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TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO ORA

Literature Review

Caseload size in best practice case management

2011

Disclaimer

The views and interpretations in this report are those of the researcher and are not the official position of the Ministry of Social Development.

Readers should note that this literature review has not been through the Ministry's full publication quality assurance process but is being published as it may be of value and interest to the social services research community and others. The report has been edited and proof read, but the layout and content has not been reviewed or updated since the report was finalised. Web links for references have been updated where possible.

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LITERATURE REVIEW ON CASELOAD SIZE IN BEST PRACTICE CASE MANAGEMENT

Summary

International literature was reviewed on the optimal or recommended caseload size in best practice case management for social services targeting at-risk young adults.

Most articles reviewed focused on both children and young adults in the areas of health, foster care and youth justice. A few articles looked at caseloads in child welfare systems in general.

Findings suggest that the optimal or recommended caseload size for case managers/youth workers is largely based on the intensity of services provided to clients rather than kinds of services. Other factors that influence optimum caseload include the differences in services provided, capacity and capability of case managers, purposes of the programmes, children and youth themselves, and other environmental factors. Together these factors determine the actual optimal caseload size for each programme or services.

Collectively, research indicates recommended caseload sizes range from 20 to 30 cases or more for low intensity services, 10 to 20 cases for moderately intensive services, and five to 10 cases for highly intensive services. The average caseload size quoted in the articles reviewed is 15-20 cases, the limit is 20 families or 35 children/young adults, and the optimum caseload size should be no more than 15 cases. However the actual caseloads were often not reflective of the optimal caseload size.

No relevant New Zealand literature was found, though information might be gathered internally within Work and Income through similar programmes/projects.

Below is a summary table summarising the recommended caseload size mentioned in a selection of articles:

Country	Research	Service Group	Recommended Caseload	Intensity of Service
USA	Council on Accreditation: a review of Youth Independent Living Services (2008)	Older adolescents, disengaged from family	12-20 cases	Smaller caseloads are recommended when youth receive counselling or other intensive services, and the worker's travel time or geographic area is extensive. Larger caseload when a worker is providing primarily follow-up contact, less intensive and more centralised services.
USA	Council on Accreditation: Early Intervention and Prevention Services (2008)	Families with children needing support	15-25 families per home visitor	
Australia	The Child and Family Services Unit of the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services: Child and Family Services, Consultation with Staff (2005)	Young people with challenging behaviours	No more than 6 young people	High level of service.
USA	Early Head Start Program	Families with children with special needs	6-10 (Region V) families per home visitor 10-15 (National) families	
Australia	Care 2001 – an out-of-home programme (2001)	Out-of-home programme children and youth	5 6.5 10 20	- High needs cases at any time. - Medium-high needs cases at any time. - Medium needs cases at any time. - Low needs cases at any time.

Australia	A study in Australia on public mental health services (2009)	General public	Mean caseload size was 20 per full-time case manager	
Australia	Queensland Public Sector Union, the Departments of Communities and Child Safety Sub Agency	At risk children in youth justice	Suggests limit be 15 children per caseworker	
USA	CWLA (1990)	Child welfare services	20 families or 35 children is the caseload limit	
	CWLA (1995)	Family foster care	12-15 children	Depending on the level of service required for each child.
USA	Child Welfare Worker Caseload: What's Just Right? (2009)	Children in welfare system	16-17 per month	

Some relevant references:

1. Case Management: Key to Access, Quality, and Financial Success: Workload Distribution¹

This 2003 research on hospital care shows that in general, a case manager can handle a load of 25 patients, young and old. This workload is best handled when a case manager has some support from a social worker.

2. Council on Accreditation: Youth Independent Living Services²

A review was done by the Council on Accreditation (2008) on Youth Independent Living Services, a cluster of services designed for older adolescents who have been separated from their homes, may have been disconnected from long-term family relationships, and may have assumed parenting responsibilities.

The review shows Youth Worker workloads generally range between 12 and 20 cases. Assignments of caseload are made, reviewed regularly, and adjusted based on consideration of the following:

- case complexity, special needs and circumstances
- age and population characteristics, including ethnic and cultural factors
- qualifications, competencies and experience of the worker, including level of supervision needed
- work and time required to accomplish assigned tasks and job responsibilities;

¹ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/169b/f039634c4315d937de13f8c59f9b2ea7d648.pdf>

² www.coanet.org/standard/yil/purpose.pdf

- case status, and progress toward achievement of desired outcomes; and
- service volume, accounting for needs of new clients and pending referrals.

The number of cases carried would be smaller when clients receive counselling or other intensive services, or when the youth worker's travel time or geographic area is extensive, compared to cases where a youth worker is primarily providing follow-up contact, or less intensive and more centralised services.

3. Department of Community Services, Caseloads in child and family services, Technical Report 2 (2007)

The Department of Community Services in New South Wales conducted an updated review in 2007 on the optimal use and mix of resources in child welfare agencies. The review mentioned the “Child and Family Services, Consultation with Staff” report produced by the Child and Family Services Unit of the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services in June 2005. This report recommended that a separate team, including youth workers, be established to handle case management for young people with challenging behaviours, and that each worker has a caseload of no more than six young people.

Table 1: Actual and recommended caseloads for Early Intervention and Prevention Services
[Extract from article]

Early Intervention and Prevention Services	Recommended	Actual	Units
UNITED STATES			
Council on Accreditation (COA)	15-25		families per home visitor
Early Head Start Program	6-10 (Region V)		families with children with special needs per home visitor
	10-15 (National)		families per home visitor
Head Start Program	10-25		families per home visitor
UNITED KINGDOM			
Sure Start Plus	29		active cases per advisor

Table 2: Actual and recommended caseloads for out-of-home care [Extract from article]

Out-of-Home Care	Recommended	Actual	Units
AUSTRALIA			
Queensland Department of Child Safety	15	32	cases at any given time
Tasmanian Child and Family Services Unit	6	young people with challenging behaviours at any given time	
Care 2001	5	high needs cases at any time	
	6.5	medium-high needs cases at any time	
	10	medium needs cases at any time	
	20	low needs cases at any time	
UNITED STATES			
Council on Accreditation: - Foster care and kinship care	18	children at any given time	
- Foster care and kinship care	8	therapeutic children at any given time (children undergoing therapy)	
- Residential Treatment	12	clients per worker	
Child Welfare League of America (CWLA): Foster Care - kinship/relative care	12-15	children at any given time	
	12-15	children at any given time	
	10	families at any given time	
	15-18	children at any given time (ongoing)	
	12	families at any given time (ongoing)	

4. Child Welfare League of America, Recommended caseload standards (1999)³

The recommended caseload standards for child protective services are as follows (CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services to Abused or Neglected Children and their Families, Revised 1999): [Extract from article]

Service/Caseload Type	CWLA Recommended Caseload / Workload
Initial Assessment/ Investigation	12 active cases per month, per social worker
Ongoing Cases	17 active families per social worker and no more than one new case assigned for every six open cases
Combined Assessment/ Investigation and Ongoing Cases	10 active on-going cases and four active investigations per social worker
Supervision	one supervisor per five social workers

³ See www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/case_work_management.pdf for 2016 information

5. Caseload management, work-related stress and case manager self-efficacy among Victorian mental health case managers (2009)⁴

This study in Australia on public mental health services shows that the mean actual caseload size was 20 per full-time case manager. Higher caseloads were associated with higher levels of work-related stress and lower levels of case manager personal efficacy. Active monitoring of caseload was associated with lower scores for work-related stress and higher scores for case manager personal efficacy, regardless of size of caseload.

6. Queensland Public Sector Union, the Departments of Communities and Child Safety Sub Agency Agreement Log of Claims

The Log suggests that for Youth Justice, the agreed caseload limits were 15 youth justice children per caseworker.

7. A Caseload-Weighting Formula for Child Welfare Services (1990)⁵

This article focused on the methods to determine child welfare services' caseload standards with an emphasis on the caseload formula. According to the caseload formula, 20 families or 35 children is the optimal caseload limit.

8. Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), Guidelines for computing caseload standards

This article gives guidelines for managers and supervisors. It highlighted the difference between caseload and workload (Workload Standards for Children and Family Social Services, U.S. Children's Bureau):

Caseloads: the amount of time workers devote to direct contacts with clients.
Workload: the amount of time required to perform a specific task.

9. Caseload Size in Best Practice (November 2002)

This is a literature review conducted by the University of Illinois to examine research related to caseload size and outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

According to the CWLA (1995), the per caseworker caseload size for family foster care should be between 12 and 15 children, depending upon the level of service required for each child. Most research indicates that caseload size should not be greater than 15 cases per worker.

Factors to be considered in determining appropriate caseload size include: the complexity of the needs of the child and family, the level of competency of the worker, the functions assigned and the time required for activities related to the case, and the geographic area served.

⁴ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19373707

⁵ www.researchgate.net/publication/234604369_A_Caseload-Weighting_Formula_for_Child_Welfare_Services

The Oregon Project, which was designed to reduce the number of children placed inappropriately in foster care, determined that workers were most effective with a caseload size of about 15 child cases. Caseload size was also very dependent on the number of court hearings for which the caseworker had to prepare.

For caseworkers managing court hearings, the most productive project worker had from three to 56 cases at any one time and a range of from zero to 11 court hearings per month (Emlen et al., 1978).

Both Illback and Neill (1995) and Stroul (1996) found the optimum caseload size to be no more than 15 cases, with Illback and Neill citing a range of 10-15 cases and Stroul finding the range to be from five to 15.

10. Child Welfare Worker Caseload: What's Just Right? (2009)⁶

This study was designed to establish a caseload standard for child welfare workers. Understanding reasonable workload expectations for child welfare workers is a cornerstone of quality service provision and the recruitment and retention of qualified workers. Results indicated that, on average, some CYF (Children, Youth and Family in USA) workers had been assigned twice as many cases as the 16 to 17 per month suggested as reasonable by this study's findings.

11. Check and Connect programme⁷

Check & Connect (CC) was developed by University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration in 1990, and was originally funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, addressing the problem of dropout for students with emotional/behavioural disabilities. Essentially, CC is a dropout prevention strategy and a school-based programme targeting at-risk students age 14 and above, who are still in school (may have truancy problems).

CC relies on close monitoring of school performance, mentoring, case management and other supports. The "Check" component is designed to continually assess student engagement through close monitoring of performance and progress indicators, with a focus of staying in school. The "Connect" component involves a mentor giving individualised attention to students, in partnership with school personnel, family members, and community service providers.

In many ways, CC is similar to a potential NEET programme. CC takes the case management/mentoring/service coordination approach. Students are assigned a monitor (eg a graduate student, special education teacher, or community member with experience in human services), who works with them year-round for two years as a mentor, advisor, and service coordinator, even when students change schools. Mentors and students meet monthly or weekly.

On average, mentors have a caseload of 35 students, who typically enter the program in 9th grade (age 14). This reduces some of the complexity that a NEET programme might encounter, such as the need to maintain contact and offer employment support.

⁶ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19780466

⁷ www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/part3.3.03.asp

NEET focuses on older youth (16-17 year olds) who are already disengaged. The students the CC programme normally works with fit the following profile:

- Skipping 15 percent (18 classes) or more of classes per month
- Absent 15 percent (three days) or more days per month
- Suspended from school two or more days
- Other behavioural incidents four or more times per month
- Failing a class
- Behind in credits and not likely to graduate in five years.

The outcomes

There have been six studies done on the effectiveness of CC. Only two studies met WWC (What Works Clearinghouse) evidence standards. Outcomes suggest that CC has a positive impact on **staying in school, progressing in schools**, but is indifferent in terms of **completing school**.