues, ethical factors, vertical organizational structures, and a lack of practice models that address the unique character of northern social work practice. Social workers struggle with personal and professional role conflicts that serve to complicate the nature of the work by creating additional stress and identity problems. Role adaptation is difficult for social workers in northern and remote communities and may be seen to contribute to poor rates of retention.

Studies regarding retention of social workers in the field of child welfare identified important issues that affect retention rates. However, these studies do not examine the problem from the perspective of location or geography. Provinces and territories have identified some of these issues and attempted to deal with them by way of internal studies, organizational change, and incentives. The recent KPMG (2001) study of child welfare in British Columbia serves as one example. However, many of the efforts directed at stabilizing the workforce have tended to target negative outcome variables, such as turnover. It is important to understand the positive as well as negative factors that affect rates of retention. Employers, educators, and communities can only be proactive around the issue of retention if they know what they need to promote and emphasize as well as what they should avoid.

Clearly, it is important to understand the conditions and reasons for turnover of social workers in northern and remote locations. The literature review included concepts and ideas that affect all northern residents and play an important role in the practice of child welfare social work across northern Canada. This research study examines the issues of retention and turnover at a series of northern sites across the western part of Canada. It is about the intersection of place, work and lifestyle, and their individual and combined effect on motivations to stay in the north.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

There is a wide and diverse range of research methods available to the social work researcher. Social work research can be used in two different ways (Klein, 2001). It can be purely focused on knowledge building that does not necessarily have practical application as its central defining purpose or it can be applied in the sense that it is used to improve services or programs. By describing situations or exploring the ideas and meaning attached to people's experiences, the social work researcher aims to promote better understanding, develop ideas, and improve the methods for delivering the services that are the focus of interest. Where there are gaps in knowledge the researcher attempts to address the uncertainty.

This study is both exploratory and descriptive in nature. Exploratory research is used to gather information on a topic or question that is relatively new or unstudied (York, 1997). Exploratory research focuses on building knowledge and information where knowledge and information may be lacking. Rubin and Babbie (1997) state that exploratory research is not intended to provide definitive conclusions but it is useful in hinting at answers and identifying further questions for research. Exploratory approaches can be used with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies though qualitative approaches tend to be more commonly associated with research that has an exploratory purpose. Part of the reason for this may be due to the greater opportunity for an exchange of ideas that can occur between the researcher and the research subjects within qualitative research.

The questions asked in this study have received limited attention and in this sense the questions fit what is normally characteristic of an exploratory approach. However, the questions also support a limited descriptive component that is part of this study. Descriptive research attempts to describe a phenomenon or phenomena without explaining it.

The Questions

This research asks two questions pertaining to social work practitioners who deliver child protection services in northern and remote communities:

1. What are the positive work and lifestyle elements in northern child welfare protection practice that are related to social workers remaining in the north?
2. What are the negative work and lifestyle elements in northern child welfare protection practice that are related to social workers wishing to leave the north?

The questions address the issue of social worker retention and they also provide opportunity to identify positive and negative characteristics of northern social work practice. The exploration of the retention question may benefit approaches to recruitment and retention as well as education strategies for northern social work practice.

Operational Definitions

There are a number of concepts within these questions that need to be defined. The questions examine work in the north as well as lifestyle factors related to living in the north. Within this context "work and lifestyle elements" refer to a wide range of variables and characteristics that include such things as climate, isolation, and recreation as well as work environment elements such as opportunities for career advancement, presence of supervision, and personal safety. Elements relate to general quality of life as well as specific working conditions.

"Social workers" are defined as people who are employed in a position that is called "social worker." Usually people with this designation hold a university degree that is either a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or a Master of Social Work (MSW). However, in many instances people who are called social workers or who hold a job that is classified as social worker may hold a college diploma or a degree from a discipline other than social work. In some instances people with this designation may not have any post-secondary education. Information from the Statistics Canada National Occupation Categories (NOC) census data (Stephenson et al., 2000a) indicates that among those who classify their occupation as social worker, 49% reported completion of a bachelor's degree, 19% reported completion of an advanced degree (usually at the master's level), 24% completed a diploma and the remaining 8% had not completed post-secondary education. The NOC data did not specify type of degree or diploma so it is impossible to determine the number of BSW graduates among the bachelor's degree group. Similarly, it is impossible to identify the number of MSW graduates among the advanced degree group.

A certain breadth of definition as to who is called a social worker is important especially for northern locations. These communities have not always had the same access to social workers with specific academic degree qualifications in social work and therefore people who do not meet the strict degree-based definition of "social worker" may still be employed in a social work position (Gove, 1995). For the purpose of this research "social worker" will refer to people who are labeled as social workers based upon their job description.

"Child welfare protection" practice includes those services that are usually associated with mandated child welfare practice. Workers may provide other services but child protection services must be a part of their work.

For purposes of this study "north" is defined in a number of ways. In terms of geography, north is a community or region above latitude 52°. The higher level of latitude means that winter daylight hours will be shorter. The communities in the "north" will be dependent upon a single resource-based industry. This might include mining, forestry, oil, or commercial fishing. The communities will be relatively isolated meaning that access to a large metropolitan area will take at least 2 hours drive by car. The communities will lack the range of services normally found in a large metropolitan area. Finally, the climate is likely to be characterized by winters of a more severe nature and summers of shorter duration.

Research Challenges

Examination of child welfare practice across provincial, territorial, and organizational jurisdictions quickly reveals that the specific nature of the delivery of child welfare services varies according to the specific organization involved and its particular governance structure. For example, in northeastern Alberta Awasak Child and Family

Services Authority, a provincially funded agency run by a community based board, delivers child welfare services. In British Columbia the Ministry for Children and Family Development delivers the same services through a provincial structure that is highly centralized. In parts of northern Manitoba the Awasis Agency is a fully delegated First Nations child welfare agency delivering service to people who have treaty status with most of the funding coming from the federal government. The agency is operated under provincial legislation through a board of directors composed primarily of Chiefs elected under the Indian Act.

Different organizational structures affect the specific work that social workers are asked to perform. In Yukon, workers outside of Whitehorse operate fairly independently and deliver a wide range of health and social services that include child welfare as only one component. The workers also provide service to a wide range of other program areas. In northern Manitoba workers for the province deliver services that are strictly child welfare focused – protection, support resources, and adoption.

Despite these various differences the locations met the conditions required for the research process described here. Multiple sites, a wide range of organizational structures with different systems of governance, different delivery requirements, and a varied selection of social workers, resulted in considerable diversity within the data. This variety increased the richness of the research material and added to its analytical value. At the same time the data was connected by virtue of the fact that the various people, systems, and sites involved the organization and delivery of child welfare programs and services. The differences were not an impediment to the research but added breadth and depth to the study. Multiple ways of approaching the research question facilitated the use of triangulation.

Triangulation

Contrast in research material was created through triangulation that used focus group interviews, survey questionnaires, and personal interviews. This research was largely exploratory and it was important to add depth and breadth to the research process in order to increase the validity of the results.

Validity in research is a concern for qualitative or quantitative methodology. Triangulation represents a method used by researchers to increase the validity of their findings. Jick (1983) states that there is a tradition of triangulation in research. However, different labels are used to identify the method of triangulation. These include convergent methodology, multimethod/multitrait, and convergent validation. Jick suggests that despite the fact that the term "triangulation" is widely associated with qualitative research, it also refers to mixing methodologies to address the same question.

Hyde (1994) defined triangulation as the use of multiple methods to explain an event. For example, a researcher might use a social worker's case notes, interviews with clients, and an interview with the social worker to explore or explain an experience of interest. In this case the data sources are different and the perspectives on the experience may also be different.

In his initial work Denzin (1978) described four different types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation involves the use of a variety of different data sources in the construction of a research study. Investigator triangulation occurs when a number of different researchers are used to address the same research question. Theory triangulation means that multiple perspectives are used to interpret a single set of data. Finally, methodological triangulation includes the use of multiple methods to study a single problem. Janesick (1994) later suggested that there is a fifth type of triangulation that she called interdisciplinary triangulation. By this she meant research that draws upon a number of different disciplines to inform the research process.

It is tempting to use triangulation to support the validity of particular findings but there is some disagreement about whether triangulation should be associated with validation or whether it is exclusively about adding rigour, breadth, and depth to the research process. Denzin (1978) suggests that triangulation is not really a tool of validation but rather an alternative to validation. He saw triangulation as a legitimate way to increase rigour, depth, and breadth. If these elements are present in a research design the results should be more believable.

The research in this study used data triangulation and methodological triangulation to address the questions. Different data sources and different research methods were employed: focus group interviews, survey questionnaires, and individual interviews with supervisors. Data analysis was largely qualitative but also included quantitative methods. In addition, the research sites spanned a wide geographic area organized under different political and administrative structures. Provincial governments, territorial government, First Nations government, and private non-profit partnerships are indicative of the range of administrative structures involved in the study sample. Multiple sites, multiple methods, and multiple respondents add richness to the study as well as considerable depth and breadth.

Whatever form or combination of forms of triangulation a researcher uses it is important to look for convergence or similarity between findings regardless of the method or methodology used. The advantage in triangulation is that the breadth and depth of data analysis is increased, thereby providing the researcher with a series of different perspectives on the same question. Focus groups, survey questionnaires, and individual interviews with supervisors provided opportunity for data and methodological triangulation.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The process of sample selection was purposive. Purposive samples are formed on the basis of the researcher's judgment and knowledge as to who or what may constitute the best subject or subjects for the particular research questions (Leary, 1995). A purposive research sample should also reflect the individuals, groups, and locations where the processes studied are most likely to be observed or encountered (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Purposive sampling can also be influenced by budget constraints and other logistic concerns but these are a secondary consideration. Budget limitations permitted a total of 16 separate sites to be used in the study.

A variety of sites and locations were considered for the sample. The final choices reflected organizational diversity within the context of the budget limitations of the researcher. All of the selected sites were within western Canada.

Employing authorities at the regional level were first contacted by telephone to explain the nature and purpose of the research. In some instances regional employing authorities had the autonomy to sanction the research. In others the researcher was directed to more senior administration within the organization. Once consent was given to proceed with the research and once the researcher received the name of a specific contact person (always a supervisor), a letter of introduction and explanation was sent to each site (Appendix B). The letter package also included the various interview guides and consent forms that would be used in the research. Samples of the interview guides, survey questionnaires, and consent forms are provided in Appendices C through J.

A follow-up telephone call was made to the contact person two weeks after sending the packages in order to discuss the specific nature of the sample. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized. The contact person met with their workers to discuss the planned research and provided interested individuals with the research material. Further telephone calls were used to set up the specific time and place for each site visit. The names of participants were known in advance for some sites while at other sites the researcher received an estimate of the number of people who might attend the focus group and return the questionnaire. Given the number of sites involved and the required travel, every effort was made to coordinate site visits in clusters.

Research Sites

In designing this research, 12 different northern sites were selected across various provincial and territorial boundaries located west of the Manitoba Ontario border. These northern sites had different organizational structures and the exact nature of the work at each site varied. However, all of the sites included child welfare and child welfare protection as a major part of service delivery. The workers and supervisors who participated in the research were involved in child protection work at least some of the time through the course of their normal work activities.

Between April 11 and July 31 2001, survey questionnaires were distributed to all selected northern sites, 23 supervisors were interviewed, and 12 focus groups were conducted. I conducted all interviews and all focus groups. During October 2001, I ran 4 comparison focus groups with 20 child welfare social workers in urban British Columbia, survey questionnaires were distributed at 4 office sites, and I interviewed 4 individual supervisors. The urban sites were limited to the lower mainland of British Columbia and the total numbers of focus group participants, survey respondents and supervisors are not equal to the northern sites. Comparison of the results has to be qualified by this consideration.

Each of the three approaches – focus groups, survey questionnaires, and supervisor interviews examined different perspectives related to the same research questions. Background on the different research approaches as well as some descriptive material follows.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are formed on the basis of purposive samples of subjects who meet the criteria for the proposed area of study. Focus groups have the potential to provide results that describe as well as explore a research question.

The use of focus groups first became widespread after World War II. The initial use of the focus group tended to be in the business and retail sector. Focus groups were found to be helpful in testing responses to advertising and in gauging consumer interest in new products. This commercial use of the focus group may explain why they did not curry much favour in the academic environment. However, interest in the focus group method did begin to develop as politicians and political parties began to use the groups as a way to determine public response and interest in issues or political personalities. Focus groups have also been used in the health and social service fields (Denning & Verschelden, 1993). They are essentially exploratory in nature in the sense that a focus group is used to develop ideas or test the response to ideas.

In terms of method, focus groups represent the middle ground between quantitative survey research and individual qualitative interviews. Focus group research has two principle strengths and advantages. The focus group provides more detail and depth than the standard survey questionnaire and focus groups allow the researcher to gain the views of more people in less time than the standard individualized qualitative interview. In many ways focus groups can be regarded as a means to gather detailed information with an economic use of time. That is not to say that focus groups are always a quick and easy method of gathering data. Reed and Payton (1997) have pointed out that issues of validity require careful consideration and the data obtained from focus groups should be considered in relationship to other data.

As noted, focus groups are normally purposive rather than random. The most effective focus groups are considered to comprise 8 to 12 people (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In the case of this research the focus groups were comprised of social workers that met the elements or criteria that were part of the research questions. Their names were selected based on personal communication as opposed to random selection. In addition to the northern focus groups, 4 urban focus groups were also recruited for this research.

Before meeting with a focus group a decision needs to be made about the manner in which questions will be asked. Usually there are two possible options that a researcher can choose in focus group question design (Krueger, 1998). The first involves development of a topic list that will be used by the researcher to construct questions while the group is actually running. These guidelines are flexible and may be abandoned given the direction that a particular focus group may take. The second route involves the development of predetermined questions or a clear question list. This latter route was selected in this research as it created consistency and did not rule out the possibility of using probe questions or follow-up questions for elaboration.

SWOT analysis

The focus group questions were organized under a format called a SWOT analysis. The acronym "SWOT" stands for: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This type of organizational format is generally associated with strategic planning exercises (Burkhart & Reuss, 1993; Mintzberg, 1994) and it has been widely used with social service and health delivery organizations (Sharma & Bhatia, 1996; Lanzotti, 1991). While the SWOT format provides an organizing structure, it is open and flexible enough to support free discussion and generation of ideas and material. The SWOT analysis was useful for this research as it focused on positive aspects of the work and the environment as well as those that might be considered negative. A completely open discussion asking participants to raise issues or concerns poses the risk of generating a series of negative responses or complaints. While these are important to hear there should be opportunity for positive expression of ideas.

The SWOT format created broad categories or headings for organizing the responses that formed the data. In addition to the SWOT categories, a fifth category of "other factors" was created. This was included as a "catch all" category that afforded participants with the opportunity to talk about issues that might fall outside the SWOT categories and to make suggestions about ways to increase retention and reduce turnover.

The focus group questions were not formally pre-tested but they were mailed out to participants and a representative from each office was contacted to see if the purpose of the focus group and the meaning of the probe questions were clearly understood. All potential participants were invited to contact the researcher if they had questions or concerns. The first two groups contacted expressed some confusion about the differences between strengths and opportunities. This was clarified by using specific illustrations at the start of each focus group. These illustrations applied to work as well as the living space. For example, the concept of strengths in terms of the work was illustrated by saying that living in a smaller community potentially means that you know more about people and their circumstances. This could mean that work activities such as risk assessments are more accurate and more certain. By contrast an opportunity associated with work might be the potential for career advancement because there is high turnover and movement in the particular office location. An example of a strength associated with the living space or lifestyle might be the relative ease and speed at which one can go from one part of a small town to another part of a small town. People are not delayed by traffic as they might be in a larger urban centre. An opportunity associated with the living space might be the chance to enjoy outdoor recreation that would be far less accessible in an urban center. Participants did not express confusion about the difference in meaning between weaknesses and threats but as a precaution examples were also used to illustrate the different meaning of these concepts.

Focus group data collection

All but two of the groups were run on the agency premises. These groups were both northern and there was a lack of adequate space in the particular offices so alternate facilities were arranged. Refreshments were provided for the focus group participants in order to add to their level of comfort. The groups ran an average of 90 minutes with a time range of 60 minutes to 120 minutes.

The researcher recorded the participants' comments in point form on flip chart paper under the SWOT headings. Discussion about each SWOT category continued until comments were exhausted. At this point the discussion stopped and the recorded comments were reviewed with participants to verify their accuracy. Participants were then asked to pick one or two comments that stood out for them as a reason to stay or a reason to leave (dependant upon the SWOT category). These comments were also recorded on the flip chart and reviewed with participants by way of summarizing and validating the results. The flip chart notes were read, typed, and mailed back to participants for further verification. The notes under each of the SWOT categories were then read, compared, and organized under headings that grouped the comments. These comments were counted and rank ordered by frequency.

A total of 81 social workers from Yukon, northern British Columbia, northern Alberta, northern Saskatchewan, and northern Manitoba participated in the northern focus groups. Nine of the focus groups included workers who worked and lived in the same community or locality while three of the groups comprised workers employed in separate offices and separate communities. For example, one focus group drew from workers scattered through eight communities that are widely separated by distance and other factors such as climate and culture. Table 1 displays brief descriptive information from the northern focus groups.

Table 1

Northern Focus Groups

Province or Territory	Males	Females	Total participants	Number of Sites	Number of offices
Yukon	7	1	8	1	8
BC	12	23	35	6	6
Alberta	0	19	19	1	1
Saskatchewan	0	3	3	1	2
Manitoba	4	12	16	3	3
Total	23	58	81	12	20

Each focus group began with a brief overview of the research as well as personal introductions. In each focus group situation the researcher provided participants with limited autobiographical information. The researcher also reviewed the fact that the research would be non-identifying in nature. Participants were asked to respect the views and comments of their colleagues through the focus group process.

Four urban sites were also recruited for the purpose of exploring differences in responses between urban-based and northern-based workers. All of the urban sites were located in the lower mainland of British Columbia, that is the general area of Vancouver and its suburbs. The urban sites were part of the Ministry for Children and Family Development in British Columbia and as such did not reflect the variety of organizational structures that was characteristic of the northern sites. However, the urban sites delivered service to diverse population groups and provided a point of comparison to the northern site locations.

In exploratory research with specific population groups one can only speculate about whether or not the information is unique to that group or whether it might be generalized to other groups. In the case of this research with its focus on the north and the experience of northern child welfare workers the urban sites provided additional opportunity for contrast and comparison. Budget limitations restricted the urban sites to one province, British Columbia.

The urban focus groups were run using the same procedures applied to the northern groups. The process of recruiting focus group members was identical to recruitment of northern focus group members. Regional managers of the Ministry for

Children and Family Development in British Columbia chose the specific office locations used for the focus groups. The four sites represented a range of urban child welfare offices staffed by social workers with the Ministry for Children and Family Development. For example, the Richmond office is situated in an area that is largely middle class while the Vancouver office that was assigned provided service to the downtown eastside, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the country. In all cases the researcher was able to use office space provided by the employing authority.

Descriptive information regarding the urban focus groups was again limited to gender and office location. The information obtained from the focus group participants is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Urban Focus Groups

Location	Male	Female	Total Participants	Number of sites	Number of offices
Surrey	3	1	4	1	1
Surrey	1	6	7	1	1
Richmond	0	3	3	1	1
Vancouver	3	3	6	1	1
Total	7	13	20	4	4

Survey Questionnaire

The survey was designed for two reasons. First it added some broad descriptive information about northern social workers. Second it provided another means to ask questions related to the research purpose, designed to explore perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The survey was anonymous and allowed for individual responses that might not have been made in the context of a focus group. It was considered that differences in data gathered from the anonymous survey versus the more public focus group data might add depth to the exploratory research. Information that is divulged privately and withheld publicly tends to suggest different levels of sensitivity and this can be useful in speculating on the meaning and importance attached to responses.

Rubin and Babbie (1997) note that survey research is an ancient technique that has a long history in social work and social work research. The survey used in this research was designed to be clear and simple. It relied on questions that generated data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The survey comprised 20 questions. Questions 1 through 12 were closed and focused on gathering descriptive information. Questions 13 through 20 were open and asked respondents to briefly summarize their thoughts on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that they associated with child welfare work. These questions followed the same SWOT format used in the focus groups. The survey participants were also asked to respond to questions that asked them to summarize their thoughts on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that they associated with their living environment.

The first northern site was used to pre-test the survey questionnaire. The workers completed it without difficulty and the survey was not modified. The workers' responses from the pre-test site were used in the overall sample.

As in the case of the focus groups a small group of urban respondents were recruited for comparative purposes. The survey questions were slightly modified to reflect the southern urban location. The surveys were mailed and distributed to each of the selected sites. The accompanying instructions indicated that the completed surveys were to be collected by the researcher at the time the focus group was scheduled. In this way it was hoped that there would be a high rate of return as well as a high correlation between survey respondents and focus group participants. Workers from the northern sites returned 74 completed surveys while workers at the urban sites completed 12.

The survey questions requiring responses of a nominal or ratio nature were recorded and entered into SPSS. The open-ended questions were analyzed and then labeled using the categories that emerged from the focus group data. In some instances the survey responses did not match the focus group categories closely enough and a new category had to be created. The responses from the open-ended questions were categorized as nominal variables and entered into SPSS for analysis.

Supervisor Interviews

Individual interviews are a traditional method for gathering qualitative data. In this research supervisors at each northern and urban site were interviewed in order to gather information about what they regarded as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and challenges associated with the work. The sample was purposive and interviews were conducted with any supervisor willing and able to participate. The supervisors, like the workers, needed to be involved in the delivery of child welfare services.

A total of 23 supervisors from the northern sites and 4 supervisors from the urban sites agreed to be interviewed. Some of the northern sites were staffed by up to 4 supervisors. At sites where there were multiple supervisors the number of interviews was not limited to one and included as many supervisors from a site as were willing to participate. Table 3 provides brief descriptive material about the supervisors who participated in the interviews.

Table 3

Supervisors

Variable	Northern responses	Urban responses
Male	8	2
Female	15	2
Years at location (*M*)	17.87	20
Years worked as supervisor (*M*)	6.13	5

Participation was voluntary and supervisors who agreed to participate received a copy of the interview guide several weeks prior to the interview. The supervisors were invited to contact the researcher if they had questions or if they required clarification. The interview guide was not pre-tested as provision of the sample interview guide was expected to provide the supervisors with opportunity to clarify any question that was not understood. All participating supervisors signed consents prior to their participation.

The individual interviews with supervisors in child welfare formed one component of data triangulation in that the supervisors were asked similar questions on the issues covered in the focus groups and survey questionnaires (Morgan, 1988). While the supervisors talked about their own work, the nature of this work included recruitment and retention of social workers. In that sense the questions produced data focusing on the issue of social worker retention.

The SWOT organization was used as a framework for the supervisor questions. However, the context of the interviews was different as they were private. Also, it might be argued that the supervisors represented different views based upon their status, position, and relative power within the organizations. Local office supervisors are often in the position of middle management where they experience pressure from their workers as well as more senior levels of management. Often the pressure may originate from different points of view and different concerns. It was considered that supervisors might provide a different perspective on the same questions addressed to the workers.

The supervisor interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviews were relatively short, producing anywhere from 9 to 16 pages of transcribed text. The transcriptions were analyzed thematically in order to search for the main themes, repetitive themes, and similarities in responses. The interview transcripts were read and reread using a constant comparative strategy designed to isolate and analyze the themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The responses from the small group of urban supervisors and the larger group of northern supervisors were compared. The supervisor comments were also compared to the themes that emerged from the focus groups and survey responses. It was important to determine if supervisors were identifying the same strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats or whether their views were markedly different.

Summary

The research design created a number of different vehicles for contrast and comparison. Focus group data, survey questionnaire data, and supervisor interview data could be compared and contrasted. This created an opportunity for data triangulation. Multiple data sources create the opportunity for data triangulation by increasing the depth and breadth of the research. In addition, data obtained from the northern sites could be compared to the data gathered from the urban sites.

The overall design of the research created a variety of different vantage points from which to explore the research questions of this study. Data triangulation, urban and northern contrast, and different organizational structures allowed the researcher to examine the question from a variety of perspectives.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

The results are displayed under the headings of *Focus Group Findings, Survey Results, and Supervisor Interviews*. The ordering of the results reflects the order in which the data was approached for analysis and organization purposes. Results from the focus groups were used to help organize the results from the survey questionnaires by way of developing themes. These results in turn provided a point of comparison when the transcripts of the supervisors were read and analyzed.

Focus Group Findings

Analyzing and organizing the results

The results were analyzed using a combination of content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), thematic analysis (Tesch, 1990; Van Manen, 1990), and a constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The urban and northern focus groups were organized and read separately but the method of organization remained consistent. The SWOT categories provided "umbrella" headings that governed the organization of the data. The notes were read in distinct blocks using the headings of the SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and the additional fifth category called "other factors". Further analysis involved reading the typed notes to gain a sense of the issues and themes raised in the various focus groups. Comments or questions were jotted down next to some of the groups' comments along with ideas about possible linkages or connections between comments. Tesch (1990) refers to this as the identification of commonalities and uniqueness. The notes were read again and the responses grouped under particular headings or themes that conveyed the intent or meaning of the comments and ideas raised during the focus group discussion.

Max van Manen (1990) defines a theme as "the experience of focus, of meaning, of point" (p. 87). He suggests that a theme is a reduction of a notion or a shortened way of making sense of phenomena. Van Manen says that themes can be identified in three ways: through a holistic approach, a selective or highlighting approach, or a detailed line-by-line approach.

In this research the theme headings were arrived at inductively through use of a selective or highlighting approach based on the comments recorded from the focus groups. This process relied heavily on the constant comparative method. Comments from the flip chart notes were read and highlighted and then grouped under headings. Once the comments were grouped under the headings, the comments were repeatedly reread and in some cases new theme headings were developed and some comments were moved if they fit better under a different theme heading. Following the SWOT format, strengths were the first area of focus group commentary to be considered in the organization of the data.

Strengths identified by the focus groups

The comments under the theme headings were counted and the headings were rank ordered by comment frequency. It should be noted that this table and the following focus group tables quantify comments and not participants. A total of 81 people participated in the northern focus groups and 20 people participated in the urban focus groups. The northern group is 4 times the size of the urban group and this fact has to be considered in comparison of the responses.

Table 4 displays the frequency and rank of the top 5 strengths for the northern and urban groups. A complete list of the response themes for the categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the northern groups is presented in Appendix K. The list in Appendix K also provides a view of the specific statements that were grouped under the theme headings which are rank ordered. Definitions for the various theme headings are provided in Appendix L.

Table 4

Strengths Identified by the Focus Groups

Theme	Frequency of responses in Northern groups	Rank	Frequency of responses in Urban groups	Rank
Community and family	38	1	2	8
Working in a small town	25	2	0	-
Northern practice	24	3	0	-
Environment	24	3	8	1
Learning and education	18	5	2	8
Culture	14	6	6	3
Job benefits	7	10	6	3
Economy	0	-	5	5
Resources	0	-	8	1

Participants were asked to comment on one or two of the factors that most strongly contributed to their staying in their present workplace and living environment. In the northern focus groups community and family was regarded as the most important strength that contributed to staying. The themes of environment and the appeal of northern practice were noted but the importance of these themes was not nearly as strong as community and family. In terms of community and family, focus group participants said things like:

> "Having extended family in the community is important."
>
> "A small community allows you to do so much in a day without worrying about traffic and congestion."
>
> "It's a safe environment for children and families."

Responses from the urban groups were not clearly confined to one particular theme. The job benefits associated with the local office and the quality of the work received mention as key strengths as did culture and the environment. Regarding job benefits urban workers said things like:

> "I enjoy the work and the opportunities afforded by the work."
>
> "It is the collegial atmosphere."

Weaknesses identified by the focus groups

Participants were also asked to comment on weaknesses that they associated with the work and with their living space. This particular aspect of the focus group discussions usually resulted in the longest list of comments and the liveliest exchanges among group members. The category of weaknesses provided a forum for complaints and workers were able to comment on various frustrations and irritations. Like the request for strengths, the request for weaknesses asked participants to consider the work as well as the place or location in which they lived. Certain issues were easy for participants to separate but some, like travel, applied to both work and life outside of work. The frequency and rank order of the top 5 weakness themes from the northern groups and the top 5 response themes from the urban groups are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Weaknesses Identified by the Focus Groups

Theme	Frequency of responses in northern groups	Rank	Frequency of responses in urban groups	Rank
Work	32	1	17	1
Location	31	2	7	3
Visibility	23	3	0	-
Cost of living	17	4	5	5
Supervision and management	14	5	8	2
Generalist/specialist	5	11	7	3

It is interesting to note that the category of visibility was mentioned 23 times by northern focus group participants. Unlike work and location, which received mention in both the northern and urban focus groups, visibility did not receive a single mention by participants in the urban focus groups. If one regards weaknesses as a source of stress and potential aggravation in terms of deciding to leave, then visibility is clearly a factor experienced by workers in northern settings while not an issue of concern or weakness for the urban workers.

As with the strengths, participants were asked to review the themes or categories recorded on the flip chart in order to select one or two that most strongly contributed to consideration for leaving. In relation to weaknesses two factors figured prominently for the northern focus groups. Negative experience of the work was the strongest concern related to consideration of leaving. Comments included such things as:

"High caseloads and high workloads"

"Workload pressures and stress."

"Burnout."

The northern focus groups also referred to the cost of living especially as it pertained to the expense of travel. Participants said things like:

"The expense and cost of travel out."

"High cost of living."

Other weaknesses that were mentioned as factors for leaving related to issues such as poor supervision and management, and location as it pertained to separation from family and friends.

The urban groups profiled the issue of supervision and management as a particular concern. This was in relation to bureaucratic or management structure. When workers referred to management the focus was primarily on senior managers as opposed to immediate supervisors. One of the urban focus group participants referred to them as the "watchers", meaning managers involved in program planning, case reviews, and case audits. Focus group participants also talked about:

> "Lack of management support."
>
> "Workers are not supported in taking risks."
>
> "Lack of independence."

In some respects these comments are similar to the concerns expressed by the northern focus group participants. However, the issue here revolves more around management structure and support whereas the high workload appeared to be a major concern for the northern respondents.

Opportunities identified by the focus groups

Focus group participants (81 northern participants and 20 urban participants) were asked to comment on opportunities they found in their work and in the place where they lived. Opportunities are closely connected to strengths but also carry a future connotation in that respondents can consider what might be available to them in terms of work as well as lifestyle considerations.

The comments in this SWOT category were fewer in number and participants did not have the same level of enthusiasm when they discussed opportunities. This may be somewhat telling about the workers' sense of opportunity or a lack of future orientation or it may reflect the closeness between an understanding of opportunities and strengths in the minds of participants. The researcher attempted to address this latter issue by explaining the difference between an opportunity and strength through use of specific examples. Clear ideas about opportunities emerged as seen in Table 6. The 5 most frequent opportunities from the northern and urban focus groups are noted.

Table 6

Opportunities Identified by the Focus Groups

Theme	Frequency of responses in northern groups	Rank	Frequency of responses in urban groups	Rank
Work experience	45	1	10	1
Recreation	13	2	6	3
Community and family	13	2	3	4
Benefits	9	4	0	-
Business opportunities	5	5	3	4
First Nations	5	5	0	-
Education	2	10	7	2

Work experience clearly emerged as the most important aspect for both the northern and urban groups. Recreation opportunities and community and family were a distant second in importance for the northern groups while education opportunities occupied second place among the urban groups. Education was seen as the lowest opportunity for northern group participants. Opportunities to work with and learn about First Nations ranked fifth for the northern focus groups but were also mentioned frequently under the previous category of strengths. Several aboriginal participants said, "I'm from the north and this is a chance to work with my own people in my own language."

Asked which opportunities exerted the greatest appeal in thinking about staying in the north and in their present work situation, the northern groups talked about the nature of the work experience. They made comments that reflected ideas such as:

"The chance to be creative in the work."

"Generalist practice creates a lot of work related learning opportunities."

"Career advancement and variety in the work – more opportunity for generalist practice."

Recreation opportunities related to the physical environment of the north also exerted strong appeal. Participants noted the opportunity for outdoor activities as well as the fact that it was affordable. Money and cost of living factors were also mentioned as a source of appeal. Participants talked about being able to afford property that they might not be able to purchase in an urban centre and the income as being good.

In the urban groups no clear indicators emerged. Education and learning were mentioned as important factors along with family and friends, recreational opportunities, especially cultural ones, and the work experience.

Threats identified by the focus groups

The final SWOT category was that of threats as perceived in the work/workplace and/or living situation. Threats take a variety of forms ranging from actual physical threats to the person, through to job security and professional isolation. As can be seen in Table 7 both the northern and urban focus group participants express concerns that fall under a theme of safety. However, the elements that affect conceptions of threats to safety are somewhat different.

Table 7

Threats Identified by the Focus Groups

Theme	Frequency of responses in northern groups	Rank	Frequency of responses in urban groups	Rank
Safety	47	1	13	1
Travel	13	2	0	-
Community/economy	10	3	3	4
Environment	9	4	3	4
Work organization	8	5	5	2
Existential issues	0	-	4	3

The threat mentioned most often by northern focus group participants as a reason for leaving was safety. Here the comments tended to cluster around two separate safety issues. The first involved what might be called physical safety of self or family. This included the notion of lack of anonymity and the perception that people in a northern community could be easily found if harm or a confrontation was intended. None of the focus group participants actually said they were assaulted but fear of physical violence was clearly on their minds. The words safety and violence appeared through many of the comments recorded during the focus group meetings. Some comments in the notes indicative of these concerns included:

"Violent clients."

"Physical threats."

"Working in isolation and having to face verbal or physical threats."

"Lack of anonymity and threats to personal safety."

"Threat to family."

The second group of safety comments clustered around the general concern of job security. These comments included statements such as:

"Blame and lack of respect."

"Scrutiny from the watchers."

Safety stood out among the urban focus group participants but it did not emerge as a significant cause to leave the work or leave the community. In fact one group of urban workers who provided service in a largely middle class suburb said that they did not feel unsafe or threatened in their work situation. However, they did mention a variety of issues that included safety, complacency, bureaucratic requirements, lack of recognition, and service cutbacks. In one urban focus group, participants stated that they felt no particular threat was strong enough to cause them to consider leaving the work or community. However, they did cite issues that they perceived as minor threats. Workers in urban areas, like their counterparts in the north, deal with people who may have a history of violence and problems with substance misuse or addiction. This makes the work unpredictable.

Other factors identified by the focus groups

In addition to the SWOT analysis framework, focus group participants were asked to comment on other factors that might not have been covered in the discussion. They were asked to consider any other issues that affect the quality of the work and living environment in terms of long-term commitment and retention. This additional line of questioning was undertaken as the SWOT framework by itself could be considered to be overly constraining and structured. The question concerning other factors was open-ended compared to the SWOT questions that required participants to respond within clear boundaries.

In addition to opening up discussion around other concerns or considerations, the discussion about other factors was intended to provide participants with the opportunity to make suggestions about ways to improve the work experience and the living situation. The question elicited additional information and also gave participants a sense that they could make recommendations that would be included in the final document. The workers' responses were largely related to incentives or benefits that might be used to promote greater retention but in some instances workers added information related to other aspects of job satisfaction or lifestyle concerns and issues. The results are displayed in Table 8.

Table 8

Other Factors Identified by the Focus Groups

Theme	Frequency of responses in northern groups	Rank	Frequency of responses in urban group	Rank
Incentives	29	1	6	2
Compensation	28	2	0	-
Support	18	3	11	1
Hiring	12	4	0	-
Performance review	11	5	0	-
Recreation	11	5	0	-
Workload	10	7	5	4
Resources	0	-	6	2
Organization	0	-	3	5

Incentives and compensation emerged as the most important factors coming from the northern focus groups while support is clearly the most important factor for the urban groups. Incentives and compensation included suggestions such as increased holiday time, funding for professional development and continuing education, and leave days for family events. Support, which was most important for the urban groups, ranked third in importance for the northern groups. By support workers meant that the organization and management should stand fully behind their employees.

Summary of Focus Group Findings

A number of key themes emerged from the focus group discussions. Certain themes appeared to be especially important for social workers in northern locations and relatively unimportant for social workers in urban locations. Among the strengths, a connection to community and family ranked first for northern workers whereas it exerted little in the way of importance for the urban workers. Northern workers also valued work in small towns and what they saw as key elements of northern practice – relative independence and the generalist nature of practice in the north. These factors were closely tied to the importance of the environment as an appealing aspect of working and living in the north.

Both urban and northern groups had similar reservations about the weaknesses associated with the work. High caseloads and excessive paper work were frequently cited as concerns. However, the limitations of geographic location and the difficult challenge of high personal visibility were felt most strongly by northern social workers. The subject of visibility did not surface as an issue for urban workers.

The opportunities expressed by urban and northern workers were similar. Both appreciated the opportunities associated with the work experience and both found the recreational opportunities in their particular living environment to be appealing.

Both groups ranked safety as the main threat but the level of feeling about this issue was much more significant and intense for northern workers. They cited safety issues as a factor in a decision to leave, whereas urban workers did not cite this as a significant factor. Among the northern workers the issue of safety related to personal visibility and as a result a level of perceived vulnerability. Life in a small isolated community limits privacy and raises personal accessibility to clients as well as other community members.

Finally, both urban and northern groups emphasized the importance of incentives in employee retention. However, financial compensation was important for northern workers while not mentioned at all by the urban workers. The added costs of travel as well as other costs associated with northern living may serve to elevate the importance of financial compensation for the northern workers.

Survey Results

Survey questionnaire forms were mailed and distributed to the 4 urban and 12 northern sites (See Appendices H and I for copies of the questionnaires). Completed surveys were to be collected by the researcher at the time the focus group was scheduled. Among the 81 northern focus group participants, 12 did not complete the survey forms indicating a lack of time. An additional 5 survey forms were completed by workers who could not attend the focus group but wanted to contribute to the study.

Among the urban groups all but one of the completed survey forms came from focus group participants. However, only 12 surveys were returned limiting the usefulness of this data source.

A total of 74 surveys were returned from the 12 northern sites while 12 surveys were returned from the 4 urban sites. The number of social work positions shifted and changed during the course of the study so an accurate return rate is difficult to report. However, the return rate with the surveys generally ran around 70%. The surveys asked questions that provided some descriptive data about the participants. Table 9 presents this descriptive information about the northern and urban groups.

Table 9

Survey Respondents by Gender, Age, Marital Status, Education, and Work Experience

Variable	Northern		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Male	21	28.4	6	50
Female	53	71.6	6	50
Age (*M* years)	38.5		42.2	
Married or committed relationship	49	66.2	10	83.3
Number with children	43	58.1	7	58.3
BSW	33	44.6	7	58.3
MSW	8	10.8	1	8.3
Other qualification	33	44.6	4	33.3
Work experience (*M* years)	8.1		10.7	

Table 9 indicates that the northern respondents were predominantly female (71.6%). Almost 45% of the northern respondents had educational qualifications other than a social work degree. Two-thirds of the northern respondents were in a committed relationship and 58% had children.

The survey also asked a number of other questions that produced descriptive data. These questions sought information on primary community of origin and whether respondents had chosen to work in the north.

Among the northern respondents 21 (28.4%) originated from a rural southern community; 23 (31.1%) originated from a rural northern community; 25 (33.8%) originated from a southern urban community; and 5 (6.7%) originated from a northern urban community. Among northern respondents 59 (79.7%) indicated that they had chosen to live and work in the north while 15 (20.3%) were not there by choice, but by reason of their spouse's job location or the necessity to take work albeit not at a preferred location. Of these 15 respondents only 1 was of male gender.

The SWOT categories provided a valuable means to organize the survey responses. The written responses were grouped under theme headings and compared to the focus group theme headings. In this way consistency in labeling and subsequent analysis was possible.

The questionnaire asked for separate responses concerning strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats regarding the work, living space, and lifestyle. This approach was not taken in the focus groups as participants were asked to comment on both work and lifestyle at the same time. In recording the results from the survey questionnaires it was decided to combine the work and lifestyle responses. Since they were similar this facilitated comparison to the focus groups results. A complete list of response categories and frequency counts for the urban and northern respondents are available in Appendix M.

Under the first category "strengths", a total of 11 strength themes were identified. The 5 most frequent responses from the northern workers and the 5 most frequent responses from the urban workers are displayed in Table 10.

Table 10

Strengths as Reported by the Survey Respondents

Strength	Northern		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Northern Practice	62	83.8	0	-
Community and Family	58	78.4	6	50.0
Workplace	54	73.0	7	58.3
Environment	49	66.2	6	50.0
Culture	24	32.4	10	83.3
Career Advancement	20	27.0	1	8.3
Resources	0	-	8	66.7

Northern practice is the most frequently cited strength indicated by the northern focus group participants. There is no mention of "urban practice" by the urban respondents. Culture and resources were seen to be important by the urban participants. Resources were not listed as a strength by northern respondents. In fact the next category of "weaknesses" indicated that resources are a key negative factor for northerners. Community and family were important for both groups but more so for the northern social workers.

The respondents identified a total of 13 themes under the category of weaknesses. Questions were asked about weaknesses related to the work and the lifestyle. The 5 most frequent responses from the northern workers are displayed in Table 11. The table also includes the 5 most frequent responses from the urban workers.

Table 11

Weaknesses as Reported by the Survey Respondents

Weakness	Northern		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Location	57	77.0	8	66.7
Resources	57	77.0	3	25.0
Cost of Living	37	50.0	6	50.0
Education/Recreation	33	44.6	0	-
Visibility	29	39.2	0	-
Supervision/Management	20	27.0	7	58.3
Pollution	2	2.7	7	58.3
Lack of work opportunity	12	16.2	4	33.3

It was interesting that location figured prominently for both the urban and northern groups. However, in looking at the nature of the responses about location, it is clear that the concerns over location were somewhat different. Northern respondents expressed concern about isolation and distance from major centres, knowing that it takes longer to get to a transportation hub; education resources are further removed; services are a long way off; and education options for children are many hours away from the home community. These factors were viewed as playing a negative role in retention of northern workers.

Northern workers also expressed concern about resources. Resources included work related resources such as access to specialized medical/psychiatric services or specialized foster resources. Lack of these resources increases the difficulty of child welfare work and results in children not always receiving appropriate support and treatment. The comments also referred to resources for personal or family use such as an orthodontist for one's own children or specialized home building trades people. In northern communities specialized resources may not be available and people either have to pay a premium to bring them to the community or pay to travel out to access the resource.

These factors bore some relationship to cost of living, a factor cited as a key weakness by northern respondents. High fuel costs for heating and transportation, higher costs for groceries, and various material necessities are part of this concern. Running a car, buying fresh fruit and vegetables, and purchasing a new refrigerator all cost more in northern locations. Housing and property were usually viewed as less expensive, but in some places such as a northern boomtown like Fort MacMurray, prohibitive housing costs were also noted as a weakness.

The urban respondents were more concerned about things like being in the middle of urban sprawl and close proximity to the United States. The urban respondents resided in the area of greater Vancouver in close proximity to Seattle in the United States. Their concern about being close to the United States may have arisen because the surveys were completed shortly after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. The respondents also completed the survey at a time when the media reported the first deaths from mail delivered anthrax virus. At the time there was considerable public concern about further suicide attacks as well as fear of nuclear or biological weapons attacks. However, if this concern affected thoughts about retention it was likely very temporary.

Concerns raised by the northern respondents such as lack of resources and problems with high visibility did not appear as concerns among the urban workers. Urban respondents cited availability of resources as one of the positive aspects of living and working in an urban centre. Conversely, while a weakness such as pollution was only a minor concern among northern respondents it registered as an important weakness for the urban respondents. The cost of living was not noted as a concern by urban respondents even though housing in the Vancouver area is extremely expensive.

Table 12 lists the opportunities that workers associated with their job as well as their community and lifestyle. In general the respondents did not cite as many opportunities as they did strengths or weaknesses. The table includes the 5 most common themes as expressed by each of the groups.

Table 12

Opportunities as Reported by the Survey Respondents

Opportunity	Northern		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Work experience	69	93.2	11	91.7
Community and family	41	55.4	4	33.3
Career advancement	35	47.3	2	16.7
Recreation	30	40.5	4	33.3
Culture	25	33.8	4	33.3
Travel	7	9.5	0	-
Education	0	-	10	83.3

Work experience is clearly seen as the most important opportunity by both northern and urban workers. Urban workers also ranked education opportunities as important while education opportunities did not appear at all among the northern respondents. Career advancement opportunities are more important for northern workers as compared to their urban counterparts. Retention of workers may be achieved by matching them with a work experience that is interesting and fulfilling.

Threats were the final category that workers were asked to comment about. The responses are displayed in Table 13. The table examines the 5 most common themes mentioned by each group.

Table 13

Threats as Reported by the Survey Respondents

Threat	Northern		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Work organization	38	51.4	8	66.7
Safety	38	51.4	2	16.7
Travel	36	48.6	1	8.3
Community economy	35	47.3	2	16.7
Community politics	18	24.3	1	8.3
Health care	18	24.3	0	-
Environment	14	18.9	3	25.0

Northern and urban respondents viewed work organization was regarded as a significant threat. Among northern respondents there were at least three other threats that exerted more or less the same level of concern: safety, travel, and community economy.

This is significant as there may be a certain cumulative effect or even a greater degree of vulnerability among northern workers in that they feel threatened on multiple fronts.

As noted both urban and northern workers regarded work organization as a threat. By work organization they were referring to service delivery structures, reorganization, reassignment, and lack of clear guidelines. Northern workers saw personal safety issues as a threat as often as they regarded work organization as a threat. Personal safety refers to threats by clients as well as a lack of privacy and lack of anonymity. The northern workers also regarded travel as a serious concern whereas it was only mentioned once among the urban respondents. The issues of personal safety and travel are prominent concerns in the north and exert a negative effect on worker retention.

The gender status, community of origin, and educational qualifications of the northern respondents were examined to see if these variables exerted influence on the top three dependent variables reported under each of the categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It should be noted that these variables are nominal and any measure of strength of relationship is somewhat limited (Norusis, 1997).

Chi Square was used as the test to see if there was association between the variables. Lambda was used in conjunction with Chi Square to assess the strength of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). A value of 0 for lambda means that that the independent variable has no predictive value while a value of 1 means that it will be a perfect predictor (Norusis, 1997).

There was no measured association between gender and any of the top three variables from the SWOT categories. Educational degree had a weak association with greater concern around the resource shortages. Respondents with a Master of Social Work degree were far less likely to see this as a problem but the association was weak [χ^2 ($df = 2, N = 74$) = 9.28, $p = .009$, (λ=.1]. The threat of personal safety was also associated with educational degree. Those respondents with the Master of Social Work degree were less likely to be concerned about personal safety but once again the association was weak [χ^2 (df=2, $N = 74$) = $p = .05$, $\lambda = .12$]. Community of origin exerted no influence on any of the top three variables in each of the SWOT categories. This was surprising as the researcher expected that people who originated from smaller rural communities might experience fewer concerns regarding issues such as safety and visibility.

Supervisor Interviews

Supervisors at each location were interviewed in order to obtain their views regarding challenges, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with child welfare work. They were also asked other questions relating to what they believed could be done to improve conditions and circumstances for social workers in their office location. While the interviews used the SWOT categories as a way to organize questions the process was flexible. The interviewer often asked the supervisors to elaborate on a point and some of the interviews digressed from the set structure. However, the SWOT categories received clear attention from all of the supervisors.

The number of supervisors available at each site varied. For example, five of the northern sites employed a single supervisor while at the other northern sites the number of supervisors ranged from 2 to 4. This in itself may create a different environment for supervisors with some working in relative isolation and others having an immediate peer or group of peers to draw upon for support and ideas. Two of the urban offices employed more than one supervisor, however, a single supervisor was interviewed at each urban site. Like focus group participation, availability of supervisors was key to their being interviewed. In a number of situations a supervisor who had agreed to an interview had to decline due to an urgent work matter that required immediate attention. Constraints around budget and travel did not allow the researcher to return to complete the interview. Despite a few situations of this nature, more interviews (27) were completed than initially anticipated.

The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed thematically in order to search for repetitive themes and similarities in responses. Themes were grouped by colour coding and notes were made in the margins of the transcripts. In addition to frequency or repetition of a specific issue or theme, the themes were also examined for the degree of importance supervisors attached to a theme. For example, a supervisor might mention several issues connected to particular themes but spend little time discussing one of the issues while expressing more passion and taking more time to discuss another issue.

It was expected that the urban supervisors would have more experience but the findings show that the northern supervisors had an average of 1.13 years more experience than their urban counterparts. However, the number on its own did not tell the complete story as two of the urban supervisors had a combined total of 8 years supervisory experience in the north before they began to supervise in an urban setting. On the other hand, only one of the northern supervisors reported supervisory experience in the south prior to moving north and in that particular case the experience was less than one year.

Challenges in northern supervision

There were several major challenges expressed by northern supervisors. One of the most important related to staff turnover and perpetual staff shortages. Because of constant staff turnover the supervisors noted that they spend an inordinate amount of their time orientating, training, and supporting new recruits. This takes away from their ability to engage in community development work and to provide clinical supervision. A number of supervisors stated that they also carried a caseload because of staff shortages and the lack of experienced workers who might be able to handle challenging cases. For example one supervisor from northern BC said:

> I don't do supervisory work. I'm a supervisor but reality is I'm a front line worker. I'm doing the actual job because I don't have staff to do the job. In other provinces you get your BSW; you get hired and right away you're delegated to remove children. In BC you have to go through all these hoops of training and you get partially delegated. It's a big process.

Supervisors also raised concerns about the lack of available support resources for both clients and staff. Clients may receive poorer service because resources for specialized assessments or treatment are unavailable in the community. Workers are challenged because they cannot access the training and professional development that they might be able to secure in a larger urban environment.

Supervisors at some of the sites such as Yukon and northern Saskatchewan were responsible for more than child welfare services. At these sites supervisors talked about the challenge of supervising generalist workers. The supervisor has to have knowledge of all of the various programs and this is difficult given the complexity and constant change in programs. One of the supervisors put this in perspective by saying:

> I am the only supervisor for all programs in this region. That's a challenge because you have to know all the programs and try to give direction. Orientation of new staff is very difficult and I can't manage the number of units I supervise.

Travel was also reported as a challenge. A number of supervisors were responsible for workers dispersed over a large geographic area. They noted the difficulty in traveling to see every worker in every office on a regular basis. The distance, time, and weather conditions served to make this a challenge.

The urban supervisors talked about the severity of cases and the complexity of cases as being the major challenge. Children come into care with multiple problems and their needs are incredibly complex. Various specialized resources have to be identified and coordinated. These factors were compounded by concerns around turnover and administrative demands such as paper work. However, turnover concerns were not as strongly or as deeply expressed as in the case of northern supervisors.

Are supervision challenges in the north different?

Almost all of the supervisors interviewed in northern locations discussed the challenge of frequent staff turnover and constant recruitment as being characteristic of work in the north. However, a number of supervisors acknowledged that they were aware of urban locations that struggled with similar high rates of turnover. A number of northern supervisors also noted that a lack of resources, generalist practice, a large First Nations population, and dangerous travel presented challenges that are probably unique to northern social work practice.

Two of the urban supervisors made clear comparative comments from their experience in both northern and urban locations. In both instances the supervisors had worked in the north as supervisors and then transferred to a southern urban location. Both noted that northern practice was more generalist and in many ways less constraining than urban practice. One supervisor put it this way:

> I think in many ways you have more responsibility because… at least the time when I was there [meaning the north], you were dealing with several different programs. Here I just deal with protection. When I worked in the north I dealt with adoption, I had to do family service, even income assistance, the mentally handicapped. You know the… a different range of programs.

One urban supervisor also noted the higher expectations placed on urban workers, particularly when they deal with groups of highly specialized and qualified professionals.

All the urban supervisors, even those without northern experience, thought that staff retention problems in the north were an issue that sets urban and northern practice apart. Urban supervisors experience turnover but it is not as difficult to recruit replacements for staff when they leave. One supervisor who has always worked in the lower mainland said, "my sense is that some supervisors outside the lower mainland do have difficulties around staffing."

Practice and lifestyle strengths as seen by the supervisors

A number of recurrent themes emerged as the northern supervisors talked about the relative strengths of living and working in a northern environment. These strengths included living in a small town, the relative freedom and autonomy that can be experienced in working in a remote setting, the opportunities to do generalist practice, and the close working relationship that can be developed with other resources in a small community. In regard to generalist practice, one supervisor said:

> I guess the real focus for me is the opportunity for a worker to get involved in a generalist practice which from my understanding of the south is starting to - it's becoming more and more difficult to find yourself in a generalist practice. So I think for, at least a lot of young workers, there's that opportunity to get a broad range of experience.

Another supervisor who had worked in the south and moved back to the north, also emphasized the strength of generalist practice:

> I think the ministry has generally moved over the last several years and decades to more specialization. So what you have in the larger centers are offices that devote themselves to one particular aspect of practice and so you become very narrow in your focus. Whereas in the north you tend to have more integrated offices and more of a generalist practice. And so that's the difference and I think that actually one of the reasons that brought me back north was because of wanting to experience the cross-over of services that the ministry offer that you don't really get in the south. So my practice in the south was very narrow.

Other strengths noted by a smaller number of the supervisors included recreational opportunities and the opportunity to work with Aboriginal communities.

Urban supervisors were not unanimous in their assessment of strengths. They noted a number of factors including experience and maturity of staff, learning and experience that derive from the work, and the supportive nature of the particular office.

Practice and lifestyle weaknesses as seen by the supervisors

Northern supervisors cited three key weaknesses. One of these related to geographical location, especially the social and physical isolation that is a product of this. The supervisors noted how this leads to professional isolation; it adds to the cost of living; and it limits training and education opportunities for supervisors and workers.

A second weakness cited by many of the supervisors related to staff shortages and staff turnover. This creates stress for supervisors as it adds to the futile feeling of trying to do a job that cannot be done according to standards because the resources are simply not there.

The third main weakness discussed by supervisors was that of personal/professional boundaries and high personal visibility that comes with living in small communities. For example, a supervisor who moved to the north from a southern urban setting said:

> It's been a big struggle for me – maintaining my boundaries and my privacy. I'm accustomed to that sort of urban anonymity. Whereas some people would perceive a small community as supportive and it's nice to know your neighbour, I find that intrusive and I don't want people to come up to me in the mall and tell me stuff about child protection intakes when my spouse is there and people are walking by.

Several of the urban supervisors talked about not having adequate support or the right resources to meet particular client needs. One of the supervisors who had worked in the north as a supervisor stated that urban resources were not nearly as rich or abundant as social workers in the north might expect. This supervisor believed that resources were less accessible in some instances and workers often ended up using resources that were not entirely adequate for the particular needs of a child. Urban supervisors cited lack of senior management support combined with perpetual reorganization as other major weaknesses.

Practice and lifestyle opportunities as seen by the supervisors

Under the category "opportunities" most often mentioned by supervisors from the north was career advancement. For example, one supervisor said, "If you're interested in supervising you'd probably find more opportunity in the north because the competition to act is a lot lower." In this response "act" meant to fill in as a supervisor when the regular supervisor is away or a supervisor position is vacant. Career advancement included promotion to more senior positions as well as the opportunity to move laterally into other kinds of positions. Another supervisor made the following comments: "Social workers stand a better than average opportunity for career advancement. Similarly I would say that probably exists for supervisors as well, an opportunity to move up." Supervisors believe the opportunities for career advancement are relatively abundant in the field of northern child welfare social work practice

A number of supervisors also talked about recreational opportunities as well as the breadth and creative nature of the work. Recreational opportunities were primarily connected to outdoor activities. Surprisingly, one supervisor even stated that there were educational opportunities given the incentives and supports this person's agency had built into further education of its staff. Supervisors also talked about the work experience as having a tremendous degree of breadth. This translates into an opportunity to learn about different facets of child welfare.

Career advancement was not mentioned as an opportunity by the urban supervisors. From the supervisors' perspectives social workers do not enter child welfare practice in an urban setting in order to move rapidly up a career path. However, the supervisors noted that there are opportunities for workers to be seconded to special projects that give a break from protection work. Three of the supervisors mentioned training and education as other areas of opportunity. However, the fourth supervisor noted that some offices and workers were excluded from education and training as there was never sufficient coverage to free them for a day or two of training.

Practice and lifestyle threats as seen by the supervisors

Northern supervisors mentioned visibility and safety as that affected the supervisor and their workers. Descriptions of visibility and safety as threats varied. For example, a supervisor said:

> The first threat I would bring up is that fish bowl effect. Everyone knows who you are and what you do. There is a lot of angry feeling toward the ministry and that gets directed toward at us.

Another supervisor at a different location made the following comments about the same issue:

> I mean, you can't go downtown without seeing one of your clients - you can't go out for a social evening without running into one of your clients. It's very easy to be continually working. You can't get away from it, that's right. You have to be very, very good at setting boundaries between your personal and your

> professional life and if you struggle with that at all then this is a place that will burn you out very fast.

Two other issues that were discussed included the economic uncertainty of living in a single industry town and a lack of support from senior management. The latter issue was connected to other issues such as negative media attention and the constant challenge of trying to meet standards that are impossible, given staff shortages and workloads. This concern was particularly apparent among the supervisors from northern British Columbia.

Safety was mentioned as a concern by two of the urban supervisors, while two others noted personal health and the health of workers as being threatened by the stress of the work. The issue of boundaries was not mentioned as a threat.

What can supervisors do?

Supervisors were asked a number of questions designed to generate possible solutions that might lead toward more effective recruitment and retention. They were asked to consider factors that retain workers and factors that contribute to workers leaving. They were also asked about initiatives that either they or their organization could do to promote better retention.

Northern supervisors were most concerned about developing a work environment in which workers were treated as professionals and granted more autonomy to make decisions about the work. The supervisors also emphasized the need to break the cycle of attrition in that constant staff turnover and resulting shortages were seen as creating poor morale, high stress, and burnout among workers. However, the supervisors did not provide a specific strategy for doing this other than suggesting that vacancies have to be filled quickly in order to avoid placing additional burden upon staff that chose to remain. Northern supervisors generally felt that employers were too slow to fill vacancies often because they were trying to meet short-term budget considerations.

A number of northern supervisors talked about the importance of introducing what might be called a "professional" approach to the work. The opposite of a professional approach is a system of service that depends on a hierarchical structure of decision-making and a series of check lists that are a function of tasks that need to be completed. This system does not allow workers to use their own professional judgment and every case is highly regimented or fit into a formula. These concerns are best illustrated by three quotes from three different supervisors.

> You treat workers as if they are employed professional social workers who are also adults.

> I think if we were less rigid in terms of the way we do our job and could exercise some professional discretion then I think we would keep people from feeling like they were working on an assembly line or being dictated to and critiqued for non-compliance with standards.

> I want workers to start challenging themselves and I think that what that does, it gives them a sense of, oh maybe I can be trusted to make some decisions.

A number of northern supervisors from British Columbia also talked about the problems with the recruitment process itself in that they are rarely involved in selection panels. A quote from a supervisor puts this problem in context.

> They hire my staff for me. They show up. I don't even know if they are going to show up. I don't even know who they are or where they come from.

Several supervisors talked about the need to break the cycle of attrition. So long as there are staff shortages, resource shortages, and heavy workload demands, retention will be an issue. One suggestion for addressing this was described as the need to provide a safe and supportive work environment. A safe work environment meant keeping the work demands at a reasonable level. A number of supervisors also mentioned the importance of recruiting from the north as much as possible. For example, one supervisor said:

> I think we need to look at finding students out of high schools in the north to come and job shadow for a month. This is what you do and it may encourage them to think about going into social work.

This suggestion was based on a sense or knowledge that people recruited from the north were more likely to stay. Supervisors also talked about engaging in better career planning with staff. This strategy might result in planned movement and shifts in job responsibilities. The supervisors who raised this issue suggested that the strategy could produce staff less likely to burn out and more likely to retain a strong interest in their work.

Urban supervisors discussed the importance of keeping work demands at a reasonable level and creating an environment in which workers feel supported. Part of this involved providing support and creating a buffer between workers and senior management.

Comparison of the Three Northern Data Sources

The focus groups, surveys, and supervisor interviews asked similar questions in order to explore the issues that influence retention of child welfare social workers in northern communities. Each data source was somewhat different in terms of the participants who contributed. More importantly, each data source was developed using different methods of information gathering. Focus group interviews, anonymous survey questionnaires, and private, individual interviews are all distinct methods of gathering data regarding the same research question.

The focus groups required participants to state their views and opinions in front of their work colleagues. This may have produced a degree of reticence among some participants though this could not be determined while running the groups. Local office politics or relationships between workers may influence open discussion among work colleagues. The survey questionnaires were private and anonymous. Respondents could say what they wished without fearing what a colleague might think or fearing that their comment might somehow get back to their supervisor or manager. Similarly, the supervisors' interviews were private, though unlike the survey respondents, supervisors engaged in active discussion with the researcher.

Comparison of the results from the three data sources indicates the extent to which the data has depth in terms of the degree of similarity or agreement regarding the results. Within the focus group interviews, in the anonymity of completing a survey questionnaire, and in the individual supervisor interviews, the various participants expressed many of the same thoughts and sentiments. But differences of opinion are also important and instructive. Supervisors speak from a different vantage point than workers and may have different views on the issues. Similarly, differences may reflect the strength or weakness of one research method versus another. In the case of this research, focus groups and survey questionnaires sought to explore the same question with the same people but through a different method. A person who was relatively quiet in a focus group might still voice their thoughts while completing the survey questionnaire.

Table 14 provides a brief comparison of the top 4 findings from the three northern groups or data sources (focus groups, survey questionnaires, and supervisor interviews) using the SWOT categories. In the case of the focus groups and survey questionnaires the ranking is based on frequency count of the particular themes. The top four supervisor responses are based upon a combination of frequency and amount of interview space or time that was devoted to discussing or emphasizing a particular theme. The findings are arranged in order. Themes that occur in all three data sources are italicized.

Table 14

A Comparative Summary of the Northern Data

SWOT Category	Focus Groups	Survey Questionnaires	Supervisor Interviews
Strengths	Community/Family	*Northern practice*	*Northern practice*
	Work/Small town	Community/Family	Work/Small town
	Northern practice	Workplace	Generalist practice
	Environment	Environment	Autonomy
Weaknesses	Work	*Location*	*Location*
	Location	Resources	Staff turnover
	Visibility	*Cost of living*	Visibility
	Cost of living	Education/Recreation	*Cost of living*
Opportunities	*Work experience*	*Work experience*	Career advancement
	Recreation	Community/Family	*Recreation*
	Community/Family	Career advancement	*Work experience*
	Benefits	*Recreation*	Creativity
Threats	*Safety*	Work organization	*Safety*
	Travel	*Safety*	*Community/Economy*
	Community/Economy	Travel	Management
	Environment	*Community/Economy*	Workloads

Comparison of strengths

All three data sources named northern practice as a strength and as a factor that encourages people to stay. While the concept of northern practice may not be clearly defined in the social work literature it is apparent that the workers and supervisors involved in this research thought that they were doing something that they labeled "northern practice". The supervisors talked about autonomy and generalist practice as other strengths but these issues can be seen as closely connected to the idea of northern practice. In the focus group data workers described northern practice as creative, independent, community based, and generalist. It is rooted in small communities and avoids the narrow confines of specialist practice. Northern practice requires social workers to cross program boundaries. This involves a certain amount of risk taking but it has personal, professional, and community benefits.

A strength noted by the focus groups participants as well as supervisors was the concept of work in a small town. This strength is related to the idea of community and family, a strength that was raised in both the focus groups and survey questionnaires. Northern workers and northern supervisors enjoy the ambience of living and working in a small town. There appears to be a level of comfort and degree of certainty associated with working in a small community.

On balance a comparison of the three data sources under the SWOT category of strengths reveals responses that are similar. Workers described the appeal of the environment as a strength while supervisors did not, but apart from this difference the results were similar.

Comparison of weaknesses

Location and cost of living are noted as weaknesses within all three data groups. Location is especially strong as a factor that exerts a negative influence on retention. When workers in the focus groups considered weaknesses that would cause them to move, location was a key response. Some wanted to be closer to children or other family members while others saw recreation, education, and health care needs as problems that derive from location. Location is seen to contribute to a perception of deprivation or disadvantage. Living and working in the north is constructed or viewed as a deficit. Cost of living is connected to location. Groceries, fuel for transportation and heating, travel costs, and in some locations housing costs all contribute to a sense that northerners face a high cost of living.

There were differences between the focus groups and survey respondents regarding other top ranked weaknesses. Visibility and the work itself ranked as key weaknesses for the focus group participants. Although the focus group participants and survey respondents more or less comprised the same people the survey respondents cited resources and education/recreation opportunities as major weaknesses.

Supervisors were concerned about staff turnover and visibility. Visibility showed up as a weakness in the focus group responses and staff turnover bears some relationship to work, a factor that was cited as a weakness in the focus groups. In discussing location the supervisors noted that it has a negative influence on education and professional development opportunities so there was some similarity to the questionnaire results that cited education and recreation as weaknesses.

Comparison of opportunities

Work experience and recreation were common opportunities found in all three data sources. Workers and supervisors believe that social work practice in the north provides a variety of rich work opportunities. This idea is connected to the theme of northern practice. The supervisors linked this to another opportunity labeled creativity, another theme that is closely connected to the worker and supervisor description of northern practice.

Supervisors and respondents to the survey questionnaire also mentioned career advancement opportunities as an important opportunity in northern practice. The various participants regard northern social work as a context in which career advancement can be rapid. Community and family considerations were cited by the workers but not by supervisors. Overall, the opportunities that emerged from the three data sources were similar.

Comparison of threats

Safety and the community economy emerged as factors within all three data sources. Safety issues tended to be prominent. Safety is connected to issues such as visibility and accessibility as well as concern about clients who have a history of violence. Worker responses in the focus group data and the questionnaire data noted travel as a key threat and in some respects this is closely related to safety issues.

The survey questionnaire data showed that workers regarded work organization as a major concern. This response was similar to two issues raised during the supervisor interviews – management and workload. Interestingly the workers did not raise this concern to the same degree during the focus group discussion. However, it is clear that the elements cited in the category "threats" are similar.

The three data sources produced convergent results. There were some differences but the basic outcomes were similar. This provides a consistent platform on which to discuss the issue of retention and the nature of northern social work practice.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Research Intent

The intent of this research was to examine positive and negative aspects of work and lifestyle that influence the issue of retention of social workers engaged in northern child welfare practice. The views of social workers and supervisors were gathered and analyzed to develop ideas about how retention might be improved. A small urban sample provided a measure of comparison to the data gathered in the north. Within the northern data three different sources, focus groups, survey questionnaires, and supervisor interviews, added breadth and depth to the information gathered in this research process. The SWOT analysis provided a framework for understanding the qualities and characteristics respondents liked and did not like about their work and their living situation. The SWOT structure also ensured that there was a voice for both negative and positive considerations. The issue of worker retention is complex and this framework was useful in eliciting a broad range of perspectives.

While the research question was primarily concerned with social worker retention in child welfare within the context of northern social work practice, the results have relevance to other considerations. These include social work education and the development of a model of northern social work practice. The findings of this exploratory study will first be discussed in terms of the implications for social worker recruitment and retention. This discussion is relevant for employers interested in understanding the factors that promote and sustain workforce stability and employee satisfaction. Second, the research findings will be considered in terms of social work education and the preparation of professional workers for specialized work settings. This is also relevant to the subject of staff recruitment and retention. Current education standards and curriculum content may not reflect an appreciation or understanding of the conditions and requirements of northern social work practice. Finally, the ideas and comments of northern social workers and their supervisors provide some insight and thoughts about what constitutes northern social work practice. These will be incorporated into the discussion of the results.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention of social workers are important dimensions of effective social work administration and service delivery. Most human service organizations recruit new staff on a regular basis. The implications in terms of retention will both influence and be influenced by the nature of social work supervision. Social workers in this study complained about high workloads and this has implications for worker stress and burnout. The relationship between this and retention has been identified in the literature (Anderson, 2000; Shapiro, Dorman, Burkey & Welker, 1999). While not unique to northern social work practice it is relevant within the context of this study.

Supervisors were quite direct about the problems with retention of workers for northern practice. A number of supervisors noted that a significant portion of their work activity was occupied by orientation and training of new staff. Several supervisors even reported that they had to carry personal caseloads to help new workers adjust to the demands of their job. They expressed a strong need to somehow break the cycle of attrition and turnover. Specific turnover rates were unavailable. However, one supervisor had the unofficial number for a particular office. The number of full time equivalent positions varied during a 10 year period ranging from 3 to 5 positions but during the 10 year period 70 social workers moved through that particular office.

The findings suggest that staff turnover exerts a negative influence on the supervisors' perception of the work. It also has a demoralizing effect on workers who constantly witness the departure of colleagues. High turnover and poor retention is seen to have an effect on the availability and quality of supervision. One supervisor who worked in an urban setting and then moved north put it this way:

> Over 10 years I had the same staff in the same unit before I came here. I was used to a unit that could function independent of a lot of direct supervision and there was a lot of time for clinical supervision. Here it's all the practical matters of what you need to do to get into court - what you need to do to make a referral - what you need - because that experience level is not as high or anywhere near as high as it was in my other life. It's almost like a Maslowe's heirarchy. You can't start talking clinical issues with a worker around her caseload if she hasn't figured out the mechanics of what you need to do to keep jurisdiction - what you need to do to make a referral. You know, how do you identify the practicalities of what needs to happen first.

When turnover is so frequent it governs the functions, activities, and time of supervisory staff in a manner that is disproportional to what one would normally expect in a supervisor role. In practical terms, less time is available for clinical supervision, new program initiatives, and community consultation. Service quality must undoubtedly suffer and take second place to demands of recruitment and orientation activities. One supervisor put it this way:

> I believe an important component of the work is working with communities to develop communities to develop services to the clientele we serve and when your dealing with the younger, less mature, inexperienced staff that takes away from the supervisor being able to spend that time in the community.

Supervisors have fewer opportunities to develop clinical supervision skills. They can't always participate as fully in the development of new programs and initiatives.

The limited capacity to become involved in this type of development is viewed as a significant problem. For many supervisors new services or service enhancement can be the most exciting part of their work as it is opens opportunities for creativity and a proactive stance rather than simply reacting to problems and concerns. Social work may not be very satisfying when the actual work revolves around constantly responding to a series of crisis situations that may have been prevented with more effective programs and resources.

Findings in this study indicate that supervisors must constantly respond to the problem of staff turnover. This creates a crisis of sorts for supervisors in that other aspects of the work receive relatively limited attention. The comments of supervisors show that aspects of the job that might be more interesting, such as clinical supervision and new service initiatives, are difficult to address because time is occupied with the orientation of new staff and dealing with the consequences of staff shortages. The role and function of supervisors becomes skewed and focused on what should be a minor component of the work of supervision.

The energy and effort required to recruit new staff is an obvious concern for employers. It is also a concern for people in the community who use social services such as child welfare. When agency resources are disproportionately allocated to recruitment activities this means that fewer resources are for direct client service. Staff shortages can limit access to social workers and slow the response to client concerns. This means workers who remain must pick up the extra work, with repercussion in terms of work quality and job satisfaction.

In a larger centre the relative anonymity of workers may not expose them to the same level of personal blame that occurs in small isolated northern communities. Findings from the north indicated that worker visibility is a concern in northern communities quite different than the urban setting. In Vancouver, if you can't address the need of a client by the end of the day it is unlikely that same client will confront you in a local grocery store that evening. Such an occurrence can be typical of life in the north.

There is a danger that work in the north may become highly personalized. The cases requiring a response tend to be more severe and a constant barrage of crisis level work can take its toll on social workers. If workers experience high levels of stress or become ill as a result, this can exacerbate the problem of retention and lead to a vicious cycle of staff turnover as described quite clearly by supervisors in this study.

The constant need to recruit is costly. Many of the organizations involved in this study regularly invest large amounts of money to hold hiring panels across the country. Even if successful in finding new social work recruits, there is the additional high cost of relocating a worker from another part of the country.

One supervisor in the study lamented the cost of bringing in a bright young worker, training this person, and then seeing her leave 6 weeks into the job. The particular worker, from a large urban centre had left family and friends to work in an isolated community of 3000 people. The shock of transition was too much for the person and the employer did not realize any benefit from the time and money spent on training or recruitment. The local office entered yet another period of staff shortage where remaining workers had to assume responsibility for the additional cases.

Recruitment and client relationships

By its nature, the field of child welfare presents special challenges for social workers when it comes to the development of good relationships with clients. There are several reasons for this but the most important has to do with social control. The social control function of child welfare frequently sets workers in adversarial relationships with their clients. As a result, building bridges and developing relationships based upon trust and mutual respect often requires a considerable amount of time and skill. Building relationships can take time and the challenges are made more difficult when clients must regularly deal with new workers. In communities where turnover of child welfare workers is high, community members may even "give up" on developing relationships with the "new" workers. If this happens it is not good for the agency; it is not good for the community; and it is not good for the workers. Children in care, as well as families who have to work with the social workers, can benefit from the stability and familiarity that develops when workers stay for longer periods and don't move away.

Workers also benefit from longevity of career in small communities. The research results indicated that the relationship between the community and the worker and the worker's family, stand out as a strength and an opportunity. The longer a social worker stays, the greater their knowledge of community and family history. This can be invaluable in terms of assessing the degree of risk in particular situations and it also helps to coordinate resources and supports that are easily accessible to families in the midst of a crisis.

Contemporary child welfare practice tries to be community-based and in order for this to work social workers need to know and understand their community. The findings in this study show that workers and supervisors liked the fact that they could learn a lot about the people and the community where they lived. Working and living in a small town was cited as a key strength in the focus group discussions as well as the individual interviews with the supervisors. Workers liked the fact that people could easily be found and they also liked the fact that clients who were considered to be at high risk could be more easily monitored. Some respondents indicated that this level of community of knowledge takes some of the guesswork out of assessment and practice decisions. It assists workers in achieving a level of necessary competency.

What to do about recruitment?

It is important to make good decisions when recruiting and hiring new workers. The responses from workers and supervisors indicated that it is also important to create the conditions that will keep workers employed and reasonably happy in their work. Research that addresses the issue of retention cites factors such as adequate compensation and benefits, access to good supervision, opportunities for career advancement, and organizational stability as key to retaining social workers in child welfare (Ellet & Ellet, 1997; Wagner, van Reyk & Spence, 2001). The findings of this research suggest that employers need to focus on a number of other factors to promote an effective recruitment process.

The subjects of this study were involved in child welfare service delivery. As a field of practice, child welfare is complex and requires that social workers possess extensive knowledge in a range of important areas including child development, child abuse, substance misuse, law, and court process. Despite the complexity of child welfare programs, workers and supervisors did not express concerns about any perceived deficits in technical or professional knowledge. The findings from this research found that lack of knowledge and preparation in areas other than child welfare were cited as concerns. Specifically these involved areas associated with adjusting to and living in a small town as well as dealing with dual or multiple relationships. These were large issues for supervisors and workers and viewed as contributing to turnover problems. Workers often seemed unprepared to deal with these issues that can create discomfort and stress ni the work and the living space.

Aspects of living in a small town

High visibility was one of the key concerns reported in the focus groups and in the supervisor interviews. This is consistent with literature that examines what it is like to live and work in small northern communities (Ingebrigston, 1992) At the same time safety was stated as an important concern in all three data sources: focus groups, survey questionnaires, and supervisor interviews. High visibility coupled with fear of violence or reprisal obviously contributes to a stressful working environment. For workers with children, these fears could be multiplied several times over. The social worker may be seen as an outsider and representative of an unfair or unjust system that is persecuting the person. This creates conditions for an adversarial relationship between the social worker and clients who are community members. Collier (1993) and Hudson & McKenzie (1981) make this argument especially as it pertains to practice with aboriginal people.

Visibility did not surface as a concern in the findings from the urban data. This result was unique to the northern sites and clearly workers and supervisors feel somewhat vulnerable and uneasy about social work practice and their living circumstances in small northern communities. At the same time, the workers and supervisors said that they regarded life and work in a small community as full of opportunity and benefits. For example, the results showed that when people reflected on the appeal of living and working in the north that the small size, relative intimacy of northern communities, and the opportunities for children were highly valued and important strengths. Workers who were parents reported some appreciation for the fact they could keep tabs on their own children and the situations they were in. As previously noted, workers and supervisors valued the fact that small communities present advantages in conducting assessments and keeping track of high risk situations. It is much more difficult for people to lead an anonymous existence in a small community. It is viewed as somewhat of a "fish bowl" situation.

The findings profile a situation in northern communities that is somewhat paradoxical. How can a social worker be afraid of something yet still embrace it as an appealing quality? Clearly the familiarity and comfort of living in a small isolated community can exact a cost. Those workers who choose to remain in northern communities and are satisfied with their decision have reconciled these factors that appear contradictory.

However, in terms of recruitment and retention this still leaves the question as to how employers might be able to arrive at better judgments about who are the candidates who will adjust to the north. Also once you have a worker in place, how can you keep that worker there? This is important as reducing turnover results in cost benefits and better continuity of service.

In the survey results there was no relationship between workers who originated from small northern communities and their expressed concern about visibility and safety issues. In other words it didn't seem to matter if someone grew up in a large city such as Toronto, Ontario or in a small northern community like Lynn Lake, Manitoba; they all expressed concern about visibility and safety. Individuals who grew up in small towns are as unprepared as their urban counterparts to deal with the challenge of visibility that confronts every social worker in a small community. Visibility may not have been an issue before the person entered the social work profession but the results showed that visibility and safety were cited as serious pressing concerns for the social workers and their supervisors regardless of where they grew up. It is a product of the social work role and the work that is undertaken in child welfare. When a person fulfills this role in a small isolated community, the issue of visibility becomes a problem.

Unfortunately interview panels don't often ask applicants to consider factors that might be associated with living in a small northern community. In British Columbia for example, many of the workers who are recruited to work in child welfare are recruited outside of the province during nationwide recruitment campaigns. The traveling interview panels recruit child welfare workers and do not recruit candidates for specific locations. As a result, the standard questions don't explore an applicant's knowledge of small town living or their ability to manage dual relationships. Construction of interview case scenarios to assess this issue would not be difficult. The results from this research indicate that a better "front end" assessment of the issue might lead to more effective candidate selection. Ellet and Ellet (1997) talked about the need to employ better assessment of personality during the recruitment interview process as a means to improve retention. Assessment of an applicant's ability to adjust to a small isolated community is not so much a measure of personality as it is a measure of adaptability to a practical problem.

From the focus group notes there were 5 comments under the category of weaknesses that referred to the social difficulties for young single female workers (Appendix K p. 201). It was noted that this is; "a difficult place for single people as social opportunities are limited" and "small size of town limits opportunities for young single workers." One cannot necessarily conclude from these results that northern practice will not fit for a person who does not have a family or a partner but clearly these are concerns relevant to gender, marital status, and age.

In the focus group discussions regarding this subject, the workers talked about the fact that they did not share interests with local males who might be considered "eligible." These men were employed in the resource industry as loggers or heavy equipment operators and the workers did not feel any sense of attraction toward this group. The discussion also related to the limited number of social venues or outlets for meeting people to develop social relationships. The issue of visibility remains as a concern here in that a worker's private social life may be on constant display and subject to criticism by members of the community. Community residents know where workers go, whom they are with, and how they spend their time.

When workers talked about visibility and socializing in small town, a number of them expressed reservations about going to a local bar or pub. This was partly connected to the issue of safety. Workers were understandably concerned about finding themselves in a situation with a client who might be intoxicated and angry about an action the worker had taken. Most social workers would clearly wish to avoid this type of encounter. These views run counter to Collier's (1993) prescription for bucolic harmony but then Collier was not addressing social work within the context of a statutory service such as child welfare.

The concerns expressed by workers about socializing in the community also related to what might be called “congruence.” In child welfare practice many of the cases involve issues where alcohol plays a major role. Children often come into care because parents are alcohol or drug addicted. Alcohol as well drugs may lower inhibitions and moral constraints leading into situations where children are abused. Workers who try to dissuade a client from drinking may experience discomfort or a sense of operating under a double standard when they encounter that same client in the local bar or pub. This creates difficulty for all workers but especially those who may be younger and single. In many small communities the bar or pub is one of the few available social outlets. Without this option at least some workers may experience a sense of isolation, lack of social contacts outside work, and personal loneliness. Outside the local bar there may be few social outlets available to single workers.

The results suggest these types of concerns and questions are more important than a candidate’s knowledge of child welfare legislation or familiarity with the latest tool used for risk assessment. If a worker is unprepared for small town living their knowledge of program intricacies appear less important. Program details and program standards can be taught and learned when an employee enters the work site. The knowledge of how to live in a small town is more difficult to impart once a person is on site and many hours away from familiar surroundings. The same individual is often separated from family and close friends. Employers need to pay more attention to the applicant’s knowledge and expectation of small isolated communities. The employers also need to carefully assess an applicant's understanding of dual relationships through the interview process.

These issues underline the importance for employers to be selective when they visit academic institutions with a view to hiring new graduates. Recruitment efforts might be more effective if directed at graduates from university programs that emphasize rural and northern social work practice. Examples include the University of Northern British Columbia, Lakehead University, Yukon College, University of Manitoba at Thompson, University of Calgary Northern and Rural program, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. Actual community of origin may be less important than understanding the specific role and challenges that social workers face when they practice in small isolated communities.

During the recruitment and interview process applicants can be asked specific questions regarding their knowledge of small isolated communities. They can be asked questions about how they would handle multiple relationship dilemmas. They can also be asked questions about strategies for self-care such as their own sense of resourcefulness when it comes to developing their entertainment and recreation in an isolated setting.

The role of the community in recruitment and retention

The findings of this study show that community is both a source of strength and weakness for northern social workers. Responses from the focus groups as well as the surveys indicated that living and working in a small isolated community was an attractive feature of the job and the lifestyle. Yet at the same time the participants reported life and work in a small isolated community as stressful and even unsafe. This suggests that the community and the worker's perceptions of the community are important in addressing the issue of retention. There is a need to think about how communities might be involved in the hiring of social workers and in supporting the retention of social workers.

Community participation in the recruitment and hiring process could accomplish a number of things. It turns back a portion of power to the community and creates community investment in the human capital of the social worker. The social worker is not imposed on the community. Instead, the community invests its time and trust in the new recruit. This becomes a basis for community support and sanction of the child welfare worker's activities. It also promotes a greater sense of autonomy for the community in that they have some sense of ownership and influence over who is to be hired and entrusted with protecting their children.

Developing and promoting a framework for local community participation in recruitment may be difficult or challenging. Most of the organizations involved in this research were large bureaucracies with a management and human resources structure that was urban, centralized and based elsewhere. Often, the people who make the decisions about whom to hire lack familiarity and knowledge of the local community where the social worker is to be deployed. Not only were recruitment decisions made centrally and some distance away, the research results also showed that management system in place was viewed as a threat. Workers and supervisors did not believe that centralized management structures were very sympathetic, knowledgeable, or understanding of northern concerns. In some instances the management structure was viewed as punitive in response to northern concerns. For example, instead of addressing worker shortages by adding more staff, remaining workers were expected to increase their caseloads to cover the gap. Clearly, if supervisors and workers want to include local communities in the process of recruitment and hiring they will need to develop a plan that is convincing and highly persuasive in terms of centralized management.

It is important to note the place that communities have in the creation of an environment in which social workers feel supported and valued. Without community support, social workers are extremely vulnerable to the negative effects of high visibility, accessibility, ethical dilemmas, and public scrutiny. Community support can be operationally effective through a partnership between the community and employing agency. This supports the importance of the development of horizontal ties and a greater sense of localism. A reciprocal process of social work practice can develop in that the individual social worker benefits from the community support and the community has a stronger sense of connection to child welfare social work. This stronger connection has the potential to promote a greater understanding of the social worker's role within the area of child protection.

An example of community inclusion can be found in some social work education programs. The University of Calgary BSW Access Program included community representation as an integral part of its planning process (Zapf, Pelech, Bastien, Bodor, Carriere & Zuk, 2002). Community input is important to the development of courses and educational strategies that contribute to the education of social workers who understand and are committed to small isolated rural and northern communities. Key community members are involved in an active advisory capacity with the Calgary program. This creates a sense of investment among community members.

The liability of location as it pertains to retention

Workers in northern locations also expressed a feeling of being disadvantaged because of where they live. Location was described as problematic in the focus groups, the survey responses, and the individual interviews with supervisors. Holiday travel, attending family functions, taking children to cultural or sporting events, and obtaining specialized health care all involve travel away from the community. The influence of location is woven through the various concerns and weaknesses cited by the participants. In some northern locations workers and supervisors received an allowance or financial compensation to deal with the additional time and cost involved in northern travel. The cost itself can be substantial in a deregulated market as northern locations are removed from busy, competitive travel routes. For example, airfare from Vancouver to London England in the month of February is around the same price as a day return ticket from Terrace to Vancouver. However, many workers in the north did not receive any additional benefits or compensation to offset some of the negative consequences associated with location. Workers, and to a lesser extent supervisors, saw this as a matter that needed to be addressed in order to promote better staff retention. Some of the suggestions made by workers and supervisors included additional holiday time and paid leave for family events. While location was seen by many of the participants as a factor in retention they also had ideas on how to mitigate its potentially negative effects.

It is not clear why many of the northern agencies have not attended more to the issue of perceived inequities in location. Isolation, access to resources and services, and travel time that result from living in a remote community, were clearly expressed as major concerns. Employing authorities inattentive to this issue. This may be a function of low funding priorities and reduced budgets for social services or perhaps it is a function of decision makers believing that modern communication and travel services connect people in widely dispersed locations. If these are widely held beliefs they clearly do not fit with the perceptions held by the respondents in this research study. Location was an issue for large numbers of the participants and they feel disadvantaged because of where they live.

Given this concern that emerged from the findings, it is clear that employers have to consider the inequities or problems associated with geographical location if they want to improve retention rates in the north. Workers suggested the need for additional northern allowances for travel. In today's environment of cost cutting and deficit reduction employers may not be receptive to this solution or suggestion. However, turnover and recruitment costs are high and the benefits attached to additional allowances may be cost effective. Certainly the current situation does not appear to be cost effective as this illustration shows. One supervisor from northern British Columbia related a story of a worker who was recruited from an eastern urban centre. In considering this case, the costs of sending a three person interview panel to the eastern location must be factored in. Once hired, the new worker was sent to a training centre in the lower mainland of British Columbia. While there, food, hotel, and course training material costs were covered.

Wages of the training staff also have to be added to the cost. After completion of the 6 week training program, the relocation costs of the worker were also covered. This particular worker remained in the northern BC community 6 weeks before giving notice to leave and then headed back to a job in eastern Canada. The total cost is difficult to estimate but it was clearly in excess of $30,000.00. Some of these funds may have been more appropriately invested elsewhere.

Individual employers have to look at the relative cost of turnover and recruitment and consider how that compares to building in incentives such as additional holiday time, travel days, and monetary bonuses. A strategy of monetary bonuses was initiated in British Columbia and it will be interesting to see if it has an effect on rates of turnover among northern child protection workers. The results in this research indicated that a number of BC workers regarded the bonus as key to their decision to work in the north. While people do not enter the social work profession to become wealthy financial incentives can have an influence on their employment decision (Rycraft, 1990). Recruitment and retention policies may benefit from including this as part of a package of incentives for northern social workers.

Promoting northern practice

Improved retention of social workers is more likely to occur if workers believe that the work they are doing is important and results in positive outcomes for clients (Wagner, van Reyk & Spence, 2001). If they regard their work as second rate, undervalued, and unimportant they will be less likely to stay. The research results produced a list of positive qualities or characteristics associated with northern practice.

The comments made by the workers and supervisors need to be highlighted for purposes of promoting the value and worth of northern social work practice in the field of child welfare. Northern social work practice was seen as generalist, less restrictive, more autonomous, and full of opportunities for broad learning. The opportunities for specialization in the north are fairly limited, however northern practice might be appealing to a social worker interested in developing a wide base of skills. This type of individual may value independence and relative autonomy and associated professional learning experiences that emerge from a generalist practice work environment. For some social workers these considerations can be viewed as very attractive.

Alternatively those valuing development of a highly focused and specialized body of knowledge and skills will not find northern practice appealing. Similarly, a social worker that enjoys working in a tightly organized structure where rules, standards, and procedures are clear, will probably not be comfortable in northern practice settings. This research indicates that workers and supervisors regard high levels of professional autonomy and independence as quite characteristic of their practice in northern and remote settings.

In one respect the finding that workers and supervisors liked the generalist character of their work is surprising in that social work practice within child welfare tends to be very tightly structured and awash with rules, standards, and procedures. Child welfare work is complex and understandably there is great concern with avoiding mistakes. This is particularly so, given the public profile attached to child welfare cases in the media where serious errors have been made. Agencies have addressed the concern about making a mistake by creating a labyrinth of checks and balances, forms, procedures, rules, and standards. It might be reasonably argued that social work within child welfare is one of the least autonomous areas of practice yet the northern child welfare workers and supervisors in this study regarded autonomy and independence as key aspects of the work that are strengths. Northern practice may not hold the same potential for media scrutiny found in urban areas with higher population density and the propensity for reporters to be on the scene looking for a sensational story.

The popularity and recognition of the rewards that derive from generalist practice need to be identified and promoted. Within the profession of social work specialization may be over-rated and over-valued in terms of what really counts for recognition and status. This study suggests that generalist practice needs to be more valued and legitimized in some fields and locations, particularly northern areas. Front line workers and supervisors expressed positive comments about generalist practice. Employers need to promote generalist practice as having special features and characteristics in attracting social workers in northern work. Potential employees also need to understand that generalist practice is an integral part of the work they will do in a northern setting. The employees need to know that professional growth can occur within a context that is generalist. There is ample opportunity to develop and learn.

Finally, the results showed that northern practice provides opportunities for career advancement. In child welfare generally, career advancement is found to be a positive support for retention (Ellet & Ellet, 1997). Workers and supervisors stated that career advancement was one of the main attractions associated with social work practice in northern locations. This has important implications in terms of recruitment and retention strategies. A new graduate who has a sense of direction may be encouraged to consider the north as a practice setting in that it will enable them to grow and move ahead in their career. This may need to be given higher profile in recruitment strategies. Employers need to do a better job of selling these attributes to potential workers, and once hired the opportunities and unique qualities inherent in the northern practice environment need to be reinforced.

Keys to Improved Recruitment and Retention

The findings suggest that in order to address the challenge of retaining social workers in the north a number of factors need to be considered. Employers need to think about where and how they recruit. It is less important to assess technical aspects of an applicant's potential for child welfare work and more important to assess an applicant's understanding and ability to adapt to small communities. High visibility and the feeling of being in a fish bowl where every aspect of a social worker's life is scrutinized, exerts a strong negative force in terms of retention. Employers need to develop interview strategies to assess a potential employee's ability to manage the pressures associated with small town communities and the associated personal visibility. Once hired, employees have to adequate supports to manage this stress.

Second, it may be useful to establish closer partnerships with communities in the recruitment process. Community involvement in hiring may create more interest in supporting social workers that practice in remote locations. In the north many of the communities are aboriginal or have large aboriginal populations. In developing partnerships this has to be an important consideration. The northern focus group respondents made two comments about recruiting and hiring locally but beyond this the idea of educating and hiring more local aboriginal people was not mentioned. Although the idea of recruiting more local aboriginal workers received limited discussion in the focus groups, surveys, and supervisor interviews, it needs to receive emphasis given the composition of northern populations.

Third, it is also important to seriously consider the extent to which employers can apply additional benefits and compensation to account for the perceived disadvantages and inequities that arise from geographical location and isolation. Workers and supervisors clearly articulated the need to build in special compensating benefits for social workers committed to northern practice. Rycraft's research on retention found that adequate compensation and benefits are important when it comes to retaining child welfare social workers (1990).

Finally, employers need to promote one of the key strengths that social workers associate with their work (northern practice itself) and highlight this as a unique and important opportunity for professional development. The results from this research data suggest that northern practice is generalist, autonomous, and presents opportunities for career advancement. This style of practice will not appeal to all social workers but it is important to articulate to new social work recruits exactly what they can expect from work in the north.

These findings are also relevant for social work education. The formal process of learning cannot operate in isolation from the field of practice. Educators are the first gatekeepers of the profession and they also carry some responsibility to ensure that their graduating students have certain basic requirements that will enable the graduate to do the work.

Education for Northern Practice

Social work education at the Bachelor's level emphasizes a generalist approach to practice. The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) *Educational policy statements* (2000) describe the following expectation for a new graduate:

> A graduate of social work at the first university level will be broadly educated, be prepared for general practice and have sufficient competence for an entry level social work position. (Standard 2.2)

In concrete terms this policy statement means that undergraduate social work students are not taught to work in specific areas of practice. Instead their education experience provides them with broad practice skills and knowledge and the ability to think critically about social policy and social work practice. Respondents in this study indicated the idea of generalist practice as being broadly accepted and embraced by workers in the north.

Recently there have been some exceptions to the generalist approach with the development of a child welfare specialization in British Columbia (Armitage, Callahan, & Lewis, 2001), but generally undergraduate social work education does not provide students with specialist knowledge or skills. There is a dynamic tension and an ongoing debate about whether the undergraduate social work degree must be generalist. The logic of educators behind this policy is clear in that social work is a broad discipline that includes many areas of work. At the undergraduate level it would be difficult to develop a high degree of specialization. However, employers are not always happy about this as it requires their organization or agency to engage in additional training for entry-level workers who often have limited experience. Erosion of social welfare programs has meant that many employers struggle with fewer resources for training and education. As a result, there is a growing expectation that social work programs will produce graduates who are "job ready." Social work educators understand the constraints of employers but at the same time social work education focuses on producing critical thinkers with the ability to learn and problem solve on the job. The idea of producing job ready technicians is not acceptable to many educators.

CASSW educational policy does not disregard the importance of specialization in social work but it is expected that specialization should occur at the second level – the Master of Social Work degree. It is at the MSW level where students can focus on a particular area of practice or policy and develop expertise specific to that area of social work. In considering the idea of specialization, former models of educational specialization prepared social workers to become caseworkers or group workers or community workers (Goldstein, 1973). Social work education assumed a "silo" approach in which knowledge and skills were determined by methods of individual, group, and community practice. More recently, specialization has referred to expertise in specific fields of practice. For example, a social worker might specialize in providing treatment for children who have been sexually abused or a social worker might specialize in working with caregivers of people with dementia. However, specialization should not be viewed as exclusive to fields of practice or policy such as child welfare or mental health; specialization is also about practice location and environment.

There is a role for continuing education within the field of social work but continuing education varies in quality and substance. In terms of northern locations, workers and supervisors often have limited opportunity to access continuing education. The results from this research point to the difficulty in accessing education resources and professional development resources for the northern groups. Improvements in technology provide additional options to address this issue and there needs to be further development in this area with northern and remote locations in mind.

In the case of northern social work practice it is apparent there are certain features unique to the northern environment. One characteristic that emerges from this research is that northern practice is generalist even for practitioners who might be considered advanced in knowledge and skills. The fact that CASSW has linked generalist practice to the undergraduate degree and specialist practice to the graduate degree is problematic, at least from the perspective of a northern practitioner. This linkage suggests a status that might be interpreted as second class by northern workers who must be expert in generalist skills and knowledge. Presumably it was not the intent of CASSW to establish this kind of dichotomy in relation to northern workers but the potentially negative implications of linking the generalist to an undergraduate degree and the specialist to a graduate degree are apparent from the perspective of northern social work practice and for workers employed in the north. Years of experience in a remote northern setting where the worker may become involved in a wide range of programs and situations seems to lack the value of specialist status. CASSW needs to re-examine the language in the accreditation documents with a view to recognizing that generalist practice may be viewed as a form of specialization particularly in northern locations.

The findings of this research suggest that generalist practice is a reality for northern social work at least in the area of child welfare. Many of the workers and supervisors regarded generalist practice as one of the positive features of their work. It exerts a definite appeal and is one of the qualities that help retain child welfare workers in the north. Workers and supervisors saw that the generalist framework was associated with more autonomy and that it fit well with the need to be innovative, flexible, and creative in the work.

Workers and supervisors out of necessity have to do more with less, particularly in northern social work practice. Resource shortages, especially those that are highly specialized, require workers to move outside of program boundaries. They need to be creative in developing ways to use the few resources that exist in small isolated communities. Workers need to provide services that are not always within the mandate of their program and workers must be prepared to work with the whole community. Although the workers and supervisors referred to these types of practice requirements as generalist they really do require specific skills and abilities. Three of the skills include an understanding and ability to use a multidisciplinary approach; an ability to recruit, train, and develop resources; and the capacity to make independent professional decisions.

The clear recognition of generalist practice and its appeal suggests that BSW educational policy statements do fit with the realities of northern practice. However, it might be useful to recognize that generalist practice can also become a form of specialization as it pertains to social work practice in isolated northern environments. Generalist workers can also be specialists in generalist practice.

Visibility and safety

Visibility and safety also emerged as themes or issues that have some implications for social work education. Social workers in the field of child welfare express fears of violence regardless of geographic location (Newhill & Wexler, 1997). However, in northern locations workers are physically accessible and their private and public lives often become intertwined.

The results of this study showed that workers and supervisors repeatedly made comments suggesting that visibility was an extremely challenging and restrictive aspect of living and working in the north. It limits social contacts and places strong constraints on public behaviour. For example, in the discussion about this weakness, one comment from the focus group notes was "you have to avoid some public locations like the bar." Social workers and other professionals in a small isolated community cannot escape the sense that they are "on display". Personal behaviour is scrutinized and judgments are made that can affect a worker's professional credibility. The consequences in terms of stress are apparent.

Visibility also creates a dimension of fear and caution for the individual worker as well as for their family members. The daughter, son, or partner of a social worker may also face a close level of scrutiny by community members. A family member's behaviour that violates community norms or standards may be used to undermine a social worker's professional credibility. Problems with visibility and the related issues of boundaries and dual or multiple relationships were seen as major issues for the respondents in this study.

Boundaries and multiple relationships

Although Brownlee and Taylor (1995) and Delaney and Brownlee (1995) first raised the issue of boundaries and dual or multiple relationships in a Canadian context, it is not a matter that receives a great deal of attention in social work education. This is understandable as the vast majority of social work degree programs are located in urban areas and undergraduate students are trained with an urban population in mind. However, it is important that schools of social work place greater emphasis on this issue as the results from this research showed that workers and supervisors in the north did not believe they were well prepared to deal with dual relationships and matters arising from high visibility. Social workers struggle with the ethical dilemma of providing service or taking action when the situation involves a neighbour or a friend. Such an ethical dilemma is rarely encountered in urban settings or even in more densely populated rural areas. In many rural areas of southern Canada, it is possible to commute to work in one town and live in another. This reality creates a buffer around the challenge of having to provide social work service to neighbours or friends. The isolation of most northern communities and the distance between northern communities generally prohibit this kind of accommodation between the personal and professional life of the social worker. A number of the workers who participated in this study were the only social worker in the community where they lived. They had no choice but to provide service to people who were often friends or neighbours.

Participants in this research were child welfare workers and child welfare supervisors. Child welfare involves statutory programs and practice within a context that is frequently adversarial and conducive to relationships and situations that are conflictual in nature. This presents challenges for social workers educated and trained to be advocates and trained to practice in an anti-oppressive manner.

A new graduate who must deliver statutory services in a small isolated northern community may easily experience a crisis in terms of the ideal of professional values and the demands of the job. Social work education must give recognition to this reality in its curriculum related to northern practice settings. New graduates need to be knowledgeable about practice in special fields and locations and aware of the pressures and dilemmas associated with northern communities and rural practice areas. Educators have a responsibility to address these challenges. Similarly responsibility rests with employers who recruit and employ social workers in northern settings. These challenges might also be addressed by developing a clearer understanding of what constitutes northern practice.

Northern Social Work Practice

This research focused on questions concerning retention and turnover of child welfare workers in northern and remote locations. The research was not intended to develop or test ideas about education or a northern social work practice model. However, the research results refer to certain qualities or characteristics that are important to discuss as they relate to the education process. These qualities and characteristics are also integral to northern practice environments and suggest a potential framework or model of practice for those who work in the north.

Payne (1997) noted that theories or models are products of particular contexts and that they are constructed out of interaction and exchange that is rooted in the environment and the experience of the participants. The exchange of information between the researcher and the northern workers and supervisors produced a number of ideas that described what child welfare practice in northern and remote settings is like. Within the framework of the research results, 5 key characteristics can be identified. These characteristics suggest that northern social work practice is generalist, highly independent, multidisciplinary, subject to dynamic tension between personal and professional requirements, and heavily influenced by the geography of place.

Generalist practice

Collier (1993) stated that northern social work practice is generalist and this view was clearly supported by the responses from participants at the various northern sites. Generalist practice, when it is done well, is more than the basic expectations that the CASSW proposes for new BSW graduates. Generalist practice is synonymous with northern practice.

Effective northern practitioners have to be able to work with individuals, groups, and communities. They need to be able to use indigenous supports to develop resources and they must be able to build close cooperative networks among the various service providers in small remote locations. The northern generalist practitioner must also possess a body of knowledge and skills that enables him or her to bridge various programs. Even when the social worker's job is about child protection, there may be many times when the worker has to perform tasks normally associated with another program or area of work. Additionally, the practitioner has to search for strategies and solutions that are often outside traditional ways of delivering service. The results in this study indicated that supervisors and workers talked about creativity as both a strength and opportunity in northern practice. Creativity is closely linked to the idea of generalist practice. The range, breadth, and relative openness associated with being a generalist, opens the door to creative practice. In short, a generalist must be able to do a lot of things, many of which are not subject to a highly structured formula or scheme.

In this study the job descriptions of some of the workers and supervisors were clearly generalist in their expectations. In the Yukon, workers and their supervisors were required to deliver programs to the mentally ill, elderly, mentally challenged, young offenders, couples having relationship problems, families in crisis, people in need of income assistance, foster parents, and children in need of protection. In this setting the idea of generalist practice was formalized and clearly recognized. But even in jurisdictions like northern British Columbia where the job description was more specialized, the workers and supervisors described their work as generalist in scope. They did not feel bound and restricted by a narrow child welfare mandate and appreciated the opportunity to work in an open manner that seemed to allow them to cross program boundaries and deliver service outside conventional paradigms. The relative freedom to make one's own choices was associated with feelings of pride, independence, and professional autonomy expressed by workers. Restriction of this autonomy was viewed as problematic and detrimental to the appeal of northern practice. Restrictions affected workers' flexibility in service delivery.

Independent practice

Francis Turner (1999) notes that much of Canadian social work practice takes place in small communities where 1 and 2 person agencies are the norm. Inevitably this requires a fair amount of independence and worker autonomy. The idea that northern practice expects workers to be able operate in an independent fashion was a recurring theme in the focus groups as well as the supervisor interviews. The workers discussed this under the theme of work experience while supervisors were more direct and referred to autonomy. One of the supervisor's comments about northern practice states it aptly:

> I guess it's a great opportunity for learning but you also have to be the type of person who is fairly open to working independently so you have to have self assurance and be able to take the initiative of working independently while still keeping your supervisor informed.

Independence means being able to take initiative and being able to do so on your own with limited supervision or oversight. This stands in contrast to recent findings of the national sector study (Stephenson et al., 2001a) in which workers, supervisors, and managers complained that social work practice was increasingly subject to accountability measures that decreased professional autonomy. These measures are not confined to government agencies but also apply to non-profit and private social work organizations.

It is not that northern practitioners are unaccountable. The previous comments of the supervisor linked independence to accountability, implying recognition of standards and rules. However, it may be that northern practice is less dependent on rules and measures of bureaucratic accountability. After all, northern workers are further removed from centralized management structures. The media, which pounces upon problems in child welfare are also distant and may not always care about what happens in more remote communities. At the same time the results from the surveys, as well as results from the supervisor interviews, noted that work organization and management practices were seen as problematic. Both of these concerns related to limited independence and tight bureaucratic control. It may be that northern practice is entering a period of transition where the sense of being removed from central management authority is not so clear. Management attempts to more tightly control the practice of northern social workers may be creating resentment and frustration that shows up in these research results. It is clearly perceived as a management stance which is not supportive of a changing work organization and which is not particularly responsive to worker needs in a northern work environment.

While northern practice emphasizes independence it is by no means a solitary endeavour. In small northern communities the social workers may face a limited number of other professionals but it is especially important that these relationships work. This means that northern workers have to be skilled and knowledgeable in multidisciplinary approaches to practice.

Multidisciplinary practice

Multidisciplinary approaches are by no means unique to the north but the ability to work using a multidisciplinary approach is essential in northern practice. Multidisciplinary service is characterized by different disciplines working in a cooperative or semi-cooperative manner to meet client and program needs. The root word *multi* has Latin origins and means many. Most multidisciplinary approaches employ some form of case coordination or case management (Trute, Adkins, & MacDonald, 1994). Case management within a multidisciplinary context is designed to create effective communication and efficient division of tasks or roles. Effective communication between workers within the disciplines is extremely important. Failure to communicate plan produces a poor quality of service to the client.

Northern workers and supervisors all expressed great concern about a lack of resources. However, they also spoke of the fact that work in the north was appealing because it required cooperation with other disciplines, other agencies, and indigenous resources. Furthermore, this cooperation was seen as relatively easy to achieve in a northern practice environment. Good northern practice is synonymous with multidisciplinary practice. It arises out of the weakness of resource shortages and obligates workers and supervisors to be creative within a framework of cooperation.

Other professionals may face some of the same requirements as northern social workers. Their practice may also be more generalist in approach and they may have to be more independent in their daily work activities. These shared expectations and demands may help to break down professional boundaries and eliminate the turf issues that might otherwise arise in daily practice. If the various professionals fail to achieve effective multidisciplinary models of service delivery, the northern communities suffer.

Personal and professional practice issues

There was agreement among northern social workers and their social work supervisors that northern practice is characterized by significant tension related to role conflict around personal and professional boundaries. Issues of visibility and safety were expressed as potential stressors in northern practice. In contrast, the results from the urban sites never mentioned visibility as a concern. In fact personal anonymity was mentioned as a key strength in one of the urban focus groups.

Northern practice means that you can never become invisible or anonymous in the community. Decisions that workers make in small isolated communities affect their neighbours and their friends. They affect the worker's partner and they affect the worker's children. The professional life and the personal life are intertwined in northern practice. This reality is markedly different from urban practice where one can remain relatively anonymous. It means that strict application of the Code of Ethics doesn't work and it means that social workers have to develop different strategies to deal with confidentiality and other ethical and boundary issues.

This finding also raises the issue of vocation versus profession. When one's personal life can't be separated from one's professional life there is a tendency to understand one's work more in terms of vocation than profession. Clearly mainstream social work has moved away from this point of view. The idea of vocation raises images of charity rather than images of empowerment and entitlement. Nonetheless it is important to understand that northern social work pulls and pushes social workers in a direction that requires them to be a social worker 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is difficult to separate the work from the person. It is a dynamic tension that is inherent to northern social work practice.

Practice and geography

Zapf (2001) was correct when he said that geography plays a major role in northern social work practice. The daily practice experience is defined, or at least heavily influenced, by geographic location. Geography refers to more than line or location of latitude. The results from this research, especially the concerns that workers and supervisors expressed about location, travel, professional isolation, and economic uncertainty, all related to geography. Northern social work practice is about climate and the seasons as much as it is about assessment and intervention plans. In the research results workers expressed concerns about avalanches, the cold, forest fires, biting insects, and other natural phenomena that are integral to life in northern Canadian communities. On one level it seems strange that when asked about their likes and dislikes about the work and lifestyle, that workers would complain about mosquitoes and black flies yet this is part of living and working in the north. These geographic considerations constituted a significant number of the discomforts and concerns that workers associated with living and working in the north. Geographic environment certainly exerts some influence on social work practice in the city. However, each time a worker makes a home visit they don't have to listen to the weather forecast or the highway report. They don't have to throw a winter survival kit into the trunk of their car. They can spend their time thinking about what they will say or do with their client rather than worry about whether they will make it back home that night. In northern practice the geography of place permeates most aspects of the daily practice routine.

Geography was not an entirely negative influence on ideas about northern social work practice. This study shows that geography is also an appealing aspect of northern practice and northern living. The environment and specific recreation opportunities emerge as clear elements associated with the work and the lifestyle. These attractions obviously do not appeal to all social workers but a large number of the participants were in the north because they liked the opportunities associated with the geography of the north. A short car ride to an isolated lake or even strolling from one's back door to fish for trout exerted strong appeal for many of the research participants. Though travel was often seen as a problematic, many of the respondents liked being able to travel as part of their job. Travel created variety and enjoyment as well as a change of pace. It is a large component of northern social work practice.

Geography of place also exerted an influence on specific aspects of social work activity. Northern communities are small and contained. This means that knowledge of community members is far more extensive than it would be in an urban setting. This fact creates advantages in terms of conducting social work assessments. In the research results, supervisors and workers suggested that the activity of assessment was much easier and also more accurate in northern communities. Assessment is critical to the development of good intervention plans. It may be that the efficiency and accuracy of assessment in northern locations, offsets lack of resources and lack of specialist services.

It can be argued that these 5 characteristics of northern social work practice: generalist practice, independence, multidisciplinary work, personal and professional tension, and geography of place, are simply characteristics and do not constitute a model of practice. However, as Payne (1997) suggests, social work models are products of context. In this sense it is clear that the northern practice environment is a context that is unique and requires that practitioners possess a special set of skills and knowledge. It exerts a strong influence on social work and produces a model of practice that has distinct characteristics and attributes.

Summary

The results of this research provide evidence of what factors contribute to employee turnover as well as employee retention. The findings were discussed in terms of strategies that might be used to promote retention of social workers in northern remote locations, implications for social work education, and what the findings might mean in terms of a model of northern social work practice.

To promote retention the following recommendations are summarized here:

1. Develop questions and methods for assessing social work candidates' preparedness and suitability for small town living.
2. Recruit candidates from social work programs that have a northern focus.
3. Add incentives and benefits for social workers employed in northern and remote locations.
4. Find ways to involve communities in recruitment and hiring.

5. Promote generalist practice as a vital and important model of social work.

Social work educators and education programs need to address at least two issues that are important in northern practice. First, northern generalists are also specialists. Generalist northern practice requires specialized skills and knowledge. Second, undergraduate and graduate programs must recognize and educate students regarding visibility and boundary issues in small towns. The ability and capacity to deal with these issues is essential in retaining workers in isolated settings.

The analysis and discussion of the research results also highlighted key characteristics of northern social work practice including: generalist, independent, multidisciplinary, personal and professional tension, and geography of place.

The factors discussed in this chapter outline their relevancy to the problem of northern social worker retention and recruitment. The role of education and the characteristics of northern social work practice are germane to this discussion. The overall issue of retention of northern social workers can be better addressed if employers, educators, communities, and social workers in the field share an understanding of the challenges and the possibilities.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The personal interest for this research developed in the late 1970s when I began my career as a social worker in the field of child welfare. I was surprised and taken aback when my colleagues in that first job asked me how long I was going to stay? The question remained with me and at times even troubled me. The opportunity to pursue graduate studies at Memorial University allowed me to return to that question posed several decades ago.

Although the question and my initial reaction to it were personal, it really addressed the larger problem of retention of child welfare social workers in northern and remote locations. With that in mind the literature review presented in this document examined concepts, themes, and research results related to the meaning of north, northern communities, northern human services, models of northern social work practice, and retention of social workers in the field of child welfare social work. Design of the research used multiple methods, multiple data sources, and multiple sites in order to give depth and breadth to this study. The process of data gathering included gaining permission and consent, arranging times and places that were mutually convenient, and finally, extensive travel through vast areas of northwest Canada.

The research results show that social work practice in the north has unique qualities and elements. The use of a SWOT analysis ensured that both the negative and positive qualities of northern practice would be captured. These findings were used to develop ideas and suggestions about recruitment and retention strategies, approaches to social work education, and elements in the initial construct of a northern model of social work practice.

The research presented in this thesis reflects the perception and ideas of a sample group of social workers and supervisors who practise child welfare in selected northern Canadian locations. They were asked to share their thoughts and views on the thorny problem of retention of social workers. The format of the research enterprise was designed to ensure that the participants could reflect on the positive aspects of their work as well as those aspects that they considered negative. In this way the research produced results that might be used to highlight the fact that there are reasons to stay and practice child welfare in the north. The research is not without limitations and these will be briefly discussed.

Limitations

Budgetary constraints limited the number of sites for inclusion in this study. An expansion of geographical territory would have provided greater variety in research sites, a larger pool of subjects and data, and more of the national landscape than represented in this study sample. While the idea of additional sites was appealing, the prohibitive cost of travel to these areas made the development of research sites in these locations impossible.

The study was also limited by the fact that the urban contrast sites were all situated in the lower mainland of British Columbia. This meant that each urban site was organized under the British Columbia government Ministry for Children and Families. This single organization faced some challenges that were probably shared with other urban locations. However, there were factors that might have been unique to this particular organization. Additional urban sites would have created a larger pool of urban data and a better basis for comparison with the results from the northern site locations. In this study the usefulness of the responses to the urban survey questionnaires was limited as there were simply not enough subjects who returned the questionnaire. Budget limitations prevented the development of the additional sites to increase the size of the urban comparison group.

The design of the research assumed that the participants in the focus groups would match the survey respondents. While the northern groups were relatively close matches in terms of the focus group participants and survey respondents, they were not identical. Although this may reduce confidence in the comparison group findings, the limitations are viewed as minimal, given the congruence of the findings across the various study groups of the research.

Ideas for Further Research

The workers and supervisors in this study emphasized the challenge of visibility and the boundary issues that result from multiple relationships in small communities. The subjects were not asked how they managed or responded to this dilemma though a few offered brief comments. This issue warrants further study as it is important in northern practice both from the perspective of ethics and from the perspective of retention.

Subjects in this study made reference to the lack of preparation for living and working in the north. This concern has implications for the type and nature of education that social workers receive. During the past few years social work faculty have been surveyed around how they include content and material related to a number of different issues such as anti-racist practice (CASSW, 2001). It is important to examine the nature and extent that social work programs and social work faculty deal with the issues of visibility and multiple relationships that seemed so important for this group of northern practitioners.

Research results can present some surprises and the results from this research did not always meet my expectations. For example, I was surprised that location figured so prominently as a negative factor among the northern focus group participants. I had anticipated hearing that modern technologies such as the internet and emerging services such as E commerce would have a mitigating effect on geographic isolation. However, in the survey results, as well as the focus group results, technology was not mentioned. It was also not mentioned when it came to considering issues such as "on-line" education or web based education. It may be that technology is not seen as a substitute for face to face contact.

The strength of family and community for the northern participants was not unexpected but its relative importance compared to recreation was somewhat surprising. The qualities associated with living in a small isolated community are appealing to northern social workers. Assumptions that many northern practitioners move north for a sense of adventure and love of the outdoors stand to be challenged. Certainly this was apparent in the findings of this study. The more romantic views of northern practice are outweighed by the importance people attach to issues of stability like community and family.

Variations in responses coming from the focus groups as compared to responses from the individual questionnaires gave greater depth and meaning to the findings. This confirms the value of a multiple methods process that includes triangulation. The additional depth and breadth that develops out of multiple methods of gathering data provides the researcher with greater insight and understanding of what is actually happening.

This research study generated several ideas to constructively address the challenge of retention. Employers, communities, and educators can all contribute toward the development of policies and practices to improve retention of child welfare social workers in northern and remote locations. In addition, study participants described the unique characteristics of northern social work practice. While there might be a debate as to what is meant by northern social work practice, a distinct conception of northern practice does exist in the minds of these research participants.

At a personal level the research process was rewarding as it allowed me to come full circle and revisit ideas and places that were critical when I began my career in social work. I was reminded again of that question I faced 23 years ago: “How long are you staying?”

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF APPROVAL ICEHR

Memorial
University of Newfoundland

Office of Research

June 23, 2000

ICEHR No. 1999/00-077-SW

Mr. Glen Schmidt
School of Social Work
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Mr. Schmidt:

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research has examined the proposal for the research project entitled "*How long are you staying?*" in which you are listed as the principal investigator.

The Committee has given approval for the conduct of this research in accordance with the proposal submitted on the condition that the following minor modifications are incorporated:

1. On the Consent Form for Supervisor Interview you should delete the words "Consent Form to participate in focus group research".

2. The statement "I do not agree to participate" should be deleted from all consent forms.

3. Participants should be provided with the name of a third party, probably on the consent form, whom they may contact should they wish to speak with a resource person other than yourself (this could be your faculty supervisor).

4. Since translators are to be used in some interviews, some measure should be taken to require them to maintain confidentiality.

The Committee appreciates your discussion of possible relationships between yourself and some of the participants, and encourages you to continue to be cautious about the possibility of putting undue pressure on potential participants. This may be particularly relevant to students at UNBC and those who may become students.

The Committee's approval of your project does not imply approval of the use of personnel files in any way that would compromise the usual restrictions of confidentiality applied to such files. If you have questions regarding the requested modifications, you should contact Ms Janice Parsons, the School of Social Work Representative on the ICEHR.

G. Schmidt
June 23, 2000
page 2

If you should make any other changes either in the planning or during the conduct of the research that may affect ethical relations with human participants, these should be reported to the ICEHR in writing for further review.

This approval is valid for one year from the date on this letter: if the research should carry on for a longer period, it will be necessary for you to present to the committee annual reports by the anniversaries of this date, describing the progress of the research and any changes that may affect ethical relations with human participants.

Thank you for submitting your proposal. We wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely,

G. Inglis
Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee
on Ethics in Human Research

GI/emb

cc: Ms. J. Parsons, School of Social Work

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Glen Schmidt
Social Work Program
University of Northern BC
3333 University Way
Prince George BC V2N 4Z9
Telephone: (250)960-6519
Fax: (250)960-5536
E Mail: schmidt@unbc.ca

date

Agency Address

Dear ,

Thanks for your interest in this research. I am working toward my PhD in Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I have not included the full research proposal in this package as it is somewhat lengthy. The full proposal including the materials in this package has been reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Review Board of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

In this package I've included copies of the information letters, consent forms for focus group participants and supervisors, the questionnaire for focus group participants, and copies of the probe questions for the focus groups and the supervisors.

As far as process is concerned, my plan is to distribute the questionnaire to focus group participants prior to conducting the actual focus group. I'll collect the questionnaires once I meet with the group. The focus group meeting can occur outside of work hours or during work hours depending upon what works best for your agency. I expect that the group will run for approximately 1.5 hours. If you have space in your agency I would be grateful if I could make use of it for the focus group meeting and the supervisor interviews. If space is unavailable please let me know and I will make alternative arrangements. I expect the interview with supervisors to take 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Please review this material and I will meet you on *date* to discuss any concerns or questions you may have regarding the research plan. If the process runs as hoped in all locations I expect to complete the data gathering by the end of the summer. The material will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. I will share the results with any participants who express an interest in examining the study. I will not be identifying specific people or agencies in the study.

Thanks again for your interest and support. I look forward to meeting you.

Best wishes

Glen Schmidt

APPENDIX C

INFORMATION LETTER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Glen Schmidt
Assistant Professor
UNBC Social Work Program
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4A2

Date

Dear Participant,

My name is Glen Schmidt. I am a PhD student at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. I work at the University of Northern British Columbia as an Assistant Professor of Social Work. I am conducting research into the factors that promote retention and the factors that promote attrition in northern and remote social work practice settings. This research is being used as part of a PhD dissertation in Social Work at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am writing to ask you to participate in this research.

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire and you will also be asked to participate in a focus group discussion. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete and the focus group will run for a maximum of 1.5 hours.

Before you agree to participate you need to know the following information:
1. Your participation is entirely voluntary.
2. You will be asked to complete a questionnaire that provides information related to your education, work experience, age, parent and marital status, community of origin, and gender.
3. Your identity will not be revealed in the report.
4. The information you provide will be treated confidentially. Records will be stored in my locked office.
5. Information you provide will be used toward the PhD dissertation described above. It may also be used for related scholarly papers and journal article submissions.

If you have any questions please contact Glen Schmidt, at (250)960-6519 or my PhD supervisor Dr. Ross Klein at (709)737-8147.

Please complete the attached consent form and keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Glen Schmidt

APPENDIX D

INFORMATION LETTER SUPERVISORS

Glen Schmidt
Assistant Professor
UNBC Social Work Program
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4A2

Date

Dear Participant,

My name is Glen Schmidt. I am a PhD student at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. I work at the University of Northern British Columbia as an Assistant Professor of Social Work. I am conducting research into the factors that promote retention and the factors that promote attrition of social workers in northern and remote social work practice settings. This research is being used as part of a PhD dissertation in Social Work at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am writing to ask you to participate in this research.

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will be tape recorded and transcribed.

Before you agree to participate you need to know the following information:
1. Your participation is entirely voluntary.
2. Your identity will not be revealed in the report.
3. The information you provide will be treated confidentially. Records will be stored in my locked office.
4. Information you provide will be used toward the PhD dissertation described above. It may also be used for related scholarly papers and journal article submissions.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Glen Schmidt at (250)960-6519 or my PhD supervisor Dr. Ross Klein at (709)737-8147.

Please complete the attached consent form and keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Glen Schmidt

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Consent Form To Participate in Focus Group Research

Research Project Title: How Long Are You Staying?

Participant's Name (Please Print)

I understand that I have been asked to express my personal views regarding the attrition and retention of social workers in northern and remote communities.

I understand that if I agree to participate, I will be asked to complete a short questionnaire. I also understand that I will be asked to participate in a focus group of approximately 1.5 hours duration.

I understand that I will not be identified in any written or verbal report. Privacy and confidentiality will be protected. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time without penalty.

I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE AND HAVE READ THE STATEMENT ABOVE.

Signature Date

If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study, please provide your mailing address below.

Name
Address
City
Province
Postal Code

If you have concerns or questions about this research please contact my PhD supervisor Dr. Ross Klein at (709)737-8147.

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM SUPERVISORS

Consent Form To Participate in Focus Group Research

Research Project Title: How Long Are You Staying?

Participant's Name (Please Print)

I understand that I have been asked to express my personal views regarding the attrition and retention of social workers in northern and remote communities.

I understand that if I agree to participate, I will be asked to participate in a tape recorded interview approximately 1 hour in length.

I understand that I will not be identified in any written or verbal report. Privacy and confidentiality will be protected. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time without penalty.

I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE AND HAVE READ THE STATEMENT ABOVE.

Signature Date

If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study, please provide your mailing address below.

Name
Address
City
Province
Postal Code

If you have concerns or questions about this research please contact my PhD supervisor Dr. Ross Klein at (709)737-8147.

APPENDIX G

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide Focus Groups

1. What do you see as the major strengths associated with working as a social worker in the north?

2. How do these strengths encourage you to stay?

3. What do you see as major weaknesses associated with working as a social worker in the north?

4. How do these weaknesses encourage social workers to leave?

5. What do you see as major opportunities associated with working as a social worker in the north?

6. How do these opportunities encourage you to stay?

7. What do you see as major threats associated with working as a social worker in the north?

8. How do these threats encourage social workers to leave?

9. Are there other factors that help to keep social workers in the north?

10. Are there other factors that drive people away?

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW GUIDE SUPERVISORS

1. How long have you lived in the north?

2. How long have you been a supervisor in the north?

3. What are some of the challenges that you currently see in northern social work supervision?

4. Do you think there are differences between the challenges faced by supervisors in northern and remote communities compared to supervisors in southern urban centres?

5. What kinds of strengths do you see in northern social work practice?

6. How do these strengths encourage workers to stay?

7. What do you see as major weaknesses associated with working as a social worker in the north?

8. How do these weaknesses encourage workers to leave?

9. What do you see as major opportunities for social workers in the north?

10. How do these opportunities encourage workers to stay?

11. What do you see as major threats for social workers in the north?

12. How do these threats encourage social workers to leave?

13. Are there other factors that help to keep social workers in the north?

14. Are there other factors that drive people away?

15. As a supervisor are there things you can do to keep workers from leaving?

APPENDIX I

NORTHERN SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your present age?

2. What is your gender? Male Female

3. Are you in either a married or common law relationship? Yes No

4. Do you have children? Yes No

5. What university degrees do you hold?

6. How long have you been a practising social worker?

7. How long have you practised social work in the north?

8. Please indicate the type of community in which you were born by marking the appropriate space.

a) rural area south

b) rural area north

c) urban (20,000+) area south

d) urban (20,000+) area north

9. How long have you lived in your present community?

10. Did you choose to live in this community? Yes No

11. Have you lived in other northern communities? Yes No

12. If the answer to question 5 is yes - how long have you lived in the north?

13. What do you see as major strengths associated with living in the north? (List in point form)

14. What do you see as major weaknesses associated with living in the north? (List in point form)

15. What do you see as major opportunities associated with living in the north? (List in point form)

16. What do you see as major threats associated with living in the north? (List in point form)

17. What do you see as major strengths associated with working as a social worker in the north? (List in point form)

18. What do you see as major weaknesses associated with working as a social worker in the north? (List in point form)

19. What do you see as major opportunities associated with working as a social worker in the north? (List in point form)

20. What do you see as major threats associated with working as a social worker in the north?

Thank you.

APPENDIX J
URBAN SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your present age?

2. What is your gender? Male Female

3. Are you in either a married or common law relationship? Yes No

4. Do you have children? Yes No

5. What university degrees do you hold?

6. How long have you been a practising social worker?

7. How long have you practised social work in the lower mainland?

8. Please indicate the type of community in which you were born by marking the appropriate space.

a) rural area south

b) rural area north

c) urban (20,000+) area south

d) urban (20,000+) area north

9. How long have you lived in your present community?

10. Did you choose to live in this community? Yes No

11. Have you lived in other communities? Yes No

12. If the answer to question 11 is yes what type of community did you live in?

a)rural area south
b)rural area north
c)urban area south
d)urban area north

The next eight questions will ask you to comment on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with your present work location and domicile location. Questions 13, 14, 15, and 16 ask about living as opposed to your work. Questions 17, 18, 19, and 20 ask you about work.

13. What do you see as the three major strengths associated with living in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Strength 1 would be the most important)

14. What do you see as the three major weaknesses associated with living in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Weakness 1 would be the most important)

15. What do you see as the three major opportunities associated with living in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Opportunity 1 would be the most important))

16. What do you see as the three major threats associated with living in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Threat 1 would be the most important)
17. What do you see as the three major strengths associated with working as a social worker in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Strength 1 would be the most important)

18. What do you see as the three major weaknesses associated with working as a social worker in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Weakness 1 would be the most important)

19. What do you see as the three major opportunities associated with working as a social worker in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Opportunity 1 would be the most important)

20. What do you see as the three major threats associated with working as a social worker in the south? (List in point form in descending order ie. Threat 1 would be the most important)

Thank-you.

APPENDIX K

NORTHERN FOCUS GROUP DATA

Strengths

1. Community and family

(34) The northern community is a good place to raise kids.//// Small towns are good to live in.///It is a safer place to raise children.///There are more recreation opportunities for children given the ease of access and lower costs.///It is easy to get to know other parents.///There is more opportunity to participate in the community.///The smaller schools create a good environment for children and their education.///It is a safe environment with lower levels of crime.///There is a family orientation in the community with many activities for children.///It is easy to get to know other parents.///It is a small town and you can get to know your neighbors and community members.///People are friendly and there is a closeness in the community.///There is an opportunity to be active in the community and enhance the quality of life in the community in a meaningful way.///The community is a good environment for children and families. It is relatively safe.///The crime rate is low compared to other places.///It is a good environment for children.///People know each other in a smaller place.///You always know where your children are and you know who they are with. This creates a sense of security.///Neighbours and genuinely helpful and it is easy to develop networks and informal support.///It is a safe place to raise children.///It is a safe place to raise children.///You can live and work in the same community as your spouse.///You always know where your children are and you know who they are with. This creates a sense of security.///You can live and work in the same community as your spouse.///A small community is more personal and more caring. You really have a sense of community.///There is a strong sense of community and belonging as people are bound together.///The community does not have rigid cliques that exclude people.///Relationships - knowing a lot of people./// You can go home in 5 minutes.///The small size and easy access to facilities and activities mean that you can fit more into a day.///The community is not congested and it is easy to access services and resources in a timely way.///There is a slower pace of life.///The lifestyle is simpler and less complicated than urban living.///There is a slower more relaxed pace of life.///The time involved in local travel is minimal.

2. Working in a small town

(25) Social workers see their clients around town.///Lack of anonymity obligates congruence.///There is more personal interaction with people who are clients. This creates certain difficulties but it is also a strength. Clients know you as a person and a community member.///You learn to separate the professional from the personal.///The small size of communities means that clients can be easily found.///Dual relationships

while sometimes problematic are also a strength in that clients know you as a person and as a community member.///Clients see social workers as human beings who have regular lives.///Northern practice is better because there is greater opportunity to deal with things ie. clients don't get lost in the smaller population base and resources are easy to contact and they are known.///Workers are part of a community.///Familiarity with people in small communities enables workers to produce more accurate assessments of things like risk in an efficient manner.///People are very friendly and very accepting of the social worker.///Families know the workers.///(Families know the workers.///Neighbours are genuinely helpful and it is easy to develop networks and informal support.///The communities are comparatively small and knowledge of families and resources is easy to develop.///Familiarity with people in small communities enables workers to produce more accurate assessments of things like risk in an effective manner.///Relationships - knowing a lot of people.///People are friendly and accepting of the social worker.///Office and community are open to newcomers.///People know each other in a smaller place.///Workers are part of a community.///Familiarity - relationships are easily formed at work and in community.///There is a strong sense of community and belonging as people are bound together.///The community does not have rigid cliques that exclude people./// A small community is more personal and more caring. You really have a sense of community.

3. Northern practice

(24) One can be creative, flexible and independent in the work.///The lack of resources promotes creativity in practice.///The small size of the community and the office allows workers to have more of an impact in their work.///The work environment is not as rigid as it might be in an urban centre and this allows for greater creativity.///Expectations of workers are more realistic (employer and clients).///The pace of work is slower.///Work is less crisis oriented.///There is more innovative practice in terms of methods like circle sentencing, family group conferencing etc.///There is an agency commitment to supportive working relationships.///There is greater creativity in work out of necessity and opportunity.///There are many interesting work opportunities in the north.///Creativity is encouraged at work.///Interesting work opportunities in the north.///The chance to be a generalist.///Work is less structured than in the city.///More freedom at work.///Workplace meets the basic needs of workers.///Northern practice is better because there is greater opportunity to deal with things ie. clients don't get lost in the smaller population base and resources are easy to contact and they are known.///Practice is creative and innovative and workers can use different approaches./// Generalist practice that allows workers to work in different programs and roles.///There is more innovative practice in terms of methods like circle sentencing, family group conferencing etc.///There is greater creativity in work out of necessity and opportunity./// Expectations of workers are more realistic (employer and clients).///The pace of work is slower.///Work is less crisis oriented.

4. Environment

(24) Lifestyle is attractive ie. Environment, outdoor activities etc./// Access to the outdoors.///There is a high quality environment with low pollution.///It is a beautiful place when it is sunny.///Clean air and environment. It is a healthy place to live.///Unlimited outdoor activity - fishing, hiking, canoeing, hunting, skiing etc.///The outdoor environment is immediate and there is a lot of outdoor recreation that is cheap and accessible.///There are many opportunities for outdoor activities./// Environment - access to the outdoors and wilderness.///Fishing, hunting, and outdoor activities.///Lifestyle, environment, outdoor recreational activities.///.The environment and outdoor recreation opportunities.///There is easy access to the natural environment.///Clean air and clean water.///Climate and latitude are good.///There is easy access to the natural environment.///Clean air and clean water.///The environment and outdoor recreation activities.///Many opportunities for outdoor activities.///Environment - access to the outdoors and wilderness./// Fishing and hunting./// Outdoor activities.///Lifestyle, environment, outdoor recreational activities.///There is easy access to recreation if you chose it.

5. Learning and education

(18) There are a variety of learning experiences as you get a chance to do everything ie. intake, family service etc.////Opportunity for generalist practice.///Social work practice is generalist rather than specialist which creates good learning options at work.///Workers can gain more experience in the office and the community.///The northern location allows workers to engage in a more generalist type of practice./// The nature of the work allows for professional growth and learning opportunities.///There are training opportunities.///Education leave is available.///Northern practitioners receive good training and it is often in interesting locations outside and in the south.///Autonomy.///Practice is creative and innovative and workers can use different approaches./// Generalist practice that allows workers to work in different programs and roles.///Isolation and independence requires workers to develop good critical thinking skills.///Solo work has advantages.///Good opportunity for a social worker at the beginning of her/his career.///There is less contact with bureaucracy resulting in fewer work restrictions and constraints.///The work allows social workers to be generalist practitioners.///The nature of the work is less structured than in the city - more freedom.

6. Culture

(14) There are many work opportunities with Aboriginal people.///The history and culture in the area is rich if one wishes to explore this.///There is greater understanding of what it means to be a visible minority person (this is the case for Europeans who may be the minority in some of the communities served by the office).///There are opportunities for learning about and experiencing different cultures especially First Nations.///The community is multicultural and offers opportunities to learn about diverse

cultures.///There is opportunity to learn about another culture.///There is opportunity to learn about another culture.///The community is culturally diverse.///There is a tolerance of difference.///I'm from the north and it is a chance to work with my own people in my own language.///There are opportunities for learning about and experiencing different cultures especially First Nations.///The community is multicultural and offers opportunities to learn about diverse cultures./// Culture - this is my culture and I like the familiarity.///I'm from the north and this is a chance to work with my own people in my own language.

7. Career advancement

(10) Possibility of career advancement is more rapid x4.///The turnover of staff creates job openings.///It is easier to develop a career path.///It is easier to develop a career path.///Good opportunity for a social worker at the beginning of her/his career.///The turnover of staff creates job openings.///Degree requirements are not as rigid in the north.

8. Local office/workplace

(8) This office has a strong team.///There is a lot of collegial support and it is easy to generate.///Both the office and the community are open to newcomers.///Teamwork is promoted and practiced.///The work place meets the basic needs of workers.///Workers are close because the group is small.///Teamwork is promoted and practiced.///There is an agency commitment to supportive working relationships.

9. Agency links

(7) There are good links to agencies in the community.///There is a greater mix between professional social groups.///Knowing other resources very well - these relationships are less formal.///Networking with other agencies is easy and productive.///There are close working relationships with other agencies./// There is more direct involvement with contract management with service providers.///Knowing other resources very well - these relationships are less formal.

10. Job benefits

(7) Pay is good.///Overtime pay./// The monetary bonus is attractive and appealing.///There is a lot of overtime which allows for extra cash or more time off.///Management is trying to help ie. bonus pay and time off.///Income is higher with a recent northern location benefit.///There is job stability and job security.

11. Housing

(5) Housing and land are much more affordable than in the south.///There is a lower cost of living for housing and property compared to Vancouver.///The cost of purchasing a

house is affordable.///Housing and property costs are low making good accommodation affordable for social workers.///Property prices are lower than they would be in a southern urban centre.

12. Single comments

There is a sense of belonging and commitment to the north.

Cultural opportunities are limited bit this means that people take advantage of the opportunities that do come through the community.

In the work there is travel which is interesting.

Child welfare problems are not as severe as found in large urban centres ie. there aren't the same levels of drug abuse and prostitution.

Jurisdiction is not a problem.

Strengths That Encourage Staying

1. (18) Strong community ties.///A sense of belonging.///A sense of community as home.///Relationships with people - client acceptance of social workers.///People in the community.///Belonging to community.///Investment in the community.///A caring community.///Family ties.///Connections to family and friends.///Personal and family relationships.///Personal relationships.///Presence of family and extended family.///Being able to live and work in the same community as one's partner is very important.///Having extended family present in the community is important.///A good place to raise children.///Safe environment for children and families.///Knowledge of the community and the people. This creates more certainty around cases (for example, safety issues) and it also promotes more confidence in terms of raising one's own children.

2. (6) Access to the outdoors.///The environment.///The environment.///The natural environment.///The natural environment.///Fishing and hunting.

3. (6) Opportunity for generalist practice.///Flexibility with the work role.///Generalist practice and the opportunity for variety in the work.///There is greater independence and less structure in service delivery.///Autonomy.///The work style is less hectic and more layed back and as a result clients are less rushed

4. (5) Good colleagues.///People at work.///Good work relationships.///The people in the office are good to work with///A good supervisor.

5. (5) Higher wages.///Bonus pay.///Money-having an income.///The job.///Job security.

6. (5) Northern experience.///Professional work and experience opportunity.///Easy to move to other northern offices.///Being a change agent and being able to see that change in communities.///The work is meaningful.

7. (4) A small community allows you to do so much in a day without worrying about traffic and congestion.///Lower levels of congestion and a slower pace of life.///Lifestyle - small size, slow pace, good friends.///Lifestyle and slow pace.

8. (3) Educational leave.///Financial support for educational leave.///Good training program.

9. There are a lot of opportunities outside of work.

Weaknesses

1. Work

(32) There is a lack of top end specialized resources.///Agency resources that are available for referral are often staffed by personnel who are under-qualified and often have limited skills.///Few resources especially support services and specialists.///Specialized resources in the south do not always understand the north.///Work related specialists are less available.///Weak family support services.///Lack of resources such as specialized foster homes.///Lack of choice in resources.///Lack of resources.///Lack of specialized resources.///Lack of professional resources.///Specialized support services are very limited.///Clients have to go south for specialized services.///Lack of resources.///Lack of specialized services.///Lack of qualified or specialized resources leads to lack of success./// Caseloads are high.///There is not enough time to do the work.///Staff shortages.///High caseloads often resulting from staff shortages.///Staff turnover.///High caseloads.///Excessive paperwork.///Staff shortages due to high turnover and slow hiring creates stress.///Staff turnover is high.//High caseload size.///The high staff turnover creates stress for those who stay.///The nature of the work takes a toll on personal health.///Problems with understaffing.///High caseloads./// There is high turnover of other professionals.///Lack of experienced supervisors and workers.

2. Location

(31) Travel out for vacations is expensive.///Medical leave is the same for the north as for the south.///Winter increases cost of living ie. heating, running vehicles etc.///Cost of travel out both in time and money.///If children excel at sports, arts or academics they need to be sent out to access level of training and instruction needed.///When children are in sports they need to travel out to compete.///Recreation, arts and culture options are limited for children.///Distance and isolation create separation from family and friends.///Distance.///Cost of travel out in time and money.///Travel is dangerous at certain times.///Isolation.///High travel costs.///Isolation from family and friends.///The

requirement or need to move children out of the community.///Cost of travel out in terms of time and money.///Bad roads.///Poor roads.///Lack of activities in the community for families, young children and teens.///Geographic distance creates a problem especially for family contact with CIC.///Work related travel can be dangerous.///Travel is not factored in to caseload numbers.///The amount of travel required in the work is very tiring and draining.///Travel costs are very high for the agency.///At times the methods of travel can be unsafe.///Getting stranded is a real possibility when traveling.///Hotel accommodation in some communities can be very poor.///When clients are placed in resources away it creates geographic separation from their community and family which in turn may cause secondary trauma.///Too many client have to referred out of the community.///Referring out of the community is costly.///Travel takes a lot of time as distance between communities is great.

3. Visibility

(23) You see your clients everywhere.///There is no anonymity.///There is frustration seeing clients in the community when they are not making changes.///There is a threat of violence given the lack of anonymity.///You feel like you are in a fish bowl - high visibility and scrutiny.///Visibility and accessibility are high in a small town.///There is a lack of anonymity.///Living in a fish bowl - high visibility and lack of anonymity.///Dual relationships in a small town can complicate work and social interactions.///Accessibility can affect personal space and privacy.///High visibility and lack of anonymity.///Safety issues for workers.///Workers are highly accessible in a small community.///There is a lack of privacy.///Dual relationships frequently arise and can complicate work.///Workers constantly have to restate boundaries with neighbours and friends.///Multiple relationships ie. clients may be family members of friends.///Lack of privacy and lack of anonymity./// Seeing clients who are in some cases second or third generation.///High accessibility, high visibility - you can't get away from your work.///Lack of privacy.///Personal isolation - you have to avoid some public locations like the bar and this limits social opportunities.///Working in your home community you know everyone and this leads to challenges and conflict - when people know you they expect favours.

4. Cost of living

(17) It is expensive.///Limited retail choices.///Lack of services.///Limited retail choice.///Limited personal luxuries.///Recreation activities are expensive.///There are limited consumer/retail choices.///Lack of retail options.///High cost of living for basic needs especially in isolated communities.///Choice of recreation opportunities is limited.///Retail selection is very limited.///For people who need competition for a sport or cultural pursuit the options are limited and this can impede development of further skills.///High cost of living.///High cost of living.///High cost of living - gas, heating, transportation, food, clothing.///Education, sports and recreation are limited for children.///High levels of poverty and poor services in outlying communities.///Neither

the basic wage or the northern allowance adequately reflect the high cost of living in the community.

5. Supervision and management

(14) Supervision especially lack of clinical supervision.///Lack of mentors.///Lack of access to supervisors.///Lack of qualified supervisors and supervisors who are inexperienced because advancement is rapid.///Rapid advancement means supervisors may not be competent.///Small office size limits peer consultation.///Lack of proper orientation for new social workers.///The quality of supervision especially when workload is high for supervisors and workers.///Workers have to deal with difficult situations without support even when they are not as prepared as they are often on their own in communities.///Lack of understanding from the employer.///Decision making is highly centralized.///Lack of support from management within the larger organization.///Ministry policies do not always reflect northern reality./// Lack of recognition.

6. Health care

(10) Medical specialists are not always available and medical treatment may not be the best.///Lack of services especially medical services.///Medical care is good but doctors often change and any time a person needs to see a specialist they have to travel out.///Lack of certain medical and dental resources requiring people to travel out.///Lack of services especially medical.///Medical services are poor.///Limited medical services (MD in community only 3 days per week).///Access is poor - the nearest specialist is 5 hours away.///Quality of medical services may be poor.///Lack of medical specialists.

7. Climate

(9) Climate/weather.///Long hours of summer light are bothersome.////Ocean is too far away.///Rain.///Climate - long winters and short summers.///Insects are unpleasant.///Long winters and hazardous driving conditions.///Biting insects.///Climate.

8. Isolation

(8) There is a large amount of professional isolation.///The politics between professionals in a small town can be awkward.///Professional isolation.///People in the community expect professionals to leave and they tend not to want to invest in relationships.///Feeling isolated and out of touch with the outside world.///Feel out of touch because of separation from news and culture.///No cable or cell phones./// Isolation.///Lack of information. TV and internet connections are not always available to the extent some workers would like.

9. Education and recreation

(7) Formal education opportunities are lacking.///Recreation and education opportunities are not as great in the north as in the south.///Limited professional development opportunities.///Certain types of recreation are lacking.///Training and education opportunities are limited.///Lack of professional development opportunities.///Educational opportunities are limited.

10. Northern economy

(6) Struggling economy.///Lack of employment opportunities for partners.///Real estate prices can fall dramatically.///Single industry town.///Employment is a concern because it is a single industry town.///Work opportunities for partners are limited especially when you come in from outside.

11. Generalist practice

(5) You have to be a Jack or Jill of all trades.///Workers have lower qualifications and less experience.///Generalist practice.///The agency is a catch all for each and every problem.///Always seen as the expert even when something may be unfamiliar.

12. Social aspects of northern life

(5) It is a difficult place for single people as social opportunities are limited.///Lack of social contacts outside work.///Small size of town limits opportunities for young single workers.///Nature of the work can create difficulty around making friends or entering relationships.///Social opportunities are limited leading to social isolation.

13. First Nations

(5) Political atmosphere with First Nations is sometimes tense.///Politics with First Nations can be difficult.///Politics within First Nations communities.///Community biases such as history of relationships between people.///The legacy of residential schools.

14. Discrimination

(5) Racism in the community is very visible.///The town is full of cliques making it difficult for newcomers.///People question social workers' commitment to community.///Discrimination./// .///Lack of visible minority and disability issues in office.

15. Housing

(3) Housing choices are limited.///Housing is in short supply in some communities and the cost may be high.///Lack of housing for newcomers.

16. Legal work

(3) Court is only scheduled once per month and this is not fair to clients.///If a case has to go to full hearing it may take up to three years before it is heard.///Clients don't have access to good lawyers and choice is very limited in a small community.

17. Two comments

(2) Lack of other work options.///Hard to move south.

(2) At the local level workers are often hired who are not adequately educated or prepared for the work and they have problems with things like documentation.///Lack of control over local hiring sometimes means people who are hired may not be fit for the work.

(2) Community has sense of accepting second class status - an ingrained inferiority.///If a community is unstable it makes it very difficult.

18. Single comments

Office dynamics.

Greater knowledge of community members and systems can sometimes lead to complacency around assessments. This knowledge may prejudice responses.

Staff who are depressed or discouraged can bring office morale down.

Lack of access to culture.

Office is a guinea pig for new programs and ideas.

Environmental pollution.

Weaknesses That Promote Leaving

1. (13) High caseloads and high workloads.///Refusal of management to address high caseloads and high workloads.///Administration expectations become a priority on the workload.///The shift to crisis management.///Staff shortages result in extra expectations.///Overwork and burnout.///Stress resulting turnover and staff shortages.///Caseload size and related work pressure.///Work demands and work pressure.///Always having to be the expert creates stress.///Work load pressures and stress.///Burnout.///Lack of prevention work.

2. (11) High cost of living.///High cost of travel out.///Expense and cost of travel out.///Travel requirements.///Time away from family resulting from travel.///High travel costs.///High cost of living.///Wages.///High cost of living.///High cost of living.///Long hours, low pay.

3. (6) Seeing the same clients again and again.///Seeing clients in the community and having to avoid certain activities such as going to the pub.///Safety issues at work.///Always having to restate boundaries.///Lack of anonymity and not being able to get away.///Lack of privacy.

4. (6) If you have a bad supervisor you are stuck as there is no option to transfer in the same community.///Lack of other work opportunities.///Poor relationship with supervisor.///Lack of management support from the larger system.///Supervisors are forced or encouraged to advance too quickly.///Lack of available support in high risk situations that require immediate and critical decisions.

5. (6) Separation from family and friends.///Being single in an environment with limited social opportunities.///Difficulty in developing friendships that are age and interest appropriate.///Separation from family.///Lack of social opportunities.///Lack of extended family.

6. (4) The desire to be in a big city.///Isolation.///Distance from urban centres.///Isolation.

7. (3) Lack of feeling valued.///Lack of recognition.///Poor public perception of child welfare.

8. (3) Lack of activities of personal interest.///Lack of resources and amenities.///Lack of opportunities for children.

9. (3) Mine closure.///Employment concerns especially for spouse in a mining town.///Partner not finding work.

10. (3) Politics can get in the way especially around issues like guardianship.///Instability in the community.///The risk associated with local hires and the lack of response from local leadership when the matter is raised as a concern.

11. (2) Climate/weather.///Long cold winters.

12. (2) The fear of external scrutiny ie. Audits, Children's Commissioner etc.///Money is spent on reviews that should be going to service.

13. (2) Lack of training and education opportunities./// Lack of professional development opportunities.

14. (2) Office conflict.///Lack of understanding visible minorities and people with disabilities.

15. Lack of direction in the Ministry.

16. Lack of work resources.

17. Poor medical services.

Opportunities

1. Work experience

(45) You get to experience and work at all aspects of the job. This creates a more holistic view of the work.///The work is challenging and there is variety.///You can be more creative.///There is good opportunity for further training and education.///The chance to try new things.///Practicing child protection in a new community.///New experience with rural/northern practice.///It is professionally challenging and there is greater opportunity for generalist practice.///More freedom in the work.///The work environment offers lots of opportunity to learn.///Generalist practice creates a lot of work related learning opportunities.///Work in the north is an adventure.///Workers can be innovative and creative.///You can practice rural social work.///The chance to develop workshops and programs.///The opportunity to work in different capacities such as teaching.///Work allows people to be creative which is exciting and interesting.///Agency promotes and facilitates personal development.///You can conduct generalist practice.///Work allows people to be creative which is exciting and interesting.///Opportunity for generalist practice.///You have the ability to make a difference in clients' circumstances.///There is a chance to see the impact of your work in a small community.///There is greater opportunity for career advancement and greater opportunity to act as supervisor.///Career advancement.///Career advancement.///Career advancement can be rapid.///The location allows for career advancement if a worker is interested in this direction.///There is a lot of opportunity for career movement.///A lot of opportunity for career advancement.///Career advancement can be rapid.///The caseload is workable.///Flexibility in work (part time).///Work hours are flexible.///Work environment is comfortable - less formal and more flexible.///Opportunity to negotiate in workplace.///The smaller size of the community allows for more interagency collaboration and networking.///There are many opportunities to develop friendships with other professionals.///You can meet and socialize with people at a variety of different levels in different occupations.///You can easily become familiar with other staff and workers.///Greater independence.///Independence in work.///There is a lot of support from the supervisor.///Support in the office.///The small office creates greater opportunity to express oneself and create change.

2. Recreation

(13) Outdoor activities ie. camping fishing, hiking etc.///Outdoor recreation.///Recreation is very accessible.///Living by the ocean.///The remote location and environment create recreation opportunities.///Outdoor recreation.///Environment of summer.///Wild game.///The chance to participate in local amateur athletics.///The natural environment and associated wilderness experiences.///Self discovery is possible in the environment.///The environment - easy access to the outdoors, wild game, fish.///Affordable recreation opportunities.

3. Community and family

(13) It is good for children.///The community has a family orientation.///There are more opportunities for people who have a family than for people who are single.///Lots of work opportunities for teens.///Good collaboration between industry and high school.///You really feel like you are part of the community. There is a strong sense of community though this is more pronounced for younger people.///The lifestyle is more relaxed which creates the chance to slow down.///You can be a big fish in a little pond. Visibility can be positive.///There is a chance to make a difference in the community.///There are community development opportunities. You can be a big fish in a small pond.

4. Benefits

(9) Pay bonus for northern MCF protection workers.///The chance to save money.///Opportunity for overtime.///Bonus pay.///Regular full-time permanent employment is more readily available to workers in the north.///Incomes are high.///Possibility of working even if education is not up to southern standard.///Good work incentives.///High income for people with partners.

5. Business (External) opportunities

(5) There is opportunity for private practice.///Opportunity for creativity and business because of gaps in the community.///Business opportunities.///Business opportunities.///You can work outside the department.

6. First Nations

(5) The work is in an area of social change and this is exciting and interesting as jurisdiction transfers to First Nations.///Opportunities to learn about First Nations culture.///There is opportunity to learn about other cultures especially First Nations cultures.///Cultural/spiritual activities one can participate in such as sweats.///Real chance to learn about other cultures.

7. Travel

(4) Travel to outlying communities.///There is a lot of work related travel which creates opportunities for workers to see other parts of the province.///Travel opportunities.///Not having to live in the same community where you work.

8. Housing

(4) Low priced real estate. Rural properties are more accessible financially.///The low cost of real estate creates property ownership options that would not be present in a large centre.///The chance to live in a rural place on a lake.///Housing and property prices are low.

9. Education

(2) Continuing education opportunities supported by the agency.///Training opportunities.

Opportunities That Contribute to Staying

1. (12) The chance to be creative in work.///The chance to make a difference in the community.///Generalist practice creates a lot of work related learning opportunities.///Flexibility.///Independence and rural practice.///Chance to work in different capacities such as teaching.///Personal development and recognition of personal development.///Chance to enhance the work environment at the local level through teaching other resources.///Work is predictable.///Career advancement and variety in work (more opportunity for generalist practice).///Career advancement.///Career advancement.

2. (9) Outdoor activities.///Lifestyle - outdoor recreation///Outdoor recreation.///The lifestyle.///Environment.///Lifestyle opportunities.///Affordable recreation.///The pace of life.///Outdoor recreation (wilderness).

3. (8) Saving money.///Money./// Debt and income.///Business opportunities.///A false sense of security that the boom will continue forever.///Affordable real estate.///Property ownership.///Affordable housing.

4. (4) Friends.///Children.///Friendships and comfort level.///Good environment to raise small children.

5. (2) Good office support.///Good office environment and good working relationships.

6. Travel.

7.The chance to engage in self-discovery.

8. People you can meet through various cultural activities.

Threats

1. Safety

(47) Safety for family connected to high visibility and high accessibility.///Safety for self.///Physical threats from clients.///High visibility and personal safety.///Accessibility and lack of anonymity creates threat to safety.///Lack of privacy.///Violent clients.///Running into clients when shopping or socializing creates a lack of freedom and the personal and professional are mixed.///High visibility in the community.///Community narrow mindedness in relation to lifestyle issues.///Legacy of previous workers creates certain levels of hostility even though they have left and practice methods have changed.///Role of the child worker is threatening to many clients which produces a reaction based solely on perception of the role.///Safety factors at work and concern about violence.///Working in isolation and having to face verbal or physical threats.///Role of the social worker is not valued and workers sometimes feel threatened because of lack of respect for the position.///High visibility creates a threat - people know you and know where you live.///RCMP are often too slow to respond for assistance on after hours call outs.///Workers can't have a normal social life ie. it is difficult to go to the bar because of clients' and community members' perceptions.///Accessibility and high visibility creates personal safety issues. Workers can become the target for other issues that beset people such as poverty and marginalization.///Lack of personal space and lack of privacy.///There is personal scrutiny of lifestyle including past lifestyle history./// Some community people can be very judgmental.///There is a lack of anonymity and workers are highly accessible in the community.///The lack of anonymity is a threat to personal health and safety.///Visibility and accessibility can create safety problems.///Accessibility and high visibility create some personal safety issues.///Workers can be scapegoated in the communities.///Threats of violence directed toward workers.///If something goes wrong the worker gets caught between the local community and the agency.///Threat of violence and its effect on personal safety.///Physical threats.///Workers are very visible and accessible which creates threats to personal safety.///Lack of personal privacy./// Accountability and blame - workers are scapegoats when something goes wrong.///Lack of respect for social workers. Workers in the north are not seen as professional.///Knowing that you won't be defended by your employer or your union if something goes wrong.///Conflict at work with co-workers and supervisors.///High caseloads create threat that something might go wrong.///Lack of support from senior management.///Work stress and the threat to health and well being.///Management scrutiny of work which tends to be intense given MCF's way of operating.///Micro management.///There is a general lack of understanding of child welfare.///Lack of support from the agency system.///High case loads affect work quality./// Personal vulnerability to various legal issues such as false allegations etc.///False allegations.

2. *Travel*

(13) Roads and weather can make for hazardous travel.///Not being able to leave when you want (feeling trapped).///Depression and isolation.///Bad roads.///Weather creates threats in terms of travel and personal safety.///Travel is dangerous and there are no cell phones or radio phones in some communities.///Work conditions - isolation, poor accommodation in outlying communities.///Working in isolation.///Travel is risky and at times dangerous ie. small planes, winter roads etc./// When you work alone you can sometimes relax too much and find that you are in a dangerous situation.///Travel is dangerous as the roads are poor isolated and cold in winter.///Travel is risky and at times dangerous.///Travel is dangerous.///Weather and climate.

3. *Community/economy*

(10) The local economy is heavily dependant on resources and is unpredictable.///Single industry town might result in rapid drop of property value.///Layoffs.///Economic upheaval.///The single industry town creates uncertainty and risks especially for spouses employed at the mine. There could be a strike, shutdown of lock out.///The fact that this is a single industry town affects everyone.///If partners don't have work it creates stress and relationship strain.///Shift work and high levels of materialism lead to high rates of family breakdown.///Current boom may go bust.///Low wages and high cost of living make it difficult to save and create financial insecurity.

4. *Environment*

(9) Animals and avalanches.///Bears.///Physical environment - avalanches and floods.///Wild animals - cougars and bears.///The poor air quality is a threat to personal health.///Soil contamination from mining tailings is a health threat.///Forest fires.///Environmental threats - pollution, oil spills etc.///Bears.

5. *Agency organization*

(8) Changes in government and organization.///New demands in terms of standards, policies and forms.///Decreased funding.///Political and jurisdictional changes in First Nations may pose a threat to good child welfare practice.///Government reorganization threatens job stability and security.///Lack of permanency in the work and as a result job security is poor.///Job insecurity for local workers.///Lack of security.

6. *Health care*

(5) Isolation makes access to medical care difficult.///Poor health care and health care access.///The health of co-workers.///Personal burnout and stress.///Personal health.

7. Family

(5) Potential of separation from family especially children.///Remaining single.///Geographic isolation creates fears of losing ties with family or friends who may live in the south.///High income levels often mean that parents give children money to amuse themselves rather than spending time with them.///Not enough child care resources in the community.

8.Career

(5) No opportunity for career movement.///Lack of career options.///No chance to specialize which threatens ability to move in career.///Dependence on co-workers creates a threat if and when they leave./// Lack of flexibility creates the threat of having to quit or threaten to quit.

9. Racism

(3) Racism.///Racism.///For aboriginal people loss of identity and culture with rapid change and growth.

10. Drugs and alcohol

(2) High levels of community substance abuse create safety issues related to traffic, being accosted on the street etc.///Drug and alcohol problems are increasing among youth.

11. Community politics

(2) Community politics.///Political context means that dissatisfied people can complain directly to politicians which threatens workers' jobs

12. Miscellaneous

Not understanding the indigenous language is threatening.

Threats That Encourage People to Leave

1. (14) Safety issues related to high visibility.///Lack of anonymity and threats to personal safety.///Verbal abuse from clients that is often constant.///Personal safety.///Lack of anonymity.///Physical safety.///Being the buffer between the local community and the agency.///Threat to family.///Family safety.///Blame and lack of respect.///Scrutiny from the watchers.///Management scrutiny.///Micro management.///There is no public relations strategy for MCF.

2. (5) Remaining single.///Separation from family.///Losing ties with family and friends.///Isolation.///Family breakdown.

3. (4) Economic instability (single industry town).///Single industry town creates uncertainty and threatens spouse's income.///Boom and bust nature of the economy.///High cost of living and wages that do not meet the cost.

4. (4) Personal health - mental and physical.///Stress and resulting health problems.///Personal health and stress.///Health.

5. (3) Workload pressure.///High case loads.///Nature of the work.

7. (2) The lack of opportunity to move within MCF.///Feeling stuck in terms of job.

6. (2) Major organizational changes.///Lack of job security.

7. Bears.

8. Community politics.

9. Transience and drug use.

Other Factors

1. Incentives

(29) Incentives and supports have to be built in for staff development and continuing education.///Education leave support.///More training and staff development opportunities.///Employer should have a plan to support social workers over a lifetime by being tuned to individual needs.///Workers need to feel valued by the employer.///Retention strategies need to be life long not short term.///Work environment needs to be flexible.///More support from management.///More opportunity for secondment to other regions or communities.///Management that listens to worker concerns.///More support from the system.///Training opportunities need to be improved and increased.///Training needs to be better integrated into workers' available time.///Make training more job specific and more "northern" specific.///Create training options for in town or out of town.///More support for training and education.///Flex time and extended weekends.///Tie training into holiday time so workers can have more time away.///Follow through on commitments vis a vis current incentive package.///The need for further education and professional development.///Need to go back to school.///Lack of training for new workers.///Further education.///Better training and orientation.///More professional development opportunities.///Increased education and professional development opportunities.///Increased education and technological resources.///Increased professional development and education.

2. Compensation

(28) Isolation allowance.///Pay the cost of travel out for family members.///Allow workers to collect their travel air miles.///Increase benefits such as housing allowance and travel subsidy.///Pay student loans.///Create low interest loans for new employees.///Extra holiday time.///Provisions in collective agreement for northern isolation.///Extra travel time for holidays, funerals, family functions etc.///Subsidy for heating cost and other household expenses.///Pay student loans.///Extra week of holiday.///Pay for graduate work.///Workers need to be allowed to take time for family events.///Support workers' social connections.///Better pay.///Money.///Sabbaticals.///Improved early retirement options.///Additional holiday time.///Travel time.///Increase pay and benefits.///More time off.///Money.///More time off.///Ability to take more time off work without penalty.///Financial and education incentives.///Higher pay.///Increase wages.

3. Support

(18) Better support when workers criticized in media.///Quick management response to criticism and critical incidents.///Take away gag order.///Eliminate the culture of worker blame and the negativity toward workers in the media.///Not having a sense of peace about the work.///Poor relationship with supervisor.///Poor work environment ie. Low morale and personal conflicts.///Lack of recognition.///Poor relationships with work colleagues.///Lack of personal support for workers when they are involved in critical incidents.///Supervisors and managers who have poor people skills.///Multiple roles and expectations.///Not being rewarded and not being recognized.///Respect, recognition and being valued.///Holding senior management more accountable.///More management support for front line workers.///Greater recognition for the work being done.///Recognition of work.

4. Hiring

(12) The hiring process has to be improved. The cost of the move needs to be covered up front by the employer.///The hiring process has to be more honest and more transparent.///The orientation process needs to be improved.///The 2 year lock in has to be avoided.///Recruit and train locally.///Recognize previous training and experience.///Hire more local people as they are more likely to stay.///Post-employment training far better than pre-employment training.///Competency-based training preferable to current degree requirements.///Hire people with relevant work experience and they will be more likely to stay.///If people choose the community it would be more likely they would stay.///Educate and recruit local people.

5. Performance review

(11) Performance and evaluation tools need to be used correctly.///Provide better supervision and mentoring.///Stop punishing workers.///Better mentoring.///More

recognition within organization.///A good supervisor who is a strong advocate for staff.///Lack of support from management.///Clear direction.///Upper management needs to support workers' career choices and career trajectory.///Support for alternative practice and innovation.///Job stability.///More opportunities for career advancement.

6. Recreation

(11) Need better recreation and entertainment.///More retail options.///Need better travel out in terms of cost and options.///Create more opportunities for children in terms of sports and culture.///More consumer/retail options.///As children age and move away parents may follow.///There is not a lot of focus on children in the community.///Lack of opportunity for children.///Education for children.///Develop more recreation opportunities.///Develop taxi and bus service in the community.

7. Workload

(10) Hire more staff.///Reduce paper work///Too many manuals and standards making it impossible to learn everything and impossible to avoid mistakes.///Wanting a job where I don't have to take work home with me.///Reduced workload.///More work resources and recognition by government that these resources are required.///More community resources.///Hire more workers.///Establish more resources.///Better physical resources such as safe vehicles and adequate office space.///Primarily female staff so provide good quality on site child care.

8. Miscellaneous

(3) The bonus has created conflict and inequality.///The bonus is positive.///Treat everyone the same in terms of the bonus.
(2) Staff with disabilities need to be better supported and understood.///More emphasis on understanding visible minority people.
(2) Past experience needs to be recognized.///Degrees other than the BSW have to be recognized.
(2) Develop a sense of pride in working for MCF.///Need to believe the Ministry is speaking in good faith when it says I wants to create a healthier work environment.
(2) The need for health care and health services.///Personal health.
(2) A family crisis.///family misfortune.
Let us have a radio in the office.
Travel.

APPENDIX L

THEME HEADING DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

The theme definitions are listed according to their frequency in the northern focus groups. Themes unique to the urban focus groups are added and some of the quotes illustrating the definitions are from the urban focus group notes.

Strengths

1. Community and family: *Community* is the physical location as well as the body of people in that location. *Family* includes relatives. These two terms were combined as the comments frequently included both concepts. For example, "There is a family orientation in the community."

2. Working in a small town: Aspects of work unique to work in a small community. For example, "Familiarity with people in small communities enables workers to produce more accurate assessments of things like risk in an efficient manner."

3.Northern practice: Views or ideas about social work practice that are thought of as unique to northern locations. For example, "Work is less structured than in the city.

4. Environment: The physical surroundings of the location and the opportunities this affords. For example, "Access to the outdoors."

5. Learning and education: Formal and informal training, instructional, and knowledge enhancement opportunities. For example," The nature of the work allows for professional growth and learning opportunities."

6. Culture: Customs, intellectual and artistic pursuits as well as specific ethnic and racial groups. For example, "The community is culturally diverse."

7. Career advancement: The opportunities for reassignment or promotion in the workplace. For example, "It is easier to develop a career path."

8. Local office/workplace: The actual physical place of work and the interaction with co-workers and supervisors at that location. For example, "This office has a strong team."

9. Agency links: Contact with other organizations that might be involved with the work of the child welfare organization. For example, " There are close working relationships with other agencies."

10. Job benefits: Salary, holidays, bonuses, disability etc. For example, "Pay is good."

11. Housing: The quality and affordability of a place to live. For example, "Housing and land are much more affordable than in the south."

12. Resources: Services and consultants used to enhance and support the work. For example, "There are a lot of resources for specific ethnic groups."

Weaknesses

1. Work: The nature of the job as well as the required tasks and activities associated with the job as they relate to particular deficits. For example, "lack of choice in resources."

2. Location: The physical place or situation as well as factors that are seen to be associated with this such as travel. For example, "Cost of travel out both in time and money."

3. Visibility: The extent to which a worker is noticed and seen and the factors that arise from this situation. For example, "There is no anonymity."

4. Cost of living: The expenses associated with food, shelter, clothing, transportation, recreation, services. For example, "High cost of living for basic needs especially in isolated communities."

5. Supervision and management: The nature of scrutiny, advice, planning, and support in the work. For example, "Decision making is highly centralized."

6. Health care: Medical services and intervention including personnel and facilities. For example, "Lack of medical specialists."

7. Climate: General weather patterns and aspects of living that might be associated with weather patterns. For example, "Long winters and hazardous driving conditions."

8. Isolation: The sense or feeling of being removed from others. This might include other communities, the larger global community, other family members, or a professional group. For example, "There is a large amount of professional isolation."

9. Education and recreation: Education refers to formal training and learning opportunities. Recreation refers to personal entertainment through such things as sports and hobbies. For example, "Formal education opportunities are lacking."

10. Northern economy: Business and work in northern locations. For example, "Single industry town."

11. Generalist practice: Social work practice that is broad as opposed to specialized. In practical terms this means that a social worker might have to deliver a wide range of programs and services. For example, "You have to be a Jack and Jill of all trades."

12. Social aspects of northern life: Friendships and contacts with other community members. For example, "It is a difficult place for single people as social opportunities are limited."

13. First Nations: Indigenous aboriginal people as well as their communities and organizations. For example, "Politics with First nations can be difficult."

14. Discrimination: Unfavourable treatment based on a perceived difference such as race, gender etc. For example, "Racism in the community is very visible."

15. Housing: The quality and affordability of a place to live. For example, "Housing choices are limited."

16. Legal work: Work tasks that involve the legal system including courts, lawyers and judges. For example, "Court is only scheduled once per month."

17. Crime: Activities contrary to the law. For example, "High rate of crime."

Opportunities

1. Work experience: The quality and nature of the work. For example, "The work is challenging and there is variety."

2. Recreation: Personal entertainment through such things as sports and hobbies. For example, "Affordable recreation opportunities."

3. Community and family: *Community* is the physical location as well as the body of people in that location. *Family* includes relatives. These two terms were combined as the comments frequently included both concepts. For example, "It is good for children."

4. Benefits: Financial and "in kind" advantages associated with the work. For example, "Bonus pay."

5. Business opportunities: The chance to engage in outside work or entrepreneurial activities. For example, "There is opportunity for private practice."

6. First Nations: Indigenous aboriginal people as well as their communities and organizations. For example, "Opportunities to learn about First nations culture."

7. Travel: Physical movement to other locations. For example, "There is a lot of work related travel which creates opportunities for workers to see other parts of the province."

8. Housing: The quality and affordability of a place to live. For example, "The chance to live in a rural place on a lake."

9. Education: Formal training and learning opportunities. For example, "Access and opportunity for staff training."

Threats

1. Safety: The extent to which a worker feels personally secure both for her/him/self as well as family members. For example, "Violent clients."

2. Travel: Physical movement to other locations. For example, "Roads and weather can make for hazardous travel."

3. Community/economy: Business and work in the local economy. For example, "Current boom may go bust."

4. Environment: The physical surroundings of the location and the threats this may create. For example, "Animals and avalanches."

5. Agency organization: The manner in which the employing organization is structured and operated. For example, "Government reorganization threatens job stability and security."

6. Health care: Medical services and intervention including personnel and facilities. For example, "Isolation makes access to health care difficult."

7. Family: Family refers to issues involving relatives. For example, "Potential of separation from family especially children."

8. Career: Profession or occupation. For example, "Lack of career options."

9. Racism: Discrimination directed at an individual or group based upon their race. For example, "Racism."

10. Drugs and alcohol: Mood altering chemicals. For example, "Drug and alcohol problems are increasing among youth."

11. Community politics: Political principles or practice. For example, "Political context means that dissatisfied people can complain directly to politicians which threatens workers' jobs."

Other Factors

1. Incentives: factors that encourage workers to stay. For example, "Education leave support."

2. Compensation: payment in money or benefits. For example, "Extra week of holiday."

3. Support: Recognition and encouragement. For example, "Eliminate the culture of worker blame."

4. Hiring: The process used to recruit new workers. For example, "Recruit and train locally."

5. Performance review: The process used to review worker competency. For example, "Clear direction."

6. Recreation: Personal entertainment through such things as sports and hobbies. For example, "Need better recreation and entertainment."

7. Workload: The volume of work expected of workers. For example, "Hire more workers."

8. Resources: Services and consultants used to enhance and support the work. For example, "Better housing for clients."

9. Organization: The manner in which the employing organization is structured and operated. For example, "The agency needs stability and must avoid constant reorganization.

APPENDIX M

FREQUENCY COUNT OF ALL SURVEY RESPONSE CATEGORIES

Strengths Reported by Northern Respondents
Northern Practice (62), Community and Family (58), Workplace (54), Environment (49), Culture (24), Career Advancement (20), Housing Affordability (17), Climate (2).

Strengths Reported by Urban Respondents
Culture (10), Resources (8), Workplace (7), Environment (6), Community and Family (6), Climate (3), Anonymity (2), Urban Practice (1), Career Advancement (1), Housing Affordability (1).

Weaknesses Reported by Northern Respondents
Location (57), Resources (57), Cost of Living (37), Education/Recreation (33), Visibility (29), Turnover (27), Community Health (21), Supervision/Management (20), Climate (20), Lack of Social Opportunities (12), Lack of Work Opportunities (12), Feeling Marginalized (6), Pollution (2).

Weaknesses Reported by Urban Respondents
Location (8), Supervision/Management (7), Pollution (7), Cost of Living (6), Lack of Work Opportunities (4), Resources (3), Turnover (3), Climate (1), Social Opportunities (1), Feeling Marginalized (1).

Opportunities Reported by Northern Respondents
Work Experience (69), Community and Family (41), Career Advancement (35), Recreation (30), Culture (25), Travel (7), Affordable Housing (4).

Opportunities Reported by Urban Respondents
Work Experience (11), Education (10), Community and Family (4), Recreation (4), Culture (4), Career Advancement (2).

Threats Reported by Northern Respondents
Work Organization (38), Safety (38), Travel (36), Community Economy (35), Community Politics (18), Health Care (18), Environment (14), Drugs and Alcohol (13), Lack of Career Movement (11), Family Moving Away (10), Existential Concerns (1).

Threats Reported by Urban Respondents
Work Organization (8), Environment (3), Safety (2), Community Economy (2), Existential Concerns (2), Community Politics (1), Drugs and Alcohol (1), Lack of Career Movement (1), Travel (1), Racism (1).

APPENDIX N

CHI SQUARE AND LAMBDA

FOR EDUCATION, RESOURCES, AND SAFETY

Education and Resources

Education	Resources not mentioned as a problem	Resources mentioned as a problem	Total
BSW	4	29	33
MSW	5	3	8
Other	8	25	33
Total	17	57	74

Chi Square	Value	Degrees of Freedom	Significance
	9.289	2	.009
Lambda			
Symmetric	.103		

Education and Safety

Education	Safety is not a concern	Safety is a concern	Total
BSW	13	20	33
MSW	7	1	8
Other	16	17	33
Total	36	38	74

Chi Square	Value	Degrees of Freedom	Significance
	5.965	2	.050
Lambda			
Symmetric	.116		

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