

Retention in statutory social work from fast-track child and family programs

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Abstract

- *Summary:* Two fast-track child and family social work training programs have been established in England — Step Up to Social Work and Frontline. Trainees' financial support is far higher than for mainstream social work degrees. One of the reasons claimed for setting up these programs is addressing retention, although critics (of Frontline) predicted graduates would not stay in social work. A 4-year study assessed retention and reasons for leaving social work. Attrition rates from statutory social work were calculated from responses ($n = 2543$) to annual surveys, plus looking up non-respondents in the professional register. Interviews were conducted with fast-track graduates ($n = 80$) and employers ($n = 29$).
- *Findings:* The overall rate of social work graduates not in statutory social work at 18 months post-qualification was 12% for fast-track programs, and Higher Education Statistics Agency survey data show attrition at 15 months post-qualification as 18% for all social work routes. Frontline's original national recruitment approach was less successful for retention than Step Up to Social Work's regional approach. Perceived local authority support and intrinsic job satisfaction were associated with attrition in longitudinal bivariate analysis. Fast-track graduates leaving statutory social work typically moved to work in social care (including policy roles), health, or education.
- *Applications:* Early-career attrition appears to be somewhat lower from fast-track programs than from all social work graduates. Longer-term comparison is not yet possible. In promoting retention, employers should be aware of the importance of staff perceptions of the local authority as supportive, and of their intrinsic job satisfaction.

Keywords

Social work, social workers, child welfare, post qualifying, social work education, attrition

Introduction

Social work education in England has seen some important changes in recent years, one of which is the establishment of “fast-track” routes that, although still gaining a generic social work degree qualification, are focused on particular practice specialisms. In children’s services, these programs are Step Up to Social Work (established in 2010) and Frontline (established in 2014). Retention is a major issue in child and family social work in particular, and the Department for Education sees their child and family fast-track programs as one way to address retention problems, although this was not the only reason for setting them up. In contrast to the Government position, critics of Frontline have expressed concern that its graduates will not stay in social work. This article presents findings on retention/attrition from Step Up to Social Work and Frontline, from a 4-year mixed-method study.

Background

The average working life of a social work practitioner was estimated to be only 7.7 years in 2004–2006, compared with estimates from previous studies of 25 years for doctors and 15 years for nurses (Curtis et al., 2010). There is no more recent U.K. study to our knowledge. Retention of staff is particularly challenging in children’s social work in England. The 2020–2021 figures show a vacancy rate of 16.7% and a full-time equivalent turnover rate of 15.4% (Department for Education, 2022). The latest turnover rate was the highest reported in the last 5 years. In response to parliamentary concern, a government minister stated that the department was “... supporting the recruitment and retention of social workers through our investment in fast-track initial social worker training programmes, and in professional development programmes to improve leadership” (Quince, 2022). There are other reasons for their promotion by government in England, however, including the concerns of the government and their advisers about the consistency and practice relevance of traditional university-based courses (e.g., Department for Education, 2016; Narey, 2014).

The first fast-track program to be established, Step Up to Social Work (hereafter “Step Up”), provides successful trainees with a Postgraduate Diploma qualification in social work within 14 months. It was designed for high-achieving graduates who already have experience of working with vulnerable children, young people, and families, so a different pool of trainees from that targeted by Frontline. Step Up is employer-led, so council employers work with universities to shape the course content and syllabus. The program is hosted in 136 (89%) of England’s local authorities. Some regional partnerships provide additional academic input enabling graduates to attain a Master’s degree. Students on Step Up have university course fees paid and receive a tax-free bursary of £19,833 (2022–2023 value).

Frontline is a 2-year post-graduate program, especially designed to attract high-performing graduates with leadership potential who would not have previously thought of social work as a career, and targeting “strivers” (Smith et al., 2019), that is, those who aspire to more senior or influential roles. The financial support is again generous: fees are covered, and there is a tax-free bursary of £18,000 in year one and a salary of £25,000 + in year two when they are working as a qualified social worker. Training

comprises an intensive 5-week Summer Institute followed by placement in a consultant-led student unit in a local authority alongside ongoing academic input delivered in the unit. There is the opportunity to complete a Master's degree. In 2022, Frontline was expecting to work with over 30 local authorities.

The financial support provided to fast-track students is an obvious attraction, especially when compared to students on mainstream postgraduate courses who may receive a bursary of £3,300 p.a. and a contribution to university fees of £4,000, typically less than half the cost.

There have been some trenchant criticisms of Frontline, especially from social work academics. It has been described as elitist, seeking to create an "officer class" of social work leaders (Murphy, 2016); too short in training duration; too narrowly focused on child protection and specific practice models (Thoburn, 2017; Tunstill, 2019); and as preparing people for wider leadership roles outside the profession, meaning they are less likely to stay in social work (Hanley, 2021, 2022). In their proposal to government and the profession, MacAlister et al. (2012) explained that Frontline would draw on the successful model of Teach First, a fast-track scheme for high achieving graduates to enter teaching. Hanley (2021) has observed that dropout rates for Teach First have been high. Research for the Department for Education (Allen et al., 2016) found that Teach First in England had very high 2-year retention rates, while on the program, but thereafter retention rapidly dropped and was poorer than for other graduate routes. Hanley suggested that graduates of fast-track social work programs might follow a similar trajectory: "...some students could be strategically exploiting the well-funded nature of these programmes to pad out their experience, or as a stepping-stone to a job role outside social work" (p. 509).

The Step Up program has received much less critical scrutiny over time than Frontline, although as Croisdale-Appleby (2014) notes, Step Up did receive some critical attention when it was first launched. The difference in critical attention to the two programs is surprising, as some of the same points apply to both programs, especially the short duration of the program and inequality of financial support between fast-track and mainstream social work students. However, Frontline has had considerable political support and a national media presence. It has a national recruitment strategy with strong publicity. Step Up is promoted through regional partnerships, and so the public profile of the two programs is not comparable. Frontline's high profile in some respects invites critical scrutiny. Nevertheless, the issues of retention and progression of Step Up graduates have previously, unlike Frontline, been subject to independent external evaluation.

Earlier studies (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2016; Smith et al., 2013, 2018) have investigated the extent to which Step Up graduates enter social work jobs and stay in them. From Smith et al.'s reports, the first two Step Up cohorts, the great majority completed the program successfully and moved into posts in child and family social work (Cohort 1, 87%, $n = 185$; Cohort 2, 93%, $n = 227$). Three years after qualifying, most of these were still known to be practicing in equivalent posts (Cohort 1, 85%, $n = 161$; Cohort 2, 80%, $n = 212$). Figures were only available for the first cohort at the 5-year post-qualification point, but at this stage, 73% were still employed in child and family social work. Surveys of the first Step Up cohort and a comparison group (of social work practitioners qualifying from mainstream routes at approximately the same time) indicated little difference

between the two in terms of continuity, with 39% of the Step Up respondents and 35% of the comparators remaining in their initial post 3 years after qualifying (Smith et al., 2018).

No independent research has been published to date on retention or progression for Frontline graduates, although the Frontline organization has provided some information in a “retention briefing” (Frontline, 2019). Based on the organization’s own surveys, this claimed the retention rate in social work to be 80% across three cohorts, with 74% in local authority children’s services (raw numbers not reported). Seventy percent of the first cohort (2014), who qualified in 2015, were still in social work practice 2 years after completion of the program.

In terms of social work retention more generally, beyond fast-track graduates, a number of studies have explored associated individual and organizational factors. With respect to individual factors, the attitudes and perceptions of child welfare workers, such as job satisfaction, and stress tended to have more influence on turnover than demographic predictors, which have small or negligible effects (Kim & Kao, 2014). Resilience in child protection social workers was associated with a sense of personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion in McFadden et al.’s (2019) study. Various organizational factors have also been associated with social worker retention including supervisory and organizational and co-worker support (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Kim & Kao, 2014; McFadden et al., 2015).

The aims of our study were to investigate the longer-term outcomes of the two child and family social work fast-track programs in England and to understand possible reasons for staying in social work or leaving. This was independent research commissioned by the Department for Education for England and the commission did not include data collection from a comparison group of mainstream graduates. The research questions relevant to this article were the following:

- What are the employment destinations of fast-track graduates after completion of the Step Up and Frontline programs?
- What are their retention rates within statutory social work?
- What are the push and pull factors affecting their retention in social work?

Methods

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research questions. Methods and materials were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University School of Social Sciences.

Participants

Graduates from Cohorts 1–5 of Frontline (2015–2019) and Cohorts 4 (2017) and 5 (2019) of Step Up were identified from Frontline and Department for Education databases of those who had agreed to participate in research ($n = 1,852$; made up of 954 Step Up and 928 Frontline). Frontline graduates were already being surveyed regularly online by the Frontline organization, and by agreement additional questions from the research team were included. Step Up graduates were sent an invitation by the research team to

respond to an anonymous, confidential survey. A total of 2,543 responses were received over the various waves, with response rates ranging from 30% to 83%. Surveys ran between March 2018 and March 2021.

Materials

Employment destinations were tracked through responses to an annual online survey, beginning 6 months after graduation. Follow-up periods ranged from 6 months to 3.5 years, depending on the date of qualification. Questions were asked about job titles, role, progression, and type of employer. The 6-month survey was more detailed than subsequent waves, covering demographics, their experiences of the program and of social work practice, caseloads, and supervision. Each 6-month survey included a measure of stress, the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1998) and job satisfaction (Dyer and Hoffenberg (1975). Subsequent surveys were more narrowly focused on retention and progression.

Employment destinations and “attrition” from social work. Fast-track graduates’ employment profiles were identified from survey responses, supplemented, for non-respondents, by information from the public Social Work England (SWE) or Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC) registers of social workers. The names of social work graduates who did not respond to surveys were searched in the public registers. Frontline staff provided the research team with an anonymized survey data set for analysis and tracked non-respondents in the SWE/HCPC registers. We note that it is not possible to present findings on retention in child and family social work specifically, because the professional registers do not indicate field of practice. Further, some on the register may no longer be practicing. Because of this limitation, we refer to *attrition* from statutory social work because leaving the register means that they are no longer practicing as a “social worker” in England. To clarify, attrition here means graduating in social work and then not being identified as a registered social worker at a later point in time.

We make some comparison with published aggregate results from the Higher Education Statistics Agency’s (HESA) Graduate Outcomes Survey. This survey is undertaken 15 months after graduation, and the Skills for Care (2021) publish a report from its data on social work education. These data are from people graduating after August 2017, and results include all social work graduates together, not differentiating those completing fast-track programs from those completing mainstream programs. The response rate for social work graduates reporting their employment was 53%.

Comparison between fast-track and mainstream programs is not like for like. For fast-track programs only, we have survey and professional register data; for mainstream programs, survey data only. And it is not possible to compare only the survey data because of unknown response bias to do with survey purpose, with HESA conducting a general survey of all graduate employment and our study running a social-work-specific one. Comparison is further complicated by the potential displacement effect of students who might have pursued mainstream qualifying programs opting instead to take up places on either the Frontline or Step Up program.

The Frontline program lasts for a full year after qualification as a social worker, so the comparison of time points is also problematic. Some regional Step Up programs also continue to offer additional support beyond what is usually expected in the first year of qualified practice, although this is not standardized across England. On balance, we decided to take social work qualification as the point from which to consider attrition.

Qualitative interviews with fast-track graduates and employers. Semi-structured telephone or video interviews were conducted with graduates from each program in each year of the study. Ninety-eight interviews were completed, between 6 months and 3 years post-qualification. Twenty-one people were interviewed twice so the total number of individuals interviewed was 80. This included 40 from Frontline (30 female and 10 male) and 40 from Step Up (31 female and 9 male). Twenty-four interviewees (nine Frontline and 15 Step Up) had left social work.

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with 29 employers of fast-track graduates—some of these were dual or group interviews. Seventeen interviews were conducted with employers who had employed graduates from both Frontline and Step Up. The interviewees included five Directors of Children's Services, five workforce development managers, two executive directors, six principal social workers, and 11 heads of training and support services. The interviews sought views on employers' experiences of employing fast-track graduates, including their progression and commitment to child and family social work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Data analysis

Most of the quantitative data are presented as descriptive statistics only, generated by Stata and Excel software. Where any group comparisons were tested statistically, chi-square tests were used for categorical data with a significance threshold of 0.05. The GHQ was scored using the bi-modal scoring method with a threshold of four for clinical levels of stress.

Most of the quantitative analysis of surveys and register tracking was conducted on each wave and cohort separately. The exception is the longitudinal analysis of which factors are associated with retention 2.5 years after social work qualification. Here, data from Step Up Cohort 4 and Frontline Cohort 3 were used to examine career trajectories over time; data on both programs were combined to increase sample size and statistical power. The resulting data set comprised 188 individuals, 99 from Step Up Cohort 4 and 89 from Frontline Cohort 3; 145 (77%) were working as children's social workers after and 43 (24%) were not.

The 6-month surveys were used to measure factors relating to the social worker and their working life in the first year post-qualification. Factors assessed included both personal and organizational factors as well as their reflections on the fast-track scheme. Personal and organizational factors included two dimensions of job satisfaction: intrinsic and extrinsic. The first concerns the worker's attitude to the job itself and the way they are doing it, such opportunities for initiative and skills development, and the nature and

variety of tasks carried out. The second refers to working conditions including factors such as income, job security, and physical conditions (Dyer & Hoffenberg, 1975). Bivariate analysis explored associations between these factors and the likelihood that they would still be a children’s social worker 2 years later. For scale data, means and confidence intervals were provided, while for categorical data, chi-square tests identified statistically significant associations.

Interview transcripts were coded by the research team using NVivo software. Twenty-eight nodes generated were ordered hierarchically within four key themes: program and preparation for practice, first experiences in post, coping and resilience, and commitment to social work as a career. The material relevant to attrition was taken from a sub-sample of interviewees who had left social work at the time (2020). Content analysis of free text data relating to alternative careers was undertaken in 2020 drawing upon data from the first few years of the study only.

Findings

Attrition rates

Figures 1 and 2 below present the estimated attrition rates for Frontline and Step Up graduates. These are conservative estimates, as it is not known whether all those listed on the SWE/HCPC register were practicing. Results at 6 months post-qualification are not

Figure 1. Frontline rates of attrition from statutory social work in England, by time point.

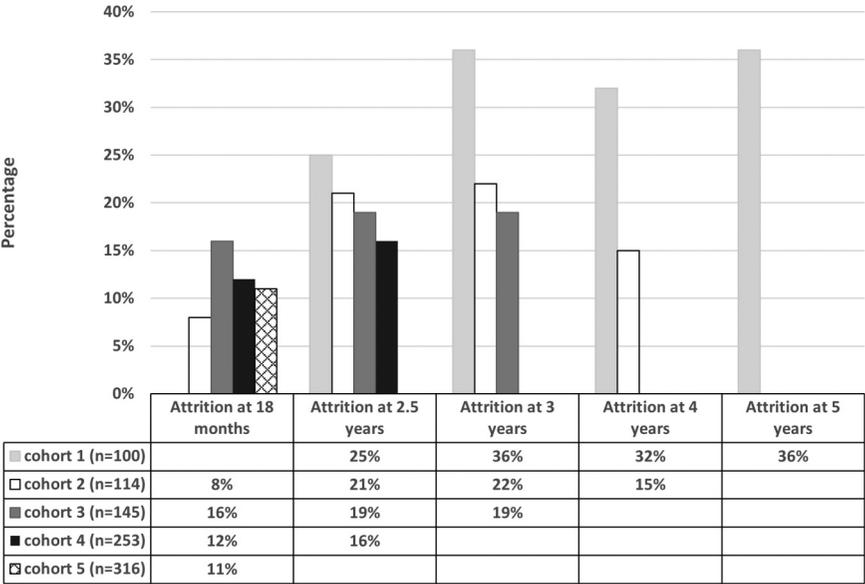
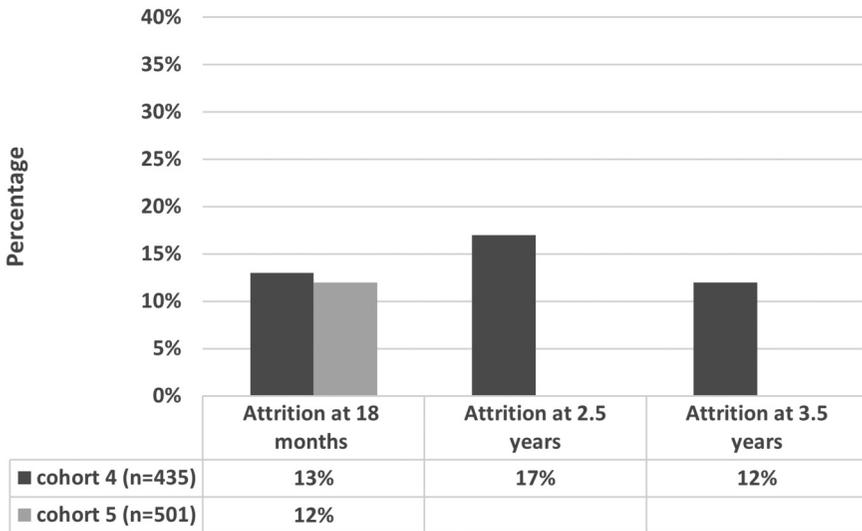


Figure 2. Step Up to Social Work rates of attrition from statutory social work in England, by time point.



included, because the Frontline program was continuing, so their attrition rates at that time point are, as expected, very low indeed. It is worth noting, however, that for Step Up, which is more comparable to mainstream programs in structure, having no consistent additional program of support for the first year in practice beyond that that all new social workers have, the attrition is 12% at 6 months post-qualification (Cohorts 4 and 5 combined). This compares with 26% for mainstream postgraduate social work trainees who qualified in 2016–2017 (Skills for Care, 2019)—a difference that is statistically significant ($z = -9.00, p < .0001$). Later time points are in some ways more meaningful for comparison; however, as it is assumed that social work graduates, perhaps especially from undergraduate programs, given the younger age of many, may not yet have joined the social work workforce within just 6 months of graduation, although this is their intention after a short break. Also, Step Up graduates would be already strongly connected to a specific local authority who would be likely to employ and retain them. Mainstream graduates may well take longer to find a job in their area of choice.

The overall attrition rate for all fast-track cohorts 18 months post-qualification was 12%—the same for Frontline and Step Up. The HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey at 15 months showed that for all social work graduates in England, attrition from the profession was 18% (Skills for Care, 2021). This difference in attrition rates between fast-track program and all social work graduates is statistically significant for both programs (Frontline $z = 4.98, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI } 9.72\% - 3.96\%$; and Step Up $z = 4.51, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI } 10.37\% - 14.65\%$). Beyond the 18-month time point, there is no comparator available with graduates of mainstream social work programs.

Interestingly, the results seem to suggest a small amount of movement in and out of the profession over time rather than simply a cumulative attrition. For example, Step Up graduates show a surprising drop in attrition between 2.5 years and 3.5 years, perhaps suggesting movement in and out of protected title social work posts within health and social care. At 2.5, 3, and 4 years, we see Cohort 1 of Frontline having relatively high levels of attrition, then a steady reduction in attrition rates with later cohorts (see Figure 1). Beyond the 18-month time-point, Step Up attrition rates tend to be slightly lower than Frontline.

We estimate the proportion of fast-track graduates working in social work with adults as between 0% and 6% for Frontline and between 5% and 10% for Step Up at various time points and for various cohorts.

The proportion of Frontline respondents in Cohorts 1, 2, 3, and 4 working in local authorities reduced over time. After finishing the program, there was substantial movement away from the original Frontline host local authority to other local authorities. However, this appeared to be more marked in the earlier cohorts. For Cohort 1, only 25% reported working in the host local authority at 2.5 years, whereas at the same time point, the percentages for later cohorts were 37% for Cohort 2, 48% for Cohort 3, and 45% for Cohort 4. Higher proportions of Step Up respondents were still working for the local authority that first employed them, at 2.5 years after qualification: 89% of Cohort 4 and 60% of Cohort 5.

Possible reasons for attrition

Alternative careers. For survey respondents who have left social work, there are some data available on alternative careers, in a free text box. One hundred unique jobs were identified that participants in Frontline Cohorts 1–4 had moved on to, up until March 2020. This does not equate to 100 individuals, as some had more than one job over this time. The 100 jobs were categorized, sometimes requiring interpretation because of limited information. Of the 100 jobs, we judged 68 to be in broad fields of social care, health, and education.

Of those Frontline graduates working in these broader fields, we estimated 44 jobs to be in direct practice roles and 14 to be in management, policy, or research. Many of the direct practice roles were closely allied to children's social care—for example, “systemic therapist” “safeguarding officer,” and “working with girls in gangs.” Some roles were lower status and salary than social workers—for example, support workers and teaching assistants, perhaps suggesting a desire for more direct engagement with children and families and less responsibility (which also emerged in some interviews). Twenty-five of the 100 jobs were categorized as clearly outside of health, social care, and education. For a further seven, it was not clear. The 25 included nine civil service posts in departments not directly connected to children's social care. Four Frontline social workers had moved into policy posts in the Department for Education, but we classed these as in the broad field of health, social care, or education.

For Step Up to Social Work, fewer trainees had left social work than was the case for Frontline, mostly due to less time having expired since qualification. Of those Step Up

survey respondents who reported alternative careers, 13 were in adult social care roles. These may be a more attractive alternative for Step-Up-trained social workers than for those qualifying via Frontline who, if they move out of children's social work, seem more likely to stay working with children and families, but in non-social work roles. A further 53 alternative roles were listed by Step Up respondents. Of those, 51 were in the broad fields of health, social care, or education, one was "full-time mother," and one was clearly outside of those fields. Seven of the 51 were in management or policy roles and the rest in direct practice. Almost all were in roles closely allied to children's social care, for example, "child welfare therapist," "family intervention team key-worker," and "early help worker."

Evidence from the general population of social work qualifiers shows that many of those not in social work are also in allied fields. In the analysis of HESA data by Skills for Care (2021), 10% of social work qualifiers were working in other social-care-related roles, and 1% in health-related roles 15 months later, which accounts for the majority of those not in social work roles.

What predicts attrition? To explore the statistical predictors of attrition, we used bivariate statistical analysis. Because the numbers leaving social work were relatively small for inferential statistics, we combined data from Frontline and Step Up graduates. There were 188 fast-track graduates in this sub-sample, of whom 43 had left social work, so statistical power to find significant associations was limited. Survey findings were analyzed to test the associations of demographic characteristics and selected survey responses 6 months after qualifying with attrition from social work at 2.5 years.

First, to assess whether this sub-sample was the representative of the sample as a whole, we compared the demographic profile of the respondents in that sample at 6 months with the respondents for whom we did not have any follow-up data 2 years later. We found no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of gender, age, and caring responsibilities. For Frontline graduates only, respondents not in the longitudinal sample were more likely to have non-white ethnicities. For Step Up graduates only, respondents not in the longitudinal sample were more likely to have parents who had not been to university. We acknowledge therefore that the longitudinal sample is not representative of the respondent cohorts in all respects.

Analysis using Pearson's chi-square tests showed no significant associations at the 0.05 level between attrition and gender; age; parents' higher education; whether they thought their fast-track scheme had prepared them well for employment; mental health (GHQ-12 score); extrinsic job satisfaction; and the following work conditions at 6 months post-qualifying: caseload, frequency, or quality of supervision and line manager support.

The only significant bivariate associations were the perception of support from the local authority and intrinsic job satisfaction. Among those who indicated 6 months after qualification that their local authority was supporting them to a great extent, 94% ($n = 33$) were still working as children's social workers 2 years later. However, among those who did not perceive this level of support, only 75% ($n = 95$) remained as a children's social worker ($X^2[1] = 6.29, p = .01$). Similarly, respondents who were satisfied

Table 1. Mean scores for job satisfaction scales.

	Children’s social worker 2 years later			Not a children’s social worker 2 years later		
	Mean	SD	Confidence interval	Mean	SD	Confidence interval
Intrinsic job satisfaction at 6m	29.3	3.6	[28.6, 30.0]	25.2	4.0	[23.5, 26.9]
Extrinsic job satisfaction at 6m	36.6	5.6	[35.3, 37.9]	33.9	6.5	[31.0, 36.7]

Note: Extrinsic job satisfaction scores are higher than intrinsic job satisfaction scores because they are calculated from a 10-item measure rather than a 7-item measure.

with the intrinsic aspects of their work as a social worker were more likely to remain—see Table 1, which shows the results for both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. The confidence intervals for extrinsic job satisfaction overlap each other, indicating no significant difference between stayers and leavers.

Reasons for leaving child and family social work. Of the nine interviewees who had left social work after training via Frontline, seven were working in related roles including safeguarding, youth support, and participation work in both statutory and non-statutory settings. Most had opted for positions where they could work directly with children:

A lot of the stuff I’m doing now is stuff that I hoped social work would be and admin and overwork just got in the way. (Rachel)

Participants reported a range of push factors including high caseloads, poor working conditions, and a lack of support. This was especially pertinent given the high levels of support and protected learning environment provided in the first year of the program, with one participant explaining that “by the end I was drowning.” Two participants reported having made mistakes while in post. In both cases, it appeared to be the lack of help and support prior to and following the mistake that led to the decision to leave child and family social work. Both said that their views and newly qualified status had not been taken into consideration.

Others reported little to no support, because of staff turnover or when clashes occurred between individuals or styles of working. Those placed in local authorities that had not adopted systemic practice appeared to experience greater dissatisfaction with the program:

I found that there was quite a lot of conflict sometimes in terms of how we approached problems and managers didn’t necessarily understand where we were coming from.

Consequently, they reported feeling alone and unsure of how to use their skills. This led to frustration, especially where prior work (in-)experience was not taken into account. Without access to support and help to manage their careers, they lacked direction on casework.

For the wider group of 31 Frontline graduate interviewees, beyond just those who had left social work, there was a sense from some of disconnect between the program's ethos and local authority culture, particularly where local authorities did not use systemic approaches. Some described positive experiences of "synchronicity" between the two, especially where local authorities had previous Frontline cohorts, but more described dissonance, for example, "I think some of the content they teach doesn't quite merge so well with the way the local authority wants to train you." Many pointed to a broader disconnect between the idealism of the program, which aimed to train "the picture-perfect social worker" and the realities of the job:

Frontline presents a really idealistic image of social work [...] in the statutory local authority settings where they are quite set in their ways, they're often quite risk averse [with] a lot of different procedures and processes to follow.

Ten Step Up graduates who had left social work were interviewed. Three had found employment in adult social services where they felt stress levels were lower and the work more attuned with their interests. Four were in non-social work social care roles, for example, in charities, education settings, or an early help team. Two were caring for their children full-time.

Step Up leavers often attributed their decision to leave to one major push factor, but on reflection acknowledged that this was underpinned by an accumulation of frustrations that ultimately led to their decision to leave. These push factors included unmanageable caseloads, high levels of stress and anxiety, internal policies including shared workspaces, and thresholds for promotion relating to how long qualified rather than taking previous work experiences into account. Many cited a conflict between their work and their personal lives, including caring for their children:

I've got a family and statutory social work is very very hard to work in when you've got kids and other commitments. I wouldn't rule out returning but I cannot see how that's compatible with me having a family at the moment.

Those working in direct service (frontline) teams had attempted to make adjustments. Employers were said to have been receptive to requests to move team or reduce working hours. However, these were seen as short-term fixes that often did not go far enough to address the imbalances. High caseloads and service expectations about paperwork and procedures were most frequently cited for needing to work beyond contracted hours. All spoke of a work ethic, which meant they were eager to maintain the quality of their work and provide the service that their clients deserved; compromises were unsatisfactory and ultimately led to maintenance of unhealthy practices, such as overworking.

Some interviewees classified themselves as "reluctant leavers" who would not rule out returning to child and family social work once their personal circumstances and caring responsibilities changed:

I don't regret doing the qualification at all...I just didn't end up in the area of practice that I liked or that worked for me. But I wouldn't rule it out [*returning to child and family social work*] and I'm still using what I did [*on the course*].

Employers' perspectives. Employers interviewed were very positive about the qualities of their fast-track-trained social workers, and several considered that they were not very different from those trained via mainstream routes. However, many employers expressed concern about the impact on local retention of the Frontline recruitment model, which had initially sought applicants from across the U.K. and then allocated them to areas. In nine of the 21 interviews, employers expressed concerns about the attrition of Frontline-trained social workers, citing the high proportions who were leaving their local authorities once they had completed the program. One reason suggested was that their existing social networks were elsewhere.

A high percentage of those who left the authority were likely to be because they've relocated to [...] for two years and then they've gravitated back to where their family networks are, and their friends.

It was noted that the Frontline program recruitment policy had changed over time, to become more regional. This had positive implications for retention, as well as allowing for more diversity in some respects.

Most employers were positive about the Step Up program in terms of retention, particularly as it helped them to "grow-their-own" social workers, enabling seamless transition into posts. Employers perceived students' older ages, their educational background, and previous work experience to be associated with their successful transition into child and family social work practice. They were positive about Step Up's regional approach that had always attracted applicants with strong local ties who then stay in a local authority longer term.

I prefer Step Up to other models because you place people where they're going to remain. I suppose that makes it different from the other programme. Because if we're investing in people we want to retain them.

Discussion

This was the first study to estimate attrition from both fast-track child and family social work programs in England. The estimates are based on the number of graduates in successive cohorts who actually left social work, rather than expressing an intention to leave. Considering the research questions, the headline finding is that there appears to be somewhat lower attrition from statutory social work for graduates of fast-track programs than for all social work programs, at the early career point of 18 months after social work qualification. Further, most of those who left stayed in social care, health, or education roles. Possible reasons for leaving suggested by the longitudinal analysis are support from the local authority and intrinsic job satisfaction. There was relatively little difference

between the two fast-track programs, although Frontline graduates had a distinctive sense of disillusion, and Step Up graduates were more focused on work-life balance. Employers were more positive about Step Up because of the local recruitment. And retention data showed that Step Up graduates were less likely to have moved away from their original employing local authority than Frontline graduates within the first 2.5 years.

Comparison of programs with different structure and timing is challenging, with the timepoint for assessing retention and attrition being debatable. However, 18 months after social work qualification, contrary to what some critics (of Frontline) had predicted, the percentage of fast-track graduates not doing statutory social work is in fact lower than it is for all social work graduates, as found in the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey (Skills for Care, 2021)—12% compared with 18%—and this difference was statistically significant. However, we cannot say whether these fast-track programs improved retention in child and family social work specifically. This is a stronger conclusion than in the published Department for Education report on this study (Scourfield et al., 2021), because there was not in that report any amalgamation of cohorts to calculate an overall attrition rate for each program.

There are of course methodological limitations, and no accurate direct like-for-like comparison of attrition with graduates of mainstream social work programs. Our method for calculating attrition uses both survey and the professional register. Using the register assumes that those whose names are listed have not left practice whereas in fact someone may have their name on the register as a legacy from when they were practicing, even though they are not now. It cannot be known for certain whether these are the same individuals, as the method relies on name match only. As noted earlier, even using survey data only is not a like-for-like comparison with HESA data, as our surveys and the HESA surveys served different purposes, which are explained to respondents, so there could be unknown differential response rates from specific occupational groups.

A key difference between fast-track and mainstream programs is that the latter do not specialize in social work with particular service user groups but offer a generic qualification, albeit often with selection of a specialist route and associated placement in the final year. Further, mainstream social work programs do not train people specifically for statutory roles but would expect their social workers to be employed in a range of settings, including the voluntary sector projects where protected title posts are less common. Given the breadth of professional roles and practice settings for which a social work education is relevant and of potential value, we should not see the different post-qualification early career trajectories as unexpected, and in fact the use of the term “attrition” is debatable as applied to non-fast-track graduates, as it implies statutory social work *should* be their destination. While the need for statutory social workers is the main rationale for Government funding of social work bursaries, it would be expected that some graduates of mainstream, non-fast-track social work degrees will work in non-statutory roles, whereas there is a clearer expectation of fast-track programs that they are specifically training people for statutory work in local authorities.

In making sense of any apparent differences between fast-track and mainstream training routes, it is also important to bear in mind that the Frontline program and *some* regional Step Up arrangements continue to support newly qualified staff for a year

after social work qualification, in addition to the standard assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) provision. With Frontline, the comparison is more difficult because of debate about the comparison timepoint. If we were to use the comparison timepoint of 18 months after the *program* ends for Frontline graduates instead of the point of social work qualification, then the attrition for all cohorts is 19% compared with 18% for all social work graduates. This is very slightly higher for Frontline, but not a statistically significant difference ($z = 0.79, p = .43, 95\% \text{ CI } 16.52\% - 21.67\%$). On balance, we consider that point of qualification is the more meaningful comparison point, while acknowledging this is not without its problems. The very latest Skills for Care report (2022) in fact shows all-social work attrition at 15 months post-qualification to be higher again, at 25%, but this is data for students graduating in 2019–2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic, so the 2021 report that we have used above is arguably the more valid comparison.

Employers saw Frontline's original national recruitment model as less successful at retaining social workers in their original local authorities than Step Up's regional model. The situation may now have improved with the Frontline organization apparently being responsive to feedback on this point. Findings on alternative careers suggest that Step Up graduates who have left social work may be more likely to work in direct practice roles than Frontline graduates, although this may not be a straightforward comparison, with the Step Up sample being more recently qualified overall than the Frontline sample. Step Up graduates who had left child and family work were also more likely to be in adult social care roles than Frontline graduates and more likely to be working in the broad area of education, social care, or health care. Frontline graduates who had left social work appeared to have more of a mix of practice, management, and policy roles. Frontline graduates in social work practice were overwhelmingly working with children and families rather than in adult social work roles. Frontline trainees, unlike Step Up equivalents, often do not come from a background of prior work in the social care field, because Frontline targets career changers, which might help explain why people leaving social work are less likely to stay in broadly allied fields and those leaving child and family work but staying in social work are less likely to consider social work with adults as an alternative option.

The longitudinal analysis of bivariate associations with leaving social work raises some interesting questions, although it was a relatively small sample, and further research with a larger sample would be helpful. It should not be concluded that extrinsic job satisfaction is not important, because other evidence suggests it is. For example, Baginsky and Manthorpe's (2016) study of Step Up graduates found extrinsic factors, such as case-loads, poor management, and supervision, identified as important challenges, as well as the intrinsic factor of not having opportunities to put social work values into practice. In a recent international example, a study with the much larger sample of over 1,200 child welfare staff (not only social workers) in Florida (Radey et al., 2022) found that better fit between work and family, and satisfaction with supervision, pay, and promotion opportunities all decreased the risk of leaving child welfare roles. This study did not measure intrinsic job satisfaction, however, and the findings of our study do suggest this is an important concept for future research—it is a concept that is to do with the quality of practice experience for social workers. It was also reflected in some of the

qualitative research findings, for example, the desire of some leavers to do more direct work with children.

Limitations of the study

The difficulties with comparing any programs—fast-track or mainstream—have already been discussed, as has the difference in data collection method between our estimation of attrition and that of the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey. The small sample size for the longitudinal analysis of bivariate associations has also already been noted. The sample size for the interviews with graduates was high for a qualitative study, but a short section of a more general journal article on retention/attrition cannot do any justice to the range of responses. Another limitation is that the study reported had to rely on Frontline’s own survey data collection, to avoid what would most likely have been a very low response rate if a rival survey had been set up. Frontline’s own surveys have a higher response rate than our own independent surveys of Step Up graduates; however, there may be unknown effects of the program provider collecting data on identifiable individuals—for example, a possible social desirability bias that could affect responses in unknown ways. Also, the quality and integrity of the Frontline survey data cannot be independently verified.

Policy implications

Recruitment to fast-track programs by itself is not the solution to the problem of retention in child and family social work. Findings from the present study support some of the conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (MacAlister, 2022). The Conservative government had committed in its 2019 manifesto to reviewing the children’s social care system in England and established the IRCSC for this purpose. In its initial report, the *Case for Change* (2021) stated that the [social work] workforce shows signs of significant strain and that there is “...more to do to recruit, retain and support a high-quality workforce.” Around 60% of social workers in 2020 had been employed for 4 years or less. Stress, associated with overwork and dislike of the workplace culture, was cited among reasons for leaving (pp 79–80).

The final report of the independent review (MacAlister, 2022) argued for systemic change that goes beyond the initial qualifying training, to continuing professional development and practice development and organizational change. It recommended very substantial investment in the professional development of social workers in the early stages of their careers, new national pay scales, routes to building expertise, and enabling social workers to remain in practice, more flexible working, and reducing bureaucracy so that social workers have more time to work with children and families (p. 11). Many of these recommendations are familiar having been advocated before, for example, Munro’s (2011) recommendations for the reform of child protection, and in some cases funded and implemented, for example, the Children’s Workforce Development Council’s Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQS) program. This was positively

evaluated and ran from 2008–2012, until replaced during a new government’s “austerity” drive by a less-well supported version, the ASYE.

Conclusion

This article has presented some initial findings about attrition from fast-track child and family social work programs, including estimated attrition rates, information on alternative careers, and the views of fast-track graduates and employers. What is not known, and is crucial for informing policy, is the comparative longer-term picture of retention in social work, with anecdotal evidence that social workers from all training routes often move away from statutory work within a few years. This paper includes some data on fast-track retention up to 5 years for Frontline and 3.5 years for Step Up, but no comparator is available for graduates from mainstream social work programs at these time points. That would seem to be a priority for future research.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ref. 2272).

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Declarations of Conflict of Interests

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest in respect of the material submitted in this article.

Authors’ Contributions

All authors contributed to developing the research methods. RJ, NM, CO’D, JS, EV, and LV conducted the interviews and coded the qualitative data. NM contributed to survey design (along with JS) and distribution. NM, LV, and CO’D led on designing the interview schedules. EV helped maintain the respondent database and distribute surveys. ME, JS, and NW analyzed the survey data. JS led the overall study, with RS and JC contributing to research management. JS completed the main first draft of the article, with JC making some major revisions. All authors reviewed and edited the text.

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