

Pennsylvania Child Welfare Caseworker Time Use Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The following summary and recommendations are based on two data sources. First, there was an analysis of data entered into CAPS across 16 counties for intakes (2017 only to avoid expungement issues; 18,897 cases and 39,101 case-months); in-home cases (2013-2017; 5,571 cases and 36,158 case-months); and placement cases (2013-2017; 1,915 cases and 18,992 case-months). Only cases that had been completed were included in the analyses to ensure the full life of the case was observed. The CAPS data were used to count the number of visits, court hearing, and other case contacts and to quantitate all direct data entry (e.g., time spent entering risk assessment information) over the life of a case. Second, there was a survey that attempted to capture all non-case specific activities, paperwork/activities not recorded in CAPS, and to provide time estimates for activities that were recorded in CAPS but for which the duration of activity could not be deduced (e.g., home visits). Forty-five counties had at least one caseworker who participated in the survey, totaling approximately 650 caseworkers.

The goals of this study were as follows: (1) estimate available casework hours per full-time employee; (2) estimate time use per case-month; and (3) calculate the implied caseload as equal to (1) divided by (2).

In the following pages, we highlight 6 key findings resulting from this work. Pursuant to these findings, we also provide recommendations of possible practice reforms that could address caseload burden. These recommendations may not be advisable in all contexts, and are merely provided as a starting point for thinking about how to balance workload.

Note: For many tables, I report two types of median values: a caseworker median, and a county median. The caseworker median is based on all responses to the survey. Thus, counties who had more caseworkers respond to the survey are disproportionately influencing the median value. The county median is a median of medians – in other words, I first calculated the median value within each responding county, and then calculated the median of the county medians. The county median essentially counts each county equally, even though they have different

Finding 1. The average worker spends at least half a work week each month on activities that would not be credited to their caseload.

We determined that a full time caseworker works approximately 221.3 days per year (subtracting weekends (104 days), state holidays (13 days), accrued vacation (12 days), sick leave (12 days), and training (2.7 days). This equates to approximately 18.4 days per month. The number of hours worked in a given month depends on the full-time work schedule of the county (e.g., 37 hours vs. 40 hours) and how much time caseworkers dedicate to non-case-specific activities. These activities include work on inactive cases (e.g., attending a court hearing as an investigator on a case that has been transferred to a placement caseworker), assisting other caseworkers, consultation with supervisors or other coworkers, general meetings, and service obligations. Caseworkers were asked to report on each of these activities in the survey. The findings are below.

Although there is substantial variability between and within counties, estimates suggest that across worker types 20-24 hours are spent on activities of supervision/consultation, assisting other caseworkers, general meetings, and work on inactive cases (Table 1). A large proportion of this activity is consulting with other caseworkers or supervisors and general meetings.

Percentile	Intake			Ongoing			Placement		
	N=303			N=300			N=265		
	50 th (middle)	25 th (low)	75 th (high)	50 th (middle)	25 th (low)	75 th (high)	50 th (middle)	25 th (low)	75 th (high)
Work on inactive cases	3	2	5	2	1	5	2	1	5
Assist other workers	5	3	10	5	2	10	5	2	10
Consult supervisor/ other workers	8	5	15	10	5	15	9	5	15
General meetings	5	2	8	5	3	10	5	4	10
Service obligations	0.1	0	0.4	0.1	0	0.4	0.1	0	0.4
TOTAL HOURS (median of sampled caseworkers)	26	16	38	26	17	36.6	24.2	15.2	36
TOTAL HOURS (median of county medians)	25.1	17.6	35.7	25.5	20.5	32	26.9	19.4	33.6

If we account for these activities in our estimate of caseworkers' available hours per month, the median county's full time intake caseworker would have 120.3 hours/month for active cases; for ongoing workers, 115.8 hours, and for placement workers, 113.9 hours. Under the current maximum of 30 cases per worker, this would allot 4 or fewer hours per case per month for direct work activities.

Recommendation 1a. Explore ways to streamline consultation activities and minimize meetings.

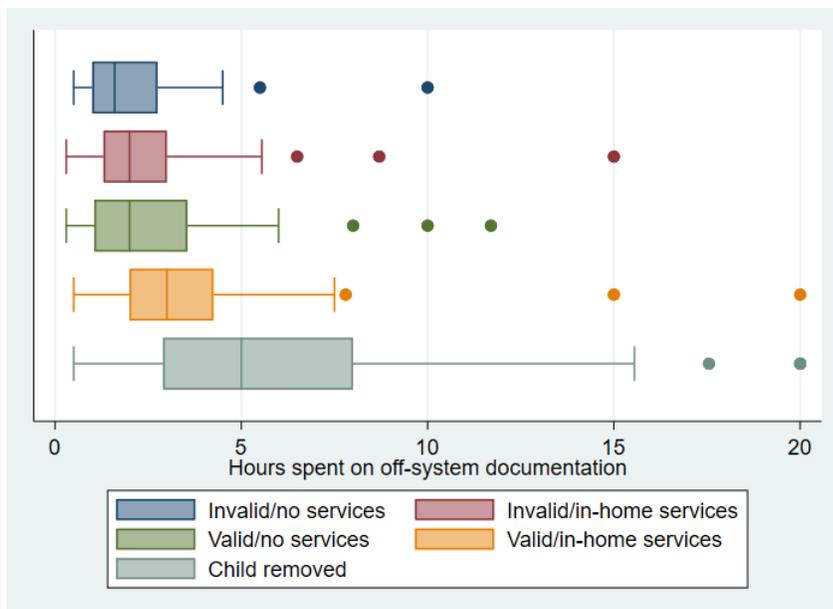
Recommendation 1b. Work on inactive cases disproportionately burdens intake workers. Partial caseload credit for inactive cases that require continued involvement may be one way of recognizing or accounting for that work.

Recommendation 1c. Allotting time to assist other caseworkers may help to further train and support new caseworkers, but could also disproportionately burden more senior caseworkers. Case-sharing (joint assignment) of difficult cases for new caseworkers may provide them with additional support while also giving caseload credit to the senior workers who are providing substantial amounts of assistance.

Finding 2. For intake workers, the amount of additional paperwork largely depends on whether the case is opened for services or placement.

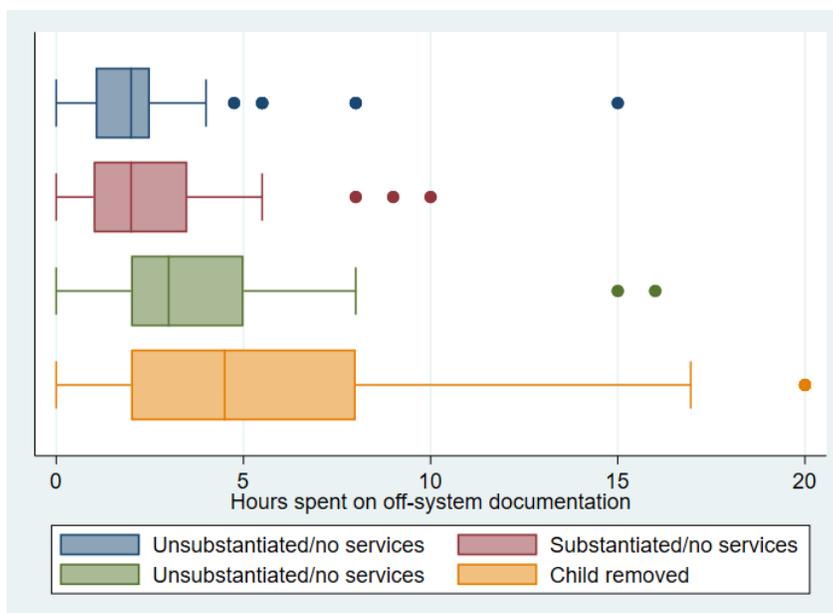
Most counties reported some documentation or paperwork that had to be completed outside of their electronic data system. However, the documentation burden was highest for cases opened for in-home or out-of-home services. The box plots below show the distribution of county documentation burden by case disposition. Notably, the added burden is likely far greater given that this is not accounting for court-related activities (discussed later) or case transfer meetings (estimated at 1 to 4 hours). Moreover, counties that intervene in a larger proportion of cases will face the greatest constraints on caseworker time, and thus may most clearly benefit from reducing the volume of disposition-related paperwork. Time spent on paperwork was similar for GPS vs. CPS intakes.

Figure 1. Off-system (non-CAPS) documentation by GPS disposition



The box plot is interpreted as follows: The outer boundaries of the boxes are the interquartile range, meaning the 25th and 75th percentile values. In other words, half of all counties' values fall within the range indicated by the box, 25% of values are higher, and 25% of values are lower. The line inside each box indicates the median (50th percentile value). The lines (referred to as "whiskers") outside the box indicate the lower and upper adjacent values (technically, this is equal to values within 1.5 times the value of the interquartile range from the upper or lower bound). The dots indicate observations that are outliers.

Figure 2. Off-system (non-CAPS) documentation by CPS disposition



The typical county spends approximately 5 hours per removal case, for both GPS and CPS cases; versus about 3 hours for in-home services cases. However, in some counties, workers reported spending more than 10 hours on documentation for removal cases, suggesting that the documentation burden is highly contingent on county requirements. In at least 18 counties, the median caseworker reported fewer than 5 hours of removal-related paperwork; in 9 counties, the median caseworker reported spending more than 10 hours. Again this is not inclusive of court-related preparation, and thus does not capture the full documentation burden associated with a removal decision.

Recommendation 2a. Conduct a thorough review of all required paperwork for case openings and determine whether any current paperwork could be redundant or unnecessary, and identify opportunities to move to electronic forms. (For example, if forms were converted to electronic format, it could be possible to autofill basic information about case members). Notably, because providing an intervention could easily cost workers an additional 10-20 hours (between paperwork, transfer meetings, and court hearings) it is at least possible that it unduly influences decision-making about case dispositions.

Recommendation 2b. Since time investment for investigations is closely linked with disposition type, a valid predictive risk tool (such as that being piloted in Allegheny County) could be used to weight caseloads, so that caseworkers would have a specific mix of lower- and higher-risk cases (and, correspondingly, lower- and higher- time investment cases).

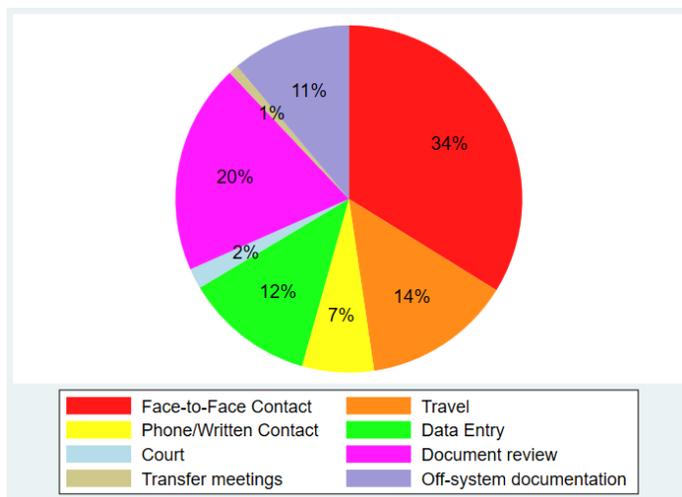
Recommendation 2c. High adherence to a 30-day intake disposition standard would ease the process of balancing workload, in addition to increasing efficiency. Coordination with law enforcement or other complication factors appears to be behind some delays, but pending CYS dispositions while awaiting the resolution of criminal court cases (if determined to be necessary) should not be counted as “active” for caseload accounting purposes.

Finding 3. Time with children and families is estimated to consume less than 35% of total case hours per month.

In the caseworker survey, caseworkers reported how long, in a typical visit, they spent speaking with case members or observing the home environment. The median caseworker in the survey reported spending half an hour speaking with each caregiver – this was fairly consistent across caseworker roles. Time spent speaking with each child in the home was approximately 20 minutes for intake and placement workers and 15 minutes for in-home workers. Intake workers spent more time each visit speaking with other household members (15 minutes each) than in-home or placement workers (10-11 minutes each). Observation of the home environment took about 16 minutes for intake workers, 15 minutes for placement workers, and 12 minutes for in-home workers.

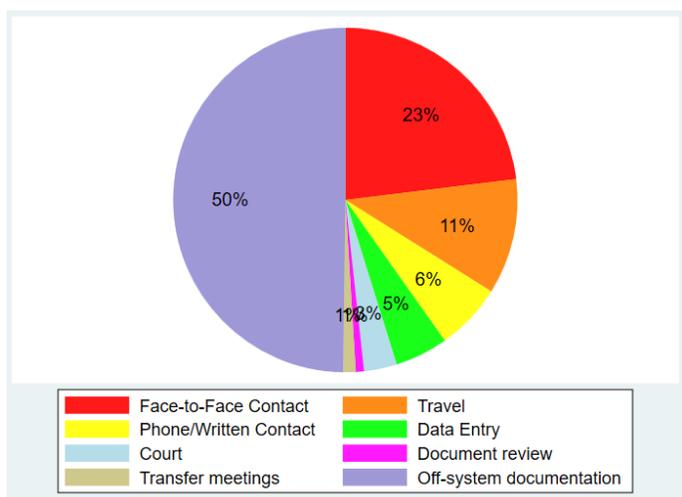
Table 2. Visits with Child or Family (time represented as minutes)										
	Intake			In-home			Placement			
	n=250			n=253			n=214			
Percentile	50th	25th	75th	50th	25th	75th	50th	25th	75th	
<i>The following questions are about how long you spend interviewing or checking in on case members during face-to-face contacts (e.g., home visits). On average, how much time do you spend PER VISIT:</i>										
Speaking with each parent or caregiver	31.8	25.2	46.2	30.6	19.8	45	30	19.8	46.2	
Speaking with each verbal child	19.8	15	30	15.6	10.2	25.2	19.8	11.4	30	
Speaking with others in the home	15	10.2	19.8	10.2	5.4	18.6	10.8	5.4	18.6	
Observing or inspecting home environment	16.2	10.2	30	12	9	20.4	15	10.2	30	

Figure 3. Distribution of time use by activity – Intakes/investigations



Using these values, we were able to estimate the duration of each recorded visit based on the location (home or not) and the number of children, caregivers, and others present at the visit. We could then extrapolate how long caseworkers spent each case-month on face-to-face contacts by summing the total for each visit across a given month. The pie charts (Figures 3, 4, and 5) are based on aggregated time use on all *case-specific* activities in all observed case-months in the 16 participating CAPS counties. Time spent on supervision, consultation, training or other activities is not included.

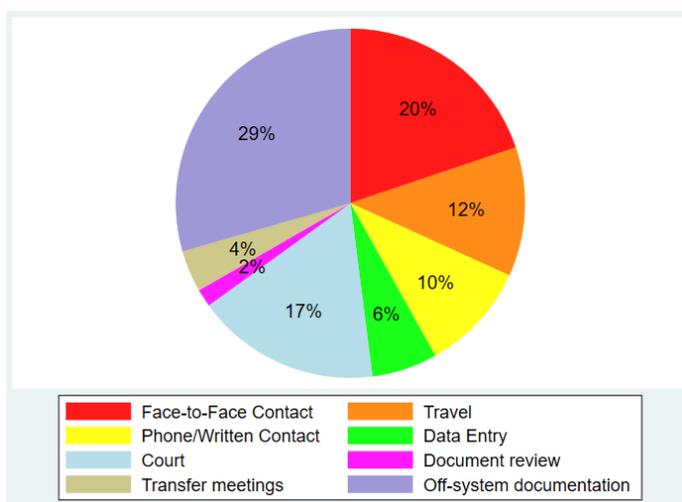
Figure 4. Distribution of time use by activity – In-home cases



Across all observed case months, we found that, during the intake stage, 34% of case hours were spent on face-to-face contacts, as compared with 23% of in-home case hours and 20% of placement case hours.

Recommendation 3a. It is commonly thought that most who enter the field of child welfare do so out of a desire to work with and provide meaningful help to children and families – in other words, the “social” aspect of social work is what brings workers into the field. If this conventional wisdom is true, then maximizing the time caseworkers spend in this aspect of their work may improve job satisfaction and reduce burnout.

Figure 5. Distribution of time use by activity – Placement cases



In addition 14% of intake case hours, 11% of in-home case hours, and 12% of placement case hours were spent traveling to and from face-to-face contacts or court.

Recommendation 3b. In geographically disperse counties, it may be possible to minimize travel time by assigning cases by subsection of the county (zip code, neighborhood, etc.). This would likely require significant planning to understand the geographic dispersion of families.

Finding 4. Caseworkers' preparation time for court hearings is widely variable.

Because most intake and in-home cases do not involve the court, the amount of time spent on court hearings is most relevant for placement caseworker workloads. Our estimates – based on survey and CAPS data across the 16 participating counties – indicate that placement caseworkers spent 17% of their time on court (including preparation and time spent at hearings), versus 3% for in-home workers and 2% for intake workers.

Table 3 shows caseworker-reported time spent on court preparation and court attendance (per hearing) by type of hearing and caseworker role. These results are based on the survey data from 45 counties. Only the most common hearing types are shown here. The median intake worker spends 2.6 hours, and the median in-home worker spends 2.9 hours, preparing for a hearing. Yet, 25% of intake workers spend 2 or fewer hours preparing for each removal hearing, and 25% spend 4.2 hours or longer; similarly, 25% of in-home workers spend less than 1.8 hours, and 25% spend more than 4.5 hours. Duration of court hearings was typically between 1 and 3 hours.

Table 3. Reported time preparing for common types of court hearings (per hearing)									
	Intake			In-home			Placement		
	n=220			n=237			n=200		
Percentile	50th	25th	75th	50th	25th	75th	50th	25th	75th
<i>For each of the following types of hearings: On average, how much time do you spend PER HEARING writing a court report or completing paperwork specific to court hearings? (This is not including time spent in court or traveling to court).</i>									
Per removal hearing	2.6	2	4.2	3	1.7	5	2.1	1.5	4
Per review hearing	2.5	1.2	4.9	3	2	5	3	2	5
Per adjudication hearing	3	2	4.5	3	2	5	2.8	1.5	4
Per closure hearing	2	1	3.9	2	1	3.5	2	1	4
Average across hearing types (caseworker median)	2.6	1.8	4.2	2.9	1.8	4.5	3	1.7	4.5
Average across hearing types (county median)	3	2.1	4	2.8	2.0	4	3	2	3.5
<i>For each of the following types of hearings: On average, how much time do you spend at court PER HEARING? Do not include travel or preparation time. You may include wait time if hearings are frequently delayed.</i>									
Per removal hearing	2	1	3	1.9	1	3	2	1	3
Per review hearing	2	1	3	1.9	1	3	2	1	3
Per adjudication hearing	2	1	3	2	1	3.3	2	1.1	3.9
Per closure hearing	1	1	3	1.2	0.6	2.3	1.3	1	2.6
Average across hearing types (caseworker median)	2	1	3	1.75	1	3	1.8	1	3
Average across hearing types (county median)	1.9	1	2.5	1.5	1.0	2.6	1.8	1.1	2.5

Importantly, court time will primarily burden placement caseworkers, who attend hearings more frequently. The majority of intake and in-home cases do not have any court involvement, and therefore, court is not likely to be a major source of workload burden for intake or in-home caseworkers.

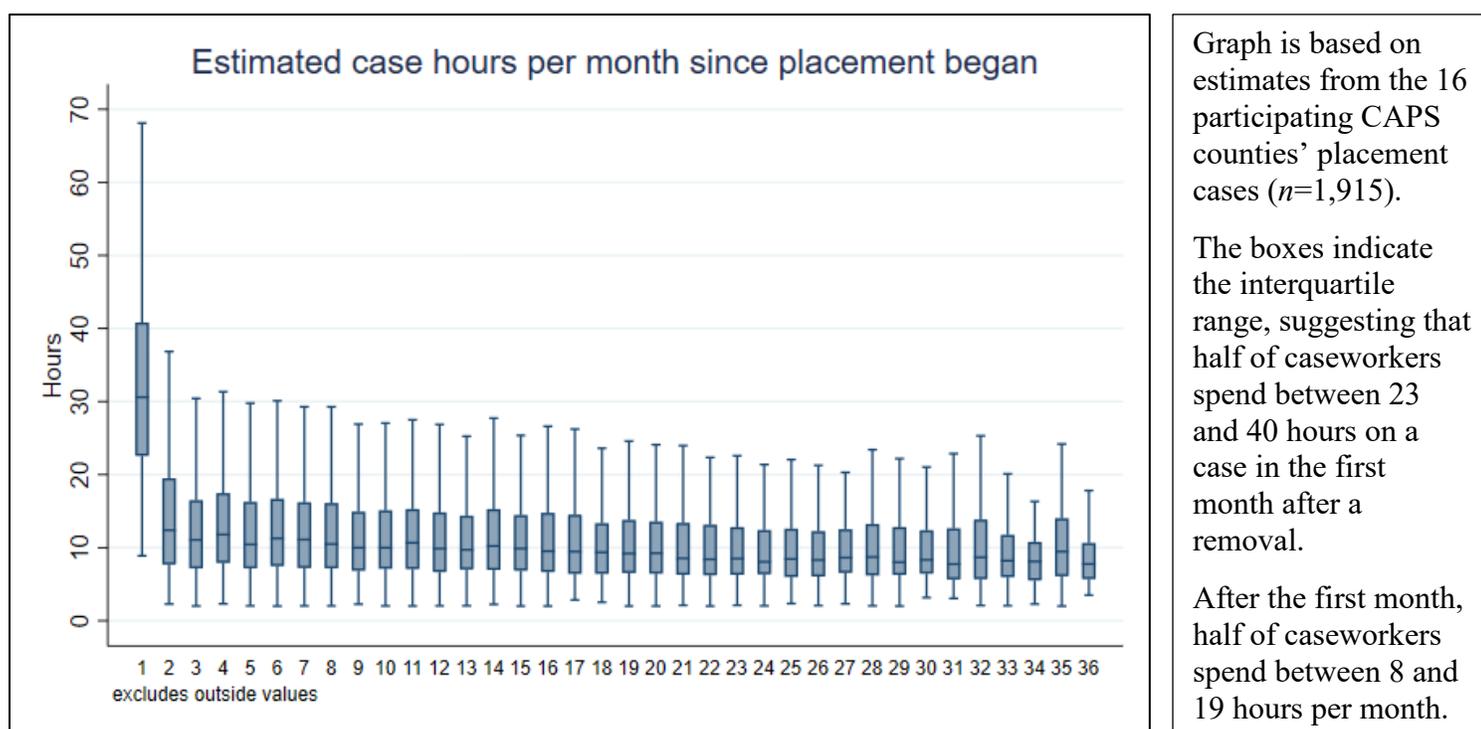
Recommendation 4a. Explore ways to generate court reports from existing documentation, or to standardize agency and court record-keeping practices. For example, in some states, court reports are a running narrative of what has happened with a child or family since the prior hearing, and is therefore largely based on existing case notes. In PA counties, this information should already be documented in assessments or case contacts, but may be in a format or style that doesn't fit court reporting expectations. Efforts to align existing documentation requirements with court report requirements may reduce effort needed to generate court reports.

Recommendation 4b. Use of predictive risk modeling to identify high-risk cases should help to balance the number of court-involved cases for intake workers, *if* decision-making patterns are consistent within county (in other words, if the risk of court involvement is not affected by individual caseworker tendencies). For in-home services cases, the distribution of court-involved cases should be balanced across workers given the increased time commitment associated with court involvement.

Finding 5. The number of ‘new’ cases likely matters more than the number of active cases.

This finding is based both on CAPS data and the survey results. Time estimates from CAPS indicate a very high time investment in the first month after a child’s removal (median of approximately 30 hours). Time investment remains about 12 hours per month across the first 6 months, then declines (Figure 6). Irrespective of time since removal, there is significant variability across cases.

Figure 6. Hours spent per placement case per month, by months since case opening



Included in these first month time use estimates is the time respondents indicated spending on initial “one time” paperwork (3 hours) and reviewing and gathering documents/reports for placement cases (3.3 hours) (see Table 4). Notably, there is also a relatively high volume of initial paperwork and document review for in-home cases (2.6 hours and 4.0 hours, respectively). In addition the volume of off-system documentation remains high in subsequent months, estimated at 4-5 hours per case per month for in-home and placement workers.

This trend was observed for intakes as well. Although most intakes are dispositioned with the first 60 days, intakes with exceptionally long durations prior to disposition have an outsized effect on monthly time use averages, because time expenditures in the middle months are low.

Table 4. Hours on Initial and Recurring Paperwork/Documents						
<i>Percentile</i>	In-Home			Placement		
	<i>50th</i>	<i>25th</i>	<i>75th</i>	<i>50th</i>	<i>25th</i>	<i>75th</i>
<i>Sampled Caseworkers</i>	n=253			n=214		
Document review On average, how much time PER CASE do you spend gathering and reviewing all reports and documentation (from CYS and other agencies' systems, such as JNET) relevant to case history?	4.0	2.0	8.0	3.3	2.0	6.0
Initial/one-time paperwork Approximately how much time PER CASE do you spend on <u>INITIAL (one-time only)</u> paperwork that is not in CAPS?	2.6	1.5	5.9	3.0	2.0	6.0
Monthly/recurring paperwork Approximately how much time do you spend PER MONTH PER CASE on <u>RECURRING</u> paperwork that is <u>not</u> in CAPS?	4.0	2.0	10.0	5.0	2.0	10.0
Transfer meetings	6.0	3.5	12.5	6.0	3.5	12.5
<i>Aggregated across counties</i>	n=45			n=45		
Document review	4.0	2.8	5.0	3.0	2.1	4.6
Initial/one-time paperwork	2.7	2.0	4.2	3.3	2.3	5.0
Monthly/recurring paperwork	4.8	2.5	6.0	4.0	3.5	5.8
Transfer meetings	5.9	4.8	10.0	5.9	4.8	10

Recommendation 5a. When assigning new cases, attention should be paid to the number of new cases a caseworker currently holds, in addition to the number of total active cases. Our estimates, based on CAPS data and survey responses, indicate that 1 new placement case would consume more than one-fourth of all available caseload hours in the first month.

Recommendation 5b. As recommended for intake cases, a review of required paperwork should be undertaken for in-home services and placement cases. Placement workers are reporting 5 hours per month per case on recurring paperwork. When this information is included alongside the CAPS data, it was estimated that paperwork accounts for approximately 29% of time spent on each placement case in a given month, and 50% of time spent on each in-home case. Data entry accounts for an additional 5-6% of time use.

Finding 6. The current maximum caseload standard of 30 is unlikely to allow for exemplary casework. Significantly lower maximum caseloads, in combination with a substantive reduction in ancillary meetings and paperwork, are likely necessary to produce an effective and stable workforce.

Below we show the estimated time investment (inclusive of CAPS estimates and survey results) per case-month at the intake, in-home services, and placement stages. We then calculate a 'reasonable caseload' based on that per-case average divided by the number of available case hours: both the per-case average and the number of available hours is county-specific, and the overall recommendations for manageable caseloads reflect the median across all study counties with CAPS data.

These results suggest an average intake caseload of 12-15, an average in-home services caseload of 12, and an average placement caseload of 11.

These estimates come with an important caveat: it is largely unknown whether caseworkers are able to accurately report average time use on specific activities. It is possible that these values are inflated. Nevertheless, caseworkers report time expenditures on paperwork, supervision, and meetings that far exceed the time engaged with children and families. Notably, for intake caseworkers, an average caseload of 12 is largely

in line with prior recommendations put out by groups such as the Child Welfare League of America. However, those groups recommend comparatively higher caseloads for in-home workers than are suggested by these estimates. Thus, practice reforms may be necessary to make caseloads more manageable.

NOTE: An important caveat to this work is that the distinction between CPS and GPS cases distorts work effort estimates in two ways. First, the one child per CPS intake practice means that case activities for CPS intakes involving multiple children are over-counted (i.e., a family visit in which all siblings are seen is counted separately on each referral). Relatedly, some families have concurrent intakes for both GPS and CPS that could be handled by the same caseworker, and again, double counting may occur. It may be worthwhile to consider the benefits and drawbacks of this approach, which may result in duplication of effort and potential uneven allocation of workload due to double-counting. Based on a review of the federal NCANDS data, Pennsylvania appears to be the only state in the country that uses a one-child-per-report model.