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Decision Making in Child Protection Services: Aftermath of a Child Fatality

Kevin Marino
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kevin Marino

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Decision Making in Child Protection Services: Aftermath of a Child Fatality

by

Kevin Marino

MA, Walden, 2012

BS, Montreat College, 2006

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

August 2025

Abstract

Child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect have a residual effect on families, communities, and child protective services (CPS) professionals tasked with ensuring child safety. The purpose of the mixed-methods study was to examine how CPS professionals made decisions in high-risk and fatality cases by evaluating decision-making processes, identifying contextual and interpersonal influences, and addressing practice questions related to administrative data, case records, caseworker and supervisor perspectives, cost implications, and organizational supports. The theoretical framework of Simon's theory of bounded rationality and near decomposability along with Fluke et al.'s ecology of decision-making model formed the study's analysis. The study included descriptive statistics and Spearman's Rho analysis for quantitative data. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted from semistructured interviews with CPS staff, focusing on one fatality case and 30 high-risk investigations. Findings revealed that decision quality is impacted by emotional stress, cognitive overload, and variability in case engagement. Limited face-to-face contact raised concerns about the accuracy of risk assessments. At the same time, cost analysis revealed inefficiencies and highlighted the need for evidence-based behavioral health models to improve decision-making and safety. The study has implications for public administrative practice by uniting cognitive and affective processes, strengthening CPS decision-making through reflective tools, revised risk protocols, real-time dashboards, simulation training, balanced policies, and interdisciplinary councils, advancing public administration and driving social change.

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Dedication

The completion of this study would not have been possible without the guidance of my Savior, Jesus Christ, the support of my beautiful wife, Ashley, and the encouragement of my kids, who listened to my “out loud thinking.” To them, I dedicate this work.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

The abuse and neglect of children at the hands of parents and caregivers is a calamitous experience. Abuse and neglect resulting in a child's death elicit severe trauma for families and communities. Over the last 25 years, the United States Child Protection System (CPS) has faced criticism and a call to reform the entire child welfare practice (McDermott, 2018; National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2006). In 2015, North Carolina public groups and legislators initiated sweeping changes in response to several child fatalities and poor outcomes in the Child and Family Services Review (Child and Family Services Review; Public Consulting Group, 2016; Public Evaluation Department of the North Carolina Legislature, 2019). A call for higher professional standards, education, and training tops the list of North Carolina's change priorities. Moreover, the core of the changes appears to be rooted in improved decision-making in CPS cases.

The complexity of CPS cases presents social workers with engaging in traumatic and dangerous family situations. Substance abuse is a prominent link to severe child abuse and emotional disturbances (Akin et al., 2015, p. 83). CPS staff are called to domestic violence scenes and are often the first to arrive, which can be deadly for the social worker, child, or parent (Agnew-Brune et al., 2017, p. 1931). Untreated mental illness in parents or children combined with substance misuse and domestic violence is a cocktail for disaster (Hodges et al., 2012). Decision-making in CPS cases is not a matter of black and white. A myriad of internal and external influences create a chaotic environment that challenges even the brightest and most experienced social workers to make informed decisions.

These enmeshed dynamics, coupled with family systems dynamics, must be considered for researchers to extrapolate answers to improve decision-making pathways for CPS professionals. Furthermore, federal and state child protection laws are inherently cumbersome in obtaining permission for research projects (Rossi et al., 2004). As such, utilizing the scholar-practitioner approach can bridge this gap. CPS-experienced scholar-practitioners are familiar with the compounded challenges and necessary administrative and relevant case data to evaluate decision-making in CPS agencies. Research regarding decision-making evaluation has been conducted academically (Fluke et al., 2020). Applying Rossi's CPS vignette evaluation method or a similar tracing process carried out by an established practitioner capable of identifying and cataloging decision influences and heuristics will produce a greater understanding of decision deficits.

Problem Statement

The public attention to CPS is intensified when news of a child fatality or severe injury resulting in impaired life is released. In March 2019, the Children's Bureau, the federal department of child welfare, released the latest number of total child deaths associated with abuse, which is 1,720 children in the United States (Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities: Statistics and Interventions, 2019). The majority of children who die as a result of abuse and neglect are between the ages of 0 and 5 (2019). The parents and caretakers in these cases struggle with poly-morbid issues such as domestic violence, drug use, and substandard living conditions. An examination of child fatalities linked to maltreatment statistics indicated that this problem exists in North Carolina (North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force Review, 2020). The North Carolina CPS workforce

lacks the appropriate skill levels to manage safety in these complex situations.

North Carolina's CPS service is county-administered and state-supervised. There are 100 counties, and each has a CPS agency. According to the North Carolina Child Fatality Taskforce (2019), the state investigated more than 68,000 complaints of abuse and neglect. In 2018, North Carolina's child population was 2.3 million children, and of those children, 27 died at the hands of parents or caretakers, excluding unsafe sleep deaths (Child Maltreatment Statistics, 2018). The state staff reviewing each fatality is far behind in the task. Coupled with three high-profile media cases that garnered national attention, the state's child welfare division implemented a new policy to address response times and aid in gathering information to prevent fatalities.

A child fatality review is a part of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. A child who dies from a factual connection to abuse or neglect is considered a child fatality as defined in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act law (Damashek & Bonner, 2010; Graham et al., 2010). All states in the United States are legally required to create and maintain a functional fatality review team. The essential function of a fatality review is to determine if the child's death was related directly or indirectly to abuse or neglect and provide solutions to prevent mortality.

In late December 2017, the North Carolina Division of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) Child Welfare Division implemented a new policy to facilitate deploying a fatality team reviewer within seven days when open CPS cases resulted in the death of a child. The new process was implemented to reduce the time required for providing feedback to improve the CPS system. The state shares the responsibility as it is

necessary to send the data collection to the federal partners. The outcomes of the review are shared first with the county child protection agency's director. The findings are then sent to the federal partners. If the review outcomes show no practice issues, the case is closed. Cases that indicate practice issues contributing to the child's death will be placed on a corrective action plan (CAP). Failure to meet a CAP's outcomes can result in the loss of state and federal funding to the county. Each state can also receive corrective action from federal partners if review timeframes are not met and data from reviews are not sent promptly.

A CAP from the NCDHHS rapid fatality review is only a "one case" or "moment in time" sample. The fatality case is reviewed thoroughly by a minimum of three division staff. The review assesses the critical decision points of the social worker conducting the investigation, the supervisor, key leadership, and the agency director. The reviewers use federal and state law and policy as a rubric to determine strengths and areas of concern. If the concerns expose severe deficits in practice, which, if properly addressed, would have a high likelihood of preventing a child's death, then that county is placed in a CAP. The county is then allowed 6-12 months to correct the issues of decision-making and practice. Failure to meet a CAP's outcomes can result in the loss of state and federal funding to the county. Moreover, it is essential to examine the social problem at the county level in North Carolina to identify specific decision-making deficits, as this is where direct practice is most prevalent.

In 2020, the NCDHHS ordered a Rapid Fatality Review of the Client organization's DSS decision-making after the death of a 3-month-old child with

unexplained injuries. The state's investigation found deficits in the agency's leadership and staff's ability to identify severe injury cases, which could have ultimately prevented the child's death. Despite the level of training and experience of staff, their present decision-making competence leaves vulnerable children at significant risk of death and serious injury. The client organization received a CAP that required the procurement of consulting and coaching services from an experienced CPS leader. The goal of the service was to improve decision-making in all CPS investigations to prevent maltreatment-related fatalities.

The problem presented thus far was rooted in the uncertainty of how CPS professionals make decisions concerning child safety. Furthermore, the nature of decision-making in CPS cases, as described by academics and professionals, is complex and overwhelming due to the multiplicity of factors influencing decision-making (Baumann et al., 2014; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2014; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Vis & Fossum, 2013). The current presentation of CPS decision-making as complex and uncertain may be attributed to the need for more attempts to study the phenomenon (Keddell, 2014). An in-depth search of the ProQuest database yielded only 127 articles related to CPS and decision-making over the last 25 years. Articles prior to 1996 could not be located. The lack of attention in research to address the complex problem of decision-making in child protection requires an immediate response. Child protection public managers can improve safety and prevent more fatalities when they have methods to enhance the skills of cognitive and affective processing.

The subject of a child's life elicits strong affective responses. The weight

expectation to keep children safe from harm and death placed on CPS staff and administration outweighs the resources provided to accomplish this mission (Slack et al., 2017). The child protection system's emphasis on performance over processes continues to neglect essential and fundamental training and education focused on logic, reasoning, and critical thinking in complex cases. Moreover, administrators who choose to place higher regard on performance are more likely to allow the pervasion of stress and turnover.

Performance-driven institutions can inadvertently favor one form of logic over the other. When this happens, an organization is often plagued with stress and high turnover. Professionals have diligently applied Certainty or Risk logic to human experiences that are reasonably uncertain (Katsikopoulos & Gigerenzer, 2013). An emphasis on quantitative data sets, or "big data," results in a one-sided evaluation of human decision-making processes (Big Data to Solve Economic and Social Problems, n.d.; O'Leary, 2016; Redden, 2020). Moreover, the application of certain logic data utilities in CPS raises ethical considerations if their use is not properly limited to the function for which they were designed (O'Leary, 2016; Redden, 2020).

When considering reasoning and its application in evaluating pathways or causes, it is necessary to determine whether certainty or uncertainty is the driving characteristic. Certainty reasoning, associated with risk logic, tends to attribute findings to cognitive deficiencies (Katsikopoulos & Gigerenzer, 2013). Attributing risk logic findings to cognitive shortcomings is not an apples-to-apples comparison solely due to the uncertain nature of decisions regarding human behavior resulting from interactions between CPS

professionals and service recipients.

Public administrators must address the critical nature of decision-making and its omnidirectional impacts. Evaluations using administrative data (risk logic) have provided a limited basis for understanding how or why CPS professionals make their own decisions. Suppose a state experiences a performance issue with initiating CPS reports promptly. In that case, the administrative report only provides one step of analysis into why or how the professionals made those decisions. As such, this evaluation set out to utilize Fluke et al.'s ecology of decision-making (EDM) model, Herbert Simon's notions of bounded rationality and near decomposability to attempt to do what Fluke et al. stated is a task "that cannot comprehensibly be done (Fluke et al., 2020, p. 37). A blending of these theories is required to perform decisional mapping, thereby gaining a better understanding of how and why decisions and performance are not aligning.

The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that carefully mapping out complex decisions can lead to better outcomes. When a poor or suboptimal decision is made, it is often reconstructed postmortem. Child welfare uses continuous quality improvement reviews, federal child and family services reviews, and child fatality reviews after decisions have been made and after a child has died. The challenge of reviewing past cases to identify areas for improvement in future work lies in the inability to reconstruct the work reliably (Lwin et al., 2018; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2014; Rossie et al., 2004). Asking a child welfare professional to recall a case they worked on a month, four months, or a year ago carries a high risk of unreliable information.

For every case a child welfare professional completes, they have an additional

five to 10 cases. The average number of people in a family in a child welfare case averages three people (a parent and two children). Multiplied by the number of cases a single professional will work on each year, which is estimated to be a minimum of 120 cases, is 360 people in that year. As such, slowing down to trace decisions in present contexts appears critical to improving decision-making and aligning expectations and the reality of work. Complex decision-making occurs in various human service environments, including law enforcement, behavioral health, emergency management, juvenile justice, and adult protection services. Moreover, this study benefits public administrators by applying its findings to their organizations, thereby justifying the allocation of additional resources to improve public services. Minimum savings could be realized by the ability to reallocate resources used for postmortem case reviews to the front end of services, thereby alleviating the current symptoms of a chaotic and vulnerable child welfare system.

Purpose

This study evaluated decision-making strategies in screening reports and investigations/assessments for frontline social workers and all leadership responsible for CPS decisions, and suggested methods to improve performance. To achieve this purpose, it was necessary to delineate the two reasoning forms applied in the CPS decision schema. As posited earlier, the two forms are certain and uncertain, and they denote when to use each form to ensure each model of rationality is complementary (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002). Utilizing administrative data from a local child protection agency for the 2020-2021 period, I examined decision-making processes through interviews with

child protection caseworkers and case reviews. I evaluated individual and collective decision markers in a recent fatality case, comparing it to a case sample to demonstrate similarities and differences. The evaluation was used to assist the agency in strengthening decision-making skills and reducing the risk of child fatalities in open CPS cases.

CPS practitioners needed a method and tool to assist in simplifying and profiling facts to effectively diagnose danger and risk. Current research (Fluke et al., 2020; Keddell, 2014; Lwin et al., 2018; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016) has identified variables that contribute to the characteristics of bounded rationality, bias, and heuristics that interfere with the worker's ability to objectively rule in or out child maltreatment. These elements can strengthen decision-making, but lack a practitioner-based model or tool. The second purpose of this evaluation was to provide a simplified model and tool, based on the existing model created by Fluke et al. (2020), for CPS practitioners to enhance decision-making accuracy. The goal was to answer whether frontline social workers and supervisors can strengthen their recognition of critical decision markers related to bounded rationality by using a simplified tool that integrates administrative and reflective data to mitigate fatality and severe injury. Another aim was determining the organizational costs associated with implementing this tool compared to the risks and costs of maintaining current practices. The question can be broken down into two simple parts, which can be used to provide recommendations to the client organization:

- Whether the tool improves decision-making.
- The comparison of costs between change and the status quo.

Nature of the Study

Mixed methods research draws on the potential strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing researchers to explore diverse perspectives and uncover relationships between the intricate layers of our multifaceted research questions. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data can enhance an evaluation by ensuring that the strengths of one type of data balance the limitations of another.

The overall goal of mixed methods research, which combines qualitative and quantitative research components, was to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions and contribute to the existing published literature. As such, this evaluation gained a deeper understanding of how and why CPS professionals make the decisions they do in cases. Furthermore, this deeper understanding served as an impetus for improving cognitive and affective processing, resulting in outcomes that are measured in congruence with one another. A three-pronged approach, combining quantitative and qualitative elements with a cost analysis of time spent in cases, was hypothesized to expand not only the "how" and "why" in CPS decision-making—a third output was to demonstrate a cost associated with decisions conflated with bounded rationality.

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative analysis collected data from sources captured in North Carolina's child welfare state database. Access to this information was restricted to outside parties. The client organization accessed the investigative reports needed, sanitized clients' names, and removed single identifiers such as case IDs or social security numbers. CPS cases follow a timeline from the initial screening of a report to case closure. The client

agency provided the essential list of reports to highlight decision points. The data in these administrative (risk logic) reports are available in all U.S. states, as required by the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act law.

Quantitative Variables

The quantifiable nominal variables inside the reports are screening decision, timeliness of initiation, frequency, duration of visits with the case parties, and number of days the case was open. Ordinal variables were the risk assessment rating and case disposition. These were all critical factors in a quantitative analysis (Bauman et al., 2014; Rossi, 2004). CPS professional education, years of experience, and state training help gain a measure of experience, education, and training, demonstrating influences on the analysis. Section 3 will provide details of the methods used for the study.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative portion of the study focused on how and why CPS staff may make these decisions. Individual interviews were conducted with CPS staff to gather essential data required for decision-making, which was used to describe decision markers identified in administrative data. Thematic analysis and saturation were used to validate the answers in a meaningful construct (Nowell et al., 2017). The exploration helped identify biases and barriers (bounded rationality), which were hypothesized to contribute to the complexity of decision-making in CPS cases. When combined with the quantitative outcomes, the qualitative analysis assisted in improving the current understanding of the decision schema.

Cost Analysis of Decision-Making

Lastly, monetary values assigned to decision-making were the final consideration in this study. A cost analysis was conducted to estimate the costs associated with time spent on cases, considering the impact of time on decisions regarding time allocation in investigative cases (Marino & Maxey, 2018). Retention issues in a CPS agency create gaps in decision-making and exacerbate poor outcomes for children (Smith & Clark, 2012). Adding a CBA strengthens the overall value of the study, and client organization leadership was predicted to respond to change positively when the monetary analysis indicated a need for additional resources.

Current cost analysis research in child welfare focuses on turnover costs. Recent academic and federal studies commonly report that the average turnover rate is between 28% and 50%. The estimated cost to replace a child welfare employee is approximately \$80,000 for a professional making a base salary of \$45,000 per year (National Association of Social Workers, 2025). An example of how such cost analysis has been used in child welfare public administration would be to state that if Child Welfare Agency X has 6,000 employees and 28% leave annually, then Child Welfare Agency X would multiply the number of staff vacated positions by the base salary plus monetary value totaled in the variables to replace an employee at the same level. In this example, the administrator would multiply \$80,000 times the number of employees exiting in a given year. At 28% of a 6,000-member workforce, this would be 1,680. As such, $\$80,000 \times 1,680 = \$134,400,000.00$. Child Welfare Agency X incurred a cost of \$134,400,000.00 to replace the lost 28% of the funds. Moreover, Child Welfare Agency

X may have become accustomed to accepting this as the norm and believing that there is nothing they can do to improve it.

This type of “sticker shock” approach appears to have had little impact on systemic changes toward improving retention factors. States and agencies have called for the hiring of additional employees, enhancing education and training, increasing wages, and providing support benefits. These solutions are beneficial. Instead of attempting to affirm further what has already been written regarding CBA, cost analysis, and child welfare, this study focused on the potential costs and benefits at the level of decision-making. This research provided a brief evaluation of the cost of using the current actuarial model of decision-making and compared it to similar behavioral health models that use evidence-based decision-making models.

Research on CPS decision-making has focused on the mechanical aspects of this process, using actuarial tools such as structured decision-making tools. Data collection, procured through administrative reports or computations from the Risk Assessment structured decision tool (Stoddart et al., 2018), provided a straightforward analysis method. Moreover, a mixed-methods study of this nature was designed to address CPS decision-making holistically through decision-tracing methods, thereby vastly improving knowledge in this area. The uniqueness of this approach lies in its attempt to explore decision-making in actual cases, which has been stated to be very challenging (Fluke et al., 2020). Former research does not apply a scholar-practitioner tethered viewpoint. Examining CPS decision-making from this perspective was hypothesized to reveal previously elusive areas, rendering what was considered very challenging to plausible

and achievable with more work, thereby adding global significance to the field of CPS.

Increasing efforts to study decision-making in CPS investigations could result in fewer repeat maltreatment cases as well as a decrease in foster care services. The preponderance of research in the field thus far is associated more closely with foster care outcomes (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2014). An effective intervention aiding in the reduction of foster care cases, repeat maltreatment, and lower risk of child fatality is increasing the quality of service at the front end of the case with increased use of evidence-based interventions (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). Specifically, an intervention to improve the current decision-making conditions, as this evaluation argues from the framework of Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon, involves identifying the characteristics and manifestations of bounded rationality and synthesizing a simple treatment to enhance direct-line staff, supervisors, and other influencers in the decision-making ecology.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was critical for two reasons. First, it sought to evaluate child welfare fatality cases to trace decision markers that will lead to preventing deaths. Second, the evaluation process aimed to provide a practical method for tracing the decisions of CPS professionals. Tracing decisions through interviews with child welfare professionals allowed a researcher to delve deeper into what is known and unknown, where their rationality was bounded, and identify critical gaps to improve decision-making. This study provided a pathway for practitioners and academics to further investigate and explore decision mapping as a means to enhance the child welfare institution's ability to prevent child fatalities and strengthen its workforce.

The ecology of child welfare professionals that can benefit from this work reaches beyond practitioners and academics. The Children's Bureau at the federal level, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (a nationally known child welfare organization), and stakeholders in multiple states and local jurisdictions need these studies to catalyze change. At the regional level, the client organization, the Department of Social Services, will ultimately learn firsthand about the decisions made by child welfare professionals to keep children safe and which ones put them in danger. North Carolina can benefit significantly since the evaluation can be replicated for the other 99 counties. After a corrective action is implemented, the impacts should be assessed as positive steps to address the issues that necessitate correction.

The broader implications of demonstrating methods and tools to improve decision-making in child welfare cases will ripple out from one county to multiple and from one state to another. Federal and national stakeholders are utilizing the same research that this researcher has access to, addressing deficits in decision-making. Reviewing the challenges associated with former approaches, such as case studies, focus groups, and vignettes, is a natural progression of the scientific approach. As such, an evaluation focused on tracing the decisions of the child welfare professionals working on fatality cases, near-fatality cases, and other protective cases has provided a rich array of information. The omnidirectional information can be filtered through bounded rationality and near decomposability, bifurcating the utility of risk logic factors and heuristics. The end product is a rendered short catalog of pertinent traced decision markers. The decision-makers are the critical elements that the researcher seeks to improve.

Simon left a legacy for public administrators to explore and apply in various fields of public administration. His work in the decision-making process offers valuable insights for this study, focusing on identifying the right questions to ask to find solutions to poor and destructive decision-making schemas in CPS work. Gerd Gigerenzer, a direct student of Simon, believed that human decisions are shaped by a lifetime of knowledge, experience, and beliefs, which collectively form heuristics. John Fluke masterfully constructs an overview of decision-making in child welfare and provides a model to help understand the multitude of threads of information coalescing from various sources. This evaluation combines the insights of the three greatest thinkers related to human decision-making to advance our understanding to the next level.

Summary

The last 25 years of research regarding decision-making in child welfare cases require more robust approaches. It is a phenomenon in which the federal oversight organization, ACF, and state supervising institutions desire drastic improvements in safe decisions for children and families. The analysis of recent fatality cases, alongside other CPS cases, through a review of administrative data and interviews with the child welfare staff of the client organization's Department of Social Services, has yielded valuable insights. The process of tracing the decisions involves a greater probability of examining the deconstructed elements to render a more accurate assessment of decisions, which will improve fatality prevention and the safety of all children receiving protective services in any jurisdiction. Moreover, to grasp the nature of such an evaluation, it was situated firmly within the conceptual work of academics and practitioners, such as Simon,

Gigerenzer, and Fluke.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

As previously stated, there is a lack of research and evidence to guide researchers in focused work on child welfare decision-making (Dagan et al., 2016). As such, when a county experiences a child fatality or other form of corrective action, the focus is on the decisions made in the CPS cases. Again, it is that uncertain arena in which child welfare professionals find themselves as they seek to improve services by enhancing decision-making. This evaluation applied the conceptual framework developed by Herbert Simon (1947), Gerd Gigerenzer (2011a, 2011b), and John Fluke et al. (2020) to examine decision-making in child welfare at a granular level. Moreover, delving into the case worker's rationality, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences allowed for the identification of characteristics of decisions that promote safety and those that do not, and for these to be cataloged.

To answer the central research question, “What external and interpersonal characteristics interfere with decision-making at the CPS professionals’ level, and how are they influenced?”, a mixed-methods design was employed to inform a holistic understanding that accounts for the mechanics and experiences inherent in decision-making (Baumann et al., 2014; Fluke et al., 2020; Simon, 1947). The quantitative subquestions included:

- RQ 1: Is the decision schema in the most recent DHHS rapid fatality “one case” reflective of decision-making in a larger case sample from the client organization?
- RQ 2: What is the relationship between the time spent on a CPS case once a report is screened in, the level of risk assessed, and the case conclusion?

- RQ 3: What is the relationship between the time CPS social workers spend in face-to-face contact and case conclusion?

The qualitative subquestion was “How do CPS staff perceive their decision-making skills?”

In the following sections, the conceptual approach and background outline the theoretical lenses chosen to answer the research questions. The relevance of using the chosen frameworks helps propel forward-thinking solutions to challenging problems plaguing public organizations. As such, the relevance lies in researching how older conceptual models, such as Herbert Simon’s work, coupled with newer ideas found in Fluke et al. and Gigerenzer, propose generative solutions aimed at improving practice. The client organization that agreed to participate in the study provided the researcher with the means to test the applications of the conceptual works on at least a small scale in hopes of replicating the study with a larger sample size. Moreover, the challenges that child welfare faces are shared among several public agencies. Improving retention and decision-making is known to enhance the quality of human life and even preserve it.

Conceptual Framework: Concepts, Models, and Theories

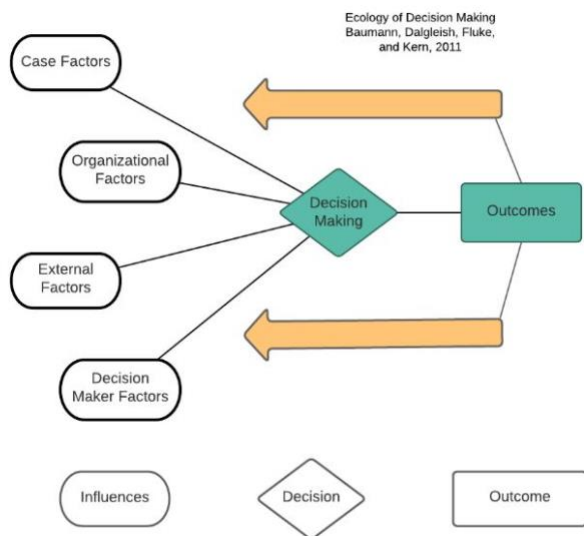
To achieve the goals of the CPS organization, the decisions of the agency and workforce must be carefully and continually studied. According to Lwin et al. (2018), few cohesive factors exist across child welfare jurisdictions; possibly, no one has studied this issue more than Dr. John Fluke. He has published extensively on child welfare subjects for over 20 years. In 2020, he and a team of colleagues published a specialized book focused on decision-making in child welfare. This study utilized three

complementary lenses to explain decisions made in CPS cases.

First, Fluke's seminal work, the ecology of decision making model (EDM), was used to map the sources of influence. Second, tracing decision schemas by applying Herbert A. Simon's (1947) notions of bounded rationality and near decomposability was helpful in understanding the subject's more challenging aspects. Simon's (1946, 1947, 1990) work relies on human reasoning to gather knowledge and understand behavior, rationality, and choice. Since a mixed methods approach was designed for this evaluation, discussing certain (risk) and uncertain logic is necessary. Gerd Gigerenzer's work in this field complemented the nature of this evaluation's attempt to map decision tracing.

Ecology of Decision-Making

Decision-making theory in child welfare and CPS is an emerging field of study. Fluke et al. (2020) published a comprehensive book on the subject. This study applied the EDM matrix (see Figure 1) to understand the critical elements in CPS practitioners' decision-making (Fluke et al., 2020). EDM distinguishes between decision-making (action) and judgments (assessment). The definition of terms provided pathways for investigation of the individual CPS worker within the micro-context of the CPS organization and the larger macro-context of the local community and state. As such, the examination connected intersections of case factors, organizational factors, various external factors, and decision-maker factors to understand calibration to state policy and law.

Figure 1*Ecology of Decision-Making Model*

Note. Fluke et al. (2020) provide an overview of the community system's pertinent influences on decisions in CPS cases.

The influence of decision-making must be studied in the context of the individual, as well as the individual's colleagues, supervisors, leaders, and community members. Fluke et al. (2020) stated that the primary challenge in researching decision-making in CPS is the variation in human decisions and their influences, which must be mitigated to achieve consistency. To do so, the right questions must be tested to understand how consistency is produced. Administrators seeking to build decision consistency in CPS work must be able to apply the appropriate form of rationality at the right time to meet this goal.

Rationality

Examining the nature of decisions pivots this discussion to expound on the

definition and utilization of rationality. Defining rationality can be challenging because one person's rationality differs from that of another. However, the most popular and widely accepted definitions of rationality are anchored in the notions of consistency and certainty (Katsikopoulos & Gigerenzer, 2013). Another argument in defining rationality is that scenarios exist in which uncertainty or unpredictability is preferred (Gigerenzer, 2011b). Simply put, the two widely accepted definitions of rationality are certain and uncertain logic (Gigerenzer, 2011a). The two forms of logic serve distinct purposes and should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Utilizing two forms of logic as they are designed can generate a fuller understanding of why a particular decision is made over another.

Certain Logic

It is worth repeating the need to distinguish between certain and uncertain logic to understand how to apply them effectively. Let us begin with logical reasoning or certainty. As stated previously, reasoning and logic associated with certainty are formula-based (Gigerenzer, 2011b). We know that $2+2=4$. Certain logic also takes on the definition of risk logic. Risk logic extends the rules of certainty beyond the absolute certainty of $2+2$ and develops specialized algorithms to aid in predicting a particular outcome based on the introduced variables. Regression models are a basic example of risk or predictability models (Gigerenzer, 2011b). A more common application of this type of logic, for example, is to say someone is in the market to buy a new home. The person can go online and find a home mortgage calculator to input the type of home, their desired budget, their income, and their credit score. The calculator will then inform the

home buyer of their affordability and potential eligibility for this loan. When interacting with certain or risk logic, this question should be asked: “Should one fully trust that the mortgage calculator is correct? Does the calculator assure one to get a loan”? Those persons who have experience in real estate would say NO! Placing too much faith in the calculator’s answer is unreasonable when several other variables not used in the computation can influence the decision. One such variable is having a solid relationship with the lending bank.

The same is true when administrative data from the CPS is applied in the interpretation of workforce performance. Let us look at an example application based on the current North Carolina referral screenings for allegedly maltreated children. Read the example:

“A 4-year-old child was in the home with their parents. The parents were using methamphetamine and fentanyl, and the drugs may be within the reach of the child. The parents were arrested for possession with intent to sell, distribute, and manufacture, and the child is now with a grandparent. The child was sick. They were lethargic and vomiting frequently. The grandparents did not take the child to the doctor. “

Based on the current policy guiding decisions, this referral could be screened as neglect due to improper supervision and assigned a 72-hour response time. The performance markers to make this decision would meet the benchmarks if this referral were screened as such. The decision does not appear to take into account enough factors to ensure the child’s safety, and the child may be unsafe in the grandparents’ care. An experienced CPS professional equipped with the knowledge of what these substances are,

the lethality of exposure at this young age, the reporter describing the type of illness the child exhibited from possible exposure to these substances, and recent statistics documenting the highest rate of lethality in maltreatment cases are children under the age of five stemming from neglect cases where the parents are active substance misusers may decide to go out much sooner than seventy-two-hours. In this example, the CPS professional who screens the report and responds within seventy-two hours will meet the performance benchmark shown in administrative data (applying certain logic only), and they may jeopardize the child's safety. Moreover, state policy, law, and training cannot keep up with rapid changes such as the fentanyl challenges and nuances in behavioral health.

Uncertain Logic

The study of decision-making has been commonly done to determine the optimal decision given a specific set of rules and expected outcomes. Focusing on the optimization goal in human affairs cannot be accomplished because there are too many unknowns (Gigerenzer, 2011a). Uncertain logic considers the utility of heuristics as a better way to make decisions in human affairs. As previously stated, human behavior is only somewhat predictable at times (Gigerenzer, 2013; Simon, 1990). Numerous unknowns mark the complex nature of CPS services. Assessing a child's safety requires more than understanding how to apply law and policy. It requires a sound understanding of human behavior. Heuristics encompasses human experience, bias, beliefs, and cultural aspects that assist decision-making.

The evaluation of decision-making ultimately should lead public managers to

reconsider the work of Herbert Simon. Simon stated, “The issue with administration and decision-making is that in light of the proverbs that I have laid out, we have yet to learn to ask the right question” (Simon, 1947, p. 45). As previously stated, the current practice of applying certain logic is limited in answering how these critical decisions are made. Moreover, a deconstruction of the anatomy of decision-making in CPS cases warrants the researcher to apply strategies geared toward detecting values, beliefs, and judgments that influence poor decisions in the social worker’s and agency’s psychology. As such, should public managers focus on performance, measured by big data, or on procedure, which is the process by which CPS decisions are made?

Bounded Rationality

Bounded rationality studies how people make decisions in an uncertain world. There are three definitions of bounded rationality. a) economist (rationality): the study of optimization under constraints, whether internal or external; the repair program which utilizes BR and adds specific free parameters; b) in psychology (irrationality) seeks the optimal answer to a simple problem and deviations come from paying attention to content resulting in bias or errors equals cognitive limitations and bounded rationality, (each of these shares accepted norms of logic) c) Herbert Simon represents “how do people make decisions when optimization is out of reach” (Simon, 1946, p. 60)? Heuristics should not take precedence over rationality. Three questions: 1) What is in the adaptive toolbox of the person or culture (what are the heuristics, social or individual)? 2) When is it normative to use heuristics - in what world will these heuristics succeed or fail; when is it better to ignore most of the information and use the ‘one good reason’ heuristic, which

can do better and is more accurate 3) how to use these insights to design strategic tools experts can use so they make better decisions and create an environment to create an ecology to use these strategies so these strategies become ecologically rational.

Various decisional influences impact the outcome of CPS cases, both positively and negatively. Bounded rationality is not a condition that requires eradication; rather, it is a condition that requires understanding. It is, after all, the essence of what has provided humanity with survival skills (Augier & March, 2004; Simon, 1990). BR is the limitation of where an individual, either consciously or unconsciously, can make decisions. For instance, think about two people who decide to go into a house-flipping business together. One person (Person A) can see a dilapidated home completely restored and the value it can be sold for. The other person (Person B) cannot visualize anything but the vacuum that this money pit will drain from their bank account. Person A's rationality is not limited by financial risk, and they are optimistic about a substantial reward when the home sells at a profit. This person is at risk of creating stressors in relationships by attempting to overspend the budget in an effort to increase profits. Person B's rationality is influenced by financial risk, which can serve the pair well by keeping the project on budget or create relational challenges by restricting the resources necessary to complete the project.

Decisions take on the personality of the individual caseworker and the organization in which they are employed. Organizations contain intra-agency beliefs, values, and cultures. Typically shaped by the agency's vision and mission, these characteristics define the identity as the public knows it (Simon, 1947). BR, for example,

can manifest in a CPS agency when an executive leader or the agency's director renders a directive to screen a specific type of child maltreatment more conservatively due to its prevalence in the home community. In this case, the manager has limited decision-making authority, and the organization's employees must follow the directive.

Near Decomposability

CPS decisions are made in teams of at least two, and many times, more are called to assist. Multiple participants in decision-making also create multiple biased influences. Simon (2002) stated that decision-making is threatened by the notion of bounded rationality and near decomposability, which occurs when an individual's biases, values, beliefs, and judgments interfere with making optimal decisions as determined by the organization (Crowther-Heyck, N.D.). Near decomposability is the intersection of decision-making where change can germinate.

ND is the point of deconstruction of a person or organization's beliefs, cultures, or values where change can occur. ND is activated when the position of BR is challenged by an alternative position (Simon, 2002). The idea is to stretch the opposing condition to the point where change can be fostered. An exercise of this nature is delicate and requires public managers to follow a process of establishing and maintaining high-quality relationships so as not to allow them to deteriorate or decompose.

As Fluke et al. (2020) stated, applying Simon's notion of bounded rationality and near decomposability to the EDM model appears to add a missing component. Adding a decision matrix tool to the current EDM structure should enhance the overall decision-making process, ultimately leading to improved safety for vulnerable children. The

evaluation can collect administrative data from state reports and trace decisional points by interviewing child welfare professionals.

Applying the Conceptual Frameworks

As they operate independently, the theoretical models discussed address a component of decision-making relevant to evaluating CPS decisions. Fluke et al. (2020) studied child welfare practice and decision-making for over fifteen years. The EDM model maps decision influences, alerting researchers to the sources of data collection. The EDM model relies heavily on administrative data, which is one of the limitations of our knowledge of the subject. Moreover, what is interesting about the EDM model is that the decision holds the central focus rather than the person making the decision.

Simon and Gigerenzer (2013) reverse the positioning, placing the person deciding the focal point. There is no decision apart from the professional's cognitive and affective processing. As such, the theoretical frameworks were utilized in this evaluation to synthesize the data and generate a deeper understanding of how and why CPS professionals make the decisions they do with the information they gather.

Relevance to Public Organizations

The relevance to public administration was in this evaluation's attempt to delve deeper into the decision-making processes of practitioners, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of why decisions are made. Public managers will have a mapping tool to apply in any complex or chaotic public institution. Furthermore, the nature of decision-making in CPS cases, as described by academics and professionals, is complex and overwhelming due to the multiplicity of factors influencing decision-

making (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Vis & Fossum, 2019). The current presentation of CPS decision-making as complex and uncertain may be attributed to the lack of attempts to study the phenomenon (Keddell, 2014). An in-depth search in the ProQuest database yields only 127 articles associated with CPS and decision-making in the last 25 years. Articles before 1996 could not be located. The primary problem is centrally located in the mystery of what limitations prevent CPS professionals from making safer decisions for children and, in general, preventing more fatalities.

Adaptation of conceptual frameworks from academic giants known for their work in decision-making was one of the necessary gaps this evaluation sought to fill. Simon eloquently stated, “To understand the deeper aspects of human reasoning, the researcher must commit themselves to the arduous task of learning where their rationality is bound and the pathways to unbind it (Simon, 1990, p. 68)”. More than mere sentiment, Simon encouraged researchers to delve into the deeper thought processes of human reasoning to answer the right question of how and why the decision was made. The relevance of this evaluation for public administration lies not only in the utilization of three renowned experts but also in what appears to be the next logical step: attempting to understand the complex and nuanced decisions made by the professionals rendering them.

Organization Background and Context

The client organization at the center of this study was a rural county child protective department in North Carolina. The agency is responsible for eleven other services in addition to child protective services, employs 55 staff members, and has a modest budget for salaries and operations. The CPS unit consists of one supervisor and

eight caseworkers. CPS workers cover various terrains, ranging from city limits to remote locations without cell phone service. Moreover, families and children suffering from behavioral health, substance misuse, and being involved in domestic violence relationships rely on services that are an hour or more away. Mitigating safety concerns involving these factors increased the risk of future maltreatment.

In 2020, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services ordered a Rapid Fatality Review of the client organization's DSS decision-making after the death of a three-month-old child with unexplained injuries. The state's investigation found deficits in the agency's leadership and staff's ability to identify severe injury cases, which could have ultimately prevented the child's death. Despite the level of training and experience of staff, their present decision-making competence was leaving vulnerable children at significant risk of death and serious injury. The client organization received a corrective action plan (CAP) that required the procurement of consulting and coaching services from an experienced CPS leader. The goal of the service was to enhance understanding of decision-making in all CPS investigations, ultimately improving decision-making in general.

Role of DPA Student/Researcher

The researcher's role was to provide the client organization with an evaluation of the child welfare professionals' decision-making process. The researcher applied North Carolina law and policy to determine whether a decision was accurate. Furthermore, through the application of decision tracing, the evaluation provided a catalog of how and why decisions are made. The goals of the review were to produce a report that

demonstrated the strengths and areas where training was required to improve decision-making performance. The researcher provided an objective, third-party expert evaluation to enhance cognitive and affective decision-making processes, thereby strengthening safe decisions for children and families.

The researcher has over twenty years of experience in child welfare in North Carolina. Experiences have spanned from direct practice to leadership positions at both the county and state levels. The researcher is often sought for consultation and to serve on committees to inform change in the state's system. This study was motivating as it addressed a central interest and revealed to this researcher the true root of the problem in child welfare organizations. Child welfare professionals are often not adequately trained or prepared in the reasoning skills required to keep children safe.

Child welfare work is a calling and passion. The calling is the sobering, objective side, and passion can give way to bias. This researcher was eager to see the child welfare system improve for the better. It started with the frontline workers. A potential bias was a persistent tendency to attribute blame to state and federal partners. Ultimately, the federal and state partners must support local child protection agencies with funding, training, and resources. Evaluating a remote county in western North Carolina revealed a need for more effective support from federal and state partners. Evaluations and high-quality training come with significant costs. The infuriating knowledge of children dying and suffering harm has not been a strong enough catalyst for change. Therefore, this researcher was mindful of the passion to drive change within the institution.

Summary

The gap in practice identified through a review of all 127 available articles and Fluke et al.'s (2020) book on decision-making underscored the need for detailed work within the conceptual framework of Simon, Gigerenzer, and Fluke. Gigerenzer (2011a & 2011b) encouraged researchers to investigate and explore decisional mapping or tracing. His position was that experience, knowledge, and beliefs enable heuristics to be crafted that aid in decision-making, which can be as accurate or more accurate than certain logical approaches. On the contrary, Fluke thinks that tracing decisions is too complicated and arduous. The gap identified from the literature review highlighted the need to conduct research that included decision tracing. Mapping and tracing decisions required a strategic data collection strategy that fostered a participant's willingness and ability to walk back through time in a case.

Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

This study investigated and explored a practical method for tracing a professional's decisions to gain a deeper understanding of where their present rationality is bound, which hinders the accurate detection of safety threats to children. Through the decision ecology, filter certain and uncertain logic, recognize where the individual and agency's rationality could be bound, and use policy and law to rebind the professional's rationality towards safer decisions for children. Studies that do not account for the beliefs and characteristics of local agencies misappropriate findings and fail to address recent gaps in CPS decision-making (Damman et al., 2020). A method that attempts to trace decisions in this manner could answer these questions, providing a greater understanding and setting the path for public managers to follow.

The mixed methods approach facilitates the most significant opportunity to investigate and explore decision-making in CPS professionals. The academic articles on this subject continue to cite shortfalls in studying decision-making from a particular logical viewpoint (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010; Hughes & Rycus, 2007). Even the use of advanced methods, such as structural equation models, while beneficial in pointing researchers toward a logical examination via statistically solid relationships between multiple complex variables, cannot clarify the mysteries of human decision-making beyond exploring such issues with practitioners (Vis & Fossum, 2019). As such, examining decision-making drivers can produce a more robust understanding of how and why decisions are made by CPS professionals (Hood et al., 2020). Applying mixed methods in this evaluation provided an opportunity to understand the present gaps in CPS

practitioners' reasoning, thereby improving services, potentially preventing fatalities through earlier detection of high-risk cases, and addressing the limitations of quantitative evaluations.

Section 3 involves vital actions to source the data via data collection steps. Then, I will discuss analytical techniques for collecting and organizing the data. This step aims to generate findings that can then be juxtaposed with the theoretical frameworks guiding the proposed study and further reviewed for their relevance to the current and emerging literature. Moreover, the client organization will benefit from the outcomes of this evaluation, which will improve decision-making processes and children's safety in the community.

Practice-Focused Questions

The organizational problem hinges on the CPS professional's ability to recognize and manage the "50 million pieces of data" to filter relevant case information needed to make decisions in a child fatality or high-risk case (Simon, 1946, 1990). To examine some of the pieces, five main practice questions can help anchor the loftier assets of the practical, day-to-day work in CPS. This study sought to answer the following practice-based questions:

- What specific factors of decision-making can be identified in administrative data?
- What factors of decision-making can be identified in case records?
- From the perspective of caseworkers and their supervisors, what are additional decision-making considerations?

- Is there evidence to show a relationship between cost and decision-making?
- What specific efforts can the client organization make to assist caseworkers and their supervisors in decision-making?

The five practice questions were designed to uncover specific characteristics of bounded rationality that obstruct cognitive and affective processing, representing a gap in the existing literature. Moreover, as bounded rationality is exposed, near decomposability will follow by advancing the pathways of improved decision-making. Administrative data factors can lead to case factors. Case factors will lead to caseworker factors. Caseworker factors will lead to dyadic decisions between the case worker and supervisor. The time spent making or not making decisions can be quantified and assessed in terms of its associated costs. As such, the client organization has a fuller understanding of the omnidirectional nature of decision-making. Therefore, the listed process must be understood and applied as a sequential and linear process. Human decision-making is rarely linear.

Decision tracing starts with the decision maker at the case level. The GCT was developed by Marino and Wright 2014 and patented in 2022 as an essential aspect of the administrative tethering approach (Marino & Wright, 2022). Applying the GCT helps emphasize the process of decision tracing of a CPS professional. I measured by examining the context, also known as the essential aspects, of the decision in space (environment) and time (when the decision occurred). To provide as much clarity as possible, it is necessary to outline the logic of a CPS professional's case in their home agency.

A child protective case begins when a report comes in alleging a child has been maltreated. Maltreatment can include but is not limited to, sexual abuse, physical injury by non-accidental means, emotional abuse, severe discipline, exposure to drug use, or a parent, legal custodian, or legal guardian not providing primary care to a child. The report shall be screened to determine if the allegations in the report align with one or more of the maltreatment typologies outlined in that state's laws and policies. Once the decision is made to provide protective services, a CPS investigator or assessor will be assigned to the case. Before going out to the home, criminal background checks, registered sex offenders list, and prior CPS history are pulled to assess potential threats in the home or towards the professional.

The investigator then interviews all household members to gather information about the allegations or other danger or safety threats found in the home. Information is also collected through a home walkthrough, during which the CPS professional will often take pictures. The walkthrough will include seeing where the children sleep, bathe, eat, and share common space with others in the home. It is not uncommon for a CPS professional to ask to look in the refrigerator or cabinets to ensure food insecurity is not a threat. Once the initial home visit is complete, the CPS investigator will complete a safety assessment with the parents, legal guardian, or legal custodian.

The CPS professional will gather information about the school (if the child is school-age or in daycare), medical providers, and other individuals who would be familiar with the family to serve as collateral contacts. Over the next 45 days, the CPS professional will continue to make home visits or community visits to interview

household members and collaterals. All the information is reviewed to render a final case decision, where the CPS professional and their supervisor indicate whether the evidence demonstrates maltreatment has occurred or not.

The state supervisory group must review the case if a fatality occurs during the open case or within twelve months of providing a CPS investigation or assessment. The home CPS agency shall notify the state of a fatality on an open case. The fatality intake form is completed, and the initial call from the state division occurs within twenty-four hours. State staff then arrange to visit the home agency to conduct a comprehensive review of the case and interview the CPS professionals involved in the decisions made in the case. The state is looking for evidence that the death is connected to the maltreatment, as well as if the actions or inactions of someone could have been prevented. When the state seeks to prevent a fatality, it analyzes information from the case record and CPS professional interviews concerning relevant policies and laws. Any deviation from the policy and law by CPS professionals will be cataloged as a potential violation that may have contributed to the fatality, and corrective action will be issued to the local county child protection agency. The inherent challenges with this type of review are hindsight bias and information limit bias, which are areas of the reviewer's bounded rationality.

The reviewers need a consistent system or tools to assist in the review process. The state staff that reviews fatality cases may or may not have direct practice experience in CPS, and they may not have experienced a child fatality on their case or in their local agency. Hindsight bias fosters the opportunity to look back on the case and state, "This decision should have been this," without being the present ecology when a particular

decision was made. Likewise, the reviewers are vulnerable to information limit bias. It is well established that CPS professionals do not always capture a case's details in their case narrative (Fluke et al., 2021). The professional may recall events as if they had just happened and admit that the information should have been in the record once it was exposed. Moreover, the intense review process increases a CPS professional's anxieties, which could impact recall or the ability to apply sound logic to improve interview outputs (Jagannathan & Camaso, 2017). As such, the current review process requires the best practice standards that this evaluation could provide.

Sources of Evidence

The complexity of decision-making in CPS necessitates a robust, multidimensional approach. The selected theoretical frameworks directly inform data collection, bridging gaps identified in the literature (Redden, 2020; Stoddart et al., 2018; Vis & Fossum, 2013). By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, this study aimed to construct a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing CPS decisions, particularly in high-risk and fatality cases.

The framework established by Fluke et al. provided a foundational structure for categorizing data sources and evaluation methodologies. Within the EDM, decision-making is positioned at the intersection of case, organizational, and external factors, alongside influences from the decision-maker. Decomposing this model into its constituent elements facilitates a systematic analysis of the data pathways informing decision-making processes.

CPS professionals access state administrative data, including reports that detail

case screening decisions, response times, risk levels, and case dispositions. For instance, the time to close a case may reflect state-level administrative trends, such as delayed closure beyond the mandated 45-day limit, which could correlate with an increase in repeat maltreatment reports. This evaluation examines how such data might influence professional decision-making behaviors.

Organizational factors reveal implicit or explicit agency rules and beliefs that shape decisions. For example, maladaptive organizational norms—such as the belief that domestic violence victims should leave abusive partners (Agnew-Brune et al., 2017)—can perpetuate mistrust and hinder service delivery. These norms not only influence experienced professionals but also shape the perceptions of less experienced staff, ultimately affecting case outcomes (Garwood et al., 2020). Moreover, organizational improvements also generate a cohesive pathway towards improving organizational culture and climate.

The decision-maker is central to this evaluation as they synthesize data from all components to arrive at case decisions. Their role involves discerning relevant information, assessing the influence of external factors, and aligning decisions with relevant policies and laws. The EDM model facilitates the distinction between certain logic (administrative data) and uncertain logic (human factors), ensuring a holistic approach to decision-making analysis. By prioritizing the decision-maker as the focal point, this study mitigates the risk of cognitive biases inherent in interpreting administrative data (Gigerenzer, 2013).

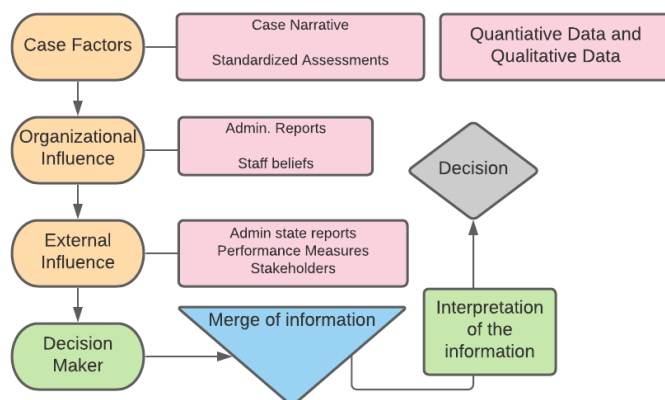
Figure 2 outlines how certain and uncertain logic was found and categorized. The

figure also categorizes the data by scientific name, distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative data. Simon's notions were detected and interpreted through the qualitative data. All information collected by the CPS professional was filtered through various influences, affecting the interpretation in the decision-making process.

Ultimately, the evaluation chose a standard to determine the information pertinent to deciding whether to keep a child safe. In North Carolina, the rubric was outlined in the state's laws governing CPS and the policy that guides practice.

Figure 2

Ecology of Decision Making: Theoretical Model Arranged to Collect and Categorize Data for Evaluation



Since the evaluation had an inherent standard in law and policy, information that does not align with those elements must be questioned by the CPS professional. The researcher was able to interact with the professional to examine the beliefs and notions that influence their rationality, including information irrelevant to policy and law. This moment elicited a certain degree of flexibility to redirect the professional to filter out

irrelevant content through law and policy. As such, the researcher catalogued specific bounded rationality and near decomposability outputs (Simon, 2002). Moreover, the moments of questioning foster exposure of BR and ND, which highlight the heuristics used by the professional and ultimately reveal the paths to trace a more holistic approach to the individual's decision schema. As such, this mixed-method case study gathered various data to provide insight into the decision-making process of the client-agency staff.

Quantitative data collection relied on administrative sources of evidence, which are available in the North Carolina state reports accessible to each local CPS agency. The specific reports requested for this evaluation are CYA-004, the SIS case worker report, and the Case Disposition Report from the Client Services Data Warehouse. These three administrative reports were consolidated into the "county report," which provided all the necessary variables to trace the logic of the decision ecology. Examining Figure 2, the data relate to case, organizational, and external factors.

The qualitative data were collected from the case records of CPS professionals and through interviews with them. Interviewing the professionals allows the researcher to explore the beliefs of a particular policy, law, maltreatment type, or family's ability to change (such as in a domestic violence or substance misuse case). These characteristics relate to BR (see Table 1).

Table 1*Decision Data Matrix*

Case Worker	Organizational Influence	External Influence
Feeling prepared knowledge and practice	Organizational culture	State law beliefs
Emotional preparedness	Organizational trust	State policy beliefs
Personal beliefs about case alleged maltreatment	Support to CPS staff	Support to local agency

Note. See Appendix A for interview questions.

The collection and analysis of the proposed data addressed multiple gaps in the current understanding of how decisions are made in CPS cases. This evaluation demonstrated the limits of reviewing the administrative data to prevent a child fatality and improve repeat maltreatment in high-risk cases. It utilized the qualitative data to explore the notions of BR and ND, eliciting the CPS professional's beliefs and biases as they gather information and assess the safety of children in a case. Tracing the workers' decisions was perceived by this evaluation as a direct way to identify decisions not aligned with policy and law, and indicate decisions that policy and law do not address in providing CPS services. The client organization received a literature review summary, a process for the agency to track decisions, and a cost analysis that differentiates between reliable and unreliable decision-making. The deliverable package was organized strategically to increase reliable and safer decisions and mitigate opportunities for child fatalities.

Published Outcomes and Research

The client organization was interested in understanding other research published

on CPS decision-making. The evaluation has added this to their deliverables to meet the client's needs. Extensive literature was collected using Walden University's library to access Ebsco Host and ProQuest journals. Several journals have studied decision-making. Ebsco and ProQuest were chosen due to the extent to which these engines reach. Most peer-reviewed material related to this topic can be found using these search engines.

The inclusion criteria began with peer-reviewed articles dating back to 1962, when the service was established. The first vital terms used were child protection services decision-making. Decision-making was too broad a topic, generating 2,053,319 results, and adding the key terms 'child protective services' and 'decision' provided 1,559 articles from 1989 to 2024. The last key term added was 'investigation,' narrowing the search to 135 peer-reviewed articles for the same period. The current evaluation is focused on the investigation phase of CPS work. As such, the last 135 articles reviewed only focused on decision-making in CPS investigations.

Moreover, a sharp decline in attention to the topic was noticed when the date range was further examined. Between 2004 and 2024, 131 relevant articles were identified globally, with 91 published between 2014 and 2024. Lastly, only eight articles were found when the review was narrowed to publications in the United States. Two of the eight studies did not meet the inclusion criteria for the search because one study was conducted in Canada, and a duplicate entry was identified.

A literature review is a scientifically acceptable methodology when numerous research articles are chosen to analyze. The review provided rich insight into the existing research, its methodologies, the outcomes obtained, the further research required to

expand knowledge on the subject, and the limitations encountered during the research process. The sample size indicated from the literature review represents the totality of articles used to complete this portion of the evaluation.

The review highlighted a greater need for specialized resources to study the decision-making process in child welfare investigations. If the system creates beneficial change, all professionals and nonprofessionals interacting with the child welfare system must be thoroughly informed about when, how, where, and why critical decisions regarding children and families are made. Based on the articles reviewed, the vast majority recommend consistent further studies into the phenomena of decision-making in child welfare (Lwin et al., 2018; McGinn et al., 2020; Middel et al., 2020; Nesmith, 2020; Rushovich et al., 2021). Two specific recommendations are highlighted in the review. One strategy is to use a family team to make safety decisions. The reason cited was for families and communities to set goals and measures for child and family safety and well-being. Family group decision-making utilizes local resources to reduce the likelihood of repeat maltreatment and prevent the need for foster care (McGinn et al., 2020). The second strategy involved using simple decision-making tools that focused on the decision-making process in conjunction with validated decision-making tools (Lwin et al., 2018; Middel et al., 2020). The review aligned with the purpose and direction of this research. This research aligned with current trends in child welfare decision-making during investigations. Moreover, it deepens the understanding by clarifying the decision-making process, which involves bounded cognitive and affective processes.

Archival and Operations Data

Daily and monthly operations data inform a child welfare agency of case specifics. A consensus of the literature review demonstrates that quantitative operational data was essential. Operations data can provide certain “flags” to draw the practitioner’s attention toward potential reliable and unreliable decision-making (Redden, 2020; Stoddart et al., 2018). This section outlines multiple data points (see Table 1) and explains why these data points are essential for the evaluation. Child welfare investigation decisions start with the intake or complaint of child abuse or neglect and move into the investigation phase of service. Operational data in investigations reveals what families were investigated, how long the investigation remained open, scores for risk assessment and safety assessments, and a final disposition of the investigation. The following is an outline of how child welfare services progress, along with the data provided at each decision point. Understanding the flow of services and the points at which data are collected provides a map of the administrative (or child welfare leadership’s) perspective on decisions made within an agency.

Each local county child protection agency is required to complete state-mandated forms on a monthly basis to track specific data points for all cases. As stated previously, the child welfare investigation begins with the intake or complaint form. Once a decision to screen a complaint is made, it proceeds to a formal investigation, during which several additional data points are captured. Table 1 outlines the eight primary decision points from intake to final disposition of an investigation case. Two tertiary data points should be investigated further. This study will use the tertiary data points to inform a cost-benefit

analysis in a later section.

Local leadership and front-line staff review the reports monthly. All CPS cases must capture elements that feed into the state data reports and the professional's narrative. Ten cases represent a statistically relevant sample based on the yearly average of 74 cases in the client organization over the last three years (Rossi et al., 2004). The home organization provided a sample size of thirty cases.

The quantitative variables found in the state-reported data include the date and time of the initial report, type of maltreatment alleged, name of the case parties (family and children in the reported household), time frame the CPS professional must respond (immediately, within 24 hours, or 72 hours), when the CPS investigator/assessor made the initial contact (date, and time), how long the case was open, what the risk assessment rating was, type of maltreatment found at case decision, and what factors may have contributed to maltreatment. Most of the case evidence was found outside of these data points, which re-emphasizes the importance of this study. Making changes based on such reports inherently limits the decisions that can be made.

Table 2

Quantitative Decision Variables from State Reports

Variable	Decision Point	Law And Policy Alignment	Outcomes
Maltreatment in report	1st decision	Typology aligns with policy and law	One of the 17 maltreatment types
Report Screened In	2nd decision	Establishes legal basis to intervene	Yes or No
Timeframe to respond assigned	3rd decision	Timeframe aligns with law and policy	Yes or No
Initial contact	4th decision	Timeframe met	Yes or No

Case closed within 45 days	5th decision	Timeframe met	Yes or No
Risk assessment completed	6th decision	Low, moderate, or high by numerical rank	0-2 = low 3-5 = moderate ≥ 6 = high
Maltreatment found	7th decision	Typology aligns with policy and law	One of the 17 maltreatment types
Contributing factors	8th decision	Typology aligns with policy and law	One of the 8 contributing factors
Face to Face Case Contacts	Tertiary	Number of contacts provided in the case	Minimum of 2 face to face contacts in a case
Time in case contacts	Tertiary	How much time was spent by investigator in each contact	There is no minimum time prescribed in policy and law

A confidentiality agreement was executed to redact all client names and identifiers, allowing access to the quantitative data. The state reports were exported into an Excel spreadsheet. The researcher reviewed the report and requested that the names and other identifiers be coded by replacing the client's name with an alphanumeric code corresponding to the CPS case. The confidentiality agreement was required to extend to address the collection of qualitative data. Names and personal identifiers were in the CPS professionals' narratives, and the researcher followed the same coding system. Interview data was sanitized of all identifiers as the questions will be targeted to specific decision points to explore the information the professional obtained, what other information would have helped make the decision, question the relevance of the information, and what the worker believes about that information and its source, how the data was interpreted with policy and law, and reviewing the interview outcome with the supervisor and manager to seek other areas of organizational bounded rationality and near decomposability.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

Participants

A small team of eight Child Protective Services (CPS) professionals from a local agency's investigative team made up the pool of potential participants from the client agency. The average experience of this CPS investigation team is 3.3 years. This group collaborated closely, sharing information about high-risk cases that are particularly vulnerable to fatality. Their experiences, especially following a recent fatality, have significantly impacted the team based on a review of the Corrective Action Plan workers' responses. According to the CAP responses, the team members were eager to learn how to improve decision-making. As such, those who choose to participate in the study have the training, knowledge, and experience to provide new insights into the phenomena of child protection decision-making.

The client agency, classified as a tier two county, aided in understanding its socioeconomic status and distress levels. Although the limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings to approximately 6,000 practitioners in North Carolina, the study provides valuable insights into affective processing in decision-making that can be applied to similar contexts (Frankfort-Nachmias & Leon-Guerro, 2018). With around thirty-nine other comparable counties, the contributions of study participants were vital in determining how to allocate resources effectively to improve CPS investigations.

Procedures

The qualitative data collection process emphasized rigorous ethical considerations and methodological integrity. The study's participants were selected from the child

protection team within the home agency. Recruitment was conducted in a non-coercive manner to ensure voluntary participation. The researcher contacted potential participants directly, explaining the study's purpose, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Consent was obtained electronically, with participants responding affirmatively to an emailed invitation.

Qualitative data was collected using a semi-structured interview process. The practice-focused questions used in this study were initially developed by Marino and Wright (2022) and are used with permission. The answers to the interview questions were collected in Marino and Wright's (2022) Good Call Tool™. This four-quadrant decision matrix was designed to promote critical thinking, identify bounded rationality, and enhance the decision-maker's state of near decomposability, thereby rendering a more substantial and objective decision.

Based on the nature of the study and the number of potential participants, it took a period of six to eight weeks (Frankfort-Nachmias & Leon-Guerro, 2018; Rossi et al., 2004). The interview data were stored and archived in accordance with North Carolina's governing records and data retention storage laws (Office of Natural Resources NC (Records Retention), 2022). Evaluation data of this nature falls into the administrative data category and must only be retained as long as its administrative value remains relevant. The administrative data ultimately belongs to the local CPS agency and was surrendered to the agency.

Protections

Participants responded to the researcher's invitation by confirming their

willingness to participate in the study. Those who chose to be interviewed were informed, both in writing and verbally, that they could opt out at any time. CPS investigators are often vulnerable to secondary stress and trauma in their work. As such, this study employed various protective measures (Jagannathan & Camasso, 2017; Marino & Wright, 2022; Damman, Johnson-Motoyama, Wells, & Harrington, 2020). Interviews were conducted privately at a community center or via Microsoft Teams, ensuring confidentiality and minimizing workplace pressures that could influence responses. Semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of decision-making processes. The Good Call Tool (GCT) was used during the interviews to systematically identify bounded rationality and heuristics that affect decision-making (see Table 2 for the qualitative constructs). Post-interview member-checking was conducted to validate the researcher's interpretations, ensuring alignment with participants' perspectives and enhancing the study's credibility. The data set was sanitized of identifiable information and securely stored in encrypted digital environments to protect participant identities and comply with institutional and legal standards.

The home agency provided permission for this research to be conducted. A signed letter was provided to the researcher. The researcher engaged with Walden University's IRB process to ensure the approach was ethical and protected the participants. Walden University's IRB board granted permission for the study and data collection.

Analysis and Synthesis

Systems for Recording, Tracking, Organizing, and Analyzing Data

The researcher employed robust systems for recording, tracking, organizing, and

analyzing data to ensure reliability and integrity throughout the research process.

Administrative data from the client organization was recorded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, facilitating data cleaning, tracking, and organization. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to conduct a descriptive analysis and Spearman's rho to investigate the potential relationships between the decision points identified earlier. MAXQDA software was used for thematic analysis. Data security was ensured by storing all datasets in encrypted cloud environments, which prevented unauthorized access and ensured compliance with ethical guidelines.

The GCT (see Figure 3) was developed by Marino and Wright in 2014. Over ten years, the tool was used and tested in the field, which culminated in the validation study period from 2016 to 2020, demonstrating gains in accurate decision-making ranging from 35% to 55% improved through correctly identifying bounded rationality and poor intuitions and confronting those beliefs with policy, law, and best practices to place them into near decomposability to ensure decisions improved (Marino & Wright, 2022). Inspiration for the GCT came from the work of John Douglas, one of the most renowned criminal profilers, who was formerly an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The GCT combines behavioral science and forensic techniques in decision-making.

Figure 3

The Good Call Tool

THE "GOOD CALL" TOOL™

Worker's Name:

Date:

Decision Point:

Recognize	Information	Examine	Intuitions
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Review	Fact or Fiction	Interpret	Action
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

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The researcher conducted individual interviews with seven of the potential eight participants of a child welfare investigative team from the client agency. Each participant chose a high-risk case to explore the information that informed their decision, guided by the practice questions listed earlier in the study. Answers to the practice questions were cataloged in one of four quadrants in the GCT. The GCT answers were then uploaded into MAXQDA for analysis, along with full interview transcripts. Moreover, the outputs received through the qualitative analysis provide steps toward a stronger decision-tracing process encouraged in the EDM model and Simon's notions of near decomposability.

A cost analysis of decision-making was conducted to provide a brief description of the average amount of time CPS professionals spend making decisions. North Carolina is one of the few states that still requires 100% time recording of case activities. The

investigators record time on a day sheet in five-minute increments. Investigators must report at a minimum of 450 minutes for a full day's work. However, the day's allocation of time is split between all the cases an investigator is handling, or at least the cases the professional working on that given day is responsible for. Each time entry is associated with a unique identifier called a SIS code. An investigator must input the SIS number, along with a description of the work completed with the family and the time spent on the activity. As such, the researcher was able to review the client organization's data to extrapolate the time spent on decision-making, as indicated in the investigator's descriptions. For example, a worker would complete a Safety Plan or Risk Assessment with the family, and this would be documented in the data entry, along with the time it took to complete it. Moreover, the researcher found that investigators were staffed with a supervisor at decision points, and that time could be extrapolated.

The time extrapolation tied to decision points can then be assigned a monetary value. The monetary value is based on a breakdown of the average salary of investigators in North Carolina. The time spent on decisions is then multiplied by the hourly amount of the average salary. A formula will be provided in the analysis section of the paper.

Procedures for Assuring Data Integrity

To maintain data integrity, systematic procedures were implemented to address potential issues, including outliers and missing information. Reasonably, there is a minimum risk of a security breach, which would be classified as an unknown risk per CITI's ethical protection of data training (CITI, 2021). Quantitative administrative data were reviewed in Excel, and outliers were detected using z-score analyses. For accuracy,

any flagged outliers were cross-verified with original case records. Missing quantitative data were managed through imputation techniques where feasible; otherwise, incomplete data points were excluded when their absence did not significantly impact the overall analysis. Qualitative data underwent member checking, allowing participants to review and clarify their interview responses to ensure completeness and alignment with their intended meanings. An audit trail documented all modifications and decisions, providing transparency and reproducibility throughout the data preparation process.

Analysis and Synthesis Procedures

Given the limited quantitative sample size, the analysis focused on descriptive statistics and correlation analyses rather than regression models. Descriptive statistics summarized key variables, including the number of cases, case durations, and risk levels, across the sample. SPSS was used to calculate measures such as means, standard deviations, and ranges, providing insights into the dataset's trends and variability.

Correlation analyses examined relationships between variables, such as the frequency of case contacts and case outcomes or the association between risk levels and case durations. These correlations provided valuable insights into how different factors interacted and influenced decision-making processes in child protection services. Although the limited sample size precluded regression analysis, the descriptive and correlation findings offered critical insights into patterns and potential areas for intervention.

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. The coding process, which was guided by both inductive and deductive

approaches, revealed recurring themes such as organizational barriers, reliance on heuristics, and challenges in assessing ambiguous case information. These themes were cross-referenced with quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of decision-making dynamics.

The researcher also conducted a cost analysis to evaluate the financial implications of decision-making practices. To estimate the economic impact of decision deficits, variables such as prolonged investigations, repeat maltreatment cases, and staff turnover were assessed. The CA underscored the financial benefits of improving decision-making processes through targeted training and decision support systems, which were projected to reduce costs associated with repeat cases and investigation inefficiencies.

Summary

In summary, the researcher employed descriptive statistics and correlation analyses using SPSS to explore quantitative data trends and relationships, while MAXQDA facilitated thematic analysis of qualitative data. Although the quantitative sample size was insufficient for regression models, the combination of descriptive and correlation analyses provided meaningful insights into decision-making practices. The addition of a cost-benefit analysis highlighted the financial advantages of addressing decision-making deficits. These findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions to improve decision accuracy and efficiency, which will be detailed in Section 4.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

Child fatalities have a lasting impact on decision-making in the child welfare system. Child welfare professionals are required to make daily decisions based on the presence or absence of evidence related to a child's safety and well-being. Whether the professional is reconciling the presence or absence of evidence, the confluence of bias precipitates vulnerabilities in the interpretation of the evidence (Fluke et al., 2020). This evaluation confirms the prevalence of bias, or, as Simon's notion suggests, bounded rationality, in decision-making and proposes a transparent approach to recognize and create pathways for professional development to mitigate the impact of these biases. Moreover, reviewing the findings reinforces the need for the home agency to establish mechanisms for documenting decision-making through decision-tracing documentation, thereby enhancing the alignment of "real-time" decision-making with policy and law.

This evaluation uncovered potential direct root causes of the omnidirectional fear, stress, and nature of personal hypervigilance that the child welfare industry puts on its workforce. The structure and procedure of the evaluation have led to a deeper understanding of the gap in the current literature regarding the improvement of early detection of the onset of bounded rationality that compromises decision-making. The practice questions, designed to explore the areas of bounded rationality, assisted in expanding the participants' interviews to gather meaningful data, yielding quantifiable insights that are severely needed to improve the health of child welfare and the families served. The five overall questions were:

- What specific factors of decision-making can be identified in administrative

data?

- What factors of decision-making can be identified in case records?
- From the perspective of caseworkers and their supervisors, what are additional decision-making considerations?
- Is there evidence to show a relationship between cost and decision-making?
- What specific efforts can the client organization make to assist caseworkers and their supervisors in decision-making?

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative sources of evidence to evaluate decision-making among CPS professionals. The quantitative data provided by the client agency consisted of various state reports that met the required decision points outlined in Table 2. The thirty cases in the sample all met the high-risk case entrance criteria. These sources captured variables such as response timeliness, risk assessment scores, maltreatment findings, and time spent on contacts across 30 cases from the client agency. Data were collected for the 2024 calendar year, de-identified, and analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics and Spearman's rho correlation.

Qualitative evidence was gathered through semistructured interviews with seven CPS professionals using the Good Call Tool (Marino & Wright, 2022), which facilitated decision tracing by prompting practitioners to evaluate case facts, intuitions, policy interpretations, and legal actions. Interview data were transcribed, anonymized, and thematically coded using MAXQDA. A cost analysis (CA) was also conducted to evaluate the fiscal impact of decision-making inefficiencies. By integrating

administrative data with practitioner insights, the researcher identified patterns of bounded rationality and cognitive bias, offering a deeper understanding of how decisions unfold in high-risk CPS contexts. The integration of these quantitative and qualitative data sources produced a multidimensional dataset, enabling the identification of key patterns, decision points, and cognitive influences. Findings are presented in detail in the following section.

Findings and Implications

The results of this research indicate that decision-making in child protection services investigations, although complex, is scientifically worthy of employing a mixed-methodology approach to inform the support of further CPS professionals and the families they serve. The child fatality this team suffered together appears to have left a lasting and traceable impact. Moreover, the central question, “What external and interpersonal characteristics interfere with decision-making at the CPS professional level?” further validated the need for CPS public leaders to incorporate data collection for both certain and uncertain decision-making processes. The application of descriptive and basic inferential analytics provided insights into specific strengths and potential vulnerabilities in the decision-making pathway of CPS investigations (see Tables 3-13). As such, to understand the “why” behind the strengths and, particularly, the vulnerabilities, the thematic analysis revealed various characteristics of bounded rationality (see Tables 14-16). The combined data would also serve to formulate a more precise deliverable of recommendations to the client agency to mitigate the conditions of BR and promote near-decomposability. As part of the deliverable package, a cost analysis

(see Table 17) of the time recorded in a case by the CPS professional can be used to aid in slowing the workers down, thereby maximizing cognitive and affective processing to further mitigate decisional vulnerability.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asks, “Is the decision schema in the child fatality case examined, one case, reflective of decision making in a larger sample from the client organization?” Descriptive statistics were computed for all nominal and ordinal coded variables ($N = 30$), which assisted in answering RQ 1. Table 3 summarizes the central tendencies and dispersion based on the descriptive analysis of decision points in a CPS investigation. The mean risk assessment score was 5.97 ($SD = 1.67$), while face-to-face contacts averaged 6.07 ($SD = 1.98$). Case contact time ranged from 1.13 to 9.78 hours, with a mean of 5.18 ($SD = 2.68$). The findings listed in Table 3 are homogeneous with the fatality case decisional markers. There are no indicators in the data set itself to suggest that a CPS investigator or their supervisor should investigate the case further.

Table 3

CPS Descriptive Analysis of Decision Points in a CPS Investigation

Variable	Mean	Std	Min	Max	Range
Maltreatment_in_Report	1.8	.69	1	3	2
First_Decision_Typology_Aligns	1.1	.30	1	2	1
Report_Screened_In	1.0	.00	1	1	0
Second_Decision_Est._Legal_Basis	1.1	.30	1	2	1
Third_Decision_Timeframe_Aligns	1.1	.30	1	2	1
Initial_Contact	1.1	.25	1	2	1
Fourth_Decision_Timeframe_Met	1.1	.25	1	2	1
Case_Closed_within_45_Days	1.5	.50	1	2	1

Fifth_Decision_Timeframe_Met	1.5	.50	1	2	1
Risk_Assessment_Completed	5.9	1.6	4	8	4
Maltreatment_Found	2.0	.78	1	3	2
Seventh_Decision_Typology_Aligns	1.1	.30	1	2	1
Contributing_Factors	1.8	.74	1	3	2
Eighth_Decision_Typology_Aligns	1.6	.49	1	2	1
Face_to_Face_Contacts	6.0	1.9	2	9	7
Time_in_Case_Contacts	5.1	2.6	1.1	9.7	8.6

Note. *Most significant: Risk Assessment Completed, Face-to-Face Contacts, and Time in Case Contacts.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asks, “What is the relationship between time spent on a CPS case once a report is screened in, the level of risk assessed, and the case conclusion?” A Spearman’s rho correlation was utilized to determine if a monotonic relationship exists between the *time spent on a case* variable and *the level of risk assessment* variable. Based on the SPSS outputs (found in Table 4), there is no monotonic relationship between these variables.

There is a very weak positive correlation ($r(30) = 0.15, p = .415$) between the risk level assessed and the time spent on a CPS case. However, this relationship is not statistically significant at the conventional $\alpha = .05$ level. This suggests that as the assessed risk level increases, the amount of time spent on the investigation does not significantly increase or decrease in a consistent or meaningful way based on this sample. Given the small effect size and the non-significant p -value, the data do not support a reliable relationship between risk assessment ranking and time spent on the case. This may suggest that risk assessment procedures and case duration are influenced by other

factors not captured by these two variables alone, or that there is a high level of variability in how risk translates to investigative intensity or duration.

Table 4

Spearman's Rho Correlation Between Risk Level Assessed and Time Spent in an Investigation

Spearman's Rho	N	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
V10 Risk Assessment	30	1.0	.
V16 Time Spent in Investigation	30	.154	.415

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asks, "What is the relationship between the time CPS social workers spend in face-to-face contacts and case closure?" The variable that coordinates with case closure from Table 3 is "case closed within 45 days." It was the only data point corresponding with case closure. A Spearman's rho correlation was utilized to determine if a monotonic relationship exists between the *face-to-face contacts* variable and the *case closed in 45 days* variable. Based on the SPSS outputs (found in Table 5), there is no monotonic relationship between these variables.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was conducted to evaluate the relationship between the number of face-to-face contacts and whether the case was closed within 45 days. Results indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between the two variables, $r(30) = 0.24, p = .90$. This suggests that the number of face-to-face contacts is not associated with timely case closure in this sample.

Table 5

Spearman's Rho Correlation between Face-to-Face Contacts and Case Closed in 45 Days

Spearman's Rho	N	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
V15 Face-to-Face Contacts	30	1.0	.
V6 Case Closed in 45 Days	30	-.24	.90

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asks, "How do CPS staff perceive their decision-making skills?" Thematic analyses were conducted with CPS investigation participants to answer RQ 4. All participants were asked the same questions in the semi-structured interviews. The GCT was used to record notes and help achieve saturation. Saturation was achieved, as evidenced by consensus in similarities between answers and codes generated through the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the interviews yielded twelve codes (see Table 6). Fear, decisions, stressors, legal repercussions, policies, system, anxiety, pressure, crucial, safety, training, and family dynamics are the twelve codes gathered from the analysis. Of the 12, three proved to be dominant themes. Decisions, fears, and stressors yielded a greater weight in the data. Presenting each code collected, along with a sampling of quotes, will provide a deeper understanding of the analysis's structure.

Table 6

Thematic Code Statistics: Code Systems of Investigator Interviews

Thematic Code	Segments	Percentage
Training	3	2
System	8	5.4
Stressors	23	15.6

Safety	12	8.2
Pressure	8	5.4
Policies	10	6.8
Legal repercussions	5	3.4
Fear	28	19
Family dynamics	4	2.7
Decisions	34	23.1
Crucial	8	5.4
Anxiety	4	2.7
TOTAL	147	100

Table 7

Thematic Analysis: Parent Code to Subcode from CPS Investigator Interviews

Parent Code	Policies	Decisions	Fear	Stressor	Safety
Subcode1	Bureaucratic Burden	Rushed Decisions	Decisional Paralysis	Fact-Finding Burden	Child centric
Subcode2	Guiding Principles	Risk Minimization	Distrust Information	High Stakes Intensity	Comprehensive Risk Assessment
Subcode3	Formalistic Compliance	High Stakes			
Anxiety	Distrust of Honesty	Cultural Complexities	Balancing Priorities		
Subcode4	Emotional Strain	Emotional Challenges	Emotional Interference	Emotional Toll	Evidence-Driven Approach
Subcode5	Disconnect from Reality	Evidentiary Uncertainty	Heightened Vulnerability	Trust Challenges	Continuous Improvement

Decisions

Decisions in child welfare investigations are made to prevent or mitigate risks associated with the maltreatment of children. The decision parent code generated 23% of the rational occupancy throughout 34 segments. Even though this is the case, decisions are often rushed due to caseloads or patient acuity. Each decision entails emotional

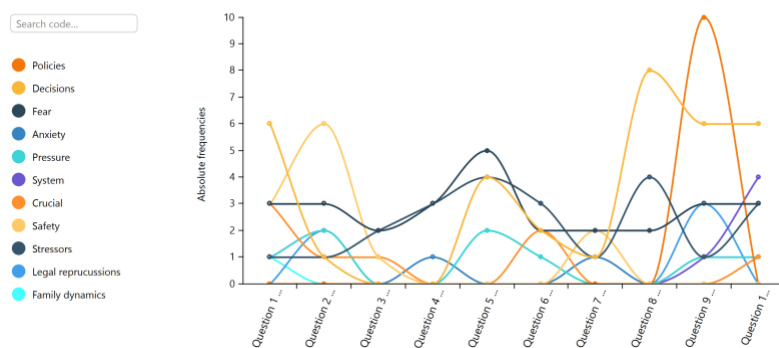
challenges and high-stakes anxiety due to evidentiary uncertainty. One responded, struggling with the balance of parental rights and child safety, stated, “Both are critical, but with so many cases, decisions often feel rushed and less balanced than they should be.” As such, it creates a vulnerability in the investigators that can lead to decisional paralysis.

Fear

Fear is the second-highest-rated code, occupying twenty-eight of the rationality segments and occurring over 19% of the time. Investigator vulnerability, coupled with emotional interferences, distrust in the information gathered in the case or from the client agency, and distrust in the honesty of the information, increases the potential for experiencing decisional paralysis. One respondent stated, “constant battle between fear of endangering the child and fear of legal repercussions.” Another respondent reflected, “second-guess every indication of honesty, adding to the stress. The focus of fear is closely related to the child’s safety, which is surrounded by the investigative fact-finding burden. As such, a third respondent stated, “The impact of fear and anxiety on our decision-making processes is crucial and often overlooked. Moreover, fear is a consistent theme found throughout all segments and threads of qualitative analysis. Figure 4 illustrates the prevalence of fear across all the questions.

Figure 4

Code Trends Throughout all Interview Questions and Participants



Note. Fear and stress are the consistent themes that run throughout each question with every participant.

Stress

Stress and child safety are closely related, as the investigator's expression of stressors reveals the reality of the fact-finding burden, high-stakes intensities, and cultural complexities, which describe the emotional toll they take as they navigate the challenges of trust. A respondent stated, "worry of being lied to creates a lot of stress during interviews. However, the analysis of child safety appears to be driven by desire. The segments of continuous improvement, striving towards an evidence-driven approach that balances parental rights and child-centric safety, demonstrate a desire to have or create a more robust and comprehensive risk assessment. While risk assessments are formalized and actuarial, current policy may be inadequate to provide the decision-making assistance the investigators desire. Another respondent stated, "We need to talk about the support systems in place (or lack thereof) for dealing with this constant stress."

Policy

Policy, as it is broken down into further subcodes, demonstrates that child welfare investigators believe it is both a bureaucratic burden and a guiding principle needed to make ethical and legal decisions. One respondent stated, “Policies can create excessive red tape. For example, the risk assessments and other tools we currently use need drastic improvements to be more family voice centered.” Moreover, the policy may produce emotional strain and a disconnect from reality due to constant worry about making a decision rooted in policy. Another respondent stated, “I often worry more about meeting policy check boxes over what the child and family really need in that moment.” That policy is inadequate to support the complex decisions required in real-life contexts, ensuring children’s safety.

Findings with Practice Questions Through the Lens of Simon

Question 1: What Specific Factors of Decision-Making Can Be Identified in

Administrative Data?

Administrative variables such as time spent (V16), risk ratings (V10), and case closure outcomes (V6, V11, V15) offered some insight but failed to produce strong, consistent correlations. This reflects bounded rationality, where decisions are constrained by limited information and the structure of the system. Workers may follow procedural routines rather than optimal strategies due to time constraints, cognitive load, or policy pressures.

Question 2: What Factors of Decision-Making Can Be Identified in Case Records?

Case records document linear progressions (contacts, assessments, closures), yet

they often overlook the emotional and interpretive aspects of fieldwork. This mirrors Simon's near decomposability, whereas decisions operate within semi-independent subunits (e.g., each case) but are influenced by larger organizational policies and norms. Discrepancies between the handling of moderate- and high-risk cases highlight this tension.

Question 3: From the Perspective of Caseworkers and Their Supervisors, What are Additional Decision-Making Considerations?

Thematic analysis revealed that fear, stress, and policy overload were the dominant influencers. These represent emotional boundaries on rationality. Some participants described moments of clarity or transformation, indicating evidence of cognitive and affective restructuring, where near decomposability enables the development of new mental models. Investigators recalibrated their decision-making frameworks in response to reflective practice, organizational pressures, or shifting perceptions of risk.

Question 4: Is There Evidence to Show a Relationship Between Cost and Decision-Making?

The cost associated with decision-making was examined by calculating the amount of time a child protection investigator reported spending on each case and multiplying that by the state's national average hourly wage. The wage is a base wage and does not include benefits. Where the state's average hourly wage equals \$26.60 per hour. This calculation is based on a breakdown of the average annual salary at \$48,000.00 (National Association of Social Workers, 2025), then divided by 12 months,

and then divided by four weeks in a month. The case sample size equals thirty cases.

Table 15 presents the cost breakdowns for the median time spent investigating high-risk to moderate-risk cases, along with the upper and lower thresholds for comparison.

Table 8

Cost Analysis

	Median	Lower Threshold	Upper Threshold
Hourly Wage State Average	\$26.60	\$26.60	\$26.60
Amount of Time in Hours	5.18	1.13	9.78
Total Cost	\$137.79	\$30.06	\$260.15

The cost analysis showed that time (and therefore monetary cost) did not predict case outcome quality. Investigators expend time unevenly across similar case types. This reflects bounded rationality, and decisions are not optimized due to emotional toll, investigative complexity, or policy ambiguity. Without an integrated qualitative context, cost data alone misrepresents performance.

Question 5: What Specific Efforts Can the Client Organization Make to Assist Caseworkers and Their Supervisors in Decision-Making?

Deliverables such as the Good Call Tool, Integrated Reporting System, and Reflective Debrief Protocols address both bounded conditions (emotional fatigue, fear of liability, policy saturation) and foster near decomposability (opportunities for new decision models to form). These tools shift practice from a reactive to a reflective approach, enhancing clarity, ethical judgment, and long-term resilience.

Implications for Individuals, Organizations, Communities, and Systems

The ecology of this study encompasses the client agency, CPS investigators,

individual families and children served, and the child welfare system. The implications section provides essential discussion points for each method and then summarizes how they fit together. Making decisions in child welfare investigations has long been recognized as a challenging task. This study provides a deeper understanding of areas of bounded rationality. It highlights the importance of slowing down and carefully examining decisions to build resilient staff and protect children and families.

Implications for the Client Agency

The client agency is tasked with creating infrastructure, policies, and training that align with both legal standards and the real-world needs of frontline CPS staff. The results of this study suggest that current policy tools—such as risk assessments and timeframe benchmarks—do not sufficiently support investigator decision-making. The weak or non-significant quantitative correlations between these variables and case outcomes indicate that simply tracking these elements is not predictive of success or safety.

Moreover, the cost analysis reveals significant variability in investigator time investments, ranging from \$30.06 to \$260.15 per case. This inconsistency suggests inefficiencies not captured by current metrics in *big data* (O’Leary, 2016). The agency should therefore consider policy revisions that incorporate more qualitative markers of case complexity and investigator burden (McCormack et al., 2020). Investing in decision-support tools, enhancing supervisory systems, and providing mental health resources could increase consistency and accuracy in decision-making.

Simon’s theory further supports the need for better systemic design: near

decomposability implies that agencies should segment decisions into interdependent but more manageable units. This supports the development of modular training and policy guides that enable investigators to focus on specific high-impact decisions (e.g., establishing the legal basis, safety planning) without overwhelming them with the full complexity of the case at once. Various teaching methodologies, such as experiential learning and micro-learning techniques, may provide new pathways to increase growth.

Implications for CPS Investigators

The qualitative findings reveal that decisions, fear, and stress have a significant influence on the investigative experience. These themes suggest a workplace where investigators must navigate complex emotional and legal landscapes with limited tools and support. Fear of legal repercussions and concerns about child safety contribute to a form of decisional paralysis, consistent with Simon's notion of bounded rationality.

To address these constraints, this study recommends the use of structured decision-making frameworks, such as the Good Call Tool, which was employed in this research. The current Structured Decision Making® tools (Evident Change, 2022), based on these findings, are not sufficient in themselves to improve healthy and safe decisions. Decision-tracing tools can enhance and scaffold investigative thinking, reduce emotional burden, and enhance clarity in complex moments (See Table 10 for the decision model of processing bounded rationality and near decomposability). Tools such as this also provide a greater ability to trace the interpersonal processing of a CPS investigator. As such, gaining an understanding of “real-time” decision-making involves the cognitive and affective influences. Perspectives should not only include technical knowledge but also

focus on emotional resilience and reflective practice. The integration of affective supports into professional development can build capacity to handle the recurring anxiety and distrust highlighted in the interviews.

Additionally, this study illustrates that time alone does not equate to better decisions. Instead, how that time is spent and how it aligns with evidence-based decision frameworks is more critical. Agencies should thus shift from outcome tracking to process evaluation, ensuring that investigators are equipped with tools that reflect both legal compliance and ethical discernment.

Table 9

An Implied Model of Processing Bounded Rationality and Near Decomposability to Improve Decision-Making

Theme or Finding	Description of Bounded Rationality	Near Decomposability Insight
Emotional Strain & Fear	Investigators experience cognitive overload due to fear of legal repercussions, safety concerns, and personal accountability, leading to reduced decision quality.	In moments of heightened fear or emotional paralysis, investigators often reevaluate core assumptions about safety, leading to new mental models that integrate family context and child risk more holistically.
Systemic Stressors	Decision-making is constrained by bureaucracy, caseload volume, and pressure to meet deadlines—forcing reliance on quick heuristics.	Exposure to high-pressure environments and inadequate support may catalyze a shift in perspective, where professionals redefine what meaningful support looks like, including policy reform or shared case consultation.
Policy as a Double-Edged Sword	Policies serve both as guidance and limitation, causing investigators to “check boxes” rather than assess true family dynamics.	When policy compliance is perceived as harmful or irrelevant to a family’s needs, some professionals begin to interpret policy through a new ethical lens—balancing rule-following with situational responsiveness.
Decisional Paralysis	Investigators experience indecision due to unclear evidence or conflicting demands, leading to inaction or conservative decisions.	In these moments, professionals are often prompted to shift from binary thinking (safe/unsafe) to a more nuanced spectrum that incorporates long-term goals for family stability and resilience.
Desire for Better Tools	Professionals recognize that current risk assessment tools fail to capture	Dissatisfaction with existing tools opens a pathway to redefine what constitutes evidence—embracing

complexity, leading them to distrust their own decisions.

professional judgment, lived experience, and context-rich observation as valid inputs.

Implications for Public Administration

From a broader public administration perspective, the findings of this study have far-reaching implications for adjacent disciplines, including law enforcement, behavioral health, education, and judicial services. These sectors, such as child protection services, operate within high-stakes environments characterized by complex bureaucracy, emotionally charged decisions, and policy constraints. The integration of Herbert Simon's concepts of bounded rationality and near decomposability sheds light on how professionals across these fields manage complex, uncertain information while navigating competing organizational goals. For example, police officers conducting wellness checks, school administrators making mandated reporter decisions, or mental health professionals balancing client autonomy with safety risks all confront similar decision-making pressures. This study's framework provides a replicable model for developing reflective practice and evidence-informed decision support in any field where human vulnerability, systemic limitations, and ethical tensions converge. The tools and insights derived here encourage other disciplines to adopt structures that elevate both professional judgment and service outcomes.

Academic Implications

CPS decision-making has long been studied from the perspectives of risk assessment tools and outcome tracking; however, few studies have integrated a multidimensional approach to understand how decisions are made in real-world practice

(Gillen & Canavan, 2024; Marino, et al., 2024; Wilkins & Keddell, 2024). This study addresses that gap by applying Simon’s theory of bounded rationality, which posits that decision-makers operate under constraints of limited information, emotional burden, and procedural complexity (Simon, 1947). The quantitative findings—such as the weak correlations between time spent, case closure rates, and risk assessment scores—empirically support Simon’s notion that optimal decision-making is rarely possible in CPS contexts. Moreover, the findings suggest that academic studies of decision-making in these contexts employ an ego-centric model based on the cognitive and affective influences (see Figure 4). The actual decision is made by the person and is clouded by a myriad of complex influences. As such, future studies in child protection decision-making may find more benefit in aligning with such a model to inform their approach.

Positive Social Change

Additionally, the qualitative data reinforce this by revealing decisional paralysis, fear, and stress as dominant themes among investigators. These emotional and systemic constraints demonstrate that CPS decision-making is not purely rational or actuarial; instead, decisions are bounded by individual limitations and systemic complexity, aligning with Simon’s principle of near decomposability. Investigators compartmentalize their judgments based on manageable “chunks” of decisions—such as legal basis, typology alignment, or timeframe compliance—without being able to manage all variables at once holistically (Hamburger, et al., 2024; Marino, et al., 2024; Simon, 1947; Wright, et al., 2024). Public managers must learn to foster deeper learning to develop the means to create a safe space for identifying bias (bounded rationality). Once identified,

managers can ensure the new process aids professionals in developing a holistic and professionally aligned heuristic. This study, therefore, advances theory by demonstrating how bounded rationality and near decomposability manifest in child welfare investigations, particularly in contexts marked by high stress and institutional constraint.

The implications discussed previously suggest the opportunity to examine various changes that aim to improve the safety ecology of child protection services. Focused on investigations, the following recommendations can be broadly adopted into all service arrays. Moreover, this could serve as a model for similar human helper fields and advance the quality of work in public administration. The recommendations include reflective decision tools, a reporting dashboard inclusive of qualitative data, incorporating the use of experiential learning (i.e., simulation) to provide a safe place to practice decision-making, evaluating, and changing policies to focus on principal/value guidance versus rule-bound approaches, and establishing an interdisciplinary team to assess decision trends. Based upon the findings of this research, six recommendations (listed in the recommendations section) can, for the most part, be implemented immediately; others may require time to establish the necessary computing infrastructure for reporting purposes. Here are the six recommendations. The recommendations lay the groundwork for exploring the more profound implications of positive change in the following section. The recommendations are provided with consideration for the limitations of this study. The following section outlines these limitations.

Recommendations

The six recommendations were generated from the findings of this study. The

client organization can implement all recommendations on a small scale to meet its current needs. Moreover, doing so could provide the needed information for other counties to adopt a similar approach, thereby improving CPS services. These recommendations are tailored to address the challenges the client agency has faced in developing a more robust understanding and means to inform higher-quality decisions in CPS investigations.

- **Implement a Reflective Decision-Making Tool Across CPS Investigations:**
Integrate a structured reflection tool (like the Good Call Tool) into daily case practice to reduce emotional bias and support bounded rationality. This tool should prompt investigators to log stressors, fears, evidence quality, and case dynamics before making final decisions.
- **Revise Risk Assessment Protocols to Incorporate Qualitative Indicators:**
Current actuarial tools lack sensitivity to emotional and contextual factors. A hybrid model that includes narrative reflections, family dynamics, and perceived safety concerns would address the near decomposability of decision-making environments.
- **Develop a Real-Time, Integrated Reporting Dashboard (See Figure 4 for a conceptual design.):** Combine quantitative data (e.g., time on case, cost, outcomes) with qualitative indicators (investigator reflections, supervisory notes) in a dashboard format. This system aligns with Simon's model by surfacing relevant information streams during decision inflection points.
- **Create a Simulation-Based Training Module Anchored in Real Case Patterns:**

Using themes from the qualitative findings (e.g., fear, pressure, emotional toll), design simulation-based trainings that mirror real-world cognitive load and emotional strain. These simulations should help caseworkers recognize bounded rationality in action and rehearse effective alternatives.

- **Revise Policy Mandates to Balance Legal Compliance with Professional Discretion:** Reframe agency policies to support a principle-guided, rather than a rule-bound, approach. This may include updating documentation templates, supervisory protocols, and performance reviews to prioritize professional reasoning alongside compliance.
- **Establish an Interdisciplinary Decision-Making Council:** Form a standing group of CPS staff, supervisors, legal experts, members of lived experience from the system, behavioral health professionals, and public administrators to review complex cases and emerging decision trends regularly. This structure will create a feedback loop for improving training, protocols, and systemic support.

Strengths and Limitations

This study's primary strength lies in its mixed-methods design, which allowed for a multi-layered understanding of decision-making in child protective services (CPS). By integrating quantitative analysis (Spearman's rho, descriptive statistics, and cost analysis) with rich qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, the project captured both systemic patterns and lived realities of CPS investigators. The application of Herbert Simon's theories of bounded rationality and near decomposability provided a theoretical

framework for interpreting the complexity of decisions under emotional and cognitive constraints. Additionally, the practical deliverables—such as the Good Call Tool™, policy recommendations, and integrated reporting prototypes—offered immediate value to the client agency, ensuring that research findings translated into actionable change.

However, the research has several limitations. The small sample size ($N = 30$) limits generalizability, and although saturation was achieved in the qualitative phase, perspectives from other regions or cultural contexts may yield different thematic emphases. The administrative data were limited to what was routinely collected, which may have omitted more nuanced decision-making inputs, such as intuition, interpersonal dynamics, or informal supports. Furthermore, the cost analysis employed state average hourly wages without accounting for benefits or regional variations, which may result in an underestimate of the actual resource impact. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of data sources and inclusion of direct voices from the field provided credible and authentic insights into decision-making processes.

Future projects should consider expanding the sample size across multiple jurisdictions to validate and compare thematic findings and test the generalizability of observed decision-making constraints. Longitudinal studies would also provide insight into how decision-making evolves throughout an investigator's tenure or in response to training and organizational change. Moreover, further exploration of decision-making through simulation-based research could capture real-time cognitive-emotional processes and test the impact of interventions (like reflective tools or policy revisions) on decision quality. Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration—with behavioral economists, public

administrators, and AI ethicists—could enhance future models of decision-support, ensuring they remain ethical, trauma-informed, and grounded in the daily realities of CPS professionals. Section five will discuss how the findings and implications will be provided to the client agency.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

To ensure meaningful impact, the research findings and recommendations will be disseminated to the client agency through a structured, multi-tiered approach. The first step will be to send the executive summary (see Appendix B), which can be shared with key leadership based on the director's discretion. The director can then engage in tailored discussions with stakeholders, focusing on key findings, particularly the implications for frontline decision-making, resource allocation, and policy burdens, and allow time for questions and collaborative planning. Following this, the six implementation objectives can be fashioned and integrated into supervision, training, and reporting workflows. The client agency will be provided immediate access to the GCT. The five other recommendations may require third-party consultation, design, and implementation assistance if the agency lacks internal capacity to do so.

In addition to leadership-level engagement and dissemination, the director will also be able to extend their support to front-line CPS investigators and supervisors through workshops and reflective team sessions. These sessions will use components such as the Decision-Making Reflection Tool, vignettes from the qualitative data, and bounded rationality concepts to foster discussion, validate staff experiences, and build capacity for evidence-informed practice. By framing findings in accessible language and emphasizing their connection to real-world challenges, the dissemination strategy is designed to promote ownership of the findings and to support sustainable, agency-led implementation of recommendations.

Dissemination to Broader Audiences

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this project, which bridges public administration, child welfare, cognitive science, and organizational behavior, several academic and professional venues are well-suited for disseminating its findings to a broader audience. Peer-reviewed journals such as *Child Welfare*, *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, and *Decision Support Systems* are suitable for formal publication. Professional conferences, such as the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), and the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), offer platforms for sharing insights with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Additionally, practitioner-oriented briefs and webinars hosted through national CPS training centers and Title IV-E programs will ensure the findings influence training and policy development across jurisdictions. These diverse dissemination channels will enable the study's contributions—especially its alignment with Herbert Simon's theories and real-world case studies—to be leveraged by a range of stakeholders committed to improving child welfare systems.

Summary

This study presents a comprehensive, mixed-methods examination of decision-making within CPS, combining administrative data, qualitative insights, and cost analysis to provide a multidimensional understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing CPS investigators and their supervisors. By applying Herbert Simon's concepts of bounded rationality and near decomposability, the research not only uncovers how emotions, policy burdens, and information constraints affect decision quality but also

provides actionable pathways for agency improvement.

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Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions

1. What do you believe is most important to consider when making decisions in child protection cases?
2. What is more important the safety of a child or protecting the parents' constitutional rights?
3. How do you determine whether someone is being genuine and honest with you when you are interacting with them?
4. How can you tell someone is being genuine and honest when you are interacting with them in a child protective case?
5. Can you describe any certain type of case that interferes with your decision making more than others?
6. Can you tell me about where you look for facts to help you make safety decisions?
7. If a parent is working with you and engaging in services does that make you want to lessen the weight of the facts?
8. How do you believe your emotions help you or hinder you in making decisions about child maltreatment?
9. When you are making decisions do you review the child protection policy and law to guide you? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else that is really important for us to discuss decision making in child protection cases?

Appendix B: Executive Summary

Executive Summary: CPS Decision-Making Study

This mixed-methods research study examined decision-making among Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators, utilizing administrative data, case records, investigator interviews, and a cost analysis. Anchored in Herbert Simon's theories of bounded rationality and near decomposability, the researcher examined how investigators make high-stakes decisions under cognitive and emotional constraints, as well as how systemic and policy factors influence their judgment.

Key Findings

- Quantitative analysis using Spearman's Rho found minimal statistically significant correlations, highlighting limited predictive power in current administrative data systems.
- Qualitative thematic analysis of interviews revealed three dominant themes in decision-making: decisions, fear, and stressors. These highlight a persistent emotional and procedural toll on investigators.
- Cost analysis found that investigative time per case ranged from 1.13 to 9.78 hours, with a median cost of \$137.79 per case.
- Bounded rationality was evident in the staff's acknowledgment of limited time, incomplete information, and overwhelming caseloads.
- Near decomposability appeared where staff challenged old assumptions or shifted perspectives under reflection, indicating a path to adaptive improvement.

Recommendations

1. Develop and implement a decision-making reflection tool for investigators to identify cognitive and emotional biases.
2. Integrate quantitative and qualitative metrics into reporting systems for improved case oversight and learning.
3. Redesign risk assessment protocols to include qualitative indicators from CPS investigators and family voice and contextual flexibility.
4. Expand simulation-based and trauma-informed training programs to enhance judgment under pressure.
5. Revise policy mandates to balance legal compliance and professional discretion.
6. Establish an interdisciplinary decision-making council at the county level.