# Lessons from the Front Lines:
# Factors that Contribute to Turnover among
# Youth Development Workers

**Helena Laroche, M.D.**
University of Iowa
helena-laroche@uiowa.edu

**Jonathan D. Klein, M.D., MPH**
Preventive Medicine
University of Rochester

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Helena Laroche
University of Iowa

Jonathan D. Klein
University of Rochester

**Abstract:** Motivated, competent Youth Development Workers (YDW's ) are essential to effective youth outreach programs. This study explores factors affecting job turnover among Youth Development Workers (YDW's) through detailed direct observation and interviews of six YDW's in four organizations and a group interview with eight different YDW's. YDW stressors included few resources, high need among youth, paperwork, excessive responsibilities, burnout/cynicism, miscommunication with supervisors, personal financial strain and lack of job security. Workers identified needs for appreciation, support from superiors, opportunities to advance, experienced mentors, resources and role definition. For programs to be effective and minimize turnover, YDW's require resources, mentorship, role definition and appreciation.

## Introduction

Programs for youth, no matter how well designed, can only be as effective as the people implementing them on the front lines. Varied programs for youth include among their aims to develop youth potential. The workers within these organizations who work directly with youth (such as mentors, job counselors, youth group leaders) are therefore called youth development workers (YDW's).

Frequent turnover of YDW's is a concern for youth programs. Program success depends on recruitment and retention of effective, motivated, and experienced workers. Turnover disrupts

the continuity of programs, requiring time to hire and retrain new personnel and is costly to the organization (Graef, & Hill, 2000).

Staff turnover also affects the youth within the program. The young people participating in programs may be particularly vulnerable to staff turnover. Past broken relationships with family leave many disadvantaged youth with difficulty trusting people, including program staff; when the staff person leaves, their trust may be further shattered.

Although there is literature on job satisfaction and turnover in industry and business, few studies focus on human service workers and we were unable to find research that focus specifically on youth development workers. In human service agency studies, job satisfaction was associated with opportunities for promotion, job challenge, skill variety and role ambiguity (Glisson, & Durick, 1988; Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1994). Increased job security and job challenge negatively influenced workers' intentions to quit. Leadership quality and organizational age predicted organizational commitment. While human service studies are inconclusive, studies of other organizational types suggest overall stress is related to increased turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaerner, 2000).

Most studies on human service workers have examined high turnover rates among child protective workers. Many newly hired workers in these studies experienced fear, uncertainty, burnout and a perception of insufficient job supervision (Gibbs, 2001; Savicki, & Cooley, 1994). Workers most likely to stay had "at least two years length of service in the agency, preceded by relevant experience in the field and/or internship and were able to accumulate overtime and its attendant benefits in pay or vacation time" (Balfour, & Neff, 1993). In addition, workers who stayed over 18 months often reported positive mentorship experiences, which made them feel cared for and valued.

Our current study was undertaken in response to a request by a coalition of local community organizations that wished to better understand high turnover rates among youth development workers. The coalition was supported by a Coalition partnership for the prevention of teen pregnancy grant from the Division of Reproductive Health of the Centers for Disease Control. The goal of this evaluation was to identify organizational and environmental factors associated with worker dissatisfaction and turnover among YDW's. We hypothesized that though many general themes would resemble those seen in human service workers, the details and contextual issues would differ. We also sought to detail stresses and other issues specific to YDW's. This study addresses some of the key issues needed to retain youth workers.

## Methods

We conducted an exploratory descriptive study using ethnographic techniques in order to evaluate factors associated with YDW turnover. We chose observation because it has many advantages, including first hand experiences of the environment in which the YDW worked (Patton, 2002). The coalition initially identified three organizations with high turnover rates that worked within a low income area of a small city. Because size and resources might affect YDW's experiences, a fourth, larger organization with greater resources was added for contrast. One researcher (H.L.) spent three to four days at each of the original three sites. Due to time constraints and little variation in this YDW's tasks from day to day, only one day was spent at

the last site. In consultation with the YDW, we observed times and places reflecting the different types of activities in which the YDW engaged.

For greater depth, we chose one YDW in each organization (based on availability) for close observation. The researcher observed the YDW's engaging in many different work tasks and queried them about her observations. During weekday, evenings and weekends, she spent time with them as they completed administrative tasks, met with youth in their offices, managed after school programs, ran youth group meetings and held special events in the community. During down times, such as when the YDW was completing paperwork, the observer took the opportunity to observe and interview some of the YDW's coworkers.

A two-hour focus group interview tested whether observations made at the organizations resonated with another group and provided new insights. The group included six YDW's from four other agencies, which had not been observed, and two workers from one of the observed agencies who the researcher had not previously interviewed.

The observer recorded extensive field notes and summarized findings on a daily basis. The group interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. The group interview transcript and field notes were coded and analyzed to identify recurrent themes (Marshall, & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002).

### Participants

In total, 14 youth development workers and two supervisors contributed to this project. All of the YDW's interviewed were minorities (eleven African Americans and three Latinos). Within this inner city population both youth participants and staff (particularly the YDW's) were primarily African American or Latino. Ten were women. Ages ranged from early twenties to mid-forties. Participants had worked with youth for between one to fifteen years. Four YDW's had worked with youth for more than ten years and nine YDW's for over four years. However, all of the workers observed had been at their current job one year or less, except one who had been at her job over two years. Most were college graduates or currently in college. None who commented on their educational background had advanced degrees, but this information was not available for all. Many grew up in or near the neighborhoods in which they worked.

Agencies varied in the services provided. Services provided by different agencies included:

1) services to help find employment
2) GED classes
3) after-school activities
4) mentoring
5) case management services
6) youth programs on topics such as STD/pregnancy prevention, drug/alcohol abuse avoidance, and self esteem
7) evening youth groups and
8) tutoring.

All organizations had at least some activities related to teen pregnancy prevention. Observed YDW's spent their days on a variety of tasks including counseling youth on job placement, helping youth navigate through difficulties with school, financial, legal and family issues, teaching GED classes, organizing and running workshops and after-school activities,

coordinating and mentoring youth groups, completing required paperwork and organizing program logistics.

The study was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rochester, School of Medicine. All participants provided written informed consent.

## Results

### Why do people choose this work? – Benefits of the job

Our study found that YDW's chose their jobs because they wanted to make a difference.
> *"I enjoy seeing youth recognize their potential… by being exposed to something that they might not have been exposed to had they not participated in these type programs."*

Another YDW thinks that what he does is important for his own child's future. The youth he helps could become his own child's teacher. The better he prepares this youth the better it will be for his child. On the other hand
> *"if I don't help out, these same kids could end up preying on my kids."*

We noted that the YDW's really care about the youth and value the trust youth place in them. YDW's identify with the youth and their problems, particularly if they grew up in the same community.
> *"I was there not even two to three years ago…. I can be able to help make them change their decision from the same things I did…. Turning it around and going above and beyond what I didn't think or imagine I could do 'cause I did not have the resources they have right now."*

One YDW was observed sharing her own difficult teenage experiences with a youth to help her avoid the same mistakes in a similar situation.  Some previously benefited themselves from youth programs and wanted to help others.

YDW's described a feeling of accomplishment when youth succeeded such as finishing high school or getting a job.  The YDW's happily introduced the observer to these successful teens. Unfortunately, though YDWs enjoyed working with youth, other job stressors often led to turnover.

### Too many responsibilities - Not enough role definition

Unclear role definitions and extensive responsibilities were particularly salient issues for workers at one site.  A worker defined his job title as "multi-task."  Once he started his job, he was amazed at the list of his job responsibilities (observer viewed a long broad list). He described two sides of the office. On one side 'they' (administrators, financial people and supervisors) have specific tasks and focused job descriptions. On the other side, the YDW's are the multi-taskers who do a little of everything. Those on the administrative side of the office can focus their efforts because they do not work with the youth. This YDW felt the office needed to hire more YDW's and to clearly define jobs and roles.

Another worker also noted that more structure would decrease her job stress.  She wanted more clearly defined, but not rigid, roles and guidelines on how to complete tasks.

*"So we can stop following one another like ducks trying to figure out what to do."*

Among the YDW's at this site it was unclear at times who was in charge of each task. Though they had a supervisor, one of the YDW's had unofficially begun providing supervision such as making the class schedule, assigning tasks and dividing the youth among workers. Sometimes this unofficial "supervisory role" led to stress with another YDW with more seniority.

As one YDW stated, "This isn't a job that is for everybody." She felt that especially among YDW's without previous experience, unrealistic expectations of the job led to turnover.

### On the job training - Mentoring
According to YDW's, many job skills must be acquired through hands on training and classroom studies, even a college degree was not enough preparation. Workers varied in the number of opportunities they had had to attend training workshops. A worker described his training as all about paperwork and deadlines, which told him what to do but not how. Some workers found that workshops focused on practical ways to get youth's attention could be helpful. YDWs thought that learning skills such as grant writing and how to work within different funding streams would be useful to prepare for supervisory positions. A worker stated that the best part of the training workshops was networking with other workers and asking them for advice. Many felt they had learned their job through trial and error and asking questions of co-workers. Those in the group interview strongly endorsed these themes.

It was found that what YDW's needed most was guidance from more experienced workers. However, frequent turnover and lack of experienced YDW's left some YDW's without good mentors. In one location, the supervisor had come from a business management background and did not have any more experience with youth than most of the workers. Thus, their supervisor could not mentor them effectively regarding working with troubled youth. Previously, these workers had benefited from the mentorship of another experienced worker in the organization. Even though their mentor had left to work elsewhere, they still relied on her for advice. Fortunately at another site, the supervisor, who had significant experience with youth, was observed carefully guiding each YDW through approaches to address youth issues. This supervisor provided mentorship for these newly hired inexperienced workers that seemed to be lacking at the other organization.

### Opportunities to advance
Most YDW's stressed the need for more opportunities to advance in the organization, gain supervisory experience and change jobs for variety. Among the reasons cited by YDW's for turnover included moving on to graduate school and opportunities for job advancement elsewhere. "To advance someone has to die, retire or leave. When one good job opens up there are ten qualified people who want it. Often they want to increase your responsibilities without increasing your pay." Another YDW stated,

*"I don't want to stagnate... When I feel that my job is done here now as a front line worker, ...I [will] need to move on...I wouldn't want to stay in that same position and have people come and go over me."*

A fourth said,

*"Burnout. I'm tired of saying do this, don't do [that], ... the part I love [is] the resources and helping them stay out of trouble. I can do that via another person. I'm*

*getting too old to field the stops the drops, mailing calendars, giving presentations…. I think once you are on the front line a long time, its time to move up…"*

Another worker pointed out that not everyone wants to be a supervisor.
*"I do think there are people who want to work with youth in a direct service way and that's all they want."*

Some YDW's craved variety.  But instead, they were repeating the same workshops day after day, year after year.

### The need for appreciation and recognition of personal needs
YDW's wanted the organization to appreciate them and care about their personal well being. One YDW described that when he injured his back at his last job, his supervisor called him at home and said he still needed to work despite his injury.  At that point he knew that the organization did not really care about him.  Soon after that incident he left the organization.

Another YDW contrasted two previous jobs. At one, the administrators seemed to care more about the paperwork than the participants and workers and turnover was large. At the other, her supervisor helped with the youth and really seemed to care about the workers thus turnover was small. For example, she sent the workers home when they were sick and filled in herself.

The solution according to one YDW:
*"Pay everybody more money…  I don't know what the chances are of that happening but it would be nice if there were even other perks built in there…. There are other little things you can do. Giving people mental health days. Do other things to show that you appreciate them and you know that they are working hard…."*

### Low pay
One YDW succinctly summarized the problem, "Human service workers don't get paid what they need to."  The entire focus group agreed. To make extra money, one YDW worked another job at night and on weekends.  He sometimes worked a full day after an overnight shift at his second job.  Some YDW's worked beyond their limited paid work hours without reimbursement because there was more to be done. One said "I'm a part time person. I get paid for 20 hours. But I do sometimes 60 hours in a week. If I can see that I'm making a difference in only one child.  I think it is worth it." Some reported that increased pay led to increased demands on their time. One said, "More money means more problems."

The only worker who reported satisfaction with his compensation was from a larger organization with more resources and had recently taken on more supervisory responsibilities. He was happy with his pay increase and compensation for extra work hours.

### Lack of resources
As with many non-for-profit agencies, finances at these organizations were tight and resources limited. One YDW reported that her organization's case loads were too high to manage effectively. Others cited lack of resources to provide services to youth and lack of information on available community resources, particularly for mental health issues.  For example, the researcher observed a YDW and her supervisor discussing two young men with serious mental

health issues and bad social situations.  Both agreed that their program did not have the resources needed to help but were unsure about other available resources.

Another scarce resource was transportation for youth to events. Some YDW's were using their own cars, putting themselves at risk for liability and danger to themselves or their possessions. Transportation issues also consumed precious time with youth.

### Lack of job security
Lack of job security was an issue for these YDW's. Many YDWs had salaries funded by grants, which provide support only for a certain time period.  Four of the people in this study have lost their jobs since data collection ended, because of changes in funding.

### Overwhelming need
Youth problems can seem overwhelming.  At times workers felt like they were not having an impact.  For example one worker, who worked with 16-20 year olds, felt like the entire generation was in trouble. "They don't have the skills." Many youth are "functionally illiterate." She felt some participants did not even want to be in the program. Some of these programs were focused on providing specific services to youth and did not have the resources or personnel to help with other problems Workers expressed frustration at not being able to help with other issues (e.g. social, school, family) which affected the youth.

### Emotional stresses
Working with youth can put YDW's on an emotional rollercoaster. The highs come when youth succeed and the lows come when youth fail to reach their goals or, worse, when youth fall victim to society's ills (crime, drugs, violence). Some YDW's had experienced the death of youth in their programs.  One worker did not watch or read the news because he did not want to know when something terrible happened to one of the participants.  He knew that if they continued to put themselves at risk "something bad would happen." YDW's sometimes took the brunt of youths' anger and emotional distress. One worker described that many youth were very angry at the world and the YDW's became the target because "they are there." "If you take it to heart you'd be dead the first month you worked here. You have to understand that it may be because of something else that happened and they will be in the next day to apologize for their behavior." This hard emotional work was perceived by some YDW's as being distributed unequally. Supervisors and administrators were seen as distanced from the youth and their problems.

### Danger
Working in dangerous neighborhoods and with high risk youth, YDW's put themselves and their property in danger. One was chased by angry youth as he tried to protect a participant, and another had her presents for her children stolen. In the latter case the youth program participants were involved, adding another layer of emotional stress.  This worker said that her faith was shaken, and she spent much of the day watching the participants, wondering who committed the crime and who knew what happened.

### Burnout - cynicism
All of the above factors can lead to burnout. One supervisor said,
> "I worked in human services for 5 years and I burned out.  So I worked in [another field] and then went back to human services. I have been doing it for 15 years but I

> *can't do that one on one with the kids anymore. I'm cynical. That's why I rely on the younger people to do it."*

Other YDW's reported feeling stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted and ready to leave. This burnout affected others in the organization. One worker pointed out that when workers get tired and unhappy, they don't put as much effort into their work and others have to take up the slack.

### Miscommunication and disconnection between YDW's and their supervisors

YDW's described miscommunication and disconnection between themselves and their supervisors. One YDW felt that supervisors were not aware of the challenges YDW's faced because they did not interact enough with youth in the program. Another reported problems communicating with funders/supervisors outside of the organization, "I can't get a hold of my supervisors. We don't have [access to the] internet, but they send email…. they don't have time to get on the phone and call us. We either find out from other people or too late."

The YDW's also wanted flexibility and support to try their own ideas when working with program participants. One stated "Let us use our creativity that we have, instead of putting up road blocks all the time." A happy YDW found that he had more flexibility in his current organization compared to past jobs. He was able to use his own ideas with support from his superiors. He described their attitude as "if it works continue, if not then move on."

### Paperwork takes up time that could be used for other activities

The researcher observed that the YDW's at all sites spent a surprising amount of their day completing paperwork. For some, each encounter must be documented in writing. Many spent considerable time tracking down participants and individuals at other organizations to gather required documentation such as a report card on every youth group participant. Sometimes there was obvious duplication due to multiple funders with different paperwork. One worker sometimes did not count paperwork toward his limited paid hours because "it has to get done." Another said "I'm still working on this paperwork. I'm ready to go on to the meat of things [helping the kids]."

## Discussion

In this exploratory study we used a descriptive analysis to look for common themes related to job turnover among a previously under-studied group, youth development workers. The themes described above are also reflected in the limited literature on job turnover and satisfaction in the human service fields, and emphasize the special challenges faced by such workers. Unlike workers in industry, business and other fields, workers in the human services field often work with sensitive emotional issues and deal with those most disadvantaged in our society. In addition, YDW's work with teenagers, who provide a particularly difficult set of challenges (Arnold, et al., 2007). Many YDW's also work in small organizations, which often do not offer the protocols and support structures potentially available to other human service workers, such as child protective workers. Because YDW's must contend with many of these stresses at once, they are particularly vulnerable to turnover.

Given the broad set of tasks necessary to develop youth potential, YDW's roles can span a large variety of issues. YDW's often need help in focusing their efforts on program goals and referring

those issues outside their job description to other people.  Given the diversity of their job, it is not surprising that clarifying and focusing YDW roles may lead to decreased turnover and increased job satisfaction (Glisson, & Durick, 1988; Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1994).  The need for role clarity begins during the hiring phase. Particularly when recruiting people for demanding jobs, such as working with troubled youth, employers should give applicants a clear view of the jobs' demands.   Krueger suggests a multistage process that includes multiple interviews and a chance to interact with youth (Krueger, 1986).  He advocates making sure the applicant understands the demanding nature of the job and will commit to staying for a reasonable time frame.  In addition, realistic job reviews involving videos about the job can increase retention by around nine percent (Cascio, 1991).

Other approaches may also help recruit effective YDWs who will be committed to stay with the program. Since they have a personal connection with local youth and the community, programs may benefit from increased recruitment of YDW's from within their own community.  Programs can also nurture future development workers from their program graduates.  Improvements in pay and benefits may attract committed candidates with the appropriate skills to be able to succeed.

YDW's jobs were varied and sometimes unpredictable.  YDW's needed guidance from experienced mentors and felt frustrated when such support was not available.  This mirrors the experience of child-care workers where " 'being thrown to the wolves' or 'having to learn entirely by trial and error,' often leads to permanent dissatisfaction" (Krueger, 1986).  Krueger suggested that training include significant time working alongside an experienced worker (mentor) and regular contact with a supervisor. Smaller organizations may benefit by collaborating with other organizations with more experienced workers.  While community coalitions often bring together agency executives (Chervin, et al., 2005), it is less common for them to convene youth development workers and their direct supervisors to share ideas and resources.  These interactions might help fill some of the need for mentoring and support.

In order to maintain an experienced work force, promote job satisfaction, and decrease job turnover, organizations must provide opportunities for advancement (Dreyer, 2001; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1994). Among social workers in public and non-profit agencies, "perceived opportunities for promotion and job challenge are pre-eminent in influencing their job satisfaction" (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000).  Promoting from within the organization provides advancement opportunity and creates experienced mentors familiar with the organizations (Krueger, 1986).

Echoing the words of YDW's in this study, Krueger states, *"Experience on the front line is a valuable asset for supervisors… It helps them be more empathetic and aware of the needs of their staff members….formal education alone is usually not adequate, nor is supervisory experience in another field."*  However, small organizations may not have advancement opportunities available for workers who are ready to advance or experienced workers available when the organization needs to fill a position. These organizations might consider working together to provide a larger pool of workers and opportunities for advancement.  Unfortunately, based on qualitative data from all 13 of the Coalition Partnership Communities, high turnover was common among all teen pregnancy prevention and other youth serving agencies, leaving a limited pool of experienced workers (Chervin, et al., 2005).

Finally, to help decrease turnover, YDW's need to feel supported and be reminded that they are valued (Gibbs, 2001).   Support or lack of perceived support from supervisors was a theme among these YDW's and has also been linked to turnover in other worker studies. (Eisenberger, Singlhamber, Vandenberghe, et al., 2002).   Solutions may lie in careful choice and training of supervisors and work to improve communication between supervisors and youth workers. YDW's need a forum to express their ideas directly to supervisors, and leaders should in turn spend time observing in the field.

This study is limited by its small size, short time-frame and focus only on the YDW's point of view.  Its strengths lie in the use of multiple data collection techniques, including direct observation, individual interviews and a group interview.  The experiences described are most relevant to organizations with similar contexts, especially small organizations.

## Conclusion

Youth development workers are crucial to the success of youth development prevention programs. Organizations may help decrease turnover by evaluating the needs of their front line workers including whether they feel they have adequate mentorship, opportunities for advancement and role definition as well as whether they feel valued by the organization. The challenge is then finding ways to make improvements within the resource constraints of the system. A broader challenge includes changing how resources are allocated and structured in order to improve support for those organizations and people within them who have chosen the vital task of reaching out to and supporting our country's youth.

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