

2023

Professional Discretion of Child Protective Services Investigators in Foster Care Placements

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Leonard Fikes

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Professional Discretion of Child Protective Services Investigators in Foster Care

Placements

by

Leonard Fikes

MLS, North Carolina Central University, 2019

BS, Fayetteville State University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

Families of color in North Carolina have been disproportionately affected in the child welfare system, particularly in the foster care system. The purpose of this qualitative research study examined the discretionary powers of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators and how they interpreted and applied child welfare policies that disproportionately impacted African American families from marginalized, underrepresented communities. Guided by Wallander and Molander's professional discretion as the framework, this research expanded the current literature and increased awareness of racial disproportionality and the continued disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system, especially foster care placements. The central research question explored how CPS investigators used discretionary powers to interpret and apply child welfare policies in foster care placements. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants with at least two years of experience in CPS in North Carolina and semistructured interviews with eight CPS investigators. Data were analyzed through the development of coding and themes. The key results of the study included that professional discretion in decision-making was hindered by a lack of resources, training, funding, rereferrals, and worker burnout. The recommendations of the study included informing child welfare professionals about the agency's challenges and expectations to enhance workplace culture using service-modifiable factors. The impact of this study on positive social change included using an antiracist lens to explore policy, practice, and organizational culture, holding stakeholders accountable for achieving transformation.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study	1
Introduction	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Research Question	5
Theoretical Foundation.....	6
Nature of the Study.....	8
Definitions	9
Assumptions and Methods	10
Scope and Delimitations.....	12
Limitations.....	14
Significance	15
Summary.....	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review	17
Introduction	17
Literature Search Strategy	17
Theoretical Foundation.....	18
Conceptual Framework	20
Analysis of Professional Discretion	20
Foster Care History in the United States	23

Child Welfare System and Professional Discretion	25
Child Welfare System Policy and Practice.....	25
Child Protective Services Role and Role of Child Welfare Social Workers in Placement Stability.....	28
Impact of Placement Instability	29
Caregiver Training and Intervention	30
Prevention of Placement Instability.....	30
Organizational Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement.....	31
Health and Education Services	31
Minimum Standards for Foster Homes	32
Foster Home Capacity	32
Placement Type	33
Practice Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement.....	35
Community Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement	36
Personal Factors Affecting Child Protective Service Investigations.....	37
Summary and Conclusions	39
Chapter 3: Research Method	41
Introduction	41
Research Design and Rationale	41
Role of the Researcher.....	42
Methodology.....	43
Target Population	43

Study Sample.....	44
Sampling Techniques	45
Data Collection Procedure.....	46
Instrumentation.....	47
Data Analysis Plan	49
Analysis Criteria.....	49
Issues of Trustworthiness	50
Credibility (Internal Validity).....	50
Transferability (External Validity).....	51
Dependability	51
Confirmability	51
Limitations of the Study	52
Significance	52
Ethical Considerations.....	52
Summary.....	53
Chapter 4: Results.....	54
Introduction	54
Setting of the Study	54
Demographics.....	54
Data Collection.....	55
Data Analysis.....	56
Evidence of Trustworthiness	57

Results of the Study.....	57
Theme 1: Insufficient resources for unsubstantiated or unverified cases and limited decision-making authority in service provisions for CPS investigators.....	58
Theme 2: Same cases are being referred multiple times (rereferrals).	61
Theme 3: Insufficient training in decision-making for CPS investigators and ambiguous policy definitions.....	63
Theme 4: High burnout rates – Heavy caseloads and elevated stress levels.	65
Theme 5: Insufficient Funding – The lack of financial resources in CPS agencies for essential family services.....	67
Summary.....	68
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	70
Introduction	70
Interpretation of the Findings	70
Limitations of the Study	71
Recommendations	72
Implications for Positive Social Change	73
Conclusion.....	75
References	77
Appendix A: Invitation to the Potential Participants (CPS Investigators)	93
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer	94
Appendix C: Participants’ Qualifying Form	96

Appendix D: The Official Invitation to Participate for Selected Eligible
Participants 98

Appendix E: Interview Protocol 101

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Discretionary power, a central feature of administrative authority, comes into play when the administration is called to select an option between two or more solutions and a way of balancing public and private interests (Pesce, 2020). Discretion is the power of choice: it is a way of balancing between different interests (public and private) involved; it is a means to achieve the purpose intended by the law; it is a selection of an option between two or more solutions suggested by a preliminary activity (Pesce, 2020).

Discretionary power can be given to a specific state authority solely on legal grounds that precisely determine the framework of this authorization. However, this government is by no means an illegal, arbitrary, or voluntarily decision-making body. The body has no right to create other rules or dispositions, nor, according to its own will, to change the already chosen alternative of disposition—but only to use that power to make a decision (Vitanski, 2015). Through this kind of specific alternative behavior, the state authorities can rule out the public authority in one way or another.

Policy documents and legislation clearly state the principles that guide child welfare (Fong, 2020). However, CPS investigators at the front line of children's interests establish child welfare policies on the ground through decision-making, interventions, and assessments of children's lives exposed to maltreatment. Nevertheless, these policies can be contradictory and vague due to the conflicting interests of CPS investigators and family preservation (Merritt, 2021). Whenever a policy is contradictory, for instance, if it

cannot be enacted due to financial challenges or there are several rules that investigators typically cannot keep up with, it develops a dilemma for them.

Consequently, CPS investigators may use their discretionary powers as street-level bureaucrats to handle such dilemmas, and their decisions and actions may conflict with the original policy aims (Fong, 2020). For example, in the United States, due to resource deficiencies, practices of frontline foster care caseworkers and the practice guidelines contradicted in multiple ways, which fail to attain the time limits established by the 1997 Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (FASFA) for reunification (White, 2006). I will consider the value of organizational conditions and policy aims as the beginning point to explore how child welfare staff view the policy aims attached to the legislation protecting the child welfare system (Collins et al., 2022). Since little is known about how child welfare staff view street-level policy aims, it is critical to analyze the aims.

Background

Around 151 million children across the globe are double or single orphans, most of whom are under the supervision of their remaining relatives or family members (Fong, 2020). A growing body of evidence indicates that many orphans live in kinship care; however, the caregivers are poorer, older, and usually lack resources or sources of support. Consequently, many of these children will receive inadequate care (Merritt, 2021). Information on children under supervision is usually inaccurate. Still, according to estimates, the range is between two and eight million children (about half the population of New York) under institutional care (Collins et al., 2022). Researchers have also

established that most children living in these institutions have at least one parent and family member, with all having relatives (Fong, 2020). However, these children are placed into care due to discrimination, poverty, ease of placement into care by relatives, and lack of essential services (Merritt, 2021).

According to Kokaliari et al. (2019), the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care is due to oppression and racism. For instance, African American children are removed from their homes into foster care at a rate three times that of White children (Kokaliari et al., 2019). At the same time, they are given unequal treatment compared to their White counterparts (Kokaliari et al., 2019; Sankaran et al., 2019). Unequal treatment is exhibited in the entire child welfare system beginning at reporting to reunification (Collins et al., 2022). Consequently, African American children undergo several foster care placements, stay in group homes, and are more likely to return to a different family of origin during reunification (Fong, 2020).

My goal was to provide readers with ideas and tools to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the context and behavior of CPS investigators in interpreting and applying child welfare policies. I also focused on understanding how removing children from home impacts child welfare and how such understanding can contribute to better decision-making.

Problem Statement

The specific research problem that will be addressed through this study is that there is a lack of information on the current decision-making guidance and policies, contributing to the lack of equity in services provided, which has resulted in poor African

American communities being disproportionately affected in the child welfare system, especially in foster care placements (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Garcia et al., 2016; Martin & Connelly, 2015; White, 2006). My qualitative study fills this gap by contributing knowledge to the literature for use by policymakers when developing policies and practices related to inequality and disparate treatment at numerous decision points in each investigation (Beniwal, 2017).

Discretion in decision-making is common among CPS investigators who work in foster care (Merritt, 2020). In North Carolina, there is a lack of understanding of organizational, community, and personal factors that contribute to discretion in decision-making. Despite the common issue of discretion in decision-making and the lack of understanding of organizational, community, and personal factors, few studies have been completed addressing discretion in foster care placements and the factors contributing to decision-making among CPS investigators.

Implicit bias can permeate the culture and function of administrative agencies as well. This is particularly evident when evaluating implicit bias as a function of discretion. (Beniwal, 2017). The findings of this study have the potential for social change implications as a result of CPS investigators addressing organizational, community, and personal factors that could affect decision-making in foster care placements.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine and better understand how individual CPS investigators use discretionary powers to interpret and apply child welfare

services policy on removing a child from their parent or guardian and placement in the foster care system. Policy interpretation is one of the crucial steps in using state evidence for one's purpose. Social and humanities experts relying on policies as evidence in line with state regulations pave the way for their professional credibility. However, it depends on the interpretation based on the skills, training, and experience they have gained over their lifetime (Apollonio & Bero, 2017).

Interpretive discourse approach (IDA) is an inherent phenomenon in the policymaking process where the policymakers use specific human actions, values, and ideas and share them in two-way communication (Wash, 2020). Research plays a crucial role when interpreting a policy and its effects on a specific population to which it is targeted. The natural meaning interpretation and the intricacies of policies might be easily understandable to outside people, like CPS investigators, who must use those policies for their research and knowledge enhancement in foster care placement.

Interpreting policy is unique because a CPS investigator's skills for analyzing the policies and finding their meaning would be based on their distinct understanding capabilities. With research, a weightage is provided to the cost-benefit analysis of the policy that would affect the child placement tactics and real-time decision-making, thereby becoming clearer and defining the consequences more vividly.

Research Question

The following research question frames the study: How do Child Protective Services investigators use discretionary powers to interpret and apply child welfare policies in foster care placements?

Theoretical Foundation

Several factors at the agency level, such as institutional racism, disengagement from the community served, resource availability, organizational infrastructure, and culture, can affect the quality-of-service provision and frequency (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Besides, the child welfare system's characteristics may also impact outcomes and services for children of diverse ethnicities and races. That, in turn, influences case outcomes for children from overrepresented ethnic and racial groups (Kokaliari et al., 2019).

CPS investigators use their discretionary power to apply and interpret child welfare policies when making decisions on foster care placements. This decision-making process is influenced by various factors, such as case-specific factors, the caseworker's background and experiences, the policies and procedures of the agency, and community laws and attitudes (Baumann et al., 2013).

The outcome of the decision to substantiate or remove a child from their home may vary between different states or even counties due to differences in laws, procedures, and agency culture, among other factors (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Alternatively, it is not yet clear how these factors might interact with the child's race and ethnicity to affect the decision-making process (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). Given the longstanding and widely recognized issue of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, it is crucial to understand the role of a child's race and the local community in the decision-making process. Prior studies have suggested several explanations for these disparities,

but further research is needed to establish the full extent and nature of these effects (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

CPS investigators exercise discretionary powers when interpreting and applying child welfare policies in foster care placements, leading to racial disparities in involvement. It is suggested that differences in economic deprivation, single parenthood, education, health, and criminal justice involvement may contribute to higher rates of reporting and investigation within CPS among specific racial populations. However, this doesn't fully explain disparities in substantiation and out-of-home placement. Therefore, the focus is on individual bias and geographic clustering as alternative explanations (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

Children's participation in the foster care and protection process refers to their involvement in decision-making and being heard. Children's right to express their views is emphasized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (McTavish et al., 2022). There is a tension between safety and participation in children's involvement in the foster care process. Policy and practice are ambiguous regarding whether children are active participants or vulnerable beings in need of protection (Lee, 2016; Warming, 2006). Several studies summarize children's perspectives on their participation in foster care processes and decision-making, highlighting the importance of considering children's voices in policy and practice (McTavish et al., 2022; Smales et al., 2020; Toros, 2021; Van Bijleveld et al., 2013). Including children's voices in the foster care and protection process has intrinsic and instrumental benefits to children, practitioners, and

policymakers. Children's participation empowers them and leads to more tailored, responsive services (Toros, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020).

Nature of the Study

This qualitative approach will use the lived experiences of CPS investigators to gain insight into how they interpret and apply child welfare policies regarding foster care placement. To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design will include an interview guide with fifteen semi-structured interview questions. The data will be analyzed to identify patterns in meaning across the information to establish themes.

Since qualitative research helps gain insights and opinions from the respondents, the whole experience revolves around their understanding of the context they have been through. The phenomena under examination would be related to their personal experience, which is the central part of the qualitative research to unearth. Sometimes, explaining personal events and opinions generates a chronological order of incidents that helps interpret why and how things happened by explaining a relationship between the variables (Austin, 2014). For example, when the first situation occurred, the second happened as a reaction. It would create an interpreted picture of the event and express the positionality of the circumstances in a detailed manner.

The same stands true for qualitative research for CPS investigators. The primary intention is to record their experiences while interpreting policies and how the process helped them in foster care placement. Understanding different contexts and generalizing the available information for the selected population is where academic knowledge of

previous years and scientific training comes into play. Their interpretive capabilities clarify the policies' ambiguities or support simplifying the detection of policy loopholes. The framing of qualitative questions could be such that instigate those responses in a structured manner so that the ending influence creates a magnified perspective for the research.

Definitions

Antiracism: The active process of identifying and challenging racism by changing attitudes, policies and practices, organizational structures, and systems, with the goal of redistributing power in an equitable way (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Child maltreatment: When a child is still a minor, which is under the age of 18 years, he might receive physical and mental abuse in the form of sexual and psychological abuse, ignorance from their care providers, and even parents, referred to as child maltreatment (World Health Organization, 2020). It could involve any possible harm to their health and survival that could hurt their dignity and self-esteem throughout their later years.

Disproportionality: The overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared with its percentage in the total population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Foster care: The term foster care describes a welfare system operated by the government or social agencies. The system is designed to temporarily place minors who cannot live with their biological parents (Ryan et al., 2016).

Kinship Care: Children are placed in the home of relatives (Swanke et al., 2016).

Street-level bureaucracy (SLB): It is the frontline social workers' discretion and personal understanding of government policies and their relevancy in enactment when certain perplexing situations arise (Cooper et al., 2015).

Assumptions and Methods

The research question of this study is explored within qualitative research, characterized by inductive reasoning and topic specificity (Walters, 2001). Inductive reasoning allows researchers to gain insights into the thoughts and experiences of their subjects rather than testing preconceived notions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This approach helps to establish an empathetic and reflective relationship with the subjects (Walters, 2001).

The methodology used in qualitative research evolves as data is collected, and a detailed set of procedures may only be described after the study has been completed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The dynamic nature of the research process can result in the modification of theory and the redefinition of research questions (Walters, 2001). Moreover, validity in qualitative research is threatened by researcher bias and the researcher's influence on the setting or individual studied (Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, to address researcher bias, the researchers must report potential biases and explain how personal values may affect data collection and analysis (Walters, 2001). To understand the researcher's influence on the subject, it is essential to acknowledge and use "reactivity" effectively (Maxwell, 1996).

Qualitative research is topic-specific and focuses on studying the object of research in its own right and importance, with results not generalizable to other

populations (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The credibility of a qualitative study can be increased through prolonged engagement with the subject or setting, persistent observation, triangulation of data, peer debriefing, and the use of multiple sources of evidence (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These techniques can help to control for validity issues in qualitative research (Walters, 2001). Moreover, to maintain the credibility of findings and interpretations, it is crucial to pay close attention to establishing trustworthiness and to be aware of personal biases and subjectivity (Glesne, 1999; Walters, 2001). The research process should also help increase awareness of how subjectivity may affect findings.

While some qualitative researchers aim for universal statements about social processes rather than commonality, others use the grounded theory approach and prioritize the potential impact on other settings and subjects over replicability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Walters, 2001). The validity of generalization in qualitative research should be considered with small and unique study samples (Maxwell, 1996). Internal generalization refers to the generalizability of a conclusion within a setting or group, while external generalizability is not a critical issue as findings are topic-specific (Maxwell, 1996). Researchers seek to develop theories and practices that may be applied elsewhere rather than results that can be replicated (Walters, 2001).

To ensure quality results and accuracy, the research must control validity using inductive reasoning and being topic-specific, avoiding biases through careful planning and constant vigilance (Glesne, 1999; Walters, 2001). Moreover, to control for validity in the interpretive process, Glesne (1999) suggests seeking assistance from others and

sharing working drafts of findings with participants (Glesne, 1999; Walters, 2001). This can help ensure that information has been correctly interpreted and allows both researcher and participant to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts studied. Lastly, the positivist viewpoint highlights the limitations of generalizations based on a limited respondent pool. Still, the case study approach can deepen the understanding of similar cases and uncover new concepts.

In conclusion, the research question is approached through qualitative research, which focuses on gaining insights into the subjects' experiences and establishing an empathetic relationship. The dynamic nature of qualitative research can result in theory modification and redefinition of research questions. Still, credibility can be increased through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and attention to trustworthiness and subjectivity. The validity of generalization is not a critical issue in qualitative research, but researchers aim to develop theories and practices that may be applied elsewhere. To control for validity in the interpretive process, the researchers can seek assistance and share working drafts with participants. To ensure quality results and accuracy, the research must control validity using inductive reasoning, being topic-specific, and avoiding biases through careful planning and constant vigilance.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study infuses the investigation into the discretion of CPS investigators for interpreting the policy to place children in foster homes. The current decision-making criteria on which the CPS investigators rely and the use of their intuition for the placement of such children need to be highlighted. The focus is on interpreting

and applying government policies. The focus is on racial discrimination, as mentioned in the problem statement, which is the overrepresentation of African American children in foster homes. Previous researchers found that the overrepresentation of African American children is subtly due to their socioeconomic status, specifically their low-income families. It is the same assumption mentioned in the current research. Thus, the scope is chosen to evaluate the current situation considering the theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Also, the scope of the study includes theories that would be slightly connected with the research and others that would be omitted for studying child maltreatment and providing child protection. There is a perceived connection between attachment theory with the child maltreatment factor as there are four styles under which a child's attachment with their caregiver and relationship would be defined (Robinson & Breaux, 2019). The four styles would remain under consideration when studying the street-level bureaucracy theory, the decision-making theory, and the comprehension of CPS investigators in identifying the children for placement in foster homes. On the other hand, social learning theory might be excluded as the learning behavior of abuse of the child's parents or any caregiver living with them is not essential for the research question here (Robinson & Breaux, 2019). It might not be significant to investigate whether the parents' abusive behavior was learned previously when studying child maltreatment and the consequent interpretation of CPS investigators for spotting the right child for foster care placement.

Generally, it is known that the sample size should be 10% of the entire population to be an accurate representation and conclusive generalization of the research results (Tools 4 Dev, n.d.). Keeping the sample size of eight for CPS investigators responding to interviews needs further probing and is a delimitation of the scope. The delimitations include a specific race and the sample size for conducting semi-structured interviews.

The research results could be generalized and transferred to all CPS investigators worldwide or even regionally within the United States before they make their interpretations about any race or ethnicity. It could save them from the biasedness that might come from the street-level bureaucracy element and attempt to pose a correct approach towards their finding for child maltreatment and placement in foster homes.

Limitations

The government statistics website Statista.com (2022) data showed that more white children also lie in foster care than black and Hispanic children. The limitation of this study is not considering why white children are placed in foster care, the street-level bureaucracy element in making decisions in the light of government policies, and the overrepresentation of racial/non-racial children in foster homes. Although the study has been narrowed down to develop a straightforward research question, it has still not considered the discretion of CPS investigators for other cultural groups.

The issue related to this omission could affect the generalization of results and transferability. The study might appear biased in terms of focusing only on the black community that has already been a victim of racial discrimination for years. The reasonable possible measures that could be used to address the limitations could be an

addition to questions where CPS investigators could be asked whether they have worked with other racial groups or only the black community. It could be asked whether they have felt more need to place Black/African American children in foster care based on their discretion or whether they felt the same for Hispanics or white children.

Significance

The study intends to contribute to the advanced knowledge of the discipline where high maltreatment risks must be detected promptly. The children at risk of actual abuse and maltreatment should not stay neglected, while the overrepresentation of racial minorities could lead to obscure results. The deserving children must be placed in proper care, for which an emphasis on the two most important responsibilities of CPS investigators is essential in this study. The roles inculcate the substantiated evidence of selecting the child as being maltreated and removal of the same child from his original home (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). Assessing the actual credibility of the cases would be a major decision based solely on the CPS investigators' discretion during their practice. This would implicate a positive social change as the children in dire need of placement would be correctly identified instead of those who fall in the category of first attachment style (secure attachment) from the attachment theory, irrespective of racial segregation.

Summary

The disproportionality of African American children in foster care placements has stirred concern for the government and the societies that enforce more substantial responsibilities upon the shoulders of CPS investigators. It would teach the discretion styles, possible bias, and the factors they use when considering a child for foster care

placement. Determining genuine child maltreatment and not socioeconomic or other pertinent factors for likely racial misrepresentation needs in-depth scrutiny. The scarce data leads this research to gain insights from a selected sample of CPS investigators for answering the formulated research question.

Detecting a genuine case of child maltreatment and keeping an eye on the assumption from doing so direct CPS investigators in a major dimension that would lead to concisely interpreting the policies. Assumptions play an integral role in the entire process since they subtly lead to the perceptions and, thus, the interpretive capabilities of CPS investigators to judge the policies of the selected population that would be affected by them. It becomes a heavy responsibility of the CPS investigators not to mix their opinions with assumptions and be clear about what is intended for the social welfare of the maltreated children and their future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter focuses on professional discretion in the child welfare system, particularly on foster care placements. The conceptual framework used in this study was developed by Wallander and Molander (2014) and is centered on professional discretion. The literature review discusses various factors that influence the decision-making process of CPS investigators, including agency policies, community laws, caseworker experiences, and attitudes. The review also highlights the complexities of professional discretion in the child welfare system and the role of various organizational, practice, and community factors in child welfare placement.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, I used a combination of search terms, searching with keywords and exact phrases and using subject headings as the search strategies. The study's usage of keyword searching includes looking for the search terms in a reference's title and abstract (Cooper et al., 2018). I focused on empirical research related explicitly to decision-making among CPS investigators regarding foster care placements. Most of the peer-reviewed articles included are scholarly articles no older than five years; however, scholarly articles older than five years were used to provide additional insight observed by other researchers.

The databases I used to conduct the literature review included SocIndex, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, Science Direct, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online, Political Science Complete, Walden Library, and Google Scholar. The journals I used to

conduct the literature review included Public Administration Review, Policy Studies Journal, Public Administration, Science and Public Policy, and American Review of Public Administration.

Additionally, these databases and search engines assisted me in locating articles for the literature review using keywords, including *disproportionality, racism, antiracism, child welfare, foster care, disparity, underrepresentation, overrepresentation, racial bias, discretion, street-level bureaucrat, child maltreatment, and out-of-home care.*

Theoretical Foundation

CPS investigators use their discretionary power to apply and interpret child welfare policies when making decisions on foster care placements. This decision-making process is influenced by various factors, such as case-specific factors, the caseworker's background and experiences, the policies and procedures of the agency, and community laws and attitudes (Baumann et al., 2013).

The outcome of the decision to substantiate or remove a child from their home may vary between different states or even counties due to differences in laws, procedures, and agency culture, among other factors (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Alternatively, it is not yet clear how these factors might interact with the child's race and ethnicity to affect the decision-making process (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). Given the longstanding and widely recognized issue of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, it is crucial to understand the role of a child's race and the local community in the decision-making process. Prior studies have suggested several explanations for these disparities,

but further research is needed to establish the full extent and nature of these effects (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

CPS investigators exercise discretionary powers when interpreting and applying child welfare policies in foster care placements, leading to racial disparities in involvement. It is suggested that differences in economic deprivation, single parenthood, education, health, and criminal justice involvement may contribute to higher rates of reporting and investigation within CPS among specific racial populations. However, this does not fully explain disparities in substantiation and out-of-home placement. Therefore, the focus is on individual bias and geographic clustering as alternative explanations (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

Children's participation in the foster care and protection process refers to their involvement in decision-making and being heard. Children's right to express their views is emphasized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (McTavish et al., 2022). There is a tension between safety and participation in children's involvement in the foster care process. Policy and practice are ambiguous regarding whether children are active participants or vulnerable beings in need of protection (Lee, 2016; Warming, 2006). Several studies summarize children's perspectives on their participation in foster care processes and decision-making, highlighting the importance of considering children's voices in policy and practice (McTavish et al., 2022; Smales et al., 2020; Toros, 2021; Van Bijleveld et al., 2013). Including children's voices in the foster care and protection process has intrinsic and instrumental benefits to children, practitioners, and

policymakers. Children's participation empowers them and leads to more tailored, responsive services (Toros, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

Analysis of Professional Discretion

To understand professional discretion while gathering data in a child welfare system, one must be aware that discretion is a part of the continuum of practical arguments where the warrants are weakest. The force of the warrants governs reasoning in reasonable arguments and the child welfare system; the warrants may be ineffective and unspecific regarding how they should be understood, considered, and weighed. This results in discretion in the child welfare system as there is no clear rule of deduction with the same force as in logical arguments.

Professional discretion while gathering data in a child welfare system involves the combination of certain forms of information about a case with rules or warrants that support a conclusion about the nature of the situation. The combination of the description of the problem and the treatment norms or regulations leads to the decision on what action to take. Practitioners in the child welfare system, such as social workers, use clinical inference rules while considering legal rules determining a person's eligibility for benefits or services.

The strength of the warrants used in professional reasoning depends on the precision of the antecedent and the consequent. In cases where the antecedent or consequent is vague, discretion must be used to fill the gaps. Moreover, in addition to the three basic elements of data, warrant, and conclusion, Toulmin's model of argument also

includes the components of rebuttal, qualifier, and backing. The factorial survey provides opportunities to study the contents of the elements that make up a practitioner's argument. It allows for investigating agreement and disagreement between practitioners and organizations in discretionary judgments.

The discretionary space in the child welfare system refers to the potential for variation in judgments made by practitioners. Using discretion can lead to positive and negative consequences, with positive outcomes resulting from flexible decision-making and adverse consequences arising from arbitrary or biased decision-making. When studying the elements of discretionary reasoning in a factorial survey, it is important to remember that the data used may not always be sufficient or contain conflicting information, requiring the practitioner to exercise discretion. Discretion also depends on personal experiences, values, and beliefs, making it difficult to standardize professional judgment.

The role of professional discretion in the child welfare system highlights the importance of continuous professional development and training to improve the quality of judgment and decision-making. The development of guidelines, standards, and protocols can help to balance the use of discretion with accountability and consistency in the system. Professional discretion while gathering data in a child welfare system can be explored in the context of discretionary reasoning, where decisions made by professionals are based on conditions of rebuttal and qualifiers. The conditions of rebuttal represent situations where a rule is not applicable or less applicable, while the qualifiers express the overall strength of a rule in coming to a conclusion. This relationship can be studied

through factorial survey designs, which allow for investigation of the shared conditions of rebuttal among respondents and the overall strength of a rule.

The magnitude of the standardized regression coefficient represents the impact of a particular vignette dimension on the conclusion and provides the force of each rule. The strength of a rule, or the qualifier, is not easily specified and partly depends on the researchers involved in the study. However, the qualifier must also consider potential exceptions to the rule, which are represented by conditions of rebuttal. Based on the main effect of a rule and exceptions, the researchers decide on an adverb that appropriately represents the strength of the rule, ranging from strong to weak.

The analysis of variation in discretionary reasoning is possible through factorial survey data. It mainly focuses on exploring disagreement in conclusions and using rules in decision-making. The research also aims to understand if this variation is due to differences between individual practitioners or subgroups of practitioners or the work context. The interpretation of the agreement in discretionary reasoning is based on the fixed part of the multilevel model. At the same time, the analysis of disagreement uses the multilevel analysis to examine the unexplained variance. This unexplained variance is decomposed into variance components at different levels of the design, such as individual practitioners or work contexts. When unexplained variance is linked to the intercept or regression slope, it is possible to conclude that the average claims or use of rules vary systematically at the specified level.

This kind of analysis provides opportunities for interpreting the link between the child welfare system and professional discretion in a more detailed and nuanced way. By

exploring the variance in discretionary reasoning, the study can gain insights into how work context and individual practitioners impact decision-making in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the study of the relationship between the child welfare system and discretion can provide valuable information for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the system. By understanding the factors that influence decision-making, the child welfare system can be adapted to serve better its intended purpose of protecting and supporting children.

Foster Care History in the United States

Foster care in the United States has a long history, dating back to the 1500s when it was first used as a means for wealthy families to provide shelter and services for poor or orphaned children (Jones, 2018). Since then, foster care has evolved into a form of care designed to support children unable to stay with their families due to safety or well-being concerns. The most significant change to federal child welfare policy in the last 20 years was the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), which significantly impacted foster care (Lindsey, 2001).

The foster care system is primarily run at the state level, and states have varying laws and regulations. Foster care has been impacted by various pieces of legislation over the years, including the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, 1988 Abandoned Infants Assistance Act, and the 1994 Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Moreover, in 1999, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was established to provide funding for youth over 14 in foster care. More recent changes have aimed to offer more services and opportunities for

foster care adolescents and address the systemic barriers that keep many of them stuck in poverty (Glaze, 2020).

Every child's experience in foster care is unique, as evident in the 2017 AFCARS Report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In 2017, there were 442,995 children in foster care, with 22% being in care for 1 to 5 months, 21% for 6 to 11 months, and 15% for 12 to 17 months. The average stay in foster care was 20.1 months. The most common reasons for exit were reunification with family or adoption, with 49% reunified and 24% adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

The critical goal of foster care is to reunite children with their parents or primary caregivers, but statistics show that this is not always achievable. Children in foster care often move from home to home, some moving as many as 15 times or others more than 15 times (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Standard placements for children in foster care include nonrelative foster family homes (45%), relative foster family homes (32%), institutions (7%), group homes (6%), trial home visits (5%), pre-adoptive homes (4%), those who have run away (1%), and supervised independent living (1%) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Throughout its history, foster care has led to diverse outcomes for children. While some studies have found positive effects of foster care compared to parental care, others have documented negative effects, particularly for children facing severe deprivation or when state intervention is overly aggressive (Roehrkasse, 2021). Moreover, Foster care prevalence is unequal among U.S. children of different races and ethnicities. This can

result from differences in child maltreatment prevalence or from disparities in the officials' propensity to intervene in families of other races (Roehrkasse, 2021).

Lastly, despite its significance and inequality, data limitations throughout foster care history in the United States have resulted in critical gaps in scholarly knowledge. A recent study has expanded the historical scope and demographic detail of previously available data on U.S. children in foster care, creating new opportunities for research on the policy causes of child welfare (Roehrkasse, 2021).

Child Welfare System and Professional Discretion

Maintaining professional discretion while gathering child welfare system data is complex and nuanced. Discretion is a crucial aspect of practical arguments in the child welfare system, where the warrants used to support a conclusion may be weak and unspecific. The combination of information about a case and the legal rules or treatment norms that apply to the situation leads to decisions on what action to take. The use of discretion in the child welfare system depends on the accuracy of the information, personal experiences, and values, making it difficult to standardize professional judgment.

Child Welfare System Policy and Practice

The child welfare system policy and practice are thoroughly studied by the Health and Human Services (HHS) (2020) with a focus on the investigations conducted by the CPS. CPS investigations offer a powerful lens to understand state intervention into families, as it directly impacts millions of families each year. A significant proportion of children nationwide, particularly Black children, experience CPS investigations by age 18

(McKim et al., 2017). Poor, Black, and Native American families are disproportionately affected by CPS (HHS, 2020), making contact with the system a common experience in marginalized communities (Fong, 2019b). The child welfare system's focus on Black mothers has been compared to the criminal justice system's focus on Black men, as both systems are shaped by racialized and gendered constructions of parental fitness (Fong, 2020).

Reports of child maltreatment often involve families facing numerous challenges, including material hardships, systemic racism, accumulated trauma, and other adversities (Fong, 2017). CPS's definition of maltreatment encompasses adversities like substance use, mental health issues, and domestic violence, often structured by racism, sexism, and classism. Hence, the child welfare system is part of broader systems like criminal justice and welfare that address problems arising from adversities (Fong, 2020).

The intervention process by CPS starts with a report made to a state hotline. Most of these reports come from professionals legally bound to report suspected maltreatment cases (HHS, 2020). CPS social workers conduct evaluations of the situation, offer advice and referrals, and manage cases in the short term. They use the information collected to assess the potential danger and make decisions about future supervision, verification of abuse claims, and removing children from their homes. In most cases, 83% of the abuse claims are found unfounded, and 95% of children remain home after the investigation (HHS, 2020). Even when the claims are not substantiated, the information gathered during the investigation is recorded in state databases for future risk evaluations and decision-making (Fong, 2020).

If the CPS decides to continue supervision, parents are monitored for involvement in programs like family therapy and substance abuse treatment, which contracted private agencies typically provide. If children are deemed to be in an unsafe environment, CPS can request court intervention and place the children in foster care to reunite the family. If reunification is impossible, the court can be asked to terminate the parental rights permanently. The rehabilitation ideals of CPS are blended with regulative and authoritative powers, which reflects the broader governance of poverty in the U.S. (Fong, 2020).

A significant role in shaping parenting practices is played by the intersection of race, gender, and class. Mothers are particularly aware of the scrutiny they face from authorities, including CPS, in the child welfare system, which is a significant area of contact between families and the state and an important topic for research on the family. Despite this, less attention has been given to the systems and practices of the surveilling systems, leading to the need for research on the mechanisms creating mothers' fears and (dis)engagement of the systems (Fong, 2020).

To better understand child maltreatment investigations, we need to examine the social and institutional processes through which family situations become child maltreatment reports and consider the constraints and aspirations of the frontline bureaucrats who file reports and their moral considerations over legal justifications (Fong, 2020). Research on child maltreatment investigations often focuses on the characteristics of children, families, and neighborhoods associated with CPS involvement.

Therefore, future studies need to illuminate the state's widespread intervention in families and shed light on how families come under CPS's purview and how this shapes the ensuing surveillance. Research must attend to this front end of the child welfare system, especially given its reach and the race and class disparities that emerge, primarily since qualitative research provides valuable insight into the child welfare system but often neglects the front door of the system - the maltreatment reporting that launches agency involvement (Fong, 2020).

Child Protective Services Role and Role of Child Welfare Social Workers in Placement Stability

Placement stability is a crucial issue for adolescents in foster care, with disruptions being more common among this population (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). Aggressive behavior, family contact, difficulties adapting to new placements, and being older with conduct disorder can all contribute to placement instability (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). Children not placed with relatives also face a higher likelihood of experiencing placement disruptions (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018).

Physical and sexual violence was identified as a strong reason for caretakers seeking to move children from their homes in a study on the causes of placement disruptions (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018). Placement stability is meant to be provided to foster children, but in reality, it is rare among them, especially for those with many risk factors before entering foster care (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018; Fallesen, 2014).

Impact of Placement Instability

Foster children's behaviors can be affected by placement instability. Contrary to the expectations that removing a child from high-risk environments would decrease risky behaviors, placement instability may increase problematic behaviors among foster children (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018; Stott, 2012). Substance use is more likely among youth with a history of placement instability (Stott, 2012).

The negative impact of placement instability on brain development should also be considered in understanding the poor outcomes and consequences for adolescents in foster care (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018). While maltreatment already negatively impacts brain development (Harden et al., 2016), the additional impact of multiple placement changes for children who have experienced maltreatment still lacks understanding (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018).

The stability of a child's placement has a crucial impact on their brain development, according to a study by Fisher et al. (2013). The authors found that disrupted brain development can result in poor executive functioning and lead to issues such as substance abuse and behavioral disorders. However, children who have experienced maltreatment still have the potential for positive changes within their brains through neural plasticity. Providing an enriched environment is the key to achieving these positive changes (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018; Fisher et al., 2013). Moreover, multiple placement changes can also damage a child's emotional well-being, making it difficult for them to form trusting relationships (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018; Fawley-King &

Snowden, 2012). Such changes can cause an emotional shutdown, loss of friends and personal belongings, and separation from siblings, leading to psychological issues.

Caregiver Training and Intervention

To address disruptive behaviors in foster children, foster parents need special training and mental health interventions (Semanchin Jones et al., 2016). A “goodness of fit” and “feeling of closeness” between the child and the foster parent can enhance placement stability, and foster parents play a crucial role in improving outcomes for foster youth (Semanchin Jones et al., 2016). It is important to support new foster parents and help them feel valued in creating more favorable outcomes (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018).

An evaluation of a foster parent training program called KEEP showed a significant decrease in child behavior problems among participants but no substantial change in caregiver stress levels (Greeno et al., 2016). The program aims to help caregivers develop skills to address behavioral issues and increase placement stability and is delivered in a sixteen-week group setting where caregivers can learn and practice new skills in a supportive environment (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018).

Prevention of Placement Instability

The stability of child placements in the foster care system has been identified as a crucial issue (Fallessen, 2014). Predictive risk models that consider the child’s characteristics and the social worker’s experience can be implemented to tackle this problem (Fallessen, 2014). The Parent Daily Report (PDR) Checklist is another tool that can be used to anticipate disruptions and provide the necessary support services (Delgado

& Fuerte, 2018). Stable placements are more likely to occur when children are integrated into the foster care environment and when their parents are involved in the placement process. Foster parents who are nurturing, motivated, and involved also play a protective role in ensuring placement stability. Multiple placement changes can lead to many problems for foster youth, including educational difficulties and lower academic achievements. To reduce placement changes and improve outcomes for foster youth, it is essential to understand the factors contributing to placement stability (Delgado & Fuerte, 2018).

Organizational Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement

Various organizational factors can affect child welfare placement (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Key factors and opportunities for improved outcomes in federal policy for children in foster care have been outlined in this section.

Health and Education Services

Children in foster care are qualified for Medicaid coverage, which provides access to essential health services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Despite this, many providers may not accept Medicaid patients, posing a challenge for foster care children with more health problems than their peers (Holgash & Heberlein, 2019). Placement instability also hinders effective healthcare as it may delay the identification and treatment of health concerns (Font & Gershoff, 2020).

Agencies can enhance the quality of care by arranging services in the new placement and transferring medical and educational records before the child is moved. Providing a more comprehensive range of placements within communities can also allow

children to retain their service providers despite changes in placement (Font & Gershoff, 2020).

Minimum Standards for Foster Homes

Federal policy requires criminal and child maltreatment background checks for prospective foster parents (Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, 2006). To address concerns over state licensing procedures, a set of National Model Foster Home Licensing Standards has been released by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (2019b). These standards focus on the home's safety and the foster parents' fitness and prohibit physical or degrading punishment, illegal substance use, and excessive legal substance use (Font & Gershoff, 2020).

Organizational factors significantly impact child welfare placement, as evidenced by the requirements set forth by the ACF standards. The standards mandate that agencies perform criminal and child maltreatment checks on potential caregivers and prevent individuals with recent convictions for child abuse-related or violent crimes from being licensed. However, there is no prohibition on individuals convicted of lesser crimes or substantiated for child maltreatment through a CPS case. This lack of restrictions raises concerns about the safety of vulnerable children who may be placed with individuals with a history of maltreatment (Block & Williams, 2019; Font & Gershoff, 2020).

Foster Home Capacity

Challenges in recruitment and retention, including a mismatch between the placement preferences of licensed families and the characteristics of children being placed, hinder the ability of agencies to provide high-quality placements for children in

need. Despite claims of critical shortages in foster homes, many homes go unused, and data collection on foster home capacity is limited (Chronicle of Social Change, 2018; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Wulczyn et al., 2018). More systematic data collection, such as the number of children foster homes can provide for, their age range, and special needs, could help states target their recruitment efforts more effectively (Font & Gershoff, 2020).

States have the potential to support families caring for children with high levels of physical, mental, or behavioral health problems. However, foster care reimbursement payments, which cannot compensate for the loss of paid employment and typically do not cover the cost of raising a child, can be insufficient for families who need to provide a high level of care and attend various appointments (Hardesty, 2018). This highlights the need for more support for families in providing the necessary care for these children.

Placement Type

The federal government's policies on child welfare placement, as reflected in federal laws, including the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), prioritize kinship care over congregate care. A belief drives this preference for children's best interests and the need to use limited resources effectively. Kinship care is necessary to accommodate many children entering foster care, and congregate care is seen as a last option, only to be used when necessary, so long as it does not compromise the safety and well-being of children (Font & Gershoff, 2020).

When a relative is suitable, meets health and safety standards, and ideally has an existing relationship with the child, they are a preferred choice for foster care placement.

However, the policy must also consider circumstances in which kinship care may not be in the child's best interests (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Decisions to turn down relatives for foster care placement may be based on specific circumstances, but if screening or oversight of kinship placements is inadequate, it may result in harm to children (Center for Arizona Policy, 2018; Riley, 2019).

The results of studies comparing youth in congregate care to those with similar initial characteristics in family foster homes are inconsistent, possibly due to the variable quality of both congregate and family foster care. Many youths are placed in congregate care only after unsuccessful placements in less restrictive settings, making it difficult to determine the relationship between congregate care and child psychosocial and behavioral functioning (Font & Gershoff, 2020). The FFPSA requires states to move children from congregate care to traditional family foster homes or, if necessary, to qualified residential treatment programs. This is based on the premise that many children in congregate care do not require such restrictive placement, to their detriment and at a high cost. However, the conclusions of the Children's Bureau report used as the basis for this requirement may be questionable, as the federal data used in their analysis may be significantly flawed (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Further research is needed to accurately assess children's best interests in placement decisions and the consequences of different care arrangements.

Practice Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement

The need for a new framework in child welfare is imperative due to the persistent racial disparities and the ineffectiveness of the current system in addressing them. The framework should be fundamentally antiracist, meaning it questions the motives of institutions and opposes policies that perpetuate racial inequity (Kendi, 2019). An antiracist framework involves identifying how current policies produce racial disparities and then recreating them to achieve equity and eliminate harm. This framework is not a reform but a complete recreation of the system, as stated by Dettlaff et al. (2020).

Applying antiracism in child welfare requires acknowledging that racial disparities are produced and maintained by the system's policies and practices. Eliminating these disparities requires a shift from reducing them to examining and remedying the policies that cause them (Myers et al., 2018). The policies that create racial inequity in the child welfare system include the forced separation of children from their homes. Abolishing the current child welfare system is necessary to eliminate the harm caused by this separation and to reimagine the support of child and family safety and well-being in an antiracist manner, as noted by Dettlaff et al. (2020).

The upEND movement is a collaborative effort that aims to work with organizers and activists who have already called for the abolition of the child welfare system and to reimagine new means of supporting child and family safety and well-being. The upEND movement aims to replace the current child welfare system with a new, antiracist framework that prioritizes community-based solutions to ensure the well-being and safety of children and families. This shift entails a redirection of resources toward communities.

The practice of child welfare placement is being reevaluated in light of its impact on racial inequities and its detrimental effects on the health and well-being of Black families (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Historically, forced family separation has been an integral part of systems like slavery, leading to trauma that is heightened for Black families in America. To address this, the child welfare field must consider the implications of its interventions on Black families in a racist society and recognize the harm of forced family separation.

The current model of child welfare intervention, which relies on involuntary surveillance and separation of families, stifles the development of alternative responses that do not inherently inflict harm (Dettlaff et al., 2020). A strengths-based perspective that harnesses the strengths of families and communities could be used to create proactive and vital courses of action. This would redirect funds currently used to maintain foster care to families and communities and invest in the well-being and safety of children, families, and communities. The goal is to divest from a harmful and oppressive system and prioritize the safety and well-being of all involved (Roehrkasse, 2021).

Community Factors Affecting Child Welfare Placement

Community factors have a significant impact on child welfare placements, as noted by multiple researchers (Villodas et al., 2016). Children removed from their biological homes due to abuse and neglect often have a history of trauma. Disruption can negatively affect their emotional, social, and psychological well-being (Villodas et al., 2016). The federal government has accepted the need to address these disruptions and has guided on ways to mitigate them, such as providing additional support and education to

foster parents and youths in care and greater support for caregivers working towards permanence (Alexander, 2021).

The role of foster parents in mitigating the risk of disruptive placements has been highlighted in recent research (Bernedo et al., 2016). Although the effects of placement disruptions have been documented, there is limited research exploring the experience of foster parents. One study found that foster parents felt undervalued and needed more training to handle children with behavioral issues (Alexander, 2021). Further qualitative research is required to gain a deeper understanding of placement disruptions from the foster parent's perspective and support stable placements.

Bernedo et al. (2016) found that the relationship between the caregiver and child is a significant factor in disruptive placements. The authors suggest that further research from a foster parent's perspective could provide valuable insights into this phenomenon. Foster parents have the most contact with children in out-of-home placements, and their knowledge and experiences can contribute to a better understanding of placement disruptions and how to support stable placements (Alexander, 2021; Bernedo et al., 2016).

Personal Factors Affecting Child Protective Service Investigations

According to Dr. Monique Mitchell, a professor specializing in grief and loss, the process of removal in the American CPS investigations can have a traumatic impact on children (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2009; Trivedi, 2019). Mitchell studied foster children and found that they often experience grief and ambiguity when separated from their families. The removal itself can have a profound effect on children, even if it is only a

brief event, according to a study by Trivedi (2019). The study highlights that children may perceive removal as a significant turning point that they will repeatedly revisit, leading to immense trauma.

The process of removal from a family and placement in foster care is often sudden and traumatic for children (Trivedi, 2019). Children may be taken from their homes in the middle of the night and placed into a holding center until a foster care placement is found. This can lead to minimal explanation and uncertainty for the child, who may end up sleeping in the offices of the CPS if a placement is not immediately available. Eventually, the child may be placed with strangers, in a group home, or with a relative, but the removal experience remains traumatic (Trivedi, 2019).

The impact of removal from their families on children is explored by Dr. Mitchell, highlighting the feelings of grief and ambiguity that arise. The stress that results from this separation can lead to various consequences, such as guilt, PTSD, isolation, substance abuse, anxiety, low self-esteem, and despair (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2009; Trivedi, 2019). Foster homes may not be able to accommodate multiple children, leading to the possibility of separation from siblings. This can cause additional trauma, as was found in a survey conducted by the former legal director of The Door, a youth-centered non-profit in New York. The survey revealed that over half of their clients in foster care had been split from their siblings, causing feelings of anger and loss (Trivedi, 2019).

Moreover, removed children may also be disconnected from their communities, including changing schools, leading to increased feelings of loss and isolation. In addition to being separated from their immediate families, they may also lose contact with other

relatives, friends, pets, and possessions, causing additional harm (Trivedi, 2019).

Additionally, it has been revealed that most children in foster care are ethnic minorities, with the family court being referred to as the “poor person’s court” and the child welfare system as an “apartheid institution” (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; Trivedi, 2019). The comparison of the removal of African American children to the disproportionate removal of Native American children before the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 has also been made (Trivedi, 2019).

Caseworkers in the child welfare system have been noted to hold biases against parents based on class, race, and poverty, which could impact their decisions to remove children. The sweeping discretion of case workers, coupled with the potential for harm being a basis for removal, increases the risk of subjective biases determining the fate of a child. Studies have found that racial discrimination exists throughout the child welfare proceedings, leading to minority and Black families being less likely to receive in-home services and more likely to face removal (Huggins-Hoyt et al., 2019; Hymel et al., 2018). A 2002 study by the Minnesota Department of Human Services found Black children to be five times more likely to be removed and, in 2018, still three times as likely as white children to be involved in the state’s child welfare system (Trivedi, 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

The chapter concludes that the study of professional discretion in the child welfare system is crucial to improving the protection and support of children. The study aims to contribute to the field by investigating the factors influencing professional discretion in the child welfare system and promoting better outcomes for children in

foster care. The review highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence decision-making in child welfare, including the impact of race and ethnicity. The review also emphasizes the importance of placement stability and community-based solutions in the child welfare system and the need for a new framework that prioritizes these issues.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This qualitative study aims to provide readers with ideas and tools to enhance their understanding of the lived experiences of CPS investigators in interpreting and applying foster care placement policies. I, the researcher investigated how CPS investigators used discretionary powers in making decisions to remove children from home and their interpretation of how this impacted child welfare. This chapter includes the research design, sampling procedures, threats to validity, ethical guidelines related to the study, methodology, and data collection and analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

The research approach selected for this study is hermeneutical phenomenology. The phenomenological approach was theorized and conceptualized by Husserl in 1931 and focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences and how they interpret those experiences (Alase, 2017). The transcendental approach to phenomenology focused on understanding lived experiences with no focus on how participants interpret those experiences (Alase, 2017). However, this study used hermeneutical phenomenology, which sought to understand the experiences of CPS officials in interpreting and applying child welfare policies in foster care placements and their interpretation of how organizational, community, and personal factors contributed to the risk of foster care placements and child maltreatment.

Hermeneutical phenomenology is appropriate for the study as it provides a means to gain insights into the experiences of CPS investigators as they exist, devoid of

preconception, bias, and external meaning (Alase, 2017). By investigating the personal lived experiences of participating CPS officials, the study obtained a holistic or wholesome understanding of the research phenomenon (discretion in applying policy), allowing the researcher to make more informed determinations.

Role of the Researcher

I, the researcher, sought to obtain insider information, so finding CPS investigators who would volunteer to participate may be challenging. This could be prompted by fear of violating work standards for the various agencies for which they work. I assumed an observer-as-participant role, where I served as observer more than participant (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). I have never worked with child welfare or interacted with CPS officials. As such, a full observer role, where there was no rapport and relationship between the researcher and participants before the actual research, might be ineffective.

To build rapport and familiarize with the target population, I posted on social media an invitation to participate to interested CPS investigators to explain the research objectives and encourage them to participate. However, interactions with participants will be brief enough to build rapport and for respondents to adjust to the researcher's presence (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This enhanced my access to an insider's view while ensuring neutrality and objectivity. The participants were fully aware that they were part of a research study, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure that participants acted as naturally as possible

during the study, I used this initial contact to understand their background, obtain their ideas, and explain their role in the research.

Before this research, I had no professional, supervisory, or personal relationships with participants and did not foresee any issues related to objectivity, neutrality, or power imbalances. However, all qualitative studies lend themselves to a risk of researcher bias resulting from their less structured, open-ended, and exploratory nature (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), qualitative researchers “find what they want to find, and then they write up their results” (p. 275). Thus, the risk of my perspectives affecting how I conducted research and interpreted data was significant.

Reflexivity guides the qualitative researcher to identify potential sources of bias and take action to address the same to ensure the credibility of their study findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). To minimize this risk, I integrated participant feedback, which involved discussing the interpretations and conclusions with participants to obtain their insights and verification (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In addition, I submitted the interpretations and findings to the peer review process, which required the presentation of solid evidence to support interpretations and open avenues for additional insights and critique from experts (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Methodology

Target Population

The target population for this study will be CPS investigators in North Carolina. A sample of eight CPS investigators within North Carolina were recruited for this study.

The sample size of the participants was appropriate for this study because it was manageable to ensure pertinent data was obtained. Saturation is vital to maintain the quality of information being delivered. Repetitive information is not beneficial to a research study; therefore, saturation creates a point conducive to determining sample size with quality data for research and interview protocol (Saunders et al., 2018).

Study Sample

Guidelines for determining nonprobabilistic sample sizes are virtually nonexistent. Purposive samples are the most used form of nonprobabilistic sampling, and their size typically relies on the concept of “saturation,” or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data (Guest et al., 2016). I determined that eight interviews would be needed to set a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability with the data set. I began recruitment once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved collecting data. I joined several professional groups, such as Child Welfare, Child Protection and Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) group. Also, I joined the National Association of Social Worker (NASW) North Carolina Chapter and posted flyers on their social media homepages during the recruitment period.

The participants for this research were open to any religion, ethnicity, age, gender, or political affiliation. Open-ended questions were asked to avoid any bias that may exist. Alkash & Al-Dersi (2017) suggested using open-ended questions when conducting interviews to ensure participants expressed their viewpoints authentically and openly.

Eligible participants had access to a smartphone or computer, as interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform. They were able to communicate effectively in English since I am monolingual in English. The study did not plan to engage a translator, as translation may have interfered with the flow of interviews. Without a translator, non-English speakers were excluded from the study.

Sampling Techniques

Convenience snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. According to Jager et al. (2017), the convenience snowball sampling method was the most efficient. It yielded excellent results due to the ability to select potential participants who provided imperative data. Convenience snowball sampling allowed the participants to be part of a study instead of feeling obligated. Providing this type of sampling method lets essential information be delivered, allowing for an increased understanding of decision-making by CPS investigators.

Access to participants was gained by posting a request for participants through social media and networking forums. In the first step of participant recruitment, I sent an invitational post (Appendix A: Invitation to Potential Participants). The post communicated the problem the study sought to address, the study objectives, and the expected benefits. I also post a recruitment flyer marketing the study alongside the invitational post. (Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer). The flyer communicated the eligibility criteria to market the study further. An informed consent form was sent if the potential participant agreed to participate.

Those interested in participating provided their email addresses and contacts during the session. I sent a qualifying form (Appendix C: Participants' Qualifying Form) with the eligibility criteria to all interested respondents asking them to confirm that they met all the set criteria.

I made phone calls to the respondents selected for the sample to confirm whether they were still willing to participate and agreed on the interview date. Interviews were conducted via Zoom. An official invitation to participate (Appendix D: Invitation to Participate) was sent via email, and participants were required to sign, indicating their consent, and scanned the signed copy back to the researcher for filing.

Data Collection Procedure

According to Gallifa (2018), phenomenological studies require one-to-one interactions between participants and the researcher to enable the latter to understand the participants' lived experiences and interpretations. This called for active listening and interaction between the parties, with an objective mindset, to ensure that I accurately captured the reality in participants' lived experiences (Gallifa, 2018). The study employed semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method in line with these provisions. Semistructured interviews were appropriate for this study as they provided a means to obtain in-depth descriptions of participants' lived experiences while ensuring that the discussion remained focused and yielded comparable responses across participants.

However, to collect information on how participants interpret their lived experiences, I will use a series of 10-15 open-ended questions. Open-ended questions

provided a platform for open communication between me and the respondents, allowing for more in-depth exchanges and gathering as much information as possible (Seidman, 2013). The interviews were collected via the Zoom platform on the agreed dates as set out in the signed consent form.

The interviews gathered data about policies applicable in foster care placement in North Carolina, personal experiences in applying and interpreting these policies in decision-making, the role of discretion in policy implementation, challenges hindering effective policy implementation, the influence of race in placement decisions, and the meanings that participants drew from their experiences (Hall & Roussel, 2020). I conducted all interviews myself, and I projected that each interview would take 45-60 minutes to complete. The recording feature on Zoom was used to record the interview proceedings, and if need be, I sent the recordings to participants for verification before transcription began. At the end of the analysis phase, participants received a copy of the preliminary findings for member checking, which communicated the study's findings and conclusions.

Instrumentation

The chief data collection instrument was an interview guide/protocol (Appendix: E Interview Protocol) with 8-10 open-ended questions. I developed the interview protocol from the research question. Studies in this area were limited, and none focused on obtaining CPS investigators' lived experiences in implementing policy and applying discretion in foster-care decisions involving children from different races. Thus, the

instruments available from existing studies did not adequately serve the aims of this study. This compelled me to develop a new interview protocol.

For this research, I collected the data by facilitating an interview using the interview protocol. I developed the interview protocol based on the research question. Open-ended questions were used throughout the interview, which had the ability to obtain information on each participant's level of experience that guided the interview on the different levels of expertise. I obtained permission from the CPS investigators by asking them to complete an informed consent form.

Boateng et al. (2018) provided crucial insights on developing effective interview questions and survey items. They presented a series of steps that guided identifying the study's domain/attribute/construct, generating items, ensuring content validity, and interpreting pretest results. I used the measures presented by Boateng et al. (2018) to develop and design items for the interview protocol.

As the instrument has not been deployed in a study before, it will be prudent to assess it for content validity. Boateng et al. (2018) defined content validity as the extent to which interview questions or survey items measure what I presumed that they would measure. To ensure content validity, I submitted the developed interview protocol for expert valuation, as Boateng et al. (2018) suggested. The authors defined expert judges as potential users of an instrument who are highly knowledgeable about scale development or the domain of interest in the study (Boateng et al., 2018). For this study, I engaged as expert judges, my Chair and Committee member, who have conducted research studies and participated in numerous peer reviews. The expert judges assessed the developed

instrument for content validity and made recommendations for improvement before the actual research.

Data Analysis Plan

The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved reading through the data to identify patterns in meaning across the information and emergent themes. The thematic analysis includes the active process of reflexivity, where the researcher's subjective experience carries a key role in deriving meaning from the data. This study used thematic analysis because it was a flexible approach to qualitative research that allowed researchers to derive new concepts and insights from the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Moreover, a thematic analysis will be relatively easy for a student learning to conduct research.

Analysis Criteria

The analysis process began with transcribing responses from recorded Zoom calls. I, the researcher, transcribed the data verbatim. I will reread the transcripts while listening to the recorded calls to ensure I accurately captured all details. To minimize researcher bias in transcription, participants received their transcripts to verify their validity before the data is analyzed. Queries raised by participants about the accuracy of the transcripts was addressed, and the specific transcript was only admitted for analysis once the parties reached common ground.

The qualitative software ATLAS.ti and Rev was used to analyze the data presented in the transcripts. The software coded the data and broke it into themes based on patterns and trends in the text. Subsequently, I reviewed and revised the themes to

ensure that each theme was distinct and had adequate information to support it. Similar themes were merged, while those lacking sufficient data to endorse them was eliminated from the study (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). At this point, I started formulating how to bring the themes together to form a narrative.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the extent to which users of the research findings are confident that the methods, interpretation, and data ensure the quality of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Qualitative researchers can ensure their studies are trustworthy by addressing issues around credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility (Internal Validity)

Internal validity is the degree to which the study design and procedures answer the research questions without bias (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The study uses data triangulation to enhance credibility by using various persons, methods, or data sources (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This study employed data triangulation by engaging multiple participants from different counties, which enhanced credibility as interpretations/conclusions could be corroborated (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The researcher must substantiate their choice of methods and interpretations. As part of reflexivity, I acknowledged my own risk of bias from being in the foster care system. This study was subjected to peer review to ensure that this bias did not affect my interpretations and conclusions. Both reflexivity and the peer review process enhanced the study's credibility.

Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability is the degree to which the findings or conclusions can be applied in other studies or settings (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This study enhanced transferability by selecting participants from different counties, which implied different work and demographic backgrounds (Palinkas et al., 2015). Collecting data from participants in different settings helps made the interpretations more generalizable than if all participants were from the same area.

Dependability

Dependability depends on the degree of consistency of a study's findings or the degree to which another study conducted under the same circumstances and using the same methods would yield the same interpretation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This study achieved dependability through data triangulation, which collected data from varied sources (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which other researchers can confirm the findings or conclusions reached by a study. Confirmability ensures that a study's interpretations or conclusions are drawn from the gathered data, not the researcher's imagination. To enhance confirmability, this study adopted reflexivity, where I acknowledged the risk of bias resulting from their personal experiences. This study was also subjected to peer review to ensure confirmability. Peer review enhanced confirmability since I substantiated all interpretations and conclusions, minimizing the risk of bias or imagination in interpretation.

Limitations of the Study

The primary expected limitation was challenges finding CPS investigators who would volunteer to respond to my interview questions. This could be prompted by fear of violating the work standards of the various agencies for which they worked. This study addressed this limitation by organizing a questionnaire with all interested participants to explain the benefits of participating and assured them of their confidentiality and privacy provisions. The second limitation was that the sample size of eight might not represent the situation in the entire state of North Carolina. I believed that the selected sample size achieved saturation, nonetheless. However, there might be a need for future studies to replicate this research using a larger sample.

Significance

This study was significant because it provided readers with ideas and tools to enhance their understanding of the lived experiences of CPS investigators in interpreting and applying foster care placement policies. (Cénat et al., 2021). Moreover, this study added additional and up-to-date sources of ethnic and racial disparities in CPS decision-making, thus, enabling states to seek meaningful reform in child welfare systems.

Ethical Considerations

A degree of anonymity, data protection, and confidentiality must be accorded to all participants taking part in this kind of traumatic child welfare system experiences research. This study protected the identity of every participant, including any information shared with the researchers. Also, bearing in mind that the participants will be CPS investigators, this study ensured that all information shared on their earlier conduct or

decisions in line with their duty was protected and that I would not report any case to the authority (Berkman et al., 2022). Any information considered sensitive by either the researcher or the respondent would not be associated with the participant's name or any other identifier. In this regard, this study used alphabetical letters in place of names and other identifiers to identify participants.

Subsequently, participants were not asked or required to answer any questions about prior personal judgment unless the participant voluntarily declares. This study also reminded the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point they so wish. Equally, I took them through the study's data protection and confidentiality mechanisms to allow them to consent to participate (Berkman et al., 2022). Finally, all the participants signed informed consent before participating in this research.

Summary

The researcher used this chapter to identify the research methods, including the data collection, analysis, sampling, and participant recruitment procedures. I used semistructured interviews to obtain the in-depth lived experiences of eight CPS investigators identified through snowball sampling. The collected data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti and Rev to identify themes by looking at trends and patterns across the data. The next chapter contains the results and interpretations of these research procedures.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This qualitative research explored the professional discretion of CPS investigators regarding foster care placements in various counties in North Carolina. Exploring the lived experiences of decision-making among CPS investigators provided a look into organizational factors surrounding decision-making regarding foster care placements. The following research question guided this research: How do Child Protective Services investigators use discretionary powers to interpret and apply child welfare policies in foster care placements?

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth narrative on data analysis and data collection used in this study. I also included the findings, the limitations, and the validity of this study. Finally, I included a summary of the identified themes.

Setting of the Study

For this study, participants were interviewed using the Interview Protocol (Appendix E), which produced detailed feedback. Each interview was conducted on the Zoom platform and was audio-recorded. Throughout the interviews, I took notes of vital points that led to extensive discussions. After the interview, I emailed each participant a copy of the transcript for their review.

Demographics

Data were collected from eight semistructured interviews conducted with CPS investigators in various counties in North Carolina. I stopped the interviews at eight participants because beyond this number, data collected had reached saturation and

answers were repetitive from the participants. Each participant had at least two years of experience in their field. Participants were recruited using social work groups on LinkedIn. Since there was an overwhelming response from the North Carolina social work groups, I had to confirm the credentials of each participant as a CPS investigator by ensuring they met all qualifications to participate.

Data Collection

After IRB approved my study, I began recruiting potential participants. I posted recruitment flyers on three different LinkedIn social work community pages. These initial recruitment efforts provided a huge response; however, only a few potential participants met the specific criteria for this study. From the initial round of recruitment, out of 25 responses, only three participants met the requirements for the study and agreed to participate. Two weeks later, I initiated a second round of recruitment efforts by posting the recruitment flyers on the same three social work community pages and received 20 responses. From the second round of responses, 13 CPS investigators met the criteria and agreed to participate. I formally invited all 13 respondents to participate and chose the first five participants that responded. The remaining participants were sent a “thank you” email, notifying them that the recruitment phase of the study was closed, and no more participants were being considered.

After securing the eight CPS investigators needed for the study, I emailed each participant the informed consent form. I allowed the participants to review the informed consent form, ask questions, and express concerns about the study. The participants responded to the email acknowledging they reviewed the informed consent form. After

review, they agreed to participate by responding with the words, “I Consent.” I then scheduled an interview time after each participant agreed to participate. The individual interviews were audio recorded on the Zoom platform.

Before each interview, I allowed the participants to examine the informed consent form and to discuss any unreadiness. Each participant was informed of the use of recordings and agreed to be audio recorded before the interview started. In conducting the interviews, I simultaneously interviewed each participant while taking notes. After the end of each interview, the recordings were uploaded to Rev.com for transcribing. After the data from each interview were transcribed, I coded the data and identified the themes. After noticing that I had reached saturation after eight interviews, I emailed the transcripts to each participant for review and to check for accuracy.

Data Analysis

To guarantee the privacy of each participant, I did not use their real names. I assigned the participants an alias to be used during the data transcription and analysis. When coding the data, I categorized the collected data based on information equivalent to other data collected using the content analysis method. I used the content analysis method to identify keywords and to analyze the meaning of specific words. I also used direct phrases from the interviews to prepare a theme chart in a Microsoft word document. The content analysis method provided information on each participant’s state of mind while identifying specific communication patterns. Five themes were spawned from the coding of the data. The codes were color-coded to explore comparison in this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I wanted to maintain qualitative rigor throughout the study; therefore, my findings were evaluated based on credibility and reliability. Member checking was used throughout each interview to validate my study. Member checking was a fundamental phase of validating information discussed during the interviews. After executing the interview protocol, I repeated the participants' feedback to maintain accuracy.

After incorporating member checking, I transcribed the collected data. Reliability was vital in this research to measure the data. I reviewed my notes, listened to the audio recordings, and reread the transcripts. I reviewed the information and identified comparisons of words and phrases in the collected data.

Results of the Study

The results for all interviews completed during the end of April 2023 are reported in this section. Data were collected through a semistructured interview using open-ended questions aligned with the research question of this study. The data collected from the findings link directly with the interview questions provided. The sample for this research study consisted of eight CPS investigators with at least two years of work experience. The sample also consisted of CPS investigators from various counties in North Carolina.

The findings from the data collected produced the following themes:

Theme 1: Insufficient resources for unsubstantiated or unverified cases and limited decision-making authority in service provisions for CPS investigators.

Theme 2: Same cases are being referred multiple times (rereferrals).

Theme 3: Insufficient training in decision-making for CPS investigators and ambiguous policy definitions.

Theme 4: High burnout rates: heavy caseloads and elevated stress levels.

Theme 5: Insufficient funding: The lack of financial resources in CPS agencies for essential family services.

The next section includes an overview of acknowledged themes exclusively from each interview. The feedback that helped with producing themes while facilitating the interview protocol are provided in the following section. This section wraps up with an in-depth summary of the results.

Theme 1: Insufficient resources for unsubstantiated or unverified cases and limited decision-making authority in service provisions for CPS investigators.

Participants were asked: Can you give me an example of how you use your professional discretion to manage the limited resources available to families? CPS Linda, an investigator from County One, NC with over 18 years of experience stated:

In my agency, most of us with over 10 years on the job have adopted informal policies that are not on the books to help manage resources to deal with the high workloads. We interact with our peers and some of the supervisors who share our agency's informal policies and practices that allow us to bend the rules to help our clients without getting into real trouble.

CPS Mary, an investigator from County Five, NC with 11 years of experience stated:

I use my professional discretion very carefully. Like you said, the resources are limited. If I'm being honest, it really doesn't matter if I practice discretion or not if the evidence isn't there. Discretion to me and the people I work for is to keep your personal feelings in check and go with the evidence. I mean, you can go around policy to make your case but when you go to court to testify, the lawyers want to see your assessment worksheet.

CPS caseworkers face two primary decisions: substantiating a case, which requires determining if there is adequate evidence to support maltreatment allegations and deciding on child removal from the home. Generally, children removed from their homes are associated with substantiated cases. In 2016, 19.5% of investigations had substantiated findings, and out of those, 21.4% led to child removal from the home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Various factors influence CPS decision-making, as described by the decision-making ecology framework (Maguire et al., 2020). This framework involves case, caseworker, organizational, and external factors that impact case-level decisions. Case characteristics entail specific allegations and risks to the child, while caseworker characteristics involve the worker's education, personal experiences, and attitudes. Organizational factors include agency policies, procedures, resource constraints, caseload size, and culture. External factors encompass the family's community and broader community laws and attitudes (Maguire et al., 2020).

Participants were asked: What factors influence your decision to substantiate or unsubstantiate a CPS a referral? CPS Kimberly, a CPS investigator from County Two, NC with six years of experience stated:

Maltreatment is hard to prove sometimes so you look at everything. Sometimes when I get to a scene, I just know deep down that abuse is there, but I have to follow procedure because I have to prove my findings in court. But as far as what influences my decision, I say it's my experience on the job, but my experience has taught me to not deviate too much from DSS policies if you want that family to get help, especially if there is a child involved. I hope that helps.

Although case factors, such as allegation type, information source, and child vulnerability, are expected to influence decision-making, substantiation or removal decisions may differ between states and counties due to variations in laws, training, procedures, population traits, agency culture, workforce, and resources. A national disparity examination without considering local contexts offers limited insight into the reasons behind these disparities. Past research has identified specific factors (case, caseworker, organizational, community, and policy) that impact child welfare decisions but has not examined whether these factors have the same association with substantiation across racial/ethnic groups. Addressing racial disproportionality in child welfare necessitates understanding how a child's race and local community characteristics individually and interactively affect child welfare decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to examine prior studies' proposed explanations of racial disparities, their evidentiary support, and remaining unknown or inconclusive aspects.

National and state-level research indicates that Black children are disproportionately represented in substantiations and out-of-home placements among CPS involved children. In contrast, patterns for Hispanic children are less consistent (Maguire et al., 2020). Most racial disparity studies do not include American Indian/Alaskan Native children due to their geographic concentration and smaller population size; however, national data suggest overrepresentation in substantiations and out-of-home placements for this group.

Theme 2: Same cases are being referred multiple times (rereferrals).

Participants were asked: What is the likelihood of a case being rereferred into the system? CPS Diane, a CPS investigator from County Three, NC with eight years of experience stated:

Rereferrals are less likely when agencies can provide services to unsubstantiated cases. Caseworkers spend too much time on a case trying to achieve the status of “substantiated” so that the case can get available resources. While caseworkers are getting emotionally involved in some of these cases, their caseloads stack up. I hate to say this, but we can’t save every family and the state don’t give us the budget to do so. Cases are gonna get referred over and over again. That’s part of the job.

CPS Marcia, a CPS investigator from County Four, NC with three years of experience stated:

My job is to investigate all cases whether they have been previously referred or not. What I can tell you is that there are some cases that will get priority over

others. The ones that don't get priority, I promise you that I will be seeing that case again.

Can you give me an example of what type of case will not get priority?

So, one time I had this case about possible maltreatment. To make a long story short, turns out that the children weren't getting fed and going to school with dirty clothes on. I think the school reported it. Basically, the state is not gonna put all their resources on a case like that. We will acknowledge it, give the family some counseling, and close the case. Now will that case get referred again? Probably so. My first year on the job all the cases on my desk were re-referrals. Unless the police are involved and there is clear case of abuse, it will not be substantiated.

Re-referrals' prevalence escalates as the number of previous referrals and foster care placements (followed by reunification) rises, while substantiation minimally impacts re-referral rates. Key risk factors correlated with a high probability of rereferral, such as a history of domestic violence, caregiver's childhood experience of child abuse/neglect, and substance abuse, are among the least frequently assessed factors by social workers. Re-referral rates differ by ethnicity, abuse category, and demographic setting (rural, urban). Initially, it was hypothesized that cases involving multiple forms of abuse would exhibit elevated re-referral rates and potentially distinct risk factors related to rereferral. Nevertheless, scrutinizing and analyzing the narrative sections of case records, it became apparent that numerous referrals classified as involving a single abuse type encompassed multiple forms.

During the study period, CPS did not mandate social workers to record all abuse types they identified upon investigation. Analyzing referrals involving multiple abuse types revealed no significant differences in rereferral or recurrence rates, nor any variation in the risk factors associated with re-referral or recurrence when juxtaposed with single-type cases. However, it remains uncertain to what extent this resemblance is attributable to the mingling of genuine single-type referrals with mislabeled or unlabeled multiple-type referrals.

Theme 3: Insufficient training in decision-making for CPS investigators and ambiguous policy definitions.

Participants were asked: What do you do when you are faced with a situation to remove a child from the home, but you don't quite understand the law to investigate? CPS Mary, a CPS investigator from County Five, NC with 11 years of experience stated:

When presented with uncertainty, we choose to err on the side of caution, which means we use "what if scenarios." We assess for the greatest danger that can occur if a child is not removed from the home. Most young investigators tend to over report because the agency does not have real guidance policies about how to report.

Re-referrals can occur due to several factors influencing a practitioner's choice to report suspected child maltreatment to CPS. Practitioners may not report based on legislative guidelines but act upon their subjective perceptions and emotional reactions. Investigators might be more influenced by their emotional responses to cases than experienced professionals. Furthermore, previous negative encounters with CPS and

skepticism about its effectiveness often discourage practitioners from involving the child welfare system. Instead, they may opt to address maltreatment concerns through a combination of education, support, and external resources.

The professional judgment in reporting child maltreatment can be a subjective, moral decision, with investigators often considering factors beyond the abuse, such as the perpetrator's age, marital status, substance use, and history of violence. The potential loss of the therapeutic relationship and the extent of engagement between the family and other professionals, like previous practitioners or social service agencies, may further influence the decision to report. Concerns about potential legal and violent consequences, failure to recognize abuse or neglect, and inadequate knowledge of reporting procedures can also deter practitioners from reporting.

Subjective evaluations of what constitutes minimal, moderate, or severe maltreatment also impact reporting decisions. Factors considered may include the child's age, abuse type, injury, circumstances, and the practitioner's familiarity with the family. These factors often contribute to a "decision threshold," where the perceived harm to the child must be severe for reporting to occur. Although practitioners are more likely to report as maltreatment severity increases, they may also normalize certain behaviors and delay reporting based on their subjective judgments of what constitutes severe discipline. In such instances, reporting to CPS is often viewed as a last resort.

Uncertainty contributing to CPS nonreporting may arise from inexperience, insufficient training, and unfamiliarity with relevant legislation and reporting obligations. The ability to self-regulate emotions facilitates practitioners to navigate difficult

discussions about mandatory reporting without letting emotional dysregulation negatively impact their decision-making. This skill also gives practitioners greater confidence and control in emotionally charged and vulnerable situations. Practitioners and social workers with high confidence in their self-efficacy and performance are likelier to remain emotionally calm and draw from prior experiences than those with low confidence. Those with low confidence tend to feel more dysregulated, frustrated, distressed, and uncertain. Moreover, low-confidence practitioners and social workers often struggle to use knowledge frameworks to guide their practice and face difficulties engaging clients. The confidence level for many practitioners and social workers may also depend on case-specific factors, such as the client's culture, disciplinary belief systems, years spent in the country of origin, and existing support networks.

Theme 4: High burnout rates – Heavy caseloads and elevated stress levels.

Participants were asked: What are some of the factors that contribute to CPS investigators' burnout in the first couple of years? CPS Leah, CPS investigator from County Six, NC with four years of experience stated:

I have been an investigator for four years. In my first year, I had 30 cases which were mostly re-referrals. I wanted to quit my second year because my case load doubled. One of the problems in my agency is that they want you to approach each referral the same way.

CPS Jo, CPS investigator from County Seven, NC with 15 years of experience stated:

I have been in this field for 15 years and I have worked at several agencies. The problem now in most agencies is that new investigators lack critical thinking skills, and they depend too much on the risk assessment tools to make decisions for them. If the tool says to investigate, new CPS workers follow the guidelines, which leads to opening a new case.

The prevalence of burnout among CPS social workers is an alarming concern. Insufficient comprehension of the organizational factors contributing to burnout among local CPS social workers exacerbates the issue. Despite the widespread nature of burnout and the lack of understanding, research on this topic remains limited in this specific area. Consequently, the primary challenge in social work practice is to grasp the impact of organizational factors on CPS social workers' burnout levels.

The surging demand for CPS services has led to massive burnout among its social workers. The turnover rate in the social work profession has almost doubled, with work environments significantly contributing to burnout. Studies have also revealed a potential link between high caseloads and social worker burnout, resulting in a tense work atmosphere. Rising burnout rates among social workers have led to increased job turnover, evident in employee retention rates across various departments. Each year, the government establishes multiple target goals related to workforce retention.

Theme 5: Insufficient Funding – The lack of financial resources in CPS agencies for essential family services.

Participants were asked: What indicates a situation where a case (initially substantiated or not) returns to a system for a second or subsequent referral? CPS Donna, a CPS investigator from County Eight, NC with 10 years of experience stated:

Normally it's domestic violence. I only say that because it does not directly affect the child. You have to understand that we are in the business of saving children, not saving marriages and relationships. I mean, if the child is being fed, wear clean clothes, going to school every day, getting good grades and so forth, that case is closed within 24 hours because that is not maltreatment, and we investigate child abuse that can be proven in court. The resources aren't there for us to take on those cases.

CPS Linda, CPS investigator from County One, NC with 18 years of experience stated:

We get a lot of cases that come through the hotline and the cases that get put on the back burner are those that are drug related. I'm not saying they don't get investigated but I'm saying they don't get priority. Let's put it this way. They will get investigated, their case will be referred to a drug counselor or treatment center but not child welfare. Why? Because the child is not affected if the parents are doing drugs. Now if the police are involved, then it becomes a whole new situation and then we get involved if the child becomes displaced.

Many families involved with CPS may obtain services that correspond to their needs following an investigation; however, providing adequate services remains a significant challenge for families with complex requirements connected to mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence. These families might not participate in available services due to feeling misjudged, stigmatized, forced, apprehensive about CPS, or unprepared to tackle the identified issues. Moreover, multiple studies have discovered that families with complicated needs either failed to acquire necessary services or received irrelevant services. Nevertheless, earlier research primarily focused on service utilization and overlooked the effects of other areas of need.

Additionally, there has been limited exploration of the relationship between the provision of well-matched services and the recurrence of CPS involvement. Consequently, further investigation is required to scrutinize the alignment between complex needs and services provided post the initial CPS inquiry, particularly considering the financial constraints faced by the agency.

Summary

In conclusion, I have provided an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of CPS investigators and their professional discretion surrounding foster care placements. The analytical view has provided clarity and information on the qualitative research question discussed in the study. Implementing the content analysis method guided the coding process in which five themes were identified. The five themes are: (1) Insufficient resources for unsubstantiated or unverified cases and limited decision-making authority in service provisions for CPS investigators (2) Same cases are being referred multiple

times (rereferrals) (3) Insufficient training in decision-making for CPS investigators and ambiguous policy definitions (4) High burnout rates: heavy caseloads and elevated stress levels (5) Insufficient funding: The lack of financial resources in CPS agencies for essential family services. Chapter 5 will complete this qualitative research study. The next chapter will provide recommendations for practitioners and policyholders and implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This research addresses a specific issue: the insufficiency of information regarding current decision-making guidance and policies that lead to unequal service provisions, disproportionately impacting African American communities in the child welfare system, particularly in foster care placements (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Garcia et al., 2016; Martin & Connelly, 2015; White, 2006). My qualitative study bridges this gap, contributing insights to the existing literature, which can be utilized by policymakers in the development of policies and practices addressing inequality and disparate treatment at multiple decision-making junctures throughout each investigation (Beniwal, 2017).

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the findings explored the decision-making of CPS investigators through the lens of professional discretion. Limitations to the study and recommendations for policymakers and child welfare professionals are offered. Finally, implications for positive social change are further explored for effective policy change. In the interviews, the participants discussed lack of resources for unsubstantiated cases and their use of insufficient decision-making tools needed to provide services to families lacking support. The participants discussed rereferrals and how they contribute to case overloads and stress. The participants discussed uncertainty in decision-making. They were uncertain how to interpret their agencies' policy because of the ambiguous language in their definitions. The participants also discussed high turnover and burnout rates in their agency. The participants noted that these turnovers and burnouts were due to how

their agency was structured and protocols needed to be followed. These factors caused most of the participants to neglect some cases and focus on others. Finally, the participants discussed budget concerns and how the lack of funding affects decision-making, also it prevents the allocation of essential child welfare resources.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study regarding foster care placement and the representation of different racial groups. The data from Statista.com (2022) indicates that a higher number of white children are in foster care compared to Black and Hispanic children. However, the study fails to explore the reasons behind the disproportionate placement of white children, the influence of street-level bureaucracy in decision-making within the framework of government policies, and the potential overrepresentation of certain racial or non-racial groups in foster homes. By neglecting these factors, the study overlooks the discretion exercised by CPS investigators concerning other cultural groups.

The omission of these considerations raises concerns about the generalizability and transferability of the study's results. It may create a perception of bias by solely focusing on the experiences of the black community, which has long endured racial discrimination. To address these limitations, it would be valuable to include additional questions that inquire whether CPS investigators have worked with other racial groups besides the black community. This would provide insights into whether they perceive a greater need to place Black/African American children in foster care based on their discretion, or if they apply the same judgment to Hispanic or white children.

By incorporating these measures, the study can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing foster care placements across different racial and ethnic groups. This enhanced perspective would contribute to a more nuanced analysis of the disparities and dynamics within the child welfare system, ultimately fostering greater equity and inclusivity in decision-making processes.

Recommendations

The modifiable maltreatment factors (MMF) framework is an innovative theoretical structure comprised of modifiable and nonmodifiable risk factors. Since all social work necessitates prioritizing factors, the MMF framework enables practitioners to concentrate on areas where change is most feasible and broaden their understanding of which factors can be modified. This practical approach directs maltreatment prevention initiatives toward modifiable factors at various levels, allowing CPS investigators and other child welfare professionals to contextualize individual and family issues within a macro context while identifying fixed risk factors. The MMF categorizes modifiable factors into service-modifiable, policy-responsive, and organizing-modifiable factors.

Service-modifiable factors can be enhanced through time-limited services or programs. Policy-responsive factors require widespread availability and sustainability beyond a typical program's duration. Organizing-modifiable factors refer to exosystem or community factors that can be altered through community organization. At present, most maltreatment prevention programs concentrate on service-modifiable factors. Precision in these definitions enables a broader understanding of modifiable factors; examples of each factor classification are provided below.

Considering my qualitative research study's findings, I suggest that organizations employing CPS social workers modify duties and responsibilities while raising awareness about decision-making, substantiating referrals, and burnout. During the initial training, new CPS social workers should be informed about the organization's challenges and obstacles. This step is crucial for a child welfare professional to fully comprehend their assigned duties, roles, and potential difficulties. Offering this guidance and modifying expectations among social workers may address burnout and turnover rates within the organization. Social workers will better understand the organization's challenges and expectations, potentially reducing stress levels and allowing them to plan their workday, which could also help decrease burnout.

Allowing CPS social workers to meet with upper management, possibly bi-weekly regularly, could help promote positive social interactions, enhance workplace culture, and alleviate accumulated stress. Social workers could debrief with managers and leadership while interacting with colleagues. This measure could provide workers with self-care and time to connect with their peers. As a result, this bi-weekly initiative could boost morale and restore motivation among social workers and child welfare professionals.

Implications for Positive Social Change

As a result, aspects of macro social work such as community organization, policy change, and others have become increasingly marginalized in education and practice. Most social work education, training, and practice now concentrate on micro levels, mainly clinical practice. The long-standing tension between individual and societal

causes of issues has been evident in the study of child maltreatment for years. However, Congressional testimonies reveal that lawmakers and the experts they consulted recognized the influence of financial difficulties on neglect. The allure of neoliberal, individualistic policies in the past and present is powerful. The political choice to portray child maltreatment because of individual pathology initiated a system focused on safeguarding children from parents with individual-level issues. As a result, the share of the annual \$21 billion budget for child welfare is allocated to foster care or psychosocial interventions.

Child welfare has become equivalent to the official child protective services system and the individual-level work conducted by state-run or contract agencies. These agencies are responsible for child protection, interpreted as secondary and tertiary prevention or treatment, such as therapy for children and parents, parenting courses, or referrals to other support services. These interrelated trends have significantly impacted how child welfare work is taught in social work schools and implemented in the field. This has led to a focus within CPS on individual-level risk factors and individual or family-oriented interventions to address issues that are observable and quantifiable at the individual level, such as mental health, substance abuse, and parenting behaviors.

The insights gained from this study can potentially effect positive social change, fostering social transformation across the profession's micro, mezzo, and macro dimensions. Social workers may be better equipped to comprehend their roles and expectations at the micro level. At the mezzo level, social change can raise awareness among leaders about the experiences of CPS social workers. Enhancing leaders'

awareness could result in more effective individualized training and increased worker incentives. Ultimately, macro-level social change involves advocating for hiring more CPS social workers while offering competitive salaries and benefits. If leaders implement changes at the mezzo level, workers may be more likely to remain with the organization for extended periods. Collaboration across all levels is essential for effective social change at each level.

Furthermore, it is crucial to guarantee that each worker understands their role and can meet the organization's expectations, minimizing stress levels to avoid burnout. The findings from this study are vital for employers to address high turnover rates and improve retention. Implementing this study's recommendations could reduce social workers' stress levels, enhance worker morale, and promote self-care. They can be more efficient and productive by tending to social workers' mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Increased worker productivity potentially leads to the organization achieving its desired outcome and goals.

Conclusion

This research fills a gap in the literature by focusing on decision-making guidelines and policies of child welfare agencies that leads to the inequity of service provisions. This research also focused on how the current child welfare policies disproportionately impact African American communities, especially in foster care placements. The outcome of this study potentially has implications for social change as CPS investigators addressed organizational, community, and personal factors that influenced decision-making in foster care placements in the future. This qualitative study

investigated and understood how individual CPS investigators utilized discretionary powers to interpret and apply child welfare services policies regarding removing or not removing a child from their parent or guardian and placement into the foster care system.

The participant's insight and feedback of their lived experiences helped guide this study. Even with limited resources, heavy caseloads, and high turnover rates, CPS investigators are still expected to be professionals and objective in their decision-making. Overall, CPS investigators and other child welfare officials still feel the need to execute their professional discretion for effective policy implementation. Although discretion in decision-making for some agencies are encouraged, risk assessment tools are intended to protect CPS investigators against allegations of subjective decision-making. These decision-making tools are used even when the recommendations offered do not align with the agency's available resources.

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Appendix A: Invitation to the Potential Participants (CPS Investigators)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a Walden University Public Policy and Administration doctoral candidate. I am conducting an academic study on child welfare services and foster care policies. I have attached a flyer providing more details about the study and eligibility criteria.

The aim of the research is to gain insights into the lived experiences of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators to understand how they interpret child welfare policies and how discretionary power is used in foster care placement decisions. The findings will go a long way towards minimizing bias in foster care decisions and ensuring that CPS investigators exercise discretion objectively by assessing the actual credibility of cases.

Available data indicates that children from racial minorities are disproportionately affected in the foster care system and are less likely than whites to reunite with their families. To some extent, CPS investigators are blamed for demonstrating bias when making foster care decisions for children from racial minority backgrounds. However, few studies have sought to obtain insights into the experiences of CPS investigators when faced with these decisions. My study aims to give CPS workers and investigators a voice, allowing them to explain in-depth their experiences in interpreting policy and applying discretion when making foster care placement determinations.

If you would like to participate in the study or have any other concerns or queries, please contact me.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

**STUDY TITLE**

Professional Discretion of Child Protective Services Investigators in Foster Care Placements

The Study

I, the principal researcher, a doctoral candidate in Public Policy and Administration at Walden University, is conducting a study involving Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators in all counties in North Carolina. The study aims to understand CPS workers' lived experiences in interpreting policy and applying discretion in decision-making regarding foster care placements.

Participants

The study targets participants who:

- i) Can speak English fluently.
- ii) Work as CPS investigators in any of the participating counties
- iii) Have worked as a CPS investigator for a minimum of two years.
- iv) Have been involved in placing both racial minority and white children.
- v) Have access to a smartphone or computer for Zoom calls.

Why Participate?

The study gives a voice to CPS investigators, who are often blamed for the disparities that characterize the foster care system. By participating, you get to tell the story of your lived experiences in interpreting policy and the role of discretion in some of these decisions.

Your Role:

You will participate in a semi-structured interview with the principal researcher in a one-on-one Zoom meeting. The interviews will take 45-60 minutes to complete and will take place on a date to be determined.

Interested participants are invited to join the researcher on a date (TBA) in a one-on-one ZOOM meeting at a time (TBA) for more details. Come and be a part of this meeting!!!

Appendix C: Participants' Qualifying Form

This qualifying form will be emailed to participants who express an interest in taking part in the study to assess their eligibility.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you so much for expressing interest in participating in my study titled '*Professional Discretion of Child Protective Services Investigators in Foster Care Placements*'

Before enrolling you as a participant, I need to be sure that you are eligible per the criteria communicated in the flyer. In this regard, I need to ask you a series of questions to gauge your eligibility. Since your participation is voluntary, you may refrain from answering any questions.

1. Can you communicate fluently in English? _____ YES _____ NO
2. Do you work as a Child Protective Services (CPS) worker in any of the counties in the state of North Carolina (indicate which county below):
 - a. None of the above: _____
 - b. Indicate County: _____
 - c. Work Address: _____
3. Have you worked as a CPS investigator for at least two years?
_____ YES _____ NO

Please indicate years of working experience: _____

4. How many foster care placements have you implemented in the course of your work? _____
5. Have you been involved in placing both racial minority and white children in your years of work?
_____ YES _____ NO

In addition,

1. Do you have access to a smartphone or computer for a Zoom meeting?
_____ YES _____ NO
2. Are you available for a 45–60-minute interview on any date between April and December 2023?
_____ YES _____ NO

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this form. I will get back to you as soon as I can.

Appendix D: The Official Invitation to Participate for Selected Eligible Participants

Study Title

Professional Discretion of Child Protective Services Workers in Foster Care Placements

Principal Researcher

Graduate School of Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

Introduction to the Study

This is a formal invitation to participate in an academic research study seeking to understand the lived experiences of CPS workers in interpreting child welfare policies and the role of discretion in foster care placement decisions.

Please note that (the principal researcher) is a doctoral candidate in Public Policy and Administration at Walden University and is conducting this research as part of academic requirements. The aim of the study is to explore CPS workers' experiences in making foster care placement decisions. The study will involve a single interview that will take place on Zoom and is expected to last between 45-60 minutes.

Before giving your consent, you must understand what your participation in the research entails. Please take your time to read through these provisions and contact me if you need clarification or have any concerns.

What the Study will Involve

You will participate in a single semi-structured interview with the principal investigator that will take not more than 60 minutes. The interview will take place online via the

Zoom platform on a date convenient for you at a date to be determined. You will be asked about your experiences with state child welfare policies, your experiences in applying and interpreting these policies, the role of discretion in policy implementation, challenges hindering effective policy implementation, the influence of race in placement decisions, and the meanings that you draw from these experiences. The data collected will include research reflections, interview notes, and recordings of your conversation with the researcher. The audio recording will be transcribed and analyzed using software to check for themes and concepts. You will be entitled to a copy of the preliminary findings of the transcript for member checking.

At the end of the study, you may be invited to participate in a debriefing session on Zoom. The aim of the debriefing session is to disseminate information on emergent themes without revealing any personal information. The session will help participants verify that the study has accurately captured all possible themes.

Your participation in the study is voluntary, and the researcher will offer an incentive of a \$20.00 gift card.

Privacy Provisions

The principal researcher will take all possible measures to ensure the anonymity of the responses you provide and protect your confidentiality. The specific steps towards ensuring privacy are as follows:

- i) You will not be identified by name in any part of the study. Instead, each participant will be assigned an alias as their unique code.

- ii) All audio files, transcripts, and notes will be stored in a locked cabinet that is only accessible by the principal researcher.
- iii) All the information you provide will be used for purposes of the study and will be discarded after that.
- iv) You can request a copy of the transcript generated from your conversation with the investigator at any time and can withdraw from the study at any point without giving prior notice, in which case all data collected up to that point will be discarded.
- v) You can refrain from answering any question that you feel is too intrusive.

Cost to Participate

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Institutional Review Board

In case of any issues that you may not be comfortable discussing with the principal investigator, or for any additional information on the rights of human subjects in research, contact the Institutional Review Board at 612-312-1210.

If you agree to the above provisions, please indicate your consent by signing here below:

I have read and understood the provisions of my engagement as a participant in this research and have had the opportunity to ask questions that have been duly answered.

I, therefore, agree to participate in the study:

Choose One Response _____ YES _____ NO

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Hello, I am a Walden University Public Policy and Administration doctoral candidate. I am conducting an academic study on child welfare services and foster care policies. Thank you for taking the time to be here today. There are no right or wrong answers, so feel comfortable expressing what you say or feel. Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning only I can access your answers.

The aim of the research is to gain insights into the lived experiences of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators to understand how they interpret child welfare policies and how discretionary power is used in foster care placement decisions. The findings will go a long way towards minimizing bias in foster care decisions and ensuring that CPS investigators exercise discretion objectively by assessing the actual credibility of cases.

Interview Questions

1. What factors influence your decision to substantiate or unsubstantiate a CPS referral?
2. How does that decision impact outcomes for children?
3. How do you determine whether a specific incident of abuse has occurred?
4. How do you determine whether the child is at risk of future maltreatment?
5. What indicates a situation where a case (initially substantiated or not) returns to the system for a second or subsequent referral?

6. What characteristics of the case (child and family) were found to have the most significant influence on decision-making?
 - The age and development of the child.
 - The parent's ability to care for the child adequately.
 - The severity of the alleged incident.
 - Caretaker and child relationship – bonding issues.
 - Social and economic factors.
7. What types of information were used in making each case decision?
 - Substantiated
 - Unsubstantiated
 - Inconclusive
8. What factors were significant in inconclusive cases?
 - Whether the child's basic needs were met.
 - Whether the caregiver offered a plausible explanation.
 - Supervisory input.
9. Is it difficult not to substantiate a case of physical abuse, and what evidence do you rely on in deciding not to substantiate?
10. What are some insignificant factors in deciding or not deciding to substantiate a case?
11. What are some characteristics of a caseworker found to impact decision-making?
 - Level of experience.

- Relationship with coworkers.
- Inherent tendency to decide one way or another in particular cases.

12. How does workload stress affect your decision-making?

- Having adequate time to do a thorough investigation was a significant factor in both substantiated and unsubstantiated decisions.
- In-depth investigations tend to result in a higher percentage of substantiated cases.
- Caseworkers may focus on a few complicated cases that involve more time and labor to substantiate. Since these are not cleared as quickly, they build up over time and become a more significant proportion of a caseworker's workload.

13. How does the role of supervisors affect environmental stress?

14. How do state policies allow for caseworker uncertainty regarding the occurrence of maltreatment?

15. What are your recommendations for better foster care placements?