

Multi-dimensional Drivers and Optimization Strategies of Turnover Intention for Grassroots Community Social Workers

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Abstract

High turnover of grassroots community social workers severely hinders the construction and steady operation of local social service systems in China. Frontline practitioners are responsible for daily case management, community activity organization and vulnerable group assistance. They are required to deliver diversified public services under tight bureaucratic schedules, so long-term work pressure easily causes occupational burnout and voluntary resignation. Existing empirical studies mostly adopt single-factor analysis and rarely construct integrated multi-layer analytical frameworks to interpret turnover intention; prior scholarship tends to focus on personal psychological traits, overlooking interactive influences from agency management and top-down governmental policies. This paper builds a three-layer analytical model based on Job Demands-Resources Theory, Occupational Embeddedness Theory and Organizational Identity Theory, to systematically explore individual, organizational and macro governance drivers of social workers' turnover intention. The study collects and codes 37 qualified journal papers released between 2019 and 2026 via thematic analysis. Research findings confirm that excessive workload, insufficient organizational support and flawed governance mechanisms jointly amplify turnover risk: heavy job demands drain personal emotional energy, lacking workplace support lowers occupational embeddedness, and unreasonable governance arrangements weaken workers' sense of belonging to their service organizations. Accordingly, this paper proposes multi-level optimization strategies involving administrative assessment adjustment, internal organizational system improvement and public financial resource reallocation. These policy suggestions can help authorities retain skilled frontline practitioners, consolidate stable community social service teams, and promote sustainable improvement of grassroots social governance across China.

Keywords

grassroots social worker, turnover intention, job demands-resources theory, occupational embeddedness, governance optimization

1. Introduction

Community social workers undertake core responsibilities including community governance, resident assistance and public service delivery. They serve as key practitioners to implement government welfare policies and community projects, bridging administrative departments and ordinary residents in daily

grassroots governance. In recent years, China has expanded government procurement of social services. Funding for grassroots social work posts keeps growing. However, staffing demands cannot be fully satisfied by available practitioners. High employee turnover becomes a prominent practical obstacle for service organizations. Severe personnel outflow brings repeated recruitment and training costs to service management departments. It also restricts the long-term development of local social work services, destabilizes frontline service teams and reduces continuity of community welfare support for vulnerable groups. It carries academic and practical value to explore major formation mechanisms of social workers' turnover intention. Existing domestic and foreign research has studied micro individual factors, such as salary standards, occupational burnout and work-family conflict [1,2]. Several papers also discuss institutional elements including supervision quality and promotion channels [3]. Most previous research applies univariate variable testing. Few studies combine individual psychology, organizational operation and governance rules within a unified analytical framework. Theoretical and empirical connections between multi-layer influencing factors remain insufficiently explored; scholars rarely clarify how factors from different dimensions interact to shape resignation decisions of social workers [4].

This paper proposes three core research questions. First, what main factors drive grassroots community social workers' turnover intention? Second, how do individual, organizational and governance factors interact to increase turnover risk? Third, what hierarchical measures can effectively reduce turnover tendency? This study takes a literature review as its core research method. It sorts peer-reviewed papers published between 2019 and 2026, builds a multi-dimensional analytical framework, and puts forward operable suggestions for social work institutions and administrative authorities. This research can enrich multi-level turnover theory application within China's grassroots social work context, and provide practical references for authority departments to optimize talent retention policies.

2. Literature Review

Current research on social worker turnover can be divided into three research streams from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The first research stream relies on Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory. Scholars point out that repetitive administrative tasks, trivial daily work and inadequate occupational resources easily cause emotional exhaustion among frontline practitioners [5]. Long overtime hours, low salary and limited professional supervision continuously consume individual psychological resources. When resource supplementation cannot offset work pressure, social workers will form a strong willingness to leave [6]. Related research mainly samples employees from single service organizations. Few studies carry out targeted analysis for community posts burdened with urban governance assignments. The second research stream originates from Occupational Embeddedness Theory. Occupational embeddedness contains three dimensions: links, fit and sacrifice. Stable colleague relationships, clear career paths and consistent community work values strengthen practitioners' occupational embeddedness [7]. Many community social workers face frequent career adaptation difficulties. Daily management work deviates from professional social work practice. Practitioners cannot apply professional intervention skills in routine jobs. Low embeddedness finally pushes experienced practitioners to transfer to education, corporate human resources and other industries [6]. Current embeddedness research seldom considers external governance constraints, including assessment mechanisms and fiscal funding cycles. The third research stream focuses on macro governance factors. Researchers find that rigid purchasing evaluation standards and short-term government procurement contracts accelerate social workers' turnover [8]. Insufficient training investment also aggravates staff loss. Local governance departments often prioritize quantitative service indicators while ignoring demands for professional services. Existing studies discuss individual and institutional factors separately. They rarely construct an integrated analytical model to explain mutual influence among multiple levels. This research gap provides space for this paper to develop multi-dimensional driver analysis and corresponding optimization schemes.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts an iterative literature review combined with thematic qualitative coding as the primary research method. It sorts existing empirical conclusions and identifies unresolved research limitations. Strict retrieval, screening and coding procedures are arranged to guarantee research validity. Four mainstream academic databases are selected for literature retrieval: Web of Science, Scopus, CNKI and Google Scholar.

Keyword groups are designed for three research dimensions. The first group covers occupational social work, job burnout and turnover intention. The second group includes institutional support and supervision mechanisms. The third group involves government procurement and performance appraisal for macro governance factors. The publication time range is set from 2019 to 2026. This rule helps collect the latest empirical findings suitable for China's current grassroots social work system. Two-stage thematic coding is carried out to exclude invalid literature. Primary screening removes conference abstracts, repeated documents, policy interpretations and duplicated publications. Secondary screening reserves peer-reviewed journal articles with complete empirical design. Short comment articles without empirical data support are excluded. Thirty-seven valid academic papers are included for follow-up thematic analysis.

Two independent coders complete all coding work. The first coder finishes initial labeling for all extracted content. The second coder randomly selects 40% of coding segments for recheck. Inter-coder reliability reaches 0.82, calculated by the Cohen's Kappa coefficient. All disagreements on coding classification are resolved through joint discussion before confirming final categories. This reliability checking process is designed specifically for this literature sample. It stabilizes classification results targeting drivers of grassroots social workers' turnover intention. Thematic qualitative coding is implemented after screening. All valid papers are divided into three core coding categories: individual-level drivers, organizational-level drivers, and macro governance drivers. Within each category, cross-text comparison, conflicting empirical results and research limitations are extracted through repeated comparison. Comparative analysis is further adopted to explore interactive effects among three layers. For example, strict administrative assessment, as a governance factor, increases daily workload. The heavier workload then aggravates individual occupational burnout. All analytical conclusions are based on original literature evidence without subjective speculation. Mixed empirical research combining questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview will be recommended for follow-up research built on conclusions obtained through this literature review.

4. Analysis of Multi-dimensional Turnover Drivers

Three tiers of analytical results are obtained through thematic coding and cross-literature comparison of collected literature samples, covering individual, organizational and macro governance levels to unpack key drivers behind grassroots social workers' turnover intention.

4.1 Individual Dimension

Consistent empirical results confirm that low salary level, frequent overtime work, work-family conflict and occupational burnout form stable predictors of turnover intention [1,2]. Long-term low income cannot match the high work intensity of grassroots posts. Frontline social workers need to respond to diverse resident demands ranging from daily counselling to emergency community incidents. They frequently receive temporary emergency community assignments beyond official working hours, including neighbourhood dispute mediation, special group assistance and sudden public event coordination. Extra tasks keep encroaching on personal and family time, reducing available hours for rest, social contact and family companionship, which gives rise to sustained negative emotional accumulation over months or years. Regression statistics extracted from sampled papers indicate occupational burnout produces the strongest regression effect among all individual variables [5]. Under long-term emotional exhaustion, practitioners gradually lose enthusiasm for social work missions and start considering job transfer. One notable limitation within existing individual-focused research is that scholars rarely discuss how governance policies shape personal work pressure; most studies set individual living circumstances as fully independent influencing factors and overlook external institutional constraints that reshape daily workload, working rhythm and long-term career sentiment of frontline practitioners.

4.2 Organizational Dimension

Inadequate professional mentorship, unclear promotion routes and weak organizational identity speed up employee departure [3]. Grassroots social work institutions allocate limited expenditure to regular professional supervision and skill upgrading activities. Frontline supervisors undertake heavy routine management duties themselves, such as report submission, project inspection and stakeholder communication, leaving little spare time to deliver tailored guidance for practitioners' daily case handling of disadvantaged groups. The majority

of institutions do not establish standardized promotion frameworks. Senior staff cannot obtain pay rises or status elevation simply through work experience accumulation and high-quality case outcomes. Meanwhile, repetitive administrative evaluation and redundant reporting work make practitioners feel disconnected from core social work values of resident-oriented service. Evidence collected from separate empirical works shows institutes with complete mentorship structures retain 42 percent more junior social workers than counterparts lacking stable mentorship arrangements. Without proper internal career development support, capable frontline staff tend to seek employment in other industries or better-funded agencies with clearer career paths; talented young practitioners will leave grassroots services once they accumulate enough practical working experience [6].

4.3 Macro governance Dimension

Brief procurement cycles, rigid quantitative evaluation and unequal regional fiscal support raise occupational uncertainty [8]. Government service procurement contracts commonly run for merely one to three years. Funding renewal results remain uncertain for most operating institutions. Once funding terminates upon contract expiration, practitioners face layoff risk, and agencies are forced to prioritize administrative chores over direct professional service delivery for community residents to satisfy assessment requirements from government purchasers. Current empirical works seldom quantify the interplay among governance rules, personal stress and institutional operation. Unstable fiscal input compels organizations to compress welfare budgets and post internal system improvement plans, which further worsens working experience for individual workers. Superposition of influences from the three tiers further elevates turnover risks, leaving an understudied research gap regarding multi-layer interaction mechanisms driving staff outflow within China's grassroots social governance context. Individual emotional pressure, imperfect institutional arrangement and unstable governance constraints reinforce one another, jointly pushing social workers to exit grassroots service positions [4].

5. Discussion & Synthesis

The analytical results confirm that grassroots social workers' turnover intention arises from overlapping constraints at individual resource depletion, organizational operational deficiency and macro governance restriction levels, rather than merely personal career choices. From the lens of Job Demands-Resources Theory, rigid top-down assessment generates excessive administrative workload that depletes individual emotional and time resources; insufficient salary, systematic supervision and career progression further shrink available job resources, creating persistent job demand-resource imbalance that fuels occupational burnout and turnover inclination [5,6].

Occupational Embeddedness Theory supplements the mechanism explanation: frequent repetitive administrative tasks erode practitioners' professional identity and career attachment [7]. Short procurement cycles make organizations reluctant to launch long-term talent development schemes, weakening workers' community and organizational embeddedness. Combined with low switching costs to enter alternative industries such as corporate human resources and education, social workers face limited obstacles when resigning, which amplifies outflow tendency [6]. Prior scholarship mostly tested individual-level variables like income and work-family conflict while neglecting the top-down pressure transmission from governance to organizations then to individuals; this study explains why standalone interventions including salary raises and occasional psychological counselling only produce transient effects, and demonstrates the necessity of institutional optimization at the governance layer for workforce retention [3].

Organizational identity serves as a critical intermediate transmission channel between macro policies and individual occupational experience. Underfunded small organizations cannot afford dedicated supervisors and standardized promotion ladders, which lowers practitioners' organizational identification and accelerates turnover. Empirical evidence from reviewed literature verifies that organizations with structured mentorship and regular supervision retain 42% more new hires than counterparts lacking such systems [3]. Therefore, retention governance needs coordinated reforms across three tiers: government departments should diversify assessment metrics and extend procurement contract terms; service agencies need hierarchical supervision and transparent promotion systems; individual-level psychological support and skill training should be delivered

continuously to relieve burnout. Multi-layer synchronous adjustment outperforms scattered single-sided remediation for long-term workforce stability.

From the perspective of actual governance scenarios, social workers' turnover triggers multiple cascading adverse consequences. Frequent turnover among frontline social workers immediately causes disruptions to community services: ongoing casework and long-term community programs have to be transferred and restarted, while service recipients need to repeatedly adapt to new practitioners. This undermines service continuity and erodes residents' trust in community public services. For social work organizations, recurring recruitment, pre-service training and onboarding for new staff substantially raise operating costs, squeeze budgets originally allocated to service development and salary improvement, and create a vicious cycle: high staff turnover leads to budget cuts, poorer remuneration, and further employee departures [1].

The three-tier analytical framework adopted in this study also reveals prominent regional disparities across China. Eastern developed regions boast sufficient budgets for government procurement of social services and mature supervision plus promotion systems, contributing to far better staff retention compared with underfunded county-level areas in central and western China. Social workers serving old urban neighborhoods and communities with large migrant populations face heavier workloads, and accordingly exhibit significantly stronger turnover intention than those working in conventional residential communities. Future research may introduce region and community type as moderating variables to refine retention strategies tailored to diverse contexts [8]. Many local authorities previously attempted to reduce turnover solely through individual-level interventions such as salary rises and regular psychological counselling. However, the mechanism established in this study proves that standalone measures deliver only temporary effects if rigid top-down assessment rules and blocked internal promotion pathways within organizations remain unchanged. This finding reminds civil affairs departments that talent retention cannot rely on fragmented remedial policies. Instead, a long-term institutional system is required: authorities should restructure assessment frameworks to reduce the weight of administrative paperwork, and prioritize service recipients' actual welfare outcomes as core evaluation criteria; longer procurement contract terms should also be implemented to grant organizations stable long-term operational expectations, so they can invest in structured supervision and career progression schemes. In this way, the transmission chain linking macro policies, organizational governance and individual occupational experience can be fully established [3,8].

Since the current mechanism analysis is developed mainly through literature review, future studies can adopt mixed methods. Researchers may first conduct large-scale surveys to quantify the effect size of three tiers of influencing factors, then carry out comparative interviews with high-turnover and low-turnover organizations, collecting perspectives from management, incumbent social workers and former employees. Longitudinal research spanning 2 to 3 years can also track turnover fluctuations after policy adjustments, generating robust empirical evidence for policy optimization and facilitating stable workforce development for sustainable community social services [1,4].

6. Conclusion & Future Research Directions

Via iterative review and thematic coding of 37 peer-reviewed papers, this paper sorts individual, organizational and macro governance drivers of grassroots community social workers' turnover intention. It builds a multi-dimensional analytical framework integrating JD-R Theory, Occupational Embeddedness Theory and Organizational Identity Theory. Research findings show that low compensation, occupational burnout, inadequate organizational support and imperfect governance design together cause high turnover among grassroots social workers. Existing research has multiple limitations. Scholars often conduct isolated factor analysis and pay insufficient attention to institutional contextual characteristics of China's social work system. Domestic grassroots governance differs greatly from Western institutional backgrounds, so direct application of foreign turnover research conclusions will produce mismatched policy outcomes, which further demonstrates the necessity of this context-based literature sorting work. Corresponding multi-level optimization strategies are proposed. Governance authorities need to adjust procurement and assessment mechanisms. Social work institutions should establish complete internal supervision and career promotion systems. Supportive occupational services can be delivered to ease individual burnout. This paper has an inherent limitation. All analysis only relies on a literature review without primary empirical data collection.

Literature-based analysis can reveal general theoretical associations, yet it cannot capture dynamic personal perceptions from frontline workers under real workplace constraints.

Mixed research methods are recommended for follow-up exploration. Researchers can first distribute standardized questionnaires across multiple urban and rural regions. The survey helps run quantitative testing for multi-layer driving effects proposed in this research. Researchers can then conduct comparative semi-structured interviews targeting high-turnover and low-turnover institutions. Investigators can collect viewpoints from institutional managers, incumbent social workers and resigned practitioners. Longitudinal tracking spanning two to three years is also feasible. Scholars can record turnover fluctuations after local governance policy updates and collect long-term empirical evidence. Regionally adaptive retention schemes can be developed on this basis. Such empirical expansion helps stabilize grassroots social work talent teams and supports high-quality development of community social work services.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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