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Long Hours, High Caseloads: An Ongoing Surge of Cases Weighs on Child Welfare Workers

By Abigail Kramer

In the poorest neighborhoods of New York City, frontline child welfare workers frequently carry caseloads far above recommended levels, according to data from the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), which runs the City’s child welfare system.

In order to keep children safe, [national child welfare experts](#) recommend that child protective caseworkers, who investigate possible cases of abuse and neglect, carry loads of no more than [12 to 14 families at a time](#). In many parts of the city, ACS succeeds in keeping caseloads well below that range: In Queens, for example, the average caseload was under eight families per worker in September. The citywide average was 10.1.

But in the highest-poverty, most stressed neighborhoods of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, [an ongoing surge in investigations and court cases](#) has repeatedly driven average caseloads above 15, 16, and even 17 families per caseworker in the past two years. In June, the average caseload in parts of the South Bronx was 18.5 families per caseworker, according to [neighborhood-level data](#) published quarterly by ACS.¹

As part of a larger package of reforms, ACS has taken several steps to bring caseloads down, including hiring hundreds of new caseworkers and offering more opportunities for ongoing training. “Caseloads are something

¹ Child welfare activity fluctuates seasonally, with investigations picking up at the start of the school year and dipping lower during the summer. Caseloads are typically at their highest levels at the start of the summer and at their lowest in the fall.

that we are really focused on and always looking to improve,” says Eric Ferrero, ACS’s deputy commissioner of external affairs.

In the neighborhoods where ACS is most active, however, it is notoriously difficult to keep caseworkers on the job. Because of fast and frequent turnover, the busiest ACS offices nearly always include a significant number of trainees, who work with just a few families at a time. As a result, more experienced workers at those offices might carry caseloads well above 20 families, according to multiple ACS caseworkers, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

“I took this job because I wanted to help kids,” said one Bronx caseworker, who was responsible for close to 30 families in September. “I thought I could make a difference. In all reality, I’m not, because I’m overwhelmed.”

ACS employs approximately 1,300 investigative caseworkers—formally known as child protective specialists—distributed among neighborhood-based field offices across the five boroughs. When someone reports a New York City parent or caregiver to the State-run child abuse and neglect hotline, it’s a caseworker’s job to show up at the family’s door and figure out what’s going on.

Reports of suspected abuse shot up at the end of 2015, after [two children](#) known to the City’s child welfare authorities [were killed in their homes](#). Stories about them appeared for months in the news media—along with excoriating criticism of ACS—and caseworkers were inundated with reports. As the number of investigations grew, so did backlogs throughout the system. Families waited [even longer than usual for court dates](#) and sat on waitlists for social-service programs—all of which makes it harder for caseworkers to close out their cases, even as new ones come in.

In a typical week, the Bronx caseworker says, she might work multiple 10-hour days, come in on Saturday to finish paperwork, and still be unable to keep up with the cases she’s assigned.

The chaos inevitably spills onto families, the caseworker says. At best, an untenable caseload means she skips steps that she knows would help struggling parents: getting a bed for a child who doesn’t have one, for example, or making an extra call to find a therapist who speaks a family’s native language.

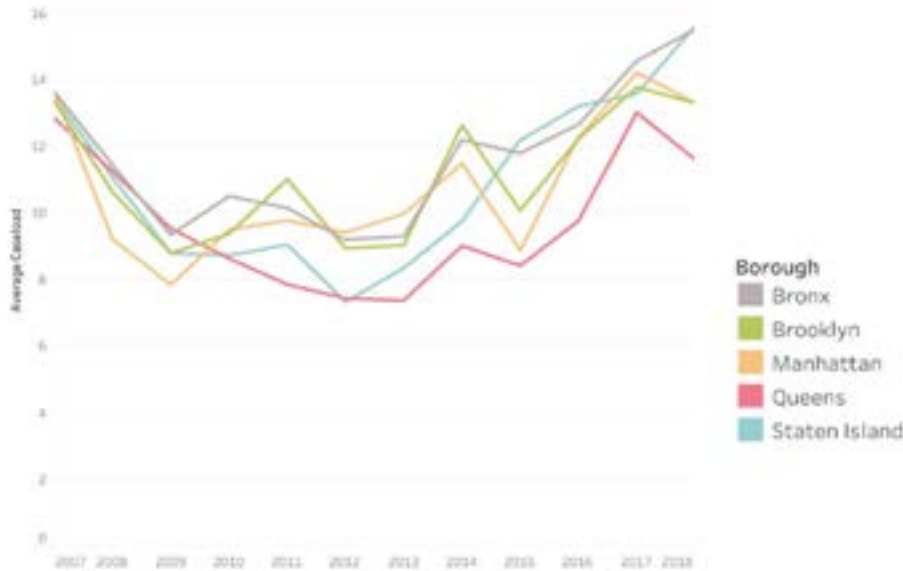
At worst, it means she can’t always fulfill the basic safety requirements of her job—including the mandate that she visit each family’s home and lay eyes on the children every two weeks. Close to 85 percent of allegations that come to ACS involve some form of neglect, rather than physical or sexual abuse, but the caseworker says she’s “always in fear” that she’ll miss a warning that a child is in real danger. “I can’t function as well as I want to,” she says.

Done right, the job of a child protective specialist calls for an acrobatic kind of duality. Caseworkers are trained to operate much like social workers, eliciting sensitive information from family members who—more often than not—want nothing to do with them. They convince parents to engage in programs like drug treatment or domestic violence counseling, and assist them to navigate the waitlists and paperwork that often stand between struggling families and services that might help.

But ACS caseworkers are also investigators, carrying the whiff of terrible authority that belongs to a person who can walk unannounced into a home, open the fridge and medicine cabinets, question the inhabitants, and

inspect children’s bodies. They are most active in the City’s lowest-income neighborhoods ([the East New York section of Brooklyn has seen more ACS investigations than any other City neighborhood for four years running](#)), but largely invisible in its wealthier areas, where people’s intimate family problems rarely land them under the scrutiny of City agents—and where, for most parents, the idea of having a child taken away is close to unimaginable. Based on caseworkers’ reports, ACS chooses among three options: The agency can offer voluntary social services and close the case; take parents to Family Court to request ongoing supervision of the family or a child’s removal; or—in the most extreme cases—take children from a home on an emergency basis, before the case even appears before a judge.

Average Caseload per Child Protective Specialist by Borough, June



Over the past two decades, the City has dramatically shrunk the number of children it removes from their homes. (The foster care census is currently at a record low of under 8,500—down from more than 40,000 in the 1990s.)

Since 2015, however, ACS has also cut the number of cases it closes at the end of an investigation. Instead, the agency has become [much more likely to bring families to court](#)—a process that can make their cases drag on for years, even if there’s never a request to remove a child, and even if the family’s

caseworker doesn’t believe there’s a clear threat to a child. “We’re keeping cases open for very small things,” says another Bronx caseworker, who has worked for ACS for close to five years. “It’s all ‘cover your ass.’ Everyone’s driving on fear right now.”

As cases keep piling up, so—for some caseworkers—does the dispiriting sense that they’re hurting the families they intended to help.

“It’s doing more harm than good,” says a Brooklyn caseworker who works with families that ACS has brought to Family Court. “We’re supposed to keep families united. That’s what the agency preaches: I have to help the mother so she can help the child.” But if a child isn’t at real risk, then keeping cases open—with the consequent months of court hearings, caseworker inspections, and mandatory services—can put intolerable stress on parents and kids. “It’s not always right for the families,” she says. “It destroys families.”

Between the demoralization and the impossible workloads, many of the colleagues she started with have already quit, and she may soon follow suit. “It’s too much,” she says. “I care about my families but I don’t want to be at work all night. I want to go home and see my own kid.”

Across the city, nearly a quarter of child protective caseworkers have been on the job for less than a year and 65 percent have fewer than three years of experience, according to ACS’s most recent published data.

Ronald Richter served as the commissioner of ACS from 2011 to 2013 and is now the executive director of JCCA (formerly known as the Jewish Child Care Association), one of the city's largest social service organizations for children. "Being a caseworker is the hardest job there is," Richter says.

Keeping offices fully staffed is one of the biggest ongoing challenges for ACS leadership. "They are constantly trying to identify where are those pockets where you have high turnover and high caseloads, and figuring out what supports can be put into those zones in order to shore up morale," Richter says. "When caseworkers get too many new cases and not enough help to manage them, that's always a recipe for disaster."

Ferrero, from ACS, points out that, by some measures, ACS is doing much better on caseloads than other parts of New York State. For example, at the end of September there were no caseworkers in the City carrying more than 15 families in their "active investigation" phase—meaning the initial 60 days in which ACS must decide whether there is credible evidence of abuse or neglect. By this measure, each borough in New York City ranked above 46 of the State's 62 counties, including, for example, Erie County, where 56 caseworkers carried more than 15 active investigations, according to data published by the New York State Office of Children and Families (OCFS), which oversees child welfare agencies across the state.

ACS has undertaken a major push to fill and prevent caseworker vacancies, hiring 650 new child protective specialists in the 2017-18 fiscal year (which ended June 30), Ferrero says. In an effort to better stay ahead of attrition, the agency currently has over 30 more caseworkers on staff than it has budgeted positions. Salaries are also higher than they've been in the past, starting at just over \$47,000 annually, with the possibility of earning close to \$78,000 after two years.

Once they're hired, caseworkers receive two months of classroom training, and are then placed in training units in the field, where they carry small caseloads and receive intensive supervision for three months. In 2016, ACS opened a workforce institute to do advanced training for experienced caseworkers. More recently, the agency established a team of coaches, who do one-on-one training with caseworkers and their supervisors, and a wellness director, tasked with providing resources for employees around issues like mental health, exercise, and the trauma they are exposed to on the job.

ACS has also rolled out several measures designed to make caseworkers' workloads more manageable. In 2017, caseworkers received smartphones with internet access and, more recently, tablets designed to let them do paperwork and documentation in the field, rather than having to return to the office. The agency has also improved transportation options, including 24-hour access to agency cars and Zipcar memberships for many caseworkers, especially those in Staten Island and other parts of the city that are hard to navigate on public transportation.

The agency has also hired Chapin Hall, a policy research institute based at the University of Chicago, to conduct an intensive workload study, designed to identify ways to make caseworkers' jobs more efficient. "It will be a very deep dive into what they spend their time doing, what are things that could cut down on time, what has worked in other jurisdictions," Ferrero says.