

# Child Welfare Social Workers' Attitudes Toward Mobile Technology Tools: **Is There a Generation Gap?**



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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Whitaker, T., Torrico Meruvia, R. & Jones, A. (2010). *Child Welfare Social Workers' Attitudes Toward Mobile Technology Tools: Is There a Generation Gap?* Washington, DC. NASW.

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## BACKGROUND

Annually, families of approximately 3.5 million children come to the attention of the child welfare system and are investigated for alleged incidents of maltreatment. More than 900,000 children are determined to be victims of abuse; three-quarters have been neglected, and one-quarter have been physically or sexually abused (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). Child welfare workers involved with these children, youth and families are charged with promoting their safety, permanency and well-being.

Daily, countless child welfare workers face critical life and death decisions and carry high case loads with limited supervision and support. Unfortunately, these factors often affect the safety, permanence and well-being of children, youth and families in addition to the recruitment and retention of qualified child welfare staff. Child welfare workers are often overburdened and work under intense pressure with limited resources. They are expected to conduct interviews and home visits, attend court hearings and conduct various administrative tasks including but not limited to, entering data into state systems to processing paperwork to ensure that vendors (e.g., child care providers, foster parents, and therapists, etc.) receive timely payments. Child welfare workers currently have to serve more families with fewer resources. Fortunately, child welfare administrators across the country have begun to recognize that access to emerging information technology can boost the efficiency of overtaxed workers.

In addition to an increased demand in services, child welfare agencies are also facing the shift in the workforce. Different generations are blending in the workplace today. Baby Boomers and the younger workforce, Generation X and Generation Y employees, each bringing different perspectives and experiences are working side by side. Generations X and Y currently make up approximately 50 percent of the American workforce (Skidmore, 2007) however, the workforce is rapidly shifting. It is estimated that 40 percent of people ages 65 and older will retire in 2010. In fact, approximately two workers are exiting the workforce for every one that is entering (Skidmore, 2007). These statistics are particularly alarming for child welfare systems that struggle to recruit and retain qualified workers for

high pressure jobs that have the potential to be emotionally draining. As the workforce shifts and new technologies emerge, child welfare administrators find themselves having to explore new effective approaches to effectively serve children, youth and families.

## PREVALENCE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORKPLACE

In the last decade, the use of information technology has changed the workplace dramatically – employees’ access to information technology has made them more efficient and productive. In addition, new technologies have changed the way employees interact with one another, access information and carry out their job responsibilities. Employees’ productivity has also increased; in 2004, six in ten employees believed that new technology contributed to a surge in employee productivity (Randstad, 2007). In addition, information technology has also helped employees to effectively manage work outside of the office. It has also been reported that more than one-third of employees occasionally use a computer at home for job-related tasks while approximately one-fifth use a computer in the home to read and send job-related email outside of their normal work hours (Family and Work Institute, 2002).

## USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN CHILD WELFARE

Like many other professions, technology is transforming the social work profession, particularly the child welfare system. A growing number of child welfare agencies have used technology to tackle tasks such as data management, client tracking, and outcomes measurement. In fact, federal, state and local agencies have spent more than \$2.8 billion on child welfare technologies over the past 10 years (Bissell & Miller, 2007). However, despite this investment, there have been slight measurable effects on the lives of vulnerable children and families. Child welfare agencies are still about a decade behind and have yet to see the same success as the private sector (*Stewards of Change*).

In addition to data management, child welfare workers have also used emerging technology to tackle case notes, interact with their colleagues and in some instances, communicate with clients. Unfortunately, caseworkers often spend more than 50 percent of their workday gathering and processing data – potentially reducing time for home visits and personal interactions with clients on any given day (GAO, 2003). In many parts of the country, child welfare administrators are using information technology, particularly mobile computing tools to increase the efficiency of overburdened social workers and capture the most up-to-date information possible.

There are a wide array of tools that can increase the efficiency of workers including but not limited to, laptops, digital cameras, and mobile phones with email access. In addition to increasing efficiency, the use of these tools can also help to increase the supervision and safety of workers. Some child welfare systems are using mobile tools such as digital pens to take pictures of notes and download them onto a computer for editing. This tool has been reported to save social workers between three and five hours a week in documentation (Reardon, 2009). In addition, other child welfare administrators have also begun using notebook and tablet PCs to access to Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) databases. The Center for Technology in Government found an increase in the amount of case notes per day and increase in the amount of cases closed with 60 days from the New York Office of Children and Family Services' pilot of mobile computing, (Raths, 2008).

While the information base is growing about the use of various technologies in child welfare, less is known about child welfare workers' attitudes about these new tools. Even less is known about factors, such as age, that influence these attitudes. Assumptions about a generation's acceptance of or resistance to technology abound, however, these assumptions remain largely unexplored.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was a member of the National and State Advisory Board of the Family Services Technology Council (FASTech) in 2008. The goal of FASTech was to advance best practices for states on the adoption of technology in child welfare systems. As part of a larger plan, FASTech decided to explore the attitudes and experiences of social workers in child welfare regarding mobile technology tools. The NASW Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section (SPS) was identified as one of the best sources of this information because it is comprised of professional social workers who work in or have an interest in promoting, protecting, and preserving the well-being of children and their families.

## METHODOLOGY

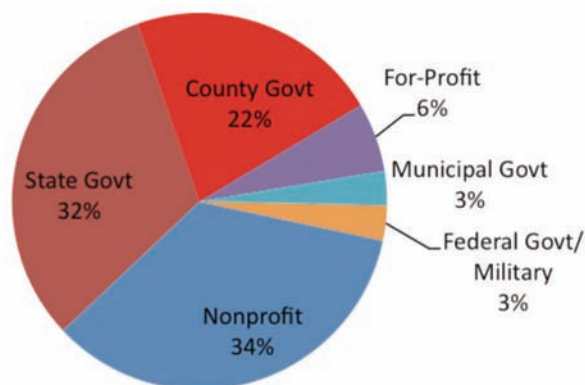
In partnership with the Family Services Technology Council, a 28-question survey was developed and administered electronically to the 930 members of the NASW Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section. Eight hundred seventy (870) emails were successfully delivered. A total of 283 responses were received for a 32.6 percent response rate.

# FINDINGS

## OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

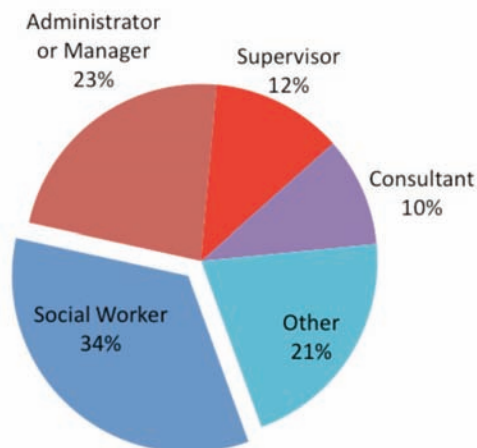
Ninety-three percent of survey respondents had a degree in social work, and 86 percent were women. Two-thirds (66%) of the survey respondents were actively employed in a child welfare setting. Of these, sixty-six percent of the respondents were employed in the nonprofit sector (34%) or by state governments (32%). Twenty-two percent were employed by county governments and six percent in the for-profit sector. Six percent were employed in either in municipal (3%) or federal government/military (3%) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. EMPLOYMENT SECTOR



A third (34%) of respondents working in child welfare settings described themselves as child welfare social workers; nearly a quarter (23%) described themselves as administrators/managers; 12 percent were supervisors; 10 percent were consultants and 21 percent described themselves as “other.” (Figure 2) Slightly less than half (46%) had a child welfare caseload.

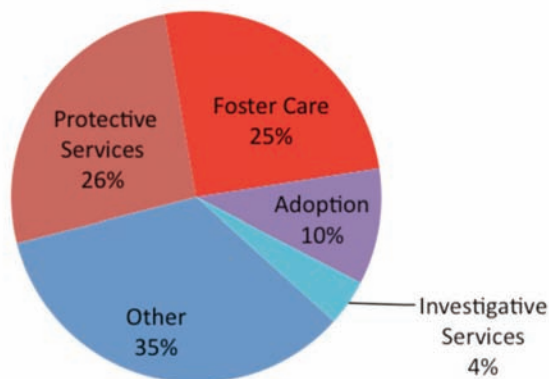
FIGURE 2. JOB TITLE





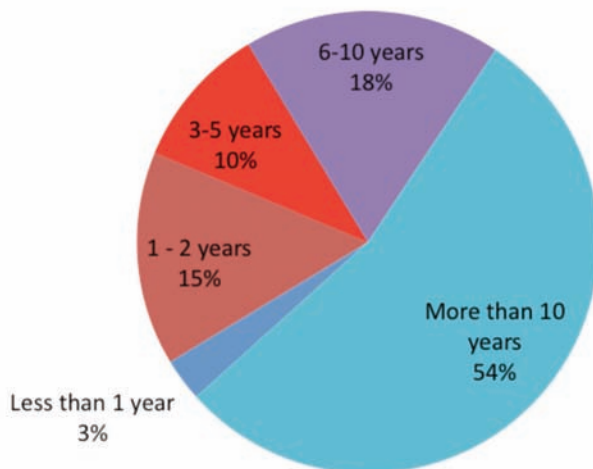
Slightly more than a quarter (26%) of respondents worked in child protective services; a quarter (25%) worked in foster care; ten percent worked in adoptions and four percent work in child investigative services. More than a third (35%) described their primary child welfare area as “other” and many in that category indicated “all of the above” as their response (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. PRIMARY WORK AREA IN CHILD WELFARE



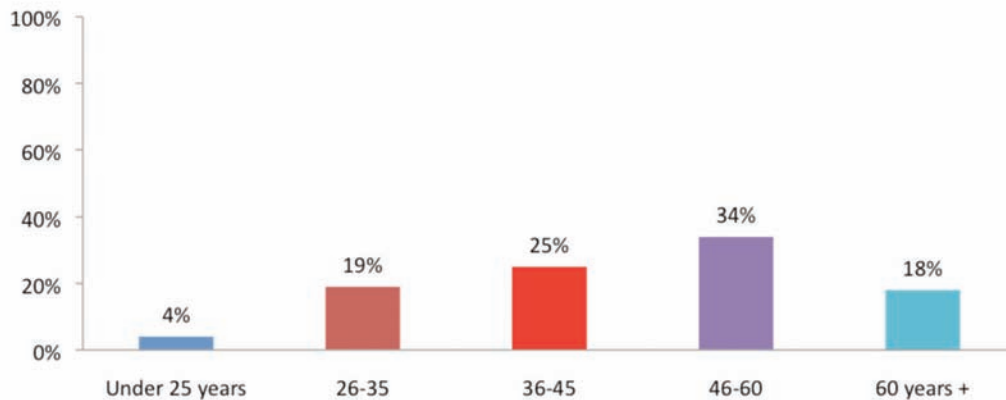
The sample was experienced, with more than half of the respondents (54%) indicating that they had worked in child welfare for over 10 years. Nearly one-fifth (18%) had worked in the field for more than six years, but less than ten years, and 25 percent had worked fewer than 5 years, but longer than one year. Only three percent of respondents had worked in the field for less than a year (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN CHILD WELFARE



The respondents were primarily middle-aged, with the majority (52%) being older than 46 years of age. A quarter of respondents were between the ages of 36 and 45 years, and 23 percent were younger than 35 years old (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. AGE OF RESPONDENTS



## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES: DEMOGRAPHICS

The respondents were separated into two groups, those 35 years old and younger (23%); and those older than 36 years (77%). The data were analyzed for differences in demographics, experiences and attitudes.

There was a noticeable difference between the two groups in terms of their demographic characteristics. The group 35 years old and younger (hereafter referred to as “younger”) had a slightly larger percentage of women (91%), than did the group 36 years old and older (hereafter referred to as “older”). As expected, the younger group was far less experienced, with 67 percent of younger social workers having fewer than five years experience, compared with 68 percent of the older social workers having more than 10 years of experience (Figure 6). Younger social workers were also much more likely to be in a direct social work role, rather than an administrative role (50% compared with 11%) (Figure 7.)

FIGURE 6. CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCE BY AGE

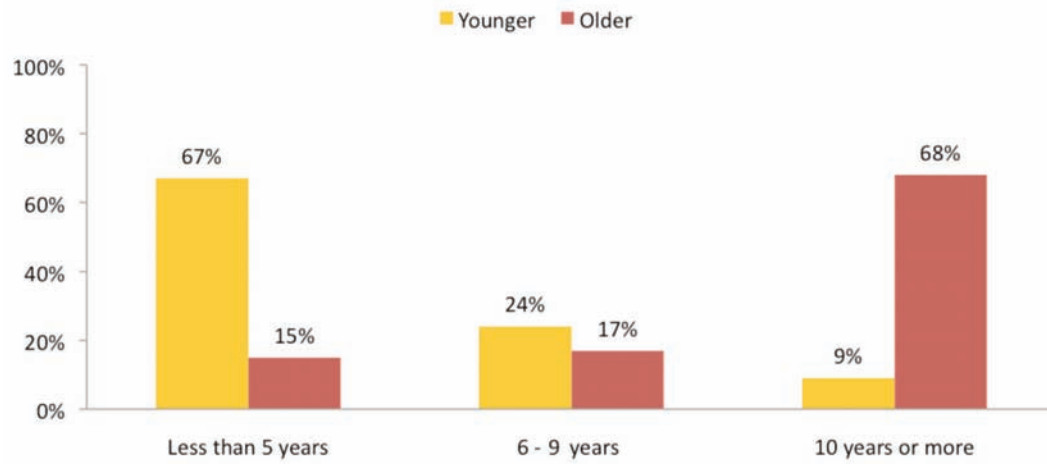
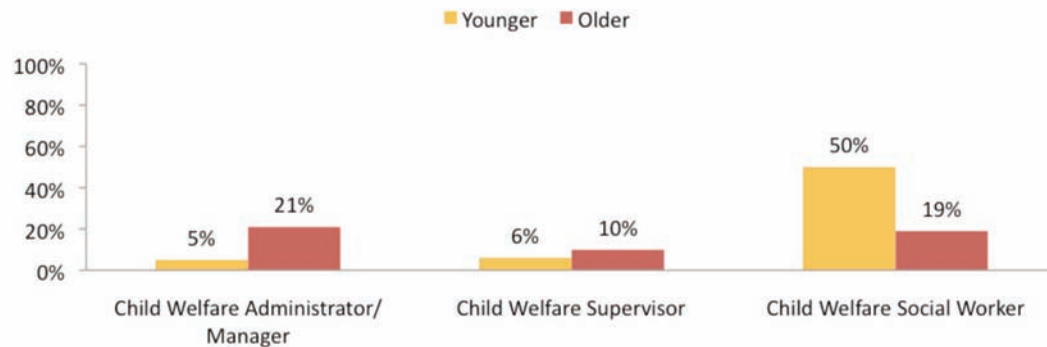


FIGURE 7. JOB TITLE BY AGE



Despite the differences in job titles, there were fewer differences in terms of how much time respondents spent in the field compared with time spent in the office. Slightly more older social workers (56%) indicated that they spent less than 50 percent of their time in the field, compared with 48 percent of younger social workers. In contrast, just slightly more younger social workers (52%) indicated that they spent more than 50 percent of their time in the field, compared to 44 percent of their older counterparts (Figure 8). More than three-fifths of the younger social workers (70%) had an active child welfare caseload, compared to almost two-fifths (39%) of older social workers (Figure 9).

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT IN THE FIELD BY AGE

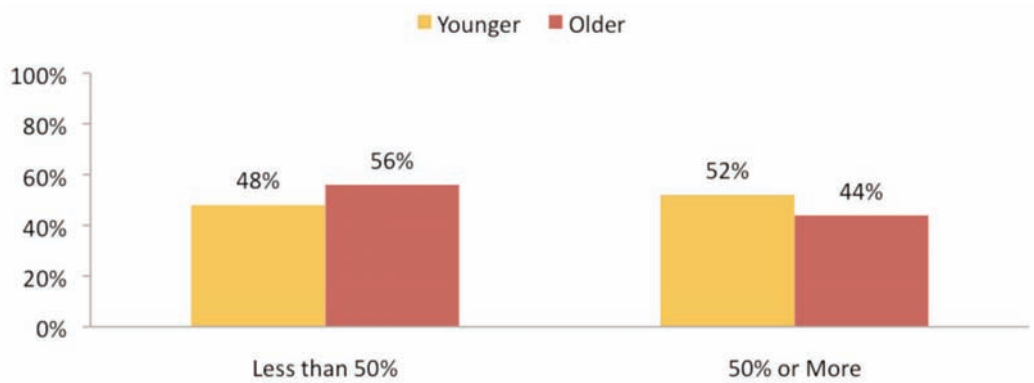
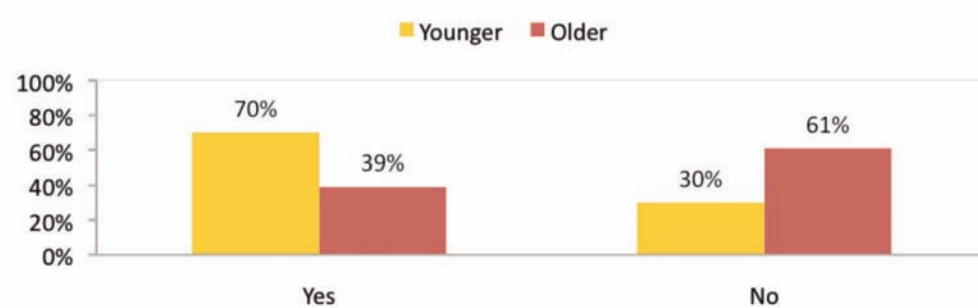


FIGURE 9. ACTIVE CHILD WELFARE CASELOAD BY AGE



## SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCE WITH TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

The respondents were asked a range of questions about their experiences with technology tools in the field. They were asked to rate their answers on a 7-point, Likert-type scale that ranged from “never used” to “use very frequently.” The responses were analyzed only for those social workers with a child welfare caseload. For some questions, “never used” was reported singularly; scores 1-3 (infrequent use) were combined; and scores 4-6 (frequent use) were combined.

## USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE FIELD

### MOBILE PHONE USE IN THE FIELD

Frequent use of a standard mobile phone in the field to place calls was reported by both younger and older social workers (82% and 84% respectively) (Figure 10). In contrast, high percentages of both older (58%) and younger social workers (85%) reported that they had never used a mobile phone with email and internet access in the field. However, older social workers were much more likely to

use a mobile phone with email and internet access than were younger social workers (22% vs. 3%) (Figure 11). Similarly, a majority of both groups also reported infrequent use of a mobile phone with a camera in the field. Fifty-three percent of younger social workers and 43 percent of older social workers reported never using a mobile phone with a camera in the field. Similarly, 73 percent of younger social workers and 60 percent of older social workers had never used a global positioning system (GPS) in the field.

FIGURE 10. USE OF STANDARD MOBILE PHONE IN THE FIELD BY AGE

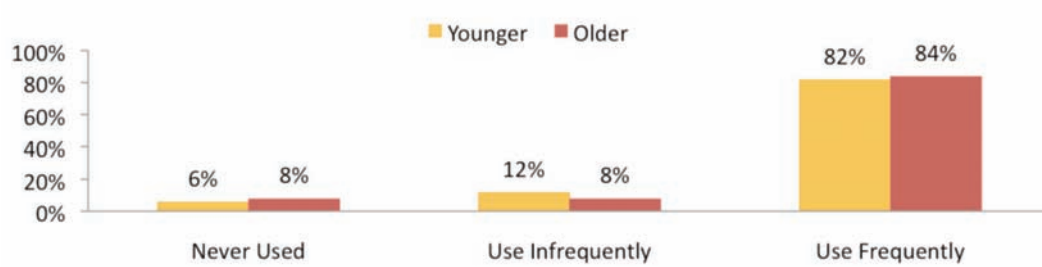
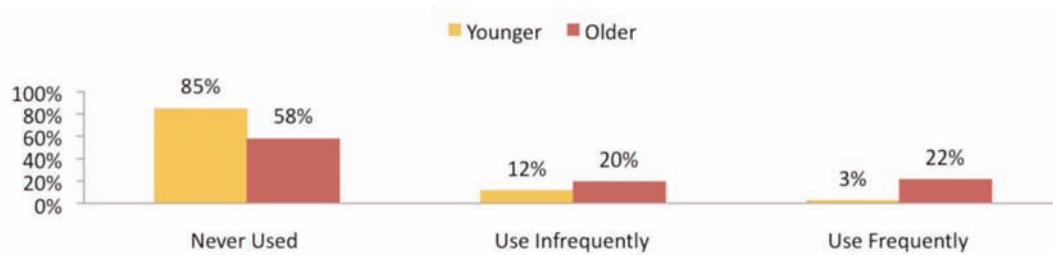


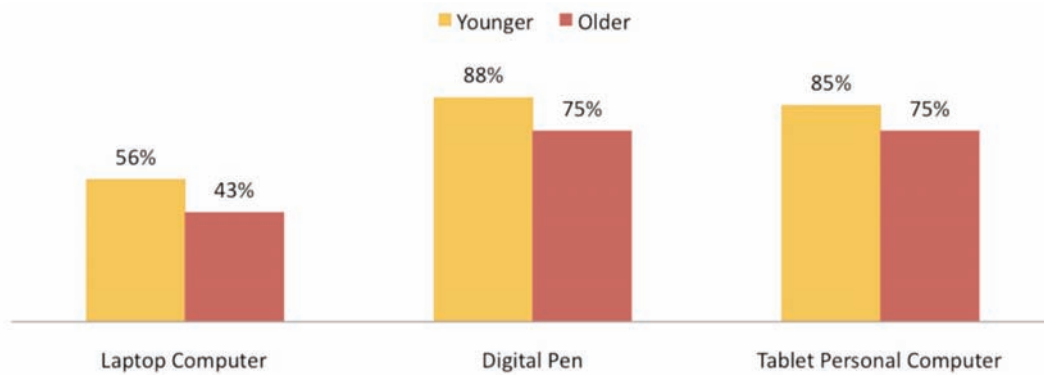
FIGURE 11. USE OF STANDARD MOBILE PHONE IN THE FIELD WITH EMAIL AND INTERNET ACCESS BY AGE



### COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IN THE FIELD

In terms of computer technology tools, the majority of social workers had never used a laptop computer, digital pen, or a personal tablet computer in the field (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12. PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHO NEVER USED TECHNOLOGY TOOL BY AGE



### TRADITIONAL TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

Regarding their use of more traditional technology tools, social workers were most likely to use a digital camera or paper notebooks and clipboards while in the field. The overwhelming majority of both age groups (94% of younger social workers and 86% of older social workers) frequently used a paper notebook/clipboard in the field, and 32 percent of both age groups reported frequent use of a digital camera in the field (Figure 13). In contrast, only nine percent of younger social workers and 12 percent of older social workers reported frequent use of either a standard camera or a tape recorder in the field (Figure 14).

FIGURE 13. PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHO FREQUENTLY USED TECHNOLOGY TOOL BY AGE

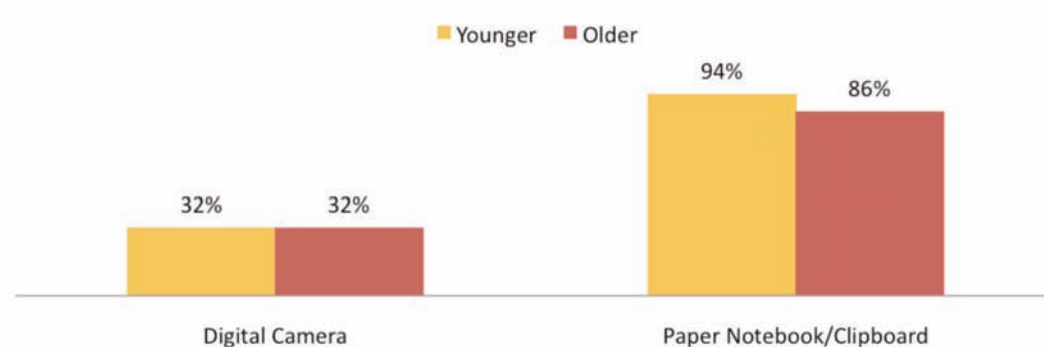
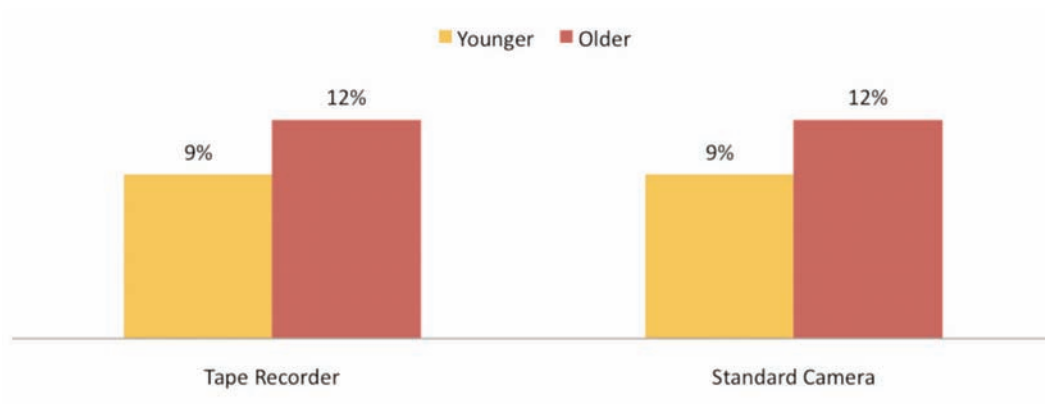


FIGURE 14. PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHO FREQUENTLY USED TECHNOLOGY TOOL BY AGE



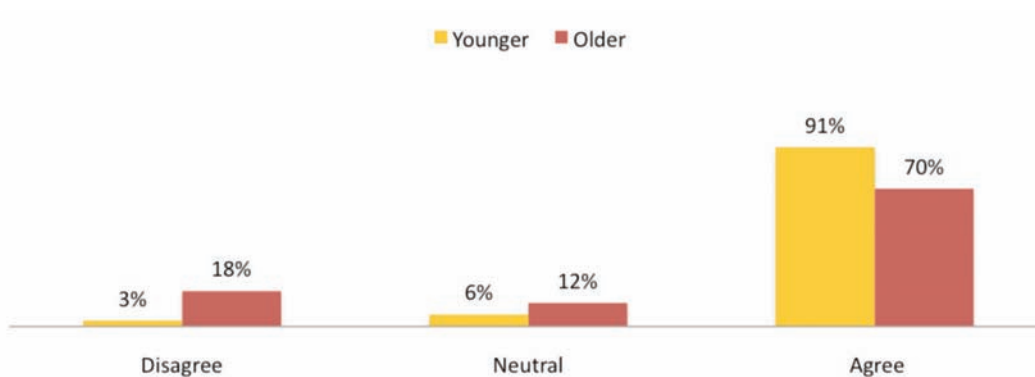
### ATTITUDES ABOUT TECHNOLOGY TOOLS OF SOCIAL WORKERS WITH A CHILD WELFARE CASELOAD

The respondents were asked a range of questions about their attitudes toward and use of technology tools in the field. They were asked to rate their answers on 7-point, Likert-type scales that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The responses were analyzed only for those social workers with a child welfare caseload. The “agree” answers were combined, as were the “disagree” answers.

### CONFIDENCE IN USING MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

Nine in 10 younger social workers reported that they had self-confidence when it comes to working with mobile technologies, compared with 70 percent of older social workers (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15. PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHO HAVE SELF-CONFIDENCE WITH MOBILE TECHNOLOGY



## CONNECTIVITY

Social workers valued connectivity to information and resources when in the field. When asked whether they thought connecting to data and to the Internet outside of the office was critical, older social workers were more likely to agree with the statement (75% vs. 54%); although one-fifth of both groups (21% and 20% respectively) disagreed with the statement (Figure 16). Similarly, more than four-fifths of older social workers (82%) agreed that access to information and case histories from different agencies was critical, although slightly more than half of the younger social workers (52%) agreed with the statement (Figure 17). Eighty-eight percent of younger social workers disagreed with the statement that remote access to data was too complex to provide any benefit or value, compared to 82 percent of older social workers (Figure 18).

FIGURE 16. CONNECTING TO DATA AND THE INTERNET OUTSIDE OF THE OFFICE IS CRITICAL, BY AGE

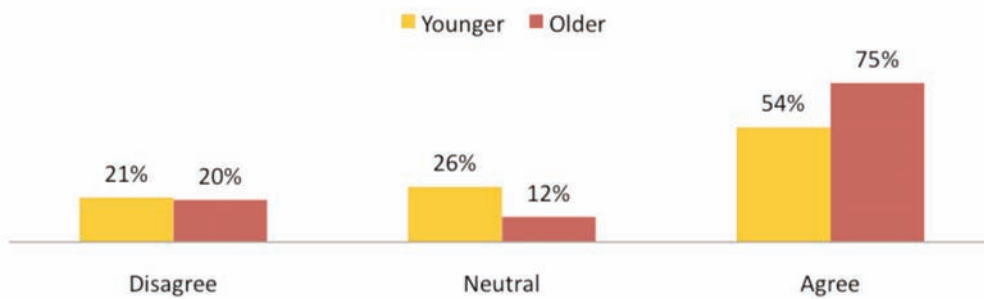


FIGURE 17. ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND CASE HISTORIES FROM DIFFERENT AGENCIES IS ESSENTIAL, BY AGE

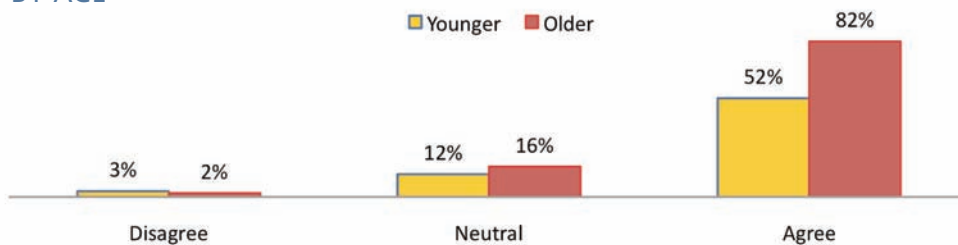
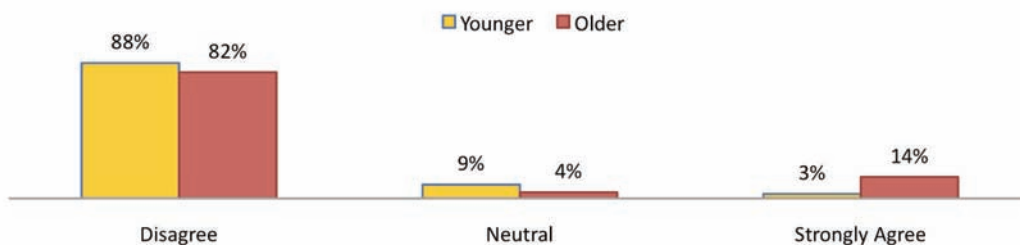


FIGURE 18. REMOTE ACCESS IS TOO COMPLEX TO PROVIDE ANY BENEFIT OR VALUE, BY AGE





## SAFETY

Social workers had mixed opinions about issues related to safety and technology. Although nearly half of younger social workers (45%) disagreed with the statement that it is dangerous to take technology tools to the client site, nearly a third (30%) agreed with the statement. Older social workers were less concerned about securing equipment, with more than half (56%) disagreeing with the statement, compared to a quarter who agreed with the statement (Figure 19). However, the majority of both age groups agreed that mobile technology tools make field work safer for child welfare workers (76% of younger social workers and 82% of older social workers) (Figure 20). The majority of both groups agreed that mobile technology tools did not pose a threat to client confidentiality (Figure 21).

FIGURE 19. IT IS DANGEROUS TO TAKE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS TO THE CLIENT SITE, BY AGE

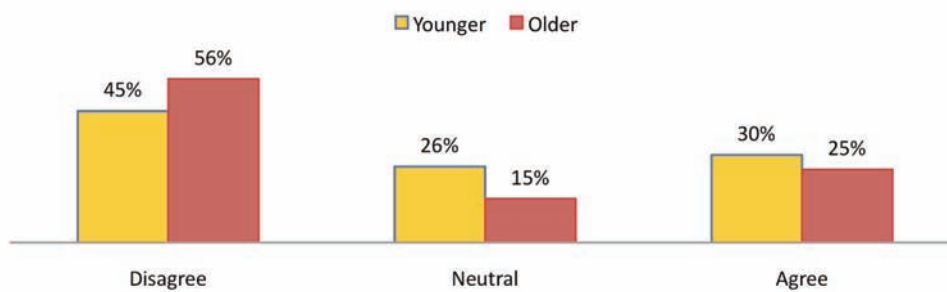


FIGURE 20. MOBILE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS MAKE FIELD WORK SAFER FOR CHILD WELFARE WORKERS, BY AGE

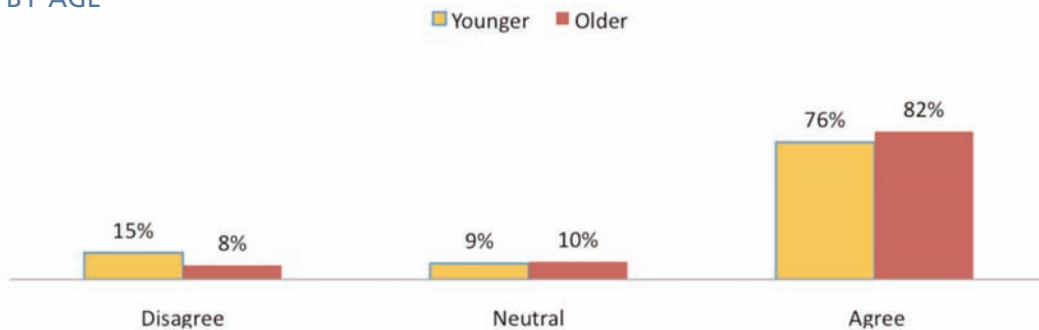
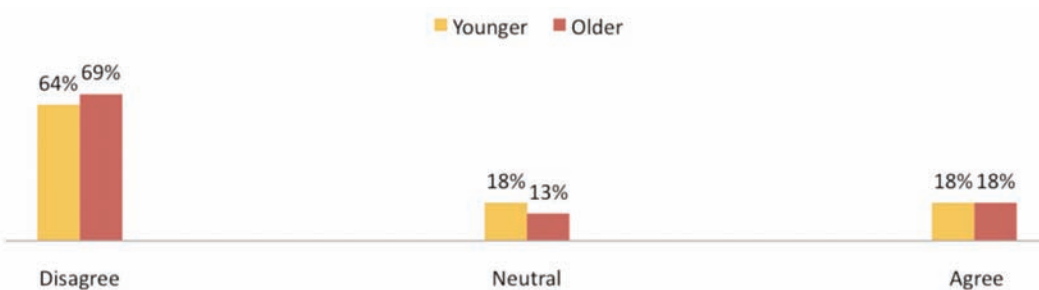


FIGURE 21. THE USE OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS COMPROMISES CLIENT CONFIDENTIALITY, BY AGE



## PRODUCTIVITY

Older and younger social workers were likely to agree that mobile technology tools aided productivity. A majority of both groups (88% of younger, and 96% of older) agreed that mobile technology tools help social workers accomplish more in less time (Figure 22); and that mobile tools can have a positive effect on caseworker productivity (94% and 90% respectively) (Figure 23). None of the respondents disagreed with either statement. Although the majority of both groups did not think that technology prevented caseworkers from doing their jobs, older social workers were almost three times more likely (8% vs. 3%) to agree with that statement (Figure 24).

FIGURE 22. MOBILE TECHNOLOGY TOOLS HELP SOCIAL WORKERS ACCOMPLISH MORE IN LESS TIME, BY AGE

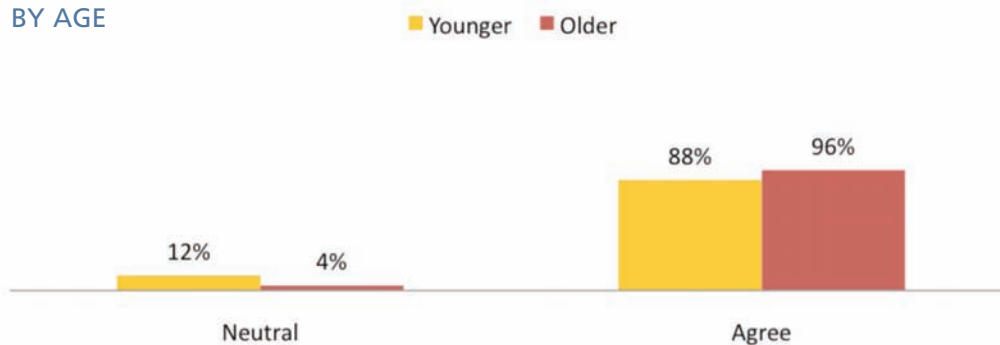


FIGURE 23. MOBILE TOOLS DEPLOYED TO CASEWORKERS CAN HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT ON CASEWORKER PRODUCTIVITY, BY AGE

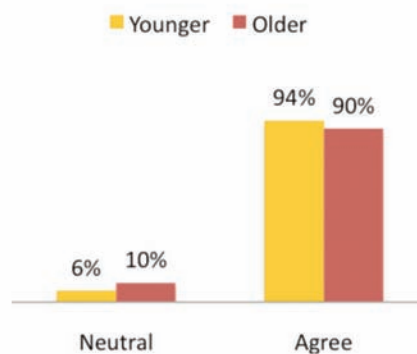
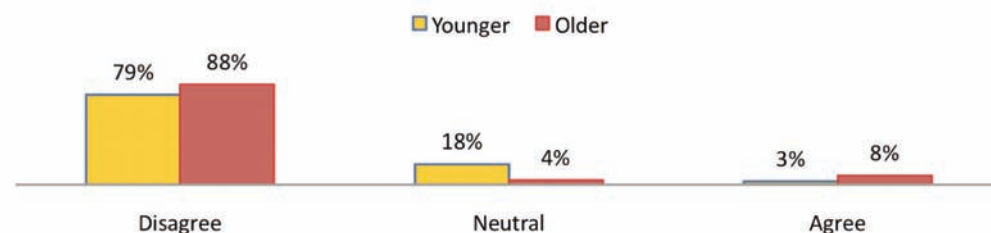


FIGURE 24. TECHNOLOGY GETS IN THE WAY AND PREVENTS CASE WORKERS FROM DOING THEIR JOBS, BY AGE



## CLIENT ENGAGEMENT

Older social workers were more likely to be optimistic about the role that mobile technology tools could play in client engagement. A majority of older social workers (61%) agreed that social networking techniques allow for new environments in which to assist families and youth and promote engagement, compared to slightly less than half (45%) of younger social workers (Figure 25). Older social workers were slightly more likely than younger social workers to agree that mobile tools improved client engagement (52% vs. 51%) (Figure 26), however, they were more likely (20% vs. 12%) to disagree with the statement that mobile technology tools improve productivity (Figure 27) or effectiveness (20% vs. 15%) when it comes to client engagement (Figure 28).

FIGURE 25. SOCIAL NETWORKING TECHNIQUES ALLOW FOR NEW ENVIRONMENTS IN WHICH TO ASSIST FAMILIES & YOUTH AND PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT, BY AGE

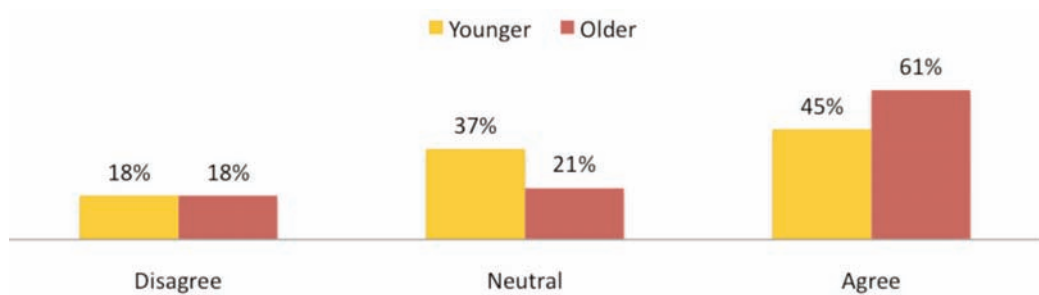


FIGURE 26. MOBILE TOOLS HELP TO IMPROVE CLIENT ENGAGEMENT OVERALL, BY AGE

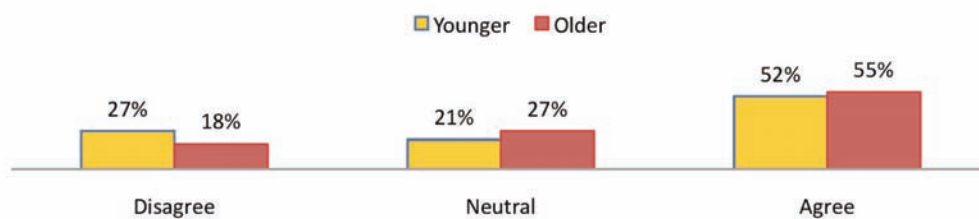


FIGURE 27. WHEN IT COMES TO CLIENT ENGAGEMENT, MOBILE TOOLS MAKE CASEWORKERS MORE PRODUCTIVE, BY AGE

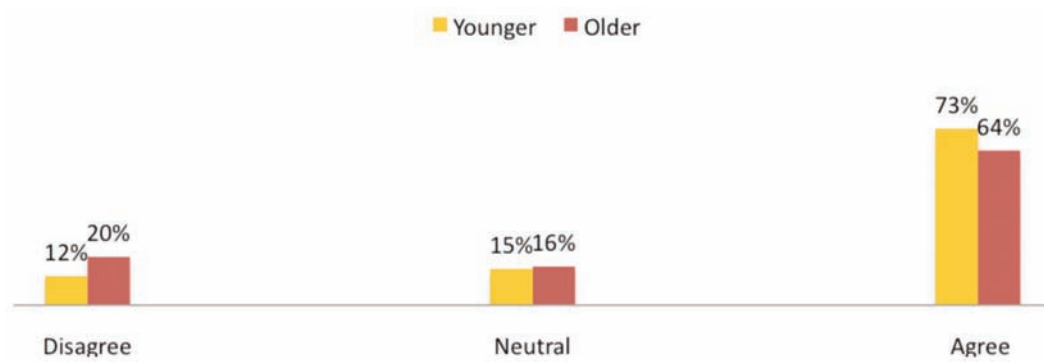
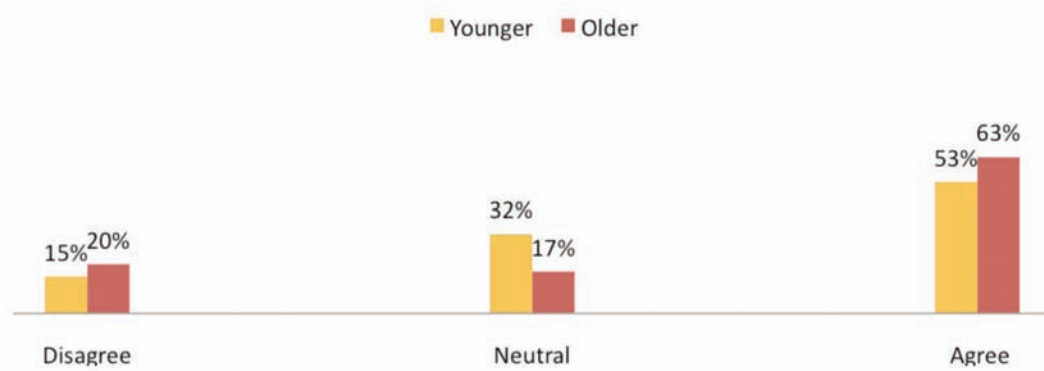


FIGURE 28. WHEN IT COMES TO CLIENT ENGAGEMENT, MOBILE TOOLS MAKE CASEWORKERS MORE EFFECTIVE, BY AGE



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, social workers in child welfare seemed receptive to the use of mobile technology tools in the field. Both older and younger social workers valued connectivity to data and the Internet while in the field, and believed that technology could improve productivity among child welfare case workers. Both groups also agreed that mobile technology tools would make field work safer, although younger social workers were more concerned about the dangers associated with taking the tools into the field.

Older social workers were more likely to value access to information and case histories while in the field than younger social workers, but were more likely to believe that technology can get in the way of caseworkers doing their jobs. Younger social workers reported higher levels of confidence about working with mobile technologies than their older counterparts, yet they were less enthusiastic than older social workers about the role that these technologies would play in terms of increasing client engagement.

The findings reinforce some ideas about generational differences regarding the use of technology, but they also contradict some of those beliefs. As the workplace becomes more multigenerational, it will be important for social workers to be attentive to biases they may hold about other generations.

## OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The social work profession is expected to increase rapidly through 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). As the workforce expands and shifts and new technologies continue to emerge, there will be more opportunities to explore new approaches to effectively serve children, youth and families. In addition, as the pool of the younger workforce increases, child welfare leaders will have to meet the needs of younger generations' abilities to multi-task at home and in the workplace because they have grown up immersed in new technologies.

The use of emerging tools can help child welfare agencies to support their workers, reduce redundancy, increase worker safety, and increase speeds of service delivery and face to face time spent with children, youth and families. These tools can also improve worker satisfaction thereby retaining qualified child welfare employees. Emerging technology not only has the potential to help child welfare workers manage workloads and respond to the increasing demand for accountability, it can also create more time to successfully serve children, youth and families.

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