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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Molly Blanchette

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Examining the Feedback Effects of the Child and Family Services Review Process on the Child Welfare Caseworker

by

Molly Blanchette

MPhil, Walden University, 2023

MSW, University of Nevada, Reno, 2010

BA, University of Nevada, Reno, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is a federally mandated continuous quality improvement process that sets and assesses national child welfare performance standards. The CFSR impacts agency practices and caseworker responsibilities. Research has linked high turnover rates, averaging around 30% nationally, to agency-related variables, some of which are influenced by the CFSR. Given this context, it was necessary to understand how the CFSR performance standards impact the workforce. Policy feedback theory grounded this study as it was used to examine the feedback effects of the CFSR on child welfare caseworkers. The research question was "How are the federal performance standards set by the CFSR perceived by caseworkers to influence the practice, experience, and retention of child welfare caseworkers, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence?" A generic qualitative study was conducted by interviewing 11 child welfare caseworkers recruited through referrals or virtual means. Interviews continued until saturation was achieved. Data were thematically analyzed. Member checking to validate results occurred. After data analysis, four themes were identified: (a) living the standards, caseworker experiences with the CFSR; (b) organizational impact, agency response shapes caseworker experience; (c) metrics versus mission, tension between performance standards and practice; and (d) solutions from the field, caseworker recommendations for improvement. The implications for positive social change include recommendations to agency leaders within child welfare to best use the CFSR with their workforce.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my daughters. Chase your dreams, whatever they are. I love you. To my mom, who taught me that education matters, you were right. To my husband, thank you. And to the child welfare workforce, may you feel seen, heard, and valued.

Acknowledgments

Writing an acknowledgement can hardly express my gratitude for those who supported me through this journey. To my family, friends, and colleagues, Jason, Mom, Mimi, Tessa, Teri, Meliah, Sierra, Kathryn, Emily, Beverly, and Kim, who encouraged and rooted for me, watched my children, supported my vision, and took my endless calls to talk about the same topic and reassure me I could do it, thank you. To my committee, Dr. Victor Kane and Dr. Lydia Londes Forsythe, who gave me guidance, feedback, and scholarship, thank you. To the field of child welfare, for inspiring me to do important work, thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction and Background

There are about 368,530 children in foster care in the United States, and around 569,879 are being served by the child welfare system (Administration for Children and Families, 2024). The child welfare system is regulated by complex requirements, many of which are set by the federal government and monitored by the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR; Carnochan et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-b). The CFSR is a federally required continuous quality improvement (CQI) process that assesses compliance with federal requirements and systemic outcomes for states and child welfare agencies, with the intent of improving child welfare practice for children and families (Ahn et al., 2022; Carnochan et al., 2013c; Milner et al., 2001). The effects of CFSR on the child welfare system extend beyond immediate performance measures.

Policy feedback theory (PFT) suggests that policies and processes such as the CFSR can shape feedback mechanisms such as agency practices, stakeholder behavior, and front-line decision-making (Béland et al., 2022; Kopec, 2023; Mischen, 2008), which then create feedback effects that either support or undermine the policy and its intended outcomes (Pierson, 1993). Within child welfare, the CFSR influences agency decision-making and impacts child welfare caseworkers as both must seek to meet the performance standards set by the federal government and measured by the CFSR (Carnochan et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). This influence contributes to agency allocation of resources, agency-defined expectations, and caseworker experience within the system.

The child welfare system experiences a high turnover rate of child welfare caseworkers. Nationally, the average turnover rate hovers around 30% (Casey Family Programs, 2023) but is as high as 40% (Burns et al., 2023). Edwards and Wildeman (2018) examined child welfare data from 46 states and found that the median caseworker lasts in the role for 1.8 years. High caseworker turnover negatively impacts the whole system's functioning, including the caseworker, the agency, and the children and families (Lushin et al., 2023). Difficult agency-related requirements are often why caseworkers choose to exit the field (Burns et al., 2023; He et al., 2018; Murphy, 2023; Valenzuela, 2021). Agency-level requirements are generally defined as aspects of the job unrelated to direct work with children and families, such as case documentation and requirements, administrative requirements, caseload sizes, court attendance, etc. (Leake et al., 2017; Valenzuela, 2021). The requirements set by the federal government and measured by the CFSR influence agency-level requirements as states and child welfare agencies continue to adjust practices to align with CFSR performance standards (Carnochan et al., 2019).

Given the persistent issue of high turnover in the field of child welfare connected to agency-level demands and how this turnover negatively impacts agency functioning and ability to achieve CFSR performance standards, it is important to explore how the CFSR influences workforce dynamics and how those dynamics affect the successful use of the CFSR. This study was conducted to fill a gap in the literature by examining the feedback effects of the CFSR for child welfare caseworkers through the lens of PFT because the broader implications of the CFSR on the workforce, such as the possible impact on turnover, are underexplored. I examined how child welfare caseworkers

perceive the CFSR, including its impact on daily job responsibilities, job satisfaction, and any possible retention impacts. Through a qualitative exploration, this study provides valuable information on how front-line professionals in child welfare engage with the CFSR.

Chapter 1 provides the background and rationale for the study's research questions, a brief description of the theoretical framework, and information about the study design. The chapter concludes by discussing the study's assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance.

Problem Statement

Although researchers have investigated the issue of high child welfare turnover and various impacts of the CFSR on child welfare practice, there is very little research about child welfare caseworkers' experience with the CFSR process, and none about the feedback effects of the CFSR for child welfare caseworkers. The child welfare system experiences a persistent high turnover of casework staff (Casey Family Programs, 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018) that diminishes agency functioning and the ability to meet performance standards meant to produce good outcomes for children and families served by the system (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 2016; Farber & Munsen, 2010; Julien-Chinn et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2022). Caseworkers report that agency-level requirements are a reason they leave their jobs (Burns et al., 2023; He et al., 2018; Murphy, 2023; Valenzuela, 2021). The CFSR is a federal oversight mechanism that assesses and monitors child welfare agency performance and compliance with federal requirements (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-b). The

performance standards measured by the CFSR contribute to agency-level requirements that may influence caseworkers' decisions to leave their jobs. Using PFT, this study was conducted to explore caseworkers' perceptions and experiences of the CFSR performance standards and process. Understanding the relationship between the CFSR and the caseworker by examining feedback effects will provide valuable information to child welfare agencies and the study of public policy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the feedback effects of the federal CFSR and understand the perceived impacts on child welfare caseworkers through the lens of PFT. Examining how the CFSR influences caseworker decision-making and systemic practices within child welfare organizations may provide valuable information for agency leaders to understand how the CFSR process may affect policy implementation and employee retention. Understanding the feedback effects of the CFSR for child welfare caseworkers may support efforts for agency leadership to utilize the CFSR process in a way that supports their caseworkers and helps retain their workforce.

Research Question

The study followed a generic qualitative design to answer the following question: How are the federal performance standards set by the CFSR perceived by caseworkers to influence the practice, experience, and retention of child welfare caseworkers, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

PFT guided this study and provided the theoretical framework to examine the research question, understanding that policy creates future behavior and policy decisions (Béland et al., 2022). PFT asserts that policy creates policy by creating feedback effects that either support or undermine future policy decisions (Pierson, 1993). PFT suggests that policy becomes both the cause and the effect by influencing the behavior of people executing the policy and future policy decisions they make (Béland et al., 2022). Within PFT, feedback effects generated by feedback mechanisms can be observed. Feedback mechanisms are processes created in response to a policy, such as how stakeholders and power groups respond to policy and how policies affect institutional dynamics, that produce feedback effects (Béland et al., 2022). Feedback effects can be positive and generate support and reinforce a policy, or they can be negative and undermine the policy's support, leading to resistance or reform (Campbell, 2012; Marier, 2012).

This logic provided the framework for understanding how caseworkers are affected by the CFSR. This policy guides child welfare practice by setting federal performance measures and reviewing for established outcomes in a cyclical process. PFT allowed examination of the CFSR as a cause and effect for caseworker behavior, including any possible feedback effects created by the CFSR and any possible feedback effects for implementing the CFSR and its expectations. For example, child welfare caseworkers' perception of the performance standards measured by the CFSR and whether the caseworker views the standards as beneficial or burdensome represent a key feedback effect. Additionally, the caseworker's observation of whether the CFSR's

program improvement plan (PIP) process creates meaningful changes within their agency and practice will illustrate how caseworkers, as front-line workers and essential stakeholders of the CFSR process, experience and respond to the CFSR. More information on the PFT can be found in the Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review sections of Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The specific research design included a generic qualitative study and analysis to address the research question in this study. The qualitative data analysis followed Saldana's (2021) descriptive coding process and utilized first and second-cycle coding, which looks for meaning by grouping words or phrases. This process allowed me to review the data multiple times, taking note of important thoughts or ideas, allowing themes to arise from the data. This study required detailed descriptive data to explain the qualities or characteristics of the phenomenon, which was obtained by recruiting child welfare caseworkers for semi-structured individual interviews conducted with the use of an interview guide protocol developed to address the problem and purpose of the study.

This study utilized purposeful sampling to ensure that the individuals participating had knowledge and experiences to answer the research questions meaningfully (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Eleven child welfare caseworkers were recruited and interviewed to ensure data saturation. Data saturation is defined as the point at which no new information is thought to be obtainable through subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Recruitment occurred through referrals in my professional network, Walden University's participant pool, and the virtual social networking platforms Facebook and

LinkedIn. The inclusion criteria for this study included the participants being (a) current or former child welfare caseworkers, (b) having direct experience in the child welfare system within the past 10 years, (c) having a basic knowledge of the CFSR process, and (d) speaking English.

Potential barriers included difficulty recruiting participants for interviews, given the high caseworker turnover within child welfare, and participant inclusion criteria of knowledge of the CFSR process. Not all caseworkers may have worked long enough in the position to realize the impact of the CFSR process on their work, given the vast amount of information a caseworker in child welfare must learn. Participants were recruited through various methods to address this barrier, including my professional network, LinkedIn and Facebook social media platforms, and the Walden University research participant pool.

I used an informed consent process to ensure participants understood the study's implications and gave their informed consent. To adequately protect the confidentiality of the participants, all work was conducted on a private computer, which is password-protected, and stored in an encrypted folder and backed up to a password-protected, encrypted hard drive that only I have access to.

Definitions

Agency-related variables: Child welfare agency organizational factors that impact the duties of a caseworker, such as caseload size, administrative burden, policy requirements, and supervisory support.

Caseworker: A person employed by a child welfare agency who is responsible for managing cases (Valenzuela, 2021) by carrying out duties required to federally set practice standards related to safety, permanency, and well-being with children and families (Ahn et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022).

Child and Family Services Review (CFSR): A federally required CQI process meant to assess compliance with federal requirements and systemic outcomes for children and families, as well as improve child welfare practice (Ahn et al., 2022; Carnochan et al., 2013c; Milner et al., 2001).

Feedback effects and feedback mechanisms: Policies have feedback effects on individuals, groups, and society, which can influence political attitudes, behavior, and preferences (Pierson, 1993). Feedback effects can be positive or negative (Campbell, 2012; Marier, 2012) or a combination of both (Moore & Jordan, 2020) and occur through processes identified as feedback mechanisms (Béland et al., 2022).

Policy feedback theory (PFT): A theoretical framework that suggests the design and implementation of public policies can influence future political behavior and policymaking (Béland et al., 2022; Pierson, 1993).

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs or conditions the researcher assumes to be true when conducting a study grounded in philosophical principles based on the chosen research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Given that this study is qualitative, certain assumptions can be made. Ontologically, I assumed the study participants would tell the truth as they experience and believe it to be. I assumed caseworkers would be honest about their

knowledge of the CFSR and provide thoughtful responses to the questions about how the CFSR impacts them. Therefore, this study explored the participants' subjective truths and in-depth experiences, providing valuable insights into how the CFSR impacts caseworkers. Epistemologically, as the researcher, I interacted with the questions being answered by the research. This study's perspective is that the only way to understand the CFSR feedback effects on child welfare caseworkers is to engage directly with caseworkers and capture their voices and perspectives. This is reasonable given the study's purpose of exploring a phenomenon not yet explored. Because of this, I acknowledge my positionality, bias, and values related to child welfare as a person with years of experience in child welfare who has been a caseworker and served in roles directly impacted by the CFSR, so that there can be transparency as data were gathered and analyzed.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was conducted to understand the impact of the CFSR process on child welfare caseworkers and explore what feedback effects, if any, result from those impacts. The researcher controls the delimitations and scope of the study, which includes determining variables such as the scope of data collection or limitations on individuals who can participate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study limits the participant pool by utilizing purposeful sampling of child welfare caseworkers to ensure participants have adequate knowledge and experiences to answer the research questions meaningfully (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The role of caseworker was chosen for this research because caseworkers in child welfare are at the intersection of being impacted by the CFSR

process (Carnochan et al., 2019) and high turnover (Casey Family Programs, 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). Caseworkers are the best candidates to provide rich and detailed descriptive data about this phenomenon, given the context of the caseworker's role, and thick and in-depth descriptive data will help achieve credibility (Tracy, 2010). This research may be transferable given the consistent nature of nationwide CFSR performance standards and high turnover within the field of child welfare.

Limitations

Qualitative research has inherent limitations that are true for this study. Because this is a qualitative study meant to understand the experiences of a select group of child welfare caseworkers, the generalizability and transferability of this study are limited (Toma, 2011). This study focused on the feedback effects of the CFSR for child welfare caseworkers. Still, the findings may or may not relate to other contexts and will not be replicable (Toma, 2011). This study was rigorous and sought to understand meaning and beliefs, but it will not provide absolute truths, as qualitative research does not (Maxwell & Kiegelmann, 2023).

This study does not represent the experiences or understandings of all child welfare caseworkers. This study cannot account for all other factors that could impact feedback effects. It does not capture all agency-specific processes, such as agency-level factors in individual child welfare agency environments, or provide a comprehensive comparison across agencies. This study did not evaluate other individual-level factors that may impact caseworkers' perception of and feedback effects for the CFSR, such as

level of burnout, level of job satisfaction, or impacts from years of experience. This study did not examine any role other than that of a caseworker.

Significance

This study fills a gap in knowledge by examining how the CFSR impacts the child welfare caseworker through the lens of PFT. The results of this study provide child welfare agency leaders with an understanding of how their child welfare casework staff experience the CFSR, including what feedback effects have been produced because of the CFSR, so they may adjust the implementation of the CFSR and the preparation of caseworkers as needed. This may help agency leaders address any negative impact on caseworker retention related to the CFSR process, leading to a more stable child welfare workforce that better serves children and families. Additionally, understanding the feedback effects of the CFSR on the front-line caseworker through a qualitative lens may lend to a deeper understanding of feedback effects and PFT.

Summary

The CFSR is a federally mandated oversight process meant to monitor and improve performance in child welfare (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-b). Child welfare caseworkers are an important stakeholder in the CFSR process as they are directed by the federal standards (Carnochan et al., 2019) and are ultimately responsible for carrying out the practice standards. How caseworkers do this is impacted by individual discretion as front-line street-level bureaucrats (Mischen, 2008). Child welfare caseworkers also experience a high turnover rate within the position (Casey Family Programs, 2023), often because of difficult agency-level requirements (Burns et

al., 2023; Murphy, 2023). This study was conducted to understand the intersection of the CFSR impact and high turnover and any policy feedback effects. It was guided by PFT, which suggests that policy creates future behavior and policy decisions (Béland et al., 2022). Chapter 1 introduced the study. Chapter 2 will provide an exhaustive examination and analysis of the existing literature for PFT, the CFSR, and turnover within child welfare.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study was conducted to examine how the CFSR impacts the child welfare caseworker through the lens of PFT. The CFSR is a federally required CQI process meant to assess compliance with federal requirements and systemic outcomes for children and families, as well as improve child welfare practice (Ahn et al., 2022; Carnochan et al., 2013c; Milner et al., 2001). Caseworkers in child welfare are involved in or impacted by the CFSR process as the requirements of the CFSR trickle down from the federal level, through the state Title IV-E agency to the local level agencies where caseworkers are employed, which may be state, county, or privately run. Caseworkers will be directly involved in a required stakeholder interview when they have a case reviewed during the CFSR onsite review (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). All child welfare caseworkers are impacted by CFSR-driven practice requirements and changes made during the PIP stage of the process, as the child welfare caseworker is responsible for carrying out the requirements in their day-to-day direct work with children and families (Carnochan et al., 2019). From this perspective, the CFSR is directly related to the child welfare caseworker.

The field of child welfare experiences a high turnover in the child welfare casework position. High turnover negatively impacts the system's functioning, including the caseworker, the agency, and the children and families (Lushin et al., 2023). There has been much research on the high turnover within the field of child welfare. One consistent reason caseworkers give for burnout or exit from the position includes reasons related to agency-related requirements, which researchers may describe as agency requirements,

work-related burnout, or agency-level variables, which are generally defined as aspects of the job unrelated to direct work with children and families, such as case documentation and requirements, bureaucratic requirements, caseload sizes, court attendance, etc. (He et al., 2018; Leake et al., 2017; Lushin et al., 2023; Valenzuela, 2021).

PFT was used to examine the intersection of work-related requirements and turnover from a public policy perspective and attempt to understand what, if any, feedback affects the CFSR creates for the child welfare caseworker. The literature review contains information about historical and current research within PFT, information about the CFSR process, and a summary of research about the high turnover and instability of the child welfare workforce. This chapter includes an explanation of the literature search strategy, a description of the theoretical foundation, the literature review, and a summary and conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

Multiple databases were utilized to thoroughly search the literature, including JSTOR and the Walden University Library, a comprehensive database that searches databases such as EBSCO, ProQuest, Thoreau, and SAGE. Additionally, Google Scholar and Cambridge Core were searched. Many search terms were used to gather information about this topic and provide insight into the development of this study. The following key terms were used: *child welfare and burnout, child welfare and turnover, child welfare and CQI, child welfare and CQI and caseworker or worker and experiences or attitudes or perceptions, CQI or continuous quality improvement and public administration or public management or public policy, child welfare and CQI and caseworker or worker*

and case study, CQI or continuous quality improvement and human services or social services, continuous quality improvement and CQI and turnover or intention to leave, performance outcomes and child welfare workforce, performance outcomes and retention and child welfare or child protection or children's services, "systematic review" continuous quality improvement and child welfare, continuous quality improvement and child welfare retention, continuous quality improvement and retention, child welfare turnover and public policy, child welfare and case review, child welfare retention and case review, child welfare and retention or attrition or turnover and case review, child welfare and case review and culture, Child and Family Services Review or CFSR, outcomes and child welfare and retention or turnover, public policy and child welfare, Policy Feedback Theory, policy feedback theory and child welfare, policy feedback theory and feedback affects, and *policy feedback theory and Child and Family Services Review.* As terms and keywords were searched and information found, more terms were identified for search and use as they correlated with the topic, were used in previous research, and assisted in understanding the current literature.

Theoretical Foundation

PFT can be traced back to scholars like E. E. Schattschneider, who stated that "new policies create a new politics" (Schattschneider, 1935, as cited in Béland et al., 2022, p. 288). PFT suggests that the design and implementation of public policies can influence future political behavior and policymaking through feedback mechanisms that lead to feedback effects (Béland et al., 2022; Pierson, 1993). For example, Social Security is a public policy enacted in 1935 that has continually garnered feedback

mechanisms, such as public support, bureaucratic support, and powerful interest groups, which have created positive feedback effects that have sustained and grown the policy's provisions through years of political opposition (Amenta & Elliot, 2019; Béland et al., 2022).

In the 1990s, PFT developed into a theoretical framework that suggested how policies create new politics. Researchers such as Theda Skocpol and Paul Pierson began to examine how existing policies influence political behavior, public perceptions, and future policy decisions. In a seminal work, Skocpol (1992) laid the groundwork for PFT by examining how social policies related to veterans and mothers emerged from political processes and shaped political engagement and subsequent political interests. Pierson (1993) then published an influential article describing a framework for PFT, including path dependency, feedback mechanisms, and political dynamics, further opening the door for scholars to utilize this framework to understand how policy and politics impact one another. Since the emergence of PFT as a theoretical framework, scholars have used it to explore and demonstrate that policies are not just the outcomes of political processes but that they can shape future political dynamics.

The framework today for understanding the interactions between policies and political behavior, according to PFT, includes:

1. *Feedback effects and feedback mechanisms:* Policies have feedback effects on individuals, groups, and society, which can influence political attitudes, behavior, and preferences (Pierson, 1993). Feedback effects can be positive or negative (Campbell, 2012; Marier, 2012) or a combination of both (Moore &

Jordan, 2020) and occur through processes identified as feedback mechanisms (Béland et al., 2022).

2. *Policy legacies:* Policies implemented in the past shape future policy decisions (Béland & Schlager, 2019; Kopec, 2023).
3. *Path dependency and lock-in effects:* Path dependency suggests that past policy choices can constrain or influence future policy options (Béland & Schlager, 2019). Once a policy is in place, it can create a difficult path to deviate from, effectively locking in the policy decisions (Pierson, 1993).
4. *Policy design:* The design of policies can have long-lasting effects on society. How policies are structured, who they benefit, and how they are implemented can all influence feedback effects (Béland & Schlager, 2019).
5. *Political behavior and mass politics:* Policy can influence political behavior by shaping individuals' perceptions of government, their expectations of future policies, and their engagement in the political process (Anzia et al., 2022; Béland & Schlager, 2019; Kopec, 2023).
6. *Policy change:* By understanding how policies create feedback effects, policymakers can better anticipate the potential outcomes of their decisions and make more informed choices about future policy changes (Béland et al., 2022).

This study used two tenets of PFT: feedback effects and policy change.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

This section will review information related to PFT. It includes a more expansive explanation of feedback effects and how they ground this study. Information about the CFSR and its peer-reviewed literature will be provided. There will also be a discussion about the turnover in the child welfare workforce and the impact this has on systemic functioning.

Feedback Effects

Feedback effects are the consequences of a policy that influence future political dynamics; these effects are a crucial aspect of PFT. Pierson (1993) identified feedback effects in his seminal work, noting that they can be positive or negative. Positive feedback effects typically reinforce a policy's success, whereas negative feedback effects can lead to opposition and undermine a policy's success (Béland et al., 2022). Additionally, recent research highlights that positive and negative feedback effects will likely coexist and impact political outcomes simultaneously (Moore & Jordan, 2020). It is necessary to understand feedback effects and how they function to determine if policies will establish pathways for support or resistance. Examining whether the feedback effect is positive, negative, or a combination reveals how policy can influence future policy decisions and aid leaders in policymaking.

Positive Feedback Effects

Researchers have demonstrated positive feedback effects and how these effects can generate support and reinforce a policy's existence in various ways. Amenta and Elliot (2019) found positive feedback mechanisms in place when they examined how

Social Security benefits have persisted through political opposition. They discovered that feedback mechanisms such as the power of well-organized groups, favorable public opinion, and strong bureaucratic support were in place, which produced positive feedback effects and maintained the policy's provisions even with resistance. In another study evaluating unemployment benefits and income across European countries, researchers found positive feedback effects for unemployment benefits (Laenen et al., 2023). The researchers found that when the unemployment benefit was high enough for an earner to maintain their standard of living, there were positive feedback mechanisms in place of increased public support for the policy, which created positive feedback effects. Hamel (2024) examined whether program visibility impacted the mass public's feedback effects and found that when a policy's beneficiaries know they are receiving a benefit, such as when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) directly hired and paid employees, a positive feedback effect for that policy was observed. The positive feedback effects identified by these researchers demonstrate that providing benefits to recipients can create positive feedback effects that make it more likely that a policy would be supported and sustained.

Positive feedback effects may also be observed to lock in policy choices made at implementation. Larsen (2019) conducted a literature review of quantitative studies that examined PFT and found that positive feedback effects can take the form of reinforcing effects. Reinforcing effects are often associated with long-term processes, and according to Pierson (2000, as cited in Larsen, 2019), reinforcing effects may result from increasing returns and favorable conditions from a policy, which increases the likelihood of that

policy producing positive effects that continue the policy. For example, social welfare programs have been shown to foster a community that supports their continuation, as Amenta and Elliot (2019) found in their examination of retirement benefits. Positive feedback effects can support the continuation of a policy and create reinforcing effects for a policy.

Reinforcing effects emphasize how initial policy decisions can create conditions that lead to further policy reinforcement and expansion, which shape future politics and policymaking. Fording and Patton (2020) analyzed Medicaid expansion and found that citizens connected Medicaid expansion with their opinion of government functioning, and in some states, positive feedback effects toward public officials created reinforcing effects and expansion. Policies can also impact public opinions and preferences. Brooks and Manza (2006) utilized quantitative analysis to understand how various nations' attitudes towards social policy impacted feedback effects, lock-in effects, and political inclination to continue welfare state policies. As individuals experience the benefits of a policy, their support for that policy may increase, creating a cycle of positive feedback that bolsters the policy's legitimacy and encourages further investment.

Negative Feedback Effects

Negative feedback effects undermine the policy's support and can lead to resistance or reform. Laenen et al. (2023) examined the feedback effects associated with taxation. They found that a disproportionate tax benefit for high earners created negative feedback effects and decreased support for a uniform poll tax system requiring the same tax for everyone regardless of income. This article demonstrates how negative feedback

effects can lead to a loss of support for a policy to continue because the public is unsatisfied with the results the policy produced. Without this support, it is more likely that the policy will discontinue or be forced to change.

The design and marketing of a policy can create negative feedback effects. Campbell (2012) discussed an American social assistance program, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), whose design allowed for a low monetary benefit and allowed for individual caseworkers to make decisions for recipients, which led to the public feeling untrusting of the program and negative feedback effects being produced for the public. Negative feedback effects can also affect how an individual feels about participating in the political system. Simonsen (2020) examined the subjective perspectives of minority and majority youths in Denmark in response to anti-immigrant political messages and found that negative feedback effects were created as minority youth disengaged from the political process in response to this political message. Though youth are disengaged from the process in this study, other times, policies create negative feedback effects that can cause groups to mobilize against policies and feel empowered (Lacombe, 2022). Negative feedback effects undermine a policy's positive forward momentum or stability.

Nuance in Feedback Effects

Recent scholars are calling for research designs to demonstrate how feedback effects function and the nuances through which feedback effects impact policy and politics. Much of the research building the theory of PFT has utilized quantitative analysis of large datasets to examine feedback effects (Busemeyer, 2022). Larsen (2019)

conducted a quantitative review of 65 PFT studies and recommended that future research examine when and why there is positive or negative feedback or possibly no feedback effects. Kopec (2023) reviewed the literature and research designs utilized to examine PFT and recommended that more qualitative research is needed, mainly to understand the effects of policy on marginalized groups and front-line street-level bureaucrats. Bussi et al. (2022) suggested that feedback effects could be multiple, work together, and cancel each other out, which previous quantitative research may not have shown because a quantitative research design would not allow for this type of observation. Jacobs and Mettler (2018) made several suggestions for research design in PFT, including obtaining new types of data not historically gathered in PFT. The researchers utilized panel data by asking the same survey questions of a panel on three separate occasions to evaluate Medicaid expansion. Mettler (2015) suggested gathering data from more types of public policies to understand the effects of feedback better. Scholars have begun to conduct studies demonstrating how feedback effects are nuanced and may be better observed through various research design choices.

The belief that feedback effects are complex is growing as the evidence is produced. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that feedback effects are likely more nuanced than positive or negative and that both forces could be present and impactful to the trajectory of a policy (Moore & Jordan, 2020). For example, Garcia-Rios et al. (2023) conducted a study examining feedback effects on persons who identified with a politicized group identity, which they identified as those who have a sense of belonging to a politically aware group that has experienced subordinate status or group-based

injustices, which politically mobilized the group. The researchers found that persons identifying with a politicized group identity were more likely to engage in politics when presented with authoritarian policies. This is not what PFT would have historically expected for this group, demonstrating how feedback effects may act differently to produce results than previously understood. Lacombe (2022) examined the negative feedback effects of policy loss specific to when gun ownership advocates faced policy losses, such as laws that regulated gun purchase and ownership. The researchers found that gun ownership advocates used these losses or negative feedback effects to rally more support. This demonstrates how perceived negative feedback mechanisms may create positive feedback effects through support for the advocacy power and membership. These studies show that negative feedback may produce positive support for a policy.

Other variables that affect a policy's feedback trajectory may also impact feedback effects. Mettler (2019) suggested in a conceptual analysis that policy design and visibility could significantly impact feedback effects and the future of a policy. Anzia et al. (2022) examined whether receiving government benefits impacted an individual's attitude towards the government in conservative rural areas receiving agriculture-related policy benefits and found that government benefits do not, on their own, create positive feedback effects. The researchers found that other variables, such as political ideology and awareness of a program, could also impact an individual's view of the program and the feedback effects produced. In another study, Vannoni (2019) examined the positive feedback effects of tobacco control tactics on the public by examining smokers and nonsmokers. They found that the smokers drove the positive feedback effects because

they believed the tobacco control measures helped control the smokers' desire to smoke. So, even though there was a control measure in place, the public found it helpful, indicating that behavioral effects influenced feedback effects. These studies demonstrate that feedback effects alone may not always influence whether a policy will continue or how the public will view policymakers, but that other variables may also impact the future of a policy.

Appropriateness of PFT as a Theoretical Framework

PFT is an appropriate theory for evaluating the impact of the CFSR on the child welfare caseworker, as the caseworker is one of the primary audiences the CFSR needs to reach to effect the systemic changes the CFSR is designed to make. Moynihan and Soss (2014) explain the importance of the frontline worker's impact on policy through discretion and interpretation. While a policy can set parameters for a caseworker, there can be unexpected deviations due to the individual and human aspects. Additionally, Kopec (2023) highlighted the understanding that implementation and engagement with policy and how programs are administered are necessary to understand policy feedback effects fully. Caseworkers in child welfare impact the delivery of policy standards and whether policy goals are met; they are front-line street-level bureaucrats (Mischen, 2008). Learning how the CFSR impacts the child welfare caseworker and what feedback effects are created for the caseworker may provide information for leaders within child welfare to better engage the caseworker in the CFSR process.

PFT is an appropriate theory for evaluating the impact of the CFSR on child welfare caseworkers, as the CFSR has been in place for three complete cycles since 2004.

Each CFSR cycle is a multi-year process, including the statewide assessment, onsite reviews, and Program Improvement Plan (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). The federal government and states have begun the fourth CFSR cycle, and the feedback effects of the CFSR for a caseworker should be visible. Policy feedback is a cyclical and iterative process that takes time to cycle through, from creating a policy that produces attitudes and behaviors, and then back through that changed system to make more effects (Campbell, 2020). Jacobs et al. (2022) suggest that as time unfolds after the implementation of a policy, feedback effects cumulate and are more pronounced. Taking time to understand the feedback effects on the caseworker may help implementers and policymakers, as Polman and Alons (2021) suggested. As the field of child welfare continues to participate in the CFSR process, understanding feedback effects in this way will enable leaders to understand the process's impact on their workforce to get the most value from it.

PFT is appropriate for evaluating the feedback effects of the CFSR on child welfare caseworkers because the recent research on PFT calls for more qualitative research to understand the intricacies of feedback effects on various populations and individuals, and this will be a qualitative study. Goss et al. (2019) identified that policies impact organizations and individuals but called for more scholarship and theory-building to separate the individual from the organization and to understand the impact of policy feedback effects. They identified that the type of policy may impact feedback effects; for example, social services policies have a high mediation ability for the agency, meaning the agency interprets the policy and makes choices for the individual, which can impact

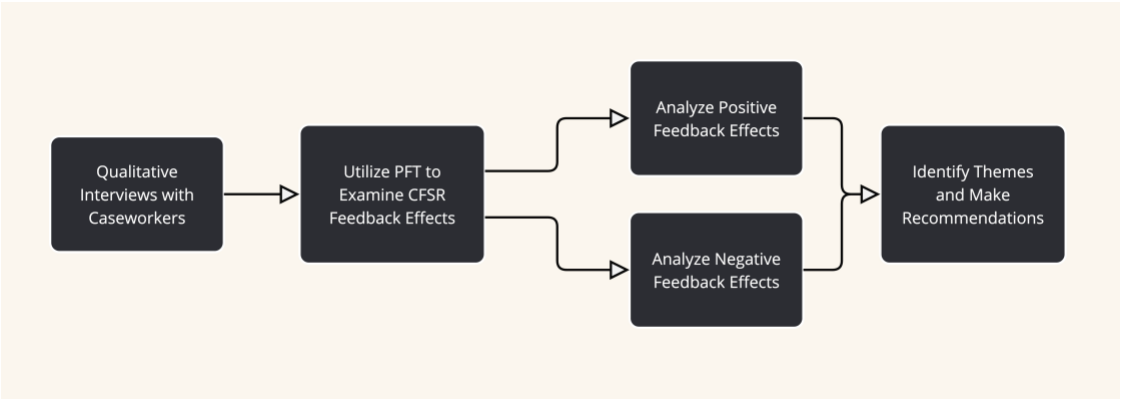
the feedback effects. Child welfare policies are social service policies. Moore and Jordan (2020) argue that by disaggregating the multiple possible dependent variables in policy feedback research, the dynamics of feedback effects can be better seen, improving policy analysis, design, and evaluation. In this study, the child welfare caseworker is one of the citizens impacted by the CFSR, which directs a complex set of objectives that form the social services policy within child welfare. These complex policies have interpretable tenets within the context of the CFSR, which create trickle-down effects on child welfare caseworkers, and understanding them will provide helpful information to the field of child welfare.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study will utilize a generic qualitative inquiry to examine the feedback effects of the CFSR as perceived by the child welfare caseworkers through the lens of PFT to make recommendations for leadership to best utilize the CFSR process with their child welfare workforce.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



The Child and Family Services Review

The CFSR is the federal process that assesses and monitors child welfare agency performance and compliance with federal requirements. Since the 1980s, the federal government has been developing its measurement system to evaluate the child welfare system (Carnochan et al., 2013c). Before the development of the CFSR, the federal government measured compliance with procedural requirements but did not capture whether this compliance improved outcomes for children and families (Mallon, 2010). The CFSR was authorized to review state child welfare programs for conformity with Title IV-B and IV-E requirements in 1994 through amendments to the Social Security Act and by a final rule published in the Federal Register in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-b). The CFSR launched for the first time in 2001 (D'andrade, 2008), has completed three full cycles as of 2024, and is in the process of the fourth round.

The Children's Bureau (CB) is the federal agency within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that has a mission of "seeks to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with states, tribes, and communities" (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-a, pg. 1). According to Milner et al. (2001), ACF created the CFSR to assess the real-life experiences of children and families involved in state child welfare programs to evaluate program outcomes, rather than solely assessing compliance with federal statutory requirements for procedures and documentation. The CFSR aims to capture the

interactions on the ground level and then determine how those interactions impact children with a focus on continual improvement built into the process through the PIP (Mallon, 2010). The CFSR has evolved into a complex multi-year process that evaluates state child welfare outcomes and performance on specific measures.

To conduct the CFSR process, the CB collaborates with states on each step. Steps in the CFSR process include states receiving their data from the CB, states conducting a statewide assessment as outlined by the CB, case reviews using a scoring metric provided by the CB, and a federal and state collaboration on the creation and implementation of two-year PIP's to improve items found to be out of substantial conformity (Carnochan et al., 2013c; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). The CFSR assesses conformity in both practice and administrative areas. There are seven practice outcomes assessed under three domains of safety, permanency, and well-being (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022), and seven systemic factors that include the statewide child welfare information system, the case review system, the quality assurance system, staff and provider training, the service array and resource development, agency responsiveness to community, and the foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment and retention (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.-b). In the most recent round of the CFSR, no state was found to conform with all outcomes and factors substantially, and every state was required to complete a PIP (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). The PIP allows states to rectify practices and improve outcomes to avoid penalties for failure to comply with federal policy requirements (D'andrade, 2008; Stoltzfus, 2005). All states must participate in Round 4 of the CFSR

(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Round 4 has begun, and states are in various phases of the process.

CFSR Process and Impacts

Evaluation of the CFSR process has been limited in the peer-reviewed literature. Milner et al. (2001), a group of Senior Child Welfare Program Specialists working for the CB, published a framework article before the first round of the CFSR occurred. The article described the proposed process and rationale for the design of the CFSR. Courtney et al. (2004) evaluated the national standards utilized by the CFSR. They found issues with bias in the performance measures due to the cross-sectional and exit cohort samples inaccurately measuring outcomes, limitations with the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Data System (AFCARS) due to limited capacity to report on entry cohort data, and challenges without representation of an entry cohort. Their recommendations for improvement of the CFSR focused on expanding beyond assessing for compliance with federal measures and recommended evaluating the interplay of policy, program, and outcomes. AFCARS is a federally mandated data collection system that requires submitting specified data about children in foster care to the federal government (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.-c). D'Andrade (2008) examined the CFSR and identified concerns with the process, including the small sample size of cases reviewed, sampling methods, national measures failing to capture state-specific performance due to state-specific practices, and concerns about the outcome measures themselves having the ability to provide an accurate evaluation. D'andrade recommended multiple improvements to the process, including redefining administrative indicators

based on entry cohorts and longitudinal data rather than exit cohorts or point-in-time counts, incorporating additional data, eliminating national data and allowing states to be evaluated against themselves, enhancing the state data systems and overhauling the federal requirements for the data systems, and allocation of more federal and state resources to child welfare agencies to carry out the work. These studies researched the process of the CFSR and called for changes to the CFSR to better evaluate outcomes in child welfare.

The Congressional Research Service, Emily Stoltzfus, also evaluated the CFSR process early in its implementation, summarizing outcomes and addressing researchers' concerns. Stoltzfus (2005) wrote about the outcome of the first round of CFSRs, identifying that no state substantially achieved all outcomes. Stoltzfus acknowledged concerns raised by researchers about the accuracy of AFCARS data due to inconsistent definitions and reporting methods across states, the application of federal standards with various state practices, and criticisms of the ability of the federal standard to measure practice accurately. Stoltzfus made several recommendations to improve the CFSR process before the second round, including improved data definitions and guidance for AFCARS, continued research and revision of national standards, and an ongoing advisory panel to review measures.

In a more recent study about the CFSR process, Carnochan et al. (2013c) evaluated the CFSR through a performance measurement lens. The researchers found that the CFSR gathered quantitative and qualitative data to assess child welfare outcomes. Still, they noted some concerns coming from the field of child welfare about the

applicability of the CFSR given states' various practices, which is a similar finding of concern to the previous research by Courtney et al. (2004) and D'andrade (2008). Carnochan et al. (2013c) also identified stakeholder involvement and performance measures issues. The researchers recommend continued reform to administrative data and performance measures and reconsidering the possible financial penalty for non-compliance. Samples et al. (2013) examined the CFSR performance measures at the local level by reviewing PIPs in 11 counties and holding focus groups with child welfare staff in 5 counties to gather recommendations about how the agency and staff respond to the CFSR requirements and gather recommendations for improvement. The authors found similar concerns to other researchers about the effectiveness of the CFSR in improving child welfare outcomes due to shortcomings with the process, such as a lack of focus on well-being, a lack of stakeholder engagement, and individuality in counties not being accounted for in performance measures. These studies about the CFSR evaluated the process and provided recommendations to modify the CFSR process so that it can best assess child welfare practices and compliance with federal measures.

The CFSR has developed over the years, and the CB has modified the process after each round. The regulation governing the CFSR, 45 CFR, gives the CB flexibility to revise the process as needed based on lessons learned from the process over time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.-c). According to Carnochan et al. (2013), for Round 2, the CB revised the penalty provisions, incorporated provisions for states to list external participants involved in the process, addressed concerns about variations in state practices, included guardianship as a permanency option, and justified

performance measure decisions. For Round 3, the CB updated the statewide data indicators to more comprehensively assess outcomes (Children's Bureau, n.d.-a) and emphasized Continuous Quality Improvement (Children's Bureau, n.d.-c) and stakeholder engagement in the process (Children's Bureau, n.d.-b). For Round 4, the CB emphasized advancing racial equity and supporting underserved communities, including people of color; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) individuals; and persons in chronic poverty (CFSR portal, n.d.). The CB recommended that states align their other planning processes, such as the Child and Family Services Plan, with the CFSR process. They gave updated tools and guidance to help states enhance their data analysis (Capacity Child Welfare, n.d.). States were also encouraged to conduct state-led reviews (CFSR Portal, n.d.) and start planning and preparation early to allow ample time for the process. The CFSR process will likely continue to be modified as lessons are learned in Round 4, given the allowance provided by 45 CFR and the premise of CQI inherent in the process.

Other peer-reviewed studies asked various questions about the impact of the CFSR process on aspects of child welfare. Mischen (2008) investigated how the CFSR process impacted child protective service agencies through a knowledge management lens, a field of study examining how large amounts of information are made into usable knowledge. They found that the CFSR process led to increased use of family team meetings and risk assessment tools, which enhanced information management and knowledge creation within the child welfare agencies. Another study examined the CFSR's impact on training outcomes and found that respondents generally perceived the

impact of the CFSR on state training agendas as positive, but close to half the participants surveyed were concerned with the potential to overuse training to address issues identified in the PIPs (Amodeo et al., 2009). Ahn et al. (2022) evaluated one state's implementation of the 2012 federal CFSR requirements for a CQI system. They found positive results for that state to monitor outcomes by implementing the federal CQI requirements, acknowledging that the CQI process was new, creating limitations for the study's findings.

Other studies utilize CFSR performance measures and data to research child welfare outcomes further. Blakey et al. (2012) utilized CFSR data to support the need for more research about foster care placement stability. Carnochan et al. (2013b) conducted a literature review about adoption and the CFSR measure related to an agency's performance in achieving timely adoption. They provided promising practices for improving this performance measure. Similarly, Carnochan et al. (2013a) conducted a literature review about reunification and the CFSR measure related to timely reunification. The researchers evaluate programs utilized by child welfare agencies to achieve timely reunification and provide questions for future researchers and the field to consider as the evidence behind timely reunification continues. Hebert (2013) used data from the CFSRs to evaluate child welfare policies in Louisiana related to educational outcomes for children. He recommended that more states utilize CFSR data to evaluate policy effectiveness and make improvements. Sedghi et al. (2025) utilized Data Envelope Analysis, a linear programming method used to consider inputs and outputs, to further evaluate CFSR performance indicators. Statistically, the researchers evaluated a state's

performance on the federal indicators and state resources to provide a more accurate picture of benchmark scores. These studies utilized CFSR measures or CFSR data to investigate child welfare outcomes further and provide recommendations for practice improvement in child welfare. However, none of the studies about the CFSR focus on the feedback effects of the CFSR on the caseworker.

The CFSR and the Caseworker

The CFSR requires participation from the child welfare caseworker. The caseworker gathers information and documents a case record in child welfare cases. CFSR case reviewers review the case file, and the caseworker participates in a stakeholder interview during the onsite review portion of the CFSR process (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Caseworkers may also be included as agency stakeholders in other parts of the CFSR process, including the Statewide Assessment and during the PIP development and implementation (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Additionally, the child welfare caseworker may be a stakeholder informed of the CFSR process results, depending on how their state or agency carries out the feedback process. The practice requirements set by federal law and evaluated by the CFSR directly impact child welfare workers. CFSR requirements have trickled down to state-level requirements in response to the CFSR (Carnochan et al., 2019), and initiatives developed and implemented as part of the PIP by states become the standards the caseworker must follow when practicing child welfare casework.

Utilizing PFT to understand the feedback effects of the CFSR on the caseworker will be essential to understand the effectiveness of the CFSR process on direct practice

change from the lens of impact to the front line. According to Mischen (2008), child welfare caseworkers are front-line workers who carry out initiatives in direct contact with the children and families interacting with the child welfare system. The child welfare caseworker has discretion in the delivery of services and benefits (Mischen, 2008), and how the individual caseworker does that based on the feedback effects of the CFSR is one way to examine the CFSR's effectiveness. Therefore, this study will take the perspective that the child welfare caseworker is a vital stakeholder in the success of the CFSR process to impact practice change.

Turnover in Child Welfare

The child welfare field experiences a high turnover rate within its workforce. Research demonstrates that child welfare turnover can be up to 40% annually (Burns et al., 2023), with a national average of 30% for the 15 years before the COVID-19 pandemic (Casey Family Programs, 2023). This turnover rate is significantly higher than the 12% recommended by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for Health and Human Service Agencies (Casey Family Programs, 2023). People who serve as caseworkers in the child welfare system do not always stay in that role for very long. In a study aimed at organizing child welfare workforce information utilizing the AFCARS data from 46 states, Edwards and Wildeman (2018) found that the median caseworker is on the job for only 1.8 years. With the high number of people who leave the caseworker role after a short time on the job, child welfare systems struggle to perform effectively, and both the agency and the individuals who interact with the child welfare system are affected.

The Impact of Caseworker Turnover on the Agency

Child welfare agencies are impacted by high turnover in several ways. High turnover creates significant costs associated with repeated hiring and onboarding cycles (Farber & Munsen, 2010). Casey Family Programs (2023) found that it costs an agency 70 to 200% of a worker's annual salary each time they leave the agency. High turnover creates unfavorable working conditions for workers who stay. The high turnover in child welfare causes difficulty for the workforce as workers left behind are often overloaded with additional work while vacancy rates are high, which leads to more burnout and turnover in the workforce (Burns et al., 2023; Casey Family Programs, 2023).

Not only does it cost a child welfare agency and its workforce to experience high turnover, but there are additional losses for the agency. When child welfare agencies experience high turnover, their ability to meet performance standards is diminished. According to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (2016), high turnover causes impaired agency functioning, delayed investigations, and fewer visits between the caseworker and the child. The challenge of high turnover leads to poor outcomes for children and families, such as longer times to achieve permanency within federal timelines, lower permanency outcomes, more placement changes, longer foster care episodes, and lost trust between children and their caseworkers (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 2016; Julien-Chinn et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2022). The high turnover of the child welfare workforce is detrimental to an agency's ability to achieve the child welfare mission of permanency, safety, and well-being of children.

Variables that Lead to Turnover for the Caseworker

Researchers have attempted to understand the issue of high turnover in child welfare for many years. One common finding is that there are personal and emotional consequences for the caseworker from working in child welfare. Caseworkers pay a high personal cost to do the work, reporting a negative impact on their health and emotional well-being and concern for their physical safety (Murphy, 2023). Lizano et al. (2021) found that child welfare caseworkers struggle with the day-to-day demands of challenging and complex casework as well as their experience with vicarious and secondary trauma from working with families who are experiencing crisis. Beer et al. (2021) examined how caseworkers felt the work at a Child Advocacy Center, which is a facility designed to house a multi-disciplinary team of professionals to work with victims of child abuse, impacted their personal and professional lives. They found that caseworkers experienced a negative impact on their personal lives, a negative impact on their daily living due to high caseloads and difficulty maintaining boundaries between professional and personal, and a negative effect on their health. The researcher quoted one participant who stated, “I am often exhausted, mentally and physically drained” (Beer et al., 2021, p. 5). The personal cost caseworkers report is one variable identified as to why people leave child welfare work.

Research has examined various coping mechanisms caseworkers utilize to deal with the difficulties of working in child welfare. Kahn (2019) examined how child welfare staff navigate psychological stress caused by working in child welfare and found that agency staff utilize distress organizing, which the researchers describe as the

utilization of collective avoidance mechanisms, to avoid the experience of stress caused by the work, which results in emotional exhaustion. Julien-Chinn et al. (2023) surveyed over 250 child welfare workers to assess what coping mechanisms they may have that help them remain in the field. They found that staying present with friends and family, practicing self-care, having a work-to-home transition, and having a religious or spiritual practice correlated with intention to stay. Research has identified that coping mechanisms can aid a worker in staying in the field or lead to a worker choosing to exit the field.

Researchers have examined the issue of turnover from the perspective of what predicts a worker will stay in the field. Kothari et al. (2021) examined child welfare employees who plan to stay in the field to determine variables associated with the decision to stay. They found that case severity, such as more severe abuse, was a variable associated with wanting to leave, and quality supervision and connection to colleagues were variables related to the decision to stay in the field. Copeland et al. (2020) used Attachment Theory to examine whether caseworker attachment classification predicted years of service. They found that attachment classification did impact years of service. The authors found that individuals with attachment styles of dismissing and preoccupation were linked to the longest tenure in child welfare.

Many researchers have identified agency-level items as a reported cause of turnover within the workforce. Caseworkers report that agency-level issues such as high caseloads, working many hours, experiencing absence from their own lives, and difficult case circumstances cause stress and anxiety for them (Murphy, 2023). He et al. (2018) found that the demands of the job and time pressures put the child welfare workforce at

risk for burnout. Radey and Wilke (2023) examined whether worker profiles predicted retention and found that individual characteristics made little difference, but that agency-level items, such as workload and supervision, did. A second group of researchers examined the same data set to identify themes from the qualitative data. They found that workers who left or stayed primarily identified organizational factors as their primary concern (Burns et al., 2023). Prost and Middleton (2020) examined professional quality of life and intent to leave the workforce. They found burnout related to agency-level variables to be an important indication of intent to leave the workforce. McLaughlin et al. (2022) conducted a study in England examining whether there were differences between those who chose to stay and those who decided to leave. While the researchers did not find significant differences between stayers and leavers, they found that organizational and job role factors are reasons caseworkers give for leaving or wanting to leave. This study defined organizational factors as resources, culture, and management practices, and job role factors as stress, caseload, and supervision. In a phenomenological study of child welfare caseworkers, Valenzuela (2021) found that the decision to leave the profession was due to what the researcher defined as “audit culture.” The researcher defined audit culture as one characterized by surveillance and suspicion that forces workers to account for productivity and performance, leading to anxiety and insecurity for caseworkers. These studies demonstrate the reported impact of agency-level variables on workforce turnover and support the need to understand the feedback effects of the CFSR for the caseworker so that agencies can best utilize the CFSR, which is a necessary CQI process, with their workforce without further contributing to turnover.

Summary and Conclusions

This study aims to examine how the federal performance standards set by the CFSR influence the practice, experience, and retention of child welfare caseworkers and understand what, if any, feedback effects for the CFSR emerge from this influence. PFT is a theoretical framework used to examine how policies impact politics. A central tenet of PFT is feedback effects, which can be positive, negative, or possibly both (Béland et al., 2022; Campbell, 2012; Marier, 2012; Moore & Jordan, 2020). By understanding the feedback effects that emerge from policies, policymakers can anticipate potential outcomes and make more informed choices about future policy decisions (Béland et al., 2022), which may help child welfare leaders as they utilize the CFSR process with their casework staff (Polman and Alons, 2021). PFT appropriately grounds this study to examine the feedback effects of the CFSR on child welfare caseworkers, as the CFSR is well-established and feedback effects should be visible; understanding feedback effects is important to guide front-line efforts. The qualitative study design will allow any nuance in feedback effects to be observed.

The CFSR is a federal process that assesses and monitors child welfare agency performance. After an exhaustive literature review, there were few independent peer-reviewed studies found evaluating the CFSR process for effectiveness (Carnochan et al., 2013 c; Courtney et al., 2004; D'andrade, 2008; Samples et al., 2013; Stolfuz, 2005) and even fewer that evaluated the impact of the CFSR on other variables in child welfare (Ahn et al., 2022; Amodeo et al., 2009; and Mischen, 2008), but none that examined the feedback effects of the CFSR for the child welfare caseworker. The child welfare

caseworker must participate in the CFSR onsite reviews when their case is reviewed. They can be a stakeholder throughout other portions of the process (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). The caseworker is directly impacted by the CFSR standards set and practice improvement efforts (Carnochan et al., 2019), with discretion in delivering services and benefits in their interactions with children and families (Mischen, 2008).

The field of child welfare has a high turnover of the child welfare workforce, which negatively impacts the system's functioning, including the caseworker, the agency, and the children and families (Lushin et al., 2023). Caseworkers consistently report that agency-level factors are a reason they exit the field. Researchers may describe agency-level factors as agency requirements, work-related burnout, or agency-level variables, which are aspects of the job unrelated to direct work with children and families, such as case documentation and requirements, bureaucratic requirements, caseload sizes, court attendance, etc. (He et al., 2018; Leake et al., 2017; Lushin et al., 2023; Valenzuela, 2021). The CFSR drives some agency-level factors by setting performance standards that child welfare agencies and caseworkers must meet.

After an exhaustive review of the literature, it became clear that researchers have not examined how standards set by the CFSR impact the child welfare caseworker through the lens of PFT. This study will explore caseworker perceptions of the CFSR's impact on retention, job satisfaction, caseworker decision-making, and frontline child welfare practice. PFT will be utilized to examine the intersection of federally set, agency-implemented requirements and caseworker impact from a public policy perspective and

seek to understand any feedback effects created by the CFSR for the child welfare caseworker.

Chapter 3 describes the methodological plan for exploring how child welfare caseworkers perceive the federal performance standards set by the CFSR to influence their practice, experience, and retention, as well as what feedback effects for the CFSR emerge from this influence.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the feedback effects of the federal CFSR as perceived by child welfare caseworkers. PFT guides this study. Examining how the CFSR influences caseworker decision-making and systemic practices within child welfare organizations provided valuable information to understand how the CFSR process affects policy implementation and employee retention. This chapter outlines the research design and role of the researcher, the methodology to include the choice of participants and data collection instruments, and a description of the procedures for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethics.

Research Design and Rationale

This study used a generic qualitative design to examine how the CFSR impacts the child welfare caseworker. PFT guided the study. Policy design and implementation create feedback effects on individuals, groups, and society, which can influence political attitudes, behavior, and preferences (Pierson, 1993). Feedback effects can be positive and support a policy trajectory or negative and undermine policy progress (Campbell, 2012; Marier, 2012). Moore and Jordan (2020) identified that feedback effects may be positive and negative and operate differently at different policy levels. Goss et al. (2019) called for scholars to examine the individual within the agency and how the individual is affected by a policy to understand the feedback effects created. Feedback effects are created through processes identified as feedback mechanisms (Béland et al., 2022). This

study explored the viewpoint of the caseworker within child welfare to understand the feedback effects of the CFSR as they perceive it.

The research question that guided this study was "How are the federal performance standards set by the CFSR perceived by caseworkers to influence the practice, experience, and retention of child welfare caseworkers, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence?" A generic qualitative research design was utilized to conduct this study. A generic qualitative research design has been used to explore real-world issues and has been successfully used in social science fields (Ellis & Hart, 2023). Using a generic qualitative research design when there is limited empirical research about a phenomenon is appropriate (Brake & Kelly, 2019). There is limited empirical research about the CFSR, as described in further detail in Chapter 2. A generic qualitative research design is suitable for examining the feedback effects of the CFSR on child welfare caseworkers because it provides the ability to ascertain from child welfare caseworkers their actual experiences with the CFSR by obtaining in-depth descriptive narratives.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this qualitative study, I was the primary research instrument (Merriam, 2009). I provide information about my background and reasons for becoming a researcher to minimize bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I have personal reasons for becoming a researcher and examining the phenomenon of child welfare caseworker experiences with the CFSR. My experience in child welfare includes being a direct service child welfare caseworker, training and CQI caseworker, supervisor, and manager

in a rural state office. I then served in various programmatic leadership roles at a state oversight office. I currently serve as a program specialist within a local county child welfare agency in an urban area. In these different roles, I participated in several processes of the CFSR in Rounds 2, 3, and 4, including participating as a first and second-level case reviewer, having cases reviewed, including cases of a subordinate staff member I directly supervised, Statewide Assessment development, facilitating PIP development and writing, and PIP Implementation. I also worked with various Children's Bureau teams during CFSR rounds. I have direct experience working in the child welfare system and participating in the CFSR. However, despite my personal experience, I recognize that each caseworker has a unique and varied experience with the CFSR.

These direct experiences within the child welfare system provide insight for this qualitative study while also creating the potential for bias. Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, their values, opinions, and thoughts will impact the research (Patton, 2015). It was important to be aware of my beliefs that could potentially bias the study and consistently practice self-reflection to control bias. While my background enhances my understanding of the subject, it also requires reflexivity to mitigate any unintended influence on the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I engaged in ongoing personal reflection throughout the research process, including reflexive journaling immediately after each interview to capture initial impressions or emerging patterns. During data analysis, I continued this practice by writing memos and annotations within NVivo, which supported data engagement and helped identify underlying assumptions, unexpected or surprising insights, and evolving interpretations

(Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I debriefed with the chair of my dissertation committee and engaged all research participants in member checking (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015) to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences. This audit trail of decisions made during the research process ensured dependability and created transparency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because I am a child welfare professional, no participants were included where there was a personal relationship, a direct professional relationship, or a power relationship.

Methodology

This study utilized a generic qualitative research design to address the research question. A generic qualitative design is appropriate when the research aims to explore and understand the study participants' perspectives (Ellis & Hart, 2023). The following section describes the link between the research question and the research design.

Participant Selection Logic

Current or former child welfare caseworkers were recruited for this study through purposeful sampling techniques. Purposeful sampling techniques help ensure the alignment of the sample with the study's objectives, thereby improving the rigor and trustworthiness of the research and findings (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposeful sampling allows for collecting in-depth and rich information by ensuring the selected participants have applicable experience and knowledge of the subject (Patton, 2015). Child welfare caseworkers are directly impacted by the CFSR as they are responsible for carrying out the requirements of the CFSR in their daily work with children and families (Carnochan et al., 2019). The child welfare caseworker position experiences a high turnover rate,

reaching up to 40% annually (Burns et al., 2023; Casey Family Programs, 2023). Prior research has connected turnover to agency-level variables (He et al., 2018; Leake et al., 2017; Lushin et al., 2023; Valenzuela, 2021). Many agency-level variables are influenced by agencies' shifting practices to align with CFSR performance standards (Carnochan et al., 2019). For these reasons, child welfare caseworkers are the appropriate participants for this study as they provided rich and in-depth information on their perception of how the CFSR affects caseworker practice, experience, retention, and any resulting feedback effects.

The inclusion criteria for this study included the participants being (a) current or former child welfare caseworkers, (b) have direct experience in the child welfare system within the past ten years, (c) have a basic knowledge of the CFSR process, and (d) speaks English. Nationwide recruitment occurred through referrals in my professional network, Walden University's participant pool, and the virtual social networking platforms Facebook and LinkedIn. Participants did not have a personal relationship with me, were not direct colleagues with me, and did not hold a subordinate relationship with me to prevent power imbalances.

To inform potential participants of the inclusion criteria, it was included in the Email Invitation to Participate, the Walden University Participant Pool Recruitment Invitation, and the Social Networking Recruitment Invitation. Contact with a potential participant was made if a participant inquired with me in response to one of these invitations. Once contact was established between a potential participant and me, I emailed them the Eligibility Screening Questionnaire (Appendix A) and the informed

consent form to assess eligibility for study inclusion and obtain informed consent. The Eligibility Screening Questionnaire contained questions to evaluate child welfare experience within the past ten years, general knowledge of the CFSR, and whether the person spoke English. Once the potential participant's eligibility was established through this process and the individual agreed to continue by providing informed consent, they were included in the study.

I planned to recruit up to 12 child welfare caseworkers to ensure information saturation, which is the point when no new information will be obtained from further data gathering (Guest et al., 2006). Data gathering and analysis occurred concurrently to help determine saturation (Mason, 2010). The 11th interview reached data saturation. I utilized reflexive journaling, transcript review, initial NVivo coding, and memo writing to determine that saturation had been achieved as participants consistently provided similar insights and experiences. Interviews were concluded once saturation was reached.

Instrumentation

For the planned research design, I needed to obtain detailed descriptive data to explain the qualities or characteristics of the phenomenon, which was achieved by recruiting child welfare caseworkers for semi-structured individual interviews. An interview guide was utilized to provide structure for the interview process. An interview guide assists the researcher with asking questions that prompt in-depth answers to the research question and helps ensure all topics are covered (Roberts, 2020). I developed an Interview Protocol (Appendix B) utilizing my academic experience, professional

experience, and the literature review to create questions that address the study's problem and purpose and follow the research-informed question formation.

The Interview Protocol is more than a list of questions; it includes a script at the beginning and end of the interview to guide the process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015). First, the interview protocol prompted me to ensure I had previously received informed consent from the participant. The interview protocol then contained a welcome and introduction section, where I introduced myself, provided the purpose of the study, information to the participant about the voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of the participant's data, the audio-recording for accuracy, and the participant's ability to stop the interview at any point, asking if the participant has any questions before prompting me to begin the interview.

The questions within the Interview Protocol align with the research question (Roberts, 2020), asking the participant about their child welfare background and experiences, understanding of the CFSR, perceptions of policy impact, impact on caseworker experience and retention, and policy feedback effects. The questions within the interview protocol were open-ended and neutral to allow participants to provide answers without bias or coercion from the author (Roberts, 2020) and in the participant's terms (Turner, 2014). The interview protocol began with collecting background information to allow participants to build trust with me and slowly start the interview process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015). The questions were asked one at a time; I used follow-up prompts if needed to ensure that rich and in-depth information was obtained from the participant (Turner, 2014). The interview guide concluded with a closing and

final thoughts section, where the participant was asked for recommendations and final thoughts, and if they would participate in member checking. A conclusion script was then read, thanking the participant for their contributions and insights and reminding them of their participation's voluntary nature and confidentiality. The interview guide prompted me to immediately participate in reflexive journaling, which I did after each interview, to document thoughts and reflections on the interview and promote objectivity (Ahmed, 2024).

To further develop the Interview Protocol and validate its content, I sought review and feedback on the questions from five child welfare professionals within my professional network, who each have extensive child welfare experience and knowledge of the CFSR and could be considered experts based on their work in the field (Rubio et al., 2003). These child welfare professionals were given an overview of the purpose of the study and asked to provide feedback on the interview protocol (Sánchez-Guardiola Paredes et al., 2021) related to the CFSR and child welfare caseworkers. Additionally, I sought review and feedback from academic colleagues, Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and my Dissertation Committee on the interview protocol to validate its content.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment began on June 7, 2025, once I received approval from my Dissertation Committee and Walden University's IRB. Nationwide recruitment occurred through referrals in my professional network, Walden University's participant pool, and two virtual social networking platforms, Facebook and LinkedIn. As recruitment efforts

occurred and I received inquiries for participation in the study, I communicated with potential participants via my Walden University email, Facebook's messaging application, and LinkedIn's messaging.

After initial inquiry, potential participants received both the Informed Consent Form to review that outlined the tenets required by Walden University, including a description of the purpose of the study, an explanation of the informed consent form, the inclusion criteria, myself and my role as a Walden doctoral student, the study procedures with timeframes, example questions, the voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits of the study, payment information, information about privacy, contact and question information, and how to provide their informed consent shall they choose to. Additionally, potential participants received the Eligibility Screening Questionnaire, which contained questions meant to assess if the person has child welfare experience within the past ten years, can demonstrate a general knowledge of the CFSR, and speaks English. If participants believed they met the eligibility criteria, wished to volunteer, and consented to participate, they emailed me with the words "I consent" and the completed Eligibility Screening Questionnaire. I rated the Eligibility Screening Criteria against the following rubric to determine the potential participant's eligibility. The participant must have provided a "yes" to questions 1, 3, and 7; selected at least two of the correct answers on 4 and 5, noting that all answers besides "not sure" are correct; and selected at least one option besides "not sure" for 6.

Before the interview, I ensured the participant met the eligibility criteria and had provided their informed consent. I utilized the Interview Protocol (Appendix B) to

structure the interview, including the introduction script that I read to give an orientation to the process for the participant (Roberts, 2020). The interview guide consisted of 18 open-ended questions meant to elicit detailed responses (Turner, 2014), with the ability to ask follow-up questions as needed and a conclusion section that allowed participants to provide any further thoughts. The participants were asked if they would participate in member checking, consisting of a transcript and initial finding review (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and if they had any final thoughts before thanking them for their time and contributions and ending the interview. The participants were asked to contact me with any further questions or concerns that they may have. After each interview, I participated in reflexive journaling on immediate thoughts or perceptions. I then reviewed each transcript carefully to verify the accuracy of the transcription and make corrections as needed. All participants were sent their cleaned transcripts to review for accuracy as part of member checking.

Data Analysis Plan

The qualitative data analysis process included reviewing the audio-recorded telephonic interviews transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview to help me become close to the data (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). To begin the analysis process, I read and reread the transcripts, taking note of thoughts by writing analytic memos. I verified the accuracy of a transcript, lightly cleaning the transcript and removing duplicate language, such as “um, um” or short phrases said more than once, such as “I believe, I believe.” I also bracketed and removed identifying data, such as the name of an

agency or state, by removing the name and bracketing "[state]." I then sent the transcript to each participant, asking for their review and feedback for member checking.

I followed Saldana's (2021) descriptive coding process to code the data. I used first- and second-cycle coding to develop themes from the interview data. I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to assist with organizing and managing codes (Dhakal, 2022). I conducted the first coding cycle using a line-by-line descriptive coding approach, which helped separate the data into smaller units and generate initial codes for the first five transcripts. These codes reflected meaningful ideas, phrases, or concepts directly drawn from the participants' words. This process allowed me to review the interview transcript data multiple times, taking note of important thoughts, ideas, and decisions via NVivo annotations and memos. After generating initial codes, I engaged in second-cycle coding to group related codes into broader categories and identify emerging patterns and themes. I maintained an audit trail, including reflexive memos within NVivo, to document my analytic decisions and support the trustworthiness of the analysis (Patton, 2015).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the term trustworthy means that this research can be trusted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To achieve trustworthiness, a researcher must address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section will address my plan to achieve trustworthiness.

Credibility

Shenton (2004) explains that credibility means alignment with reality. Some strategies can help ensure credibility, including engagement, member checking, reflexivity, peer review, and data saturation. I engaged with participants to establish rapport, build trust, and understand their perspectives. I explained the independent status of the research to participants to encourage honest and open discussion of their experiences (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, participants were asked to review the transcript and preliminary findings to confirm accuracy through member checking.

The formation of interview questions can impact credibility; therefore, ensuring neutral questions is recommended to avoid influencing participant answers (Turner, 2014). An interview protocol was used for this research. Questions within the interview protocol were designed thoughtfully with open-ended and neutral questions to promote credibility and avoid influencing responses. I participated in reflexive activities, including journaling and writing NVivo annotations and memos throughout data collection and analysis to promote credibility. Lastly, Patton (2015) suggests that thorough data analysis will help establish credibility; therefore, I continued interviews until saturation was reached and no new information or themes were presented during interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I extensively reviewed the data during analysis, keeping notes and an audit trail of decisions made in a codebook development memo.

Transferability

Transferability concerns whether a qualitative study's results can be applied to other settings, which happens through the researcher providing thick descriptions of the

participants and the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To establish transferability, I provide thick descriptions of the research process, including the sampling and recruitment process, information about inclusion criteria, basic information about the participant's background and experience in child welfare and their knowledge of the CFSR, the number of participants, information about the context and setting of the interviews, and research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Providing this information will allow other researchers to determine the transferability of this study for themselves.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability concerns whether research findings will endure (Ahmed, 2024), and confirmability is the degree to which other researchers can confirm research findings because they are grounded in the data and not affected by individual researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To achieve dependability and confirmability, there must be a detailed audit trail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I created a detailed audit trail of all decisions made throughout the data collection and analysis. I also utilized reflexive journaling, annotation, memo writing, and member checking to encourage credibility (Shenton, 2004) and produce dependability and confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers should anticipate and plan for ethical issues to protect participants and promote integrity within their research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before data collection began, I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB to ensure the planned components of the study were ethical. Once approved by the IRB, I began

recruitment. Participants were recruited nationwide through my professional network, Walden University's participant pool, and two virtual social networking platforms, Facebook and LinkedIn. Participants did not have a personal relationship with me, were not direct colleagues with me, and did not hold a subordinate relationship with me to prevent power imbalances.

I utilized the informed consent process described above to protect participants. Participants were responding to one of the three invitations. Once contact was made, I further introduced myself. I explained the study's purpose, the confidentiality of the study, and their rights as participants, including the ability to decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. I provided participants with the Informed Consent Form that outlines the requirements of Walden University for informed consent for their review, with instructions to offer informed consent via email to me with the language, "I consent." I offered to discuss any questions or clarifications the participants had during and throughout the research process.

To adequately protect the confidentiality of the participants, all work was conducted on a private computer, which is password-protected, and stored in an encrypted folder, which was then backed up to a password-protected, encrypted hard drive that only I have access to. The data collected was confidential rather than anonymous, as I know the participants' identities. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports, and a unique study ID number was given to each transcript instead of using a participant's name. Findings are presented in aggregate form,

ensuring the identity of participants will remain confidential. All research data will be kept for five years after the study concludes, at which time it will be securely deleted.

Summary

A generic qualitative research design was utilized to examine the feedback effects of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) on the child welfare caseworker. This chapter discussed the planned research design and role of the researcher, the methodology to include the choice of participants and data collection instruments, and a description of the procedures for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethics. Chapter 4 will discuss the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this qualitative study, I examined the feedback effects of the CFSR on the child welfare caseworker through the lens of PFT. Examining how the CFSR influences caseworker decision-making and systemic practices within child welfare organizations provided insight for agency leaders. The research question explored by this study was "How are the federal performance standards set by the CFSR perceived by caseworkers to influence the practice, experience, and retention of child welfare caseworkers, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence?" In Chapter 4, I describe the setting of the study, participant demographic data, discuss the data collection experience, explain the process for data analysis, discuss issues of trustworthiness, and provide the study's results.

Setting

Because I worked in a local child welfare agency during data collection, I did not include any participants with whom I had a personal relationship, a direct professional relationship, or a power relationship. Participants in this study were recruited nationally and represented a range of geographic regions, agency types, and professional experiences in child welfare. At the time of the study, no events, such as active CFSR cycles, significant budget cuts, or personnel changes, were reported by participants that would have directly influenced their responses. However, participants described working in varied child welfare agency cultures and under different leadership practices, which shaped their CFSR perspectives. Some participants were still employed in child welfare during their interview, while others had left the field. This variation in child welfare

experience, agency context, and whether participants were actively working or had left child welfare may have influenced individual reflections and the perspective through which participants interpreted the CFSR process.

Demographics

The participants in this study were current or former child welfare caseworkers who had direct experience in the child welfare system within the past 10 years, had a general knowledge of the CFSR, and could speak English. The initial plan was to interview individuals who had been or were caseworkers; however, the final sample included 11 individuals who had all served as caseworkers, nine of whom went on to hold various other roles in their time in child welfare to include roles in supervision, management, continuous quality improvement, training, and or policy writing and program development.

Participants brought a wealth of experience to the study, with a combined total of 194 years working in child welfare. The participant with the least amount of experience had 6 years, and the participant with the most amount of experience had 40 years; the mean amount of experience was 16 years. Table 1 presents participants' years of service.

Participants represented a national perspective and worked in child welfare in 13 states, with some working in more than one state. States represented include California, Florida, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. Participants worked for various child welfare agency structures, including state, county, and private agencies. Participants also described various administration structures, including state-administered, state-led and

county-administered, and state-led and county and state-administered. One participant worked for the Federal Children's Bureau for a time during their career. Another participant had extensive experience working with Tribes. At the time of the study, five participants were actively working in child welfare, and six were no longer working in child welfare.

Participant experience represented a variety of child welfare program areas, including CPS/Investigations, Permanency/Reunification, Adoptions, Foster Care Licensing, and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). CPS/Investigations caseworkers are responsible for responding to reports of child abuse and neglect and assessing child safety. Permanency/Reunification caseworkers provide case management and services to families aimed at achieving permanency for children through reunification, guardianship, or adoption. Adoption caseworkers typically receive a case once a child is legally free for adoption and has a permanency plan of adoption, working to match the child with a permanent adoptive family. ICWA caseworkers provide services to children with Native American ancestry and their families in accordance with ICWA. Foster care licensing caseworkers recruit, assess, and license foster homes. Table 2 presents program area representation.

I did not gather personal demographic information, such as age, race, or ethnicity, as it was unnecessary to answer the research question.

Table 1

Participant Years of Service

Participant	Years of Service
P01	10
P02	7
P03	11
P04	12
P05	6
P06	20
P07	25
P08	16
P09	40
P10	30
P11	17

Table 2

Participant Program Area Representation

Demographic Variable	n	%
Program Area		
CPS/Investigations	11[a]	100[a]
Permanency/Reunification	9[a]	82[a]
Adoptions	2[a]	18[a]
Foster Care Licensing	2[a]	18[a]
ICWA	1[a]	9[a]
Currently Employed in Child Welfare		
Yes	5	45
No	6	55

Note. $N = 11$; a = participants have experience in more than one program area.

Data Collection

Recruitment for the study began on June 7, 2025, and ended on July 12, 2025. Recruitment yielded 27 inquiries into study participation. Of those, six individuals were not eligible based on eligibility criteria, 10 did not follow up after being sent the Informed Consent and Eligibility Screening Questionnaire, and 11 completed the

required documentation, met eligibility requirements, provided informed consent, and became research participants. Interviews took place via telephone on a date and time selected by participants. All interviews occurred between June 15, 2025, and July 11, 2025. During interviews, I was in a private and secure location in my home where I could not be interrupted and could ensure the confidentiality of all participants. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews using the Voice Memo application on my MacBook computer. Immediately following each interview, I reflexively journaled about my initial thoughts and reactions to the interview. I then saved the recording to an encrypted secure folder along with an original version of the transcript created by the Voice Memo application.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by the interview protocol I developed, as discussed in Chapter 3. I followed the interview protocol during interviews, asking the same open-ended questions of each participant to ensure consistency across interviews. I also asked follow-up or clarifying questions as needed to ensure I understood participants' responses. I also engaged in member-checking during interviews by summarizing and reflecting to participants what I thought they had shared with me. For example, I would say, "I heard you say this…, is that correct?" This helped me confirm accuracy and promote understanding. The duration of the interviews was between 22 and 65 minutes, with an average interview time of 41 minutes.

Data Analysis

To code the qualitative data, I reviewed the recorded telephonic interviews, which were transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview to help me become close to the

data (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). I read and reread the transcripts, taking note of thoughts by writing analytic memos. Once I verified the accuracy of a transcript, I lightly cleaned the transcript by removing duplicate language, such as "um, um" or short phrases said more than once, such as "I believe, I believe." I also bracketed and removed identifying data, such as the name of an agency or state, by removing the name and bracketing "[state]." I then sent the transcript to each participant, asking for their review and feedback for member checking. I did provide a one-week timeframe for member checking and explained that if the participant did not respond by the timeframe, I would take that to mean they approved the transcript. Five participants responded that the transcript looked correct, one requested changes to grammar, one responded that they would review it but did not respond again, and four did not respond to the request for member checking of the transcript.

I followed Saldana's (2021) descriptive coding process to code the data, using first- and second-cycle coding to develop themes from the interview data. I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to assist with organizing and managing codes (Dhakal, 2022). I conducted the first coding cycle using a line-by-line descriptive coding approach, which helped separate the data into smaller units and generate initial codes for the first five transcripts. These codes reflected meaningful ideas, phrases, or concepts directly drawn from the participants' words. This process allowed me to review the interview transcript data multiple times, taking note of important thoughts, ideas, and decisions, which I documented in NVivo annotations and memos.

Data collection continued until I completed 11 interviews. I began to believe that I had reached saturation by the ninth and tenth interview, as I heard the same or similar answers to questions, reinforcing the information I had already gathered. This decision was supported by data analysis, which involved reviewing the interview recordings and transcripts. By the 10th interview, I determined I had reached saturation, which is the point when no new information is likely to be revealed by subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Because the 11th interview was scheduled, I completed it and felt confident that I had reached data saturation after speaking with this participant. I then decided to end data collection. I updated my posts on Facebook and LinkedIn, stating that data collection was complete, and requested that Walden remove my post from the Walden Participant Pool.

Using NVivo, I created an initial codebook by conducting line-by-line coding of the first five transcripts. I paused to consider my codebook and determine whether I could consolidate codes or if codes were in the appropriate high-level code or needed to be moved into different high-level codes based on emerging theme development. I then used this initial codebook to code the remainder of the transcripts, creating annotations and memos regarding analytic decision-making. No new codes emerged in NVivo after coding transcript 06. After coding all 11 transcripts, I reviewed the coded data to evaluate if any codes could be combined, removed, or reclassified. I removed a few codes with only one sentence or participant's idea and recoded that data to another code that captured the same or a similar idea. For example, I had a code titled "not understanding

the why," but because only one participant framed and spoke to this code, I was able to combine the code with a code titled "the why."

After generating initial codes, I engaged in second-cycle coding to group related codes into broader categories and identify emerging patterns and themes. I maintained an audit trail of my decision-making, including reflexive memos and annotations within NVivo, to document analytic decisions and support the trustworthiness of the analysis (Patton, 2015). I shared a two-page theme summary document with all participants for member checking. The document contained the study's title, the purpose of member checking, a participant snapshot, and a summary of the four themes with the main findings to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. At the end of the document, I asked the members to consider the following questions: Do these themes accurately capture the overall ideas and experiences you shared? Is there anything missing or that you think needs clarification? Do you have any additional thoughts or suggestions about the identified themes? Six participants responded to this request for member checking, all confirming the accuracy of the findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the term trustworthy means that this research can be trusted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to achieve trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility means alignment with reality (Shenton, 2004). I used multiple strategies to support credibility in this study, including engagement, member checking,

reflexivity, peer review, and data saturation. I engaged with participants to establish rapport, build trust, and understand their perspectives. I explained the independent status of the research to participants to encourage honest and open discussion of their experiences (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, participants were allowed to review their transcripts and my preliminary findings to confirm accuracy through member checking.

The interview protocol was designed with open-ended, neutral questions to avoid influencing participant responses (Turner, 2014). I participated in reflexive activities, including journaling and writing NVivo annotations and memos throughout data collection and analysis to promote credibility further. I continued interviews until saturation was reached and no new information or themes were presented during interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were extensively reviewed during analysis, and I maintained a detailed codebook memo to document coding decisions.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether findings can be applied to other settings, supported by providing thick descriptions of participants and the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I provided detailed accounts of the sampling and recruitment process, inclusion criteria, participant backgrounds, and experience in child welfare and the CFSR. Descriptions of the interview context and setting and the research findings are included (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). These details allow others to assess the applicability of the findings to their settings.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time (Ahmed, 2024), and confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data rather than researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A detailed audit trail documented all decisions throughout data collection and analysis. I used reflexive journaling, annotations, memo writing, and member checking to support dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). These practices ensured the findings were consistent, transparent, and rooted in the participants' accounts.

Results

This generic qualitative study examined how the federal performance standards set by the CFSR are perceived by child welfare caseworkers to influence their practice, experience, and retention, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence. The CFSR is a federally required CQI process meant to assess compliance with federal requirements and systemic outcomes for children and families, as well as improve child welfare practice (Ahn et al., 2022; Carnochan et al., 2013c; Milner et al., 2001). The CFSR performance standards directly impact the child welfare caseworker. Feedback effects are the consequences of a policy that influence future policy decisions through either positive or negative impacts (Pierson, 1993). Positive feedback effects typically reinforce a policy's success and build support for its continuation, whereas negative feedback effects can lead to opposition and undermine its success (Béland et al., 2022).

Eleven participants who had been child welfare caseworkers were interviewed through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to address

the research question. One research question guided my exploration of how the child welfare caseworker experiences the standards set by the CFSR and what, if any, feedback effects emerge from this influence. After analyzing the data, I identified four themes as described by participants: (a) living the standards, caseworker experiences with the CFSR; (b) organizational impact, agency response shapes caseworker experience; (c) metrics versus mission, tension between performance standards and practice; and (d) solutions from the field, caseworker recommendations for improvement. In the following section, I provide a detailed description of the four themes.

Theme 1: Living the Standards, Caseworker Experiences with the CFSR

This theme explores how participants perceive the effects of the CFSR on their day-to-day work as caseworkers and child welfare professionals. Participants discussed how they believed the CFSR impacted their decision-making, workload, retention, job satisfaction, and frontline casework. Importantly, because participant perceptions of the impact of the CFSR were varied, to provide context, the participant perspectives, gathered through both the eligibility screening questionnaire and interviews, are presented first. Finally, this theme captures a common observation across participants that the CFSR performance standards are perceived as unachievable.

Participants' understanding of the CFSR outcomes was consistent, whereas their experience with the CFSR process was more varied, as shown in the Eligibility Screening Questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire ensured eligibility by asking whether participants had been child welfare caseworkers, in what state, and if participants spoke English. The questionnaire also asked if the participant had a general understanding of

the CFSR, and then three questions were used to elicit the participant's general knowledge of the CFSR. These three questions gathered information about the purpose of the CFSR, what performance outcomes the CFSR assesses, and what CFSR-related activities they had participated in. Information collected by the Eligibility Screening Questionnaire (Appendix A) is summarized in Table 3. The table presents the number of times each response option was selected, the combinations of answers chosen by participants, and the corresponding percentage values.

Table 3

Eligibility Screening Questionnaire Results

Questionnaire Variable	n	%
Individual Responses for Question 4		
1. Review Cases	6	54
2. Assess Compliance with Federal Performance Measures	10	91
3. Improve Child Welfare Systems	10	91
Combinations of Responses for Question 4		
1, 2 and 3	6	54
2	1	9
2 and 3	3	27
1 and 3	1	9
Individual Responses for Question 5		
1. Child Safety	10	91
2. Well-being	11	100
3. Permanency	10	91
Combinations of Responses for Question 5		
1 and 2	1	9
1 and 3	1	89
1, 2 and 3	9	82
Individual Responses for Question 6		
1. Had your case reviewed	7	64
2. Participated in PIP activities	8	73
3. Been a case reviewer	4	36
4. Received direct or indirect feedback from CFSR results	8	73
5. Other (please explain)	2	18
Combinations of Responses for Question 6		
1	1	9
1 and 2	1	9
1, 2, 3 and 4	1	9
1, 2, 4 and 5	1	9
1, 2 and 4	1	9
1, 3 and 4	1	9
1, 4 and 5	1	9
2 and 3	1	9
2, 3 and 4	1	9
2 and 4	2	18

Participants' understanding of the CFSR was also consistently reflected in the interviews. Many participants understood the CFSR outcomes as safety, permanency, and well-being. P06 shared, "I know it's everything to do with safety, permanency, and well-being, which is what I've heard, like, preached into my brain since I started." Many participants described their understanding of the CFSR by explaining the review portion of the process. P02 explained, "So in the state of [state], there are regions, and there are regional representatives who come into the county agencies, and they do all the case reviews. They pull files, they review all the cases, and then they dictate to the county what the implications of that are."

Other participants shared this understanding of the review portion of the CFSR and further connected the CFSR to the achievement of performance standards, program improvement planning, and funding. P11 described the process as,

> They go through the cases, they review the records, they interview the caseworker, I believe they will occasionally interview the supervisor, and they interview the parents. I've seen them interview the foster parents to really kind of get an idea of what was occurring in the case, and if all the standards that were met within the CFSR, the standards that are set by the Feds, that the states are required to meet. And so they review the cases, and then determine if we've met the standards, and if not, then usually the states have to be put on a program improvement plan or a PIP. That's what it was usually called.

P10 explained the process as,

> Well, so the process came out of federal legislation as an effort, really on a macro level, to improve practice via state reviews. So basically, they were administered in every state, and federal funds were tied to the outcome measures, which are child safety, permanency, and well-being in each of those categories. And there's the federal standards that each state needed to meet in order to maintain their maximum funding. … So, and then if the states didn't meet those standards, they were placed on a PIP program improvement plan to target those measures that were lacking and try to increase training, accountability, increasing staff levels was very often a part of that pip. … I don't know how long you had. Like, you, we had to show improvement, but I don't know that any state, in my experience, no state ever actually met the federal standards because they're pretty impossible to meet. But as long as you were improving towards that, I don't believe there were penalties. I think the penalties probably would occur. It never happened in [state] or in [county], to my knowledge, while I was practicing, we ended up losing money or actually having a financial penalty. But that was built into the CFSR system.

Other participants described the CFSR's purpose of monitoring states for performance and performance improvement. P03 explained, "My understanding of the CFSR is that it is the metric in which the federal government determines how states are doing in the administration of their child welfare services. There are metrics that are to be reached." P07 described, "My understanding is that it is created to not penalize states, but

really to help them identify ways to be a better working child welfare agency and improve practice."

Some participants described the CFSR process more narrowly, as more of a process connected directly to safety concerns or an audit. P08 explained the CFSR process to be an alert on a case when there is a safety concern with required follow-up action.

> So normally, when a CFSR comes in, the alert comes from the [agency]. It goes to the lead agency to their point of contact who will conduct a email or conversation with leadership in the case management organization carrying the case, talking about what were the safety concerns that were flagged, and then there's protocols. So … where I've worked the protocol is that you had to see the children within 24 hours of being notified of the CFSR. There had to be a quality assurance review in the case management side of things, and then there was ongoing communication as to how those steps were being completed and what timeliness they were being completed, and then there would be a phone call with [agency] and their levels where they would review the concerns and just kind of the case in general. … We were just told this was a review that they were doing. The case had been flagged because there were safety permanence, well-being concerns, and we had certain steps we had to take to remedy those concerns.

P04 described knowing as a caseworker that the CFSR was an audit process, stating, "Only from, again that quality review process, oh they're going to come and they're gonna look at your cases and review cases. That's like I mentioned, that's when

everybody kind of scrambled around that... We got to do X, Y, and Z." One participant described not hearing about the term CFSR or knowing what the CFSR was when they were a caseworker and learning of it after leaving the field, P01 stated, "Yeah, so I can explain that, those acronyms were never used when I worked for the department, they always use like [child welfare acronym] or yea, they use other wording. As I was phasing myself out of working for [agency name] is when I started to know what those words were." While participants generally shared a similar understanding of the CFSR's purpose and outcomes, subtle differences in how they made sense of the process appeared to shape their beliefs about the day-to-day experiences of the effects of the CFSR. These differences became apparent as participants discussed their perception of the impact of the CFSR.

Participants describe a range of beliefs about the impact of the CFSR on caseworker decision making, workload, retention, job satisfaction, and frontline child welfare practice. A few participants felt the CFSR impacted their decision-making as a worker. P02 shared, "I think it did in terms of … like the policies are a guideline. For how to do the work. So, yeah, I mean, overall, if that structure wasn't there, the work would be way too subjective. So I think, thank goodness, there are some structures to go by." Further, P11 explained,

> I mean, yes, definitely, like, time frame-wise, it would help us make good decisions. … the CFSR, I think, really helped us [with] well-being, because there was a lot of discussion, especially that we needed to make sure, like, were these kids being able to go to camps they want, were they being able to be the average

> child, which I remember that was a big discussion within the CFSR was making sure we're really establishing the well-being piece.

Other participants described that the CFSR had less impact on their decision-making when they served in caseworker roles and had more impact once they were in supervisory roles. P08 stated, "It's impacted my decision [making] in leadership. Absolutely." Further, P07 shared,

> No, I don't think it impacted [decision-making as a caseworker]. Well, I would say more so as a supervisor, it may have impacted, because I paid much more attention to the time frames for adoption and permanency. You know, and I wouldn't say it really impacted placement decisions, but I definitely became more aware.

Others shared that they did not believe the CFSR impacted their decision-making as a caseworker. P04 stated, "As a case worker, no, I don't think so." P06 stated, "I personally don't think it did." One participant described work at two individual agencies and felt the CFSR did not impact their decision-making as a caseworker at the first agency but did at the second agency. P05 explained,

> I don't think it did until I came to [agency 2] and was actually involved in CFSRs. I think at [agency 1] it was just something that happened. It was like one of those administrative things that leadership dealt with that wasn't really my problem. I didn't have the chance to ever participate in them. So to me, it was just like something that happened, but wasn't my problem, essentially. And now that I'm here [agency 2]… I did the item-by-item analysis so that I could help develop a

> PowerPoint on the outcomes and provide it to the agency. And that was interesting to me to read all of the, items and really break them down, like, what was the strength and what was an ANI [area needing improvement], and that has impacted my quality of work now on the permanency work, the permanency case that I'm working, because I will think of things in my head like I have the mother on my caseload is not really engaged right now. And in my head, I'm like, well, what am I doing? And I know just because I know I'm a good caseworker. I know I'm doing everything I can to engage her, but I'm like, okay, if I was a CFSR reviewer is that would I think that this checks that box as a strength? And so now I think, yes, it is.

Varied perceptions of the CFSR's influence on caseworker decision-making continued as participants reported mixed opinions as to whether they believed their workload was impacted by the CFSR. Some participants believed the CFSR did impact workload. P08 stated, "Yeah, it affects the workload because it becomes the immediate priority." Other participants shared how the standards set by the CFSR increased workload for the casework position. P05 stated, "But I think also that can have a negative impact on those caseload carrying workers because they're already doing the best they can, right?" P05 also discussed the differences between the two agencies they had worked at and shared that they believe the changes may not meaningfully make it to the caseworker, stating, "But I don't think it's provided to frontline workers in a way that they can see the benefit. I think it's just another thing they have to do when they're already drowning."

Other participants shared the perspective that the CFSR creates additional work for caseworkers, P06 explained,

> It burns them out. I mean, I get it. I get permanency. I get well-being, I get safety, I get all those things. It's that overarching umbrella. We've been preaching it for decades, but adding all these extra things in there, well, if you don't hit these milestones, you're not gonna get this funding. That's never made sense to me.

P10 described how they perceived the CFSR increased workload by giving an example,

> It for sure increased. Well, it increased the perception of the workload. And by that, I mean, Hmm, So, if I have a case where, like, I know as a worker, that case needs a lot of attention. I need to be calling that mom every week. I need to be seeing that kid probably every week, and that's hard to do, right? When you have a caseload, and you only have really, you know, 20, 22 working days in a month, if there's no holidays, right? So it's not easy, but as a worker, I might make extra effort when the case is that fragile. There's other cases that they can back burner for a while, you know? They're going along, I check in, they're doing good, I've got good relatives. Like, you know, things are good. Then I may not give them as much attention. The CFSR makes you give the same attention to every single case. More frequently than you would think is necessary in some cases. So there is more of a workload and more of the documentation requirement. And so I feel like it did increase workload.

Another participant believed the CFSR adds to the workload, but not in a meaningful way for the work with families. P06 explained,

> So it's just a lot of extra work on our part. I mean, things as simple as, hey, guys, the auditors are going to be looking for things, and we don't want them to spend so much time in [database name], the database where all of our stuff is held. And if they can't find it, they're gonna, like, ding us on it versus them being able to look in one spot. So before, when we created these files, we have all of their demographic information and all these places. Now we have to put it in about four different places. It's just, it's a lot of extra work. In my opinion, it's to study for this test versus this is something that's going to continue because it's thorough and informative where anybody could find this information, it's just for these auditors, and it's. It's pointless, in my opinion.

Other participants, though, did not perceive an impact on their workload from the CFSR. P07 explained, "Not really. I don't think so. Not at that level." When asked if they believed the CFSR impacted their workload, P03 simply stated, "No."

Participants' mixed perceptions of the CFSR's impact on workload carried through to their views of the CFSR's impact on retention. While some participants believed the CFSR performance standards negatively impacted retention, others reported it was hard to make a direct connection or that the standards had little direct influence on retention. P09 explained,

> I think it does impact them… But I think it comes down to the burden of what the individual case worker has to do. And I remember in staff meetings I'd say, We

> have to start doing this this way, and there was a collective groan, you know? And I think that does impact retention, because some people said, you know, I'm going to go sell car insurance or something. I'm being silly, but, you know, I'm going to go do something that doesn't require me to, to not only deal with the client… And things that they do. I mean, with their children and just dealing with some of their thinking patterns and some of their behavioral patterns, they're more worried about, did they get their court reports in on time? Did they record in the case management system changes in placement on time? Do they do all these things becomes, because you're actually working to meet the bureaucratic requirements rather than sitting down trying to help people.

Another participant questioned whether it was the CFSR or the agency policies that impacted retention when P06 explained a vacancy rate of up to 70%,

> It's hard to tell if it's the CFSR or if it's our policies, or if it's [state agency] of policies. I'm not sure. Yes, it absolutely has, as far as our retention is horrific right now for case management. … and I think they got down to 70 something percent and they're back up to 98%. It is insane. They can't keep people more than, like, four months past pre-service, which is just insane.

P06 then gave further explanation about the CFSR's impact to retention for caseworkers by sharing,

> So all I know is the expectations, the amount of work that's on a case manager, licensing side, we have our own problems but for these poor case managers, … Cause you can see the passion when they start preservice [training], and it

> diminishes very quickly after they are told, you know, you have to see, because they have to see, you know, every child, every 25 days. And half of their kids are spread out between three different counties, and then they have to wait for another county to do an [title] worker, so they'll go and watch. Yes, I laid my eyes on this child. Okay, well, I have to do a report. Where's your information?" So they're just so stressed out. And it's a lot of it is checking boxes more than it is. Safety.

Another participant did not report a direct link between CFSR performance standards and retention. P08 shared,

> I don't know that it's directly related. I think that there's a lot of things that impact workforce retention in child welfare. I don't know that the CFSR is frequent enough that that would be the reason why people would choose not to remain in their positions. I mean, I do think that it's an additional thing, but there's always an additional thing it feels like with working in child welfare. So I would say probably no. I don't think so.

One participant felt the standards possibly did affect retention of caseworkers, in a way that helped the agency retain those who should stay. P10 explained,

> Um. No, I mean, not really. I think, because, well, I mean, maybe we were looking at cases more closely, more often. Which then ultimately is going to help weed out the workers who routinely aren't getting the job done. If that makes sense. So, like, before the CFSR, we had other tools. We certainly had other tools. We certainly had other audit measures. We certainly had requirements for staffing cases, but I think it became a lot more standardized and formalized and, like,

> scrutinized, if you will. And so that tends to, because it happens more frequently as a result of the CFSR. It tends to weed out those bad apples more effectively. before bigger problems come up. So maybe in a long term sense, you could say that, I don't think there was any sort of immediate " oh, my gosh, what? I can't do this. I quit. There wasn't any kind of immediate whiplash kind of effect on retention, but I think over time, there's been more because there's more scrutiny on an ongoing routine basis and periodic basis, it helps workers move along that maybe shouldn't be there. because they can't meet the standards.

A few participants did not report a direct link between CFSR performance standards and retention. P11 stated, "No, no, I don't think it really impacted in my office specifically, and I can only speak to [county]. I don't think it had any impact. Like, I didn't see anyone decide to quit or quit their job or stand their job solely based off of the CFSRs." And P07 stated, No, not really." And finally, P04 shared, "As a direct influence, I don't think so. I think just the work in and of itself was always the bigger influence, but I don't think the CFSR was really a major contributor to retention."

Participant perspectives about whether the CFSR influenced retention were nuanced, which was true for how participants described the CFSR as having an impact on their job satisfaction. One participant believed the CFSR impacted their job satisfaction. P08 explained,

> I would say that I did. I mean, it made it made leadership more difficult for me anyways. I think that. you're juggling a lot of things in case management, and sometimes it's just like any other job. You'd really, if you're really focused on

> one thing and then this other thing just flies into your radar and that you have to deal with. It can be frustrating. you know, and it can feel overwhelming because you, sometimes you just. The priorities are not aligned, you know what I mean? So. But you don't really have an option. It makes you feel a little bit. There's a lot of pressure with it, I would say. So, yeah, I would say it has an impact on your work satisfaction.

P03 explained how the agency's response to the CFSR positively impacted their satisfaction as they were involved in the CFSR outcomes. P03 stated,

> I would say that being included in understanding the why and how it all connected definitely helps our job satisfaction because I was at a previous county where this was not talked about at all, and you just kind of, you know, you do the thing because you were told to do the thing and that's how it is. So I would say that being included in those things is definitely helped my job satisfaction.

P06 described not being satisfied. P06 explained,

> I'm not satisfied. I'm actually working on an exit plan at the moment, and that's exactly what it's become. They're so focused on, even our [title], we just had our big [title] re-certification. I mean, everything is about hitting these milestones and then taking pictures and then posting it online for funding, like, for these private donors and all of this stuff, and it just feels fake and forced. Instead of, how are your how is your staff surviving? Like, talk about all the co-occurring stuff that they've got going on, because this job drives them to drink. Like, it's just. Even though they came in knowing,' cause, I mean, college, I feel like, does a pretty

> good job of setting you up for what you're gonna expect, but until you're thrown into it, you just have no idea. So I think all of these standards, which, like I said, I don't know if they're directly CFSR or some of our own or some of [state agency], but it just feels so much like we're checking boxes and not really doing the proper work of ensuring that these families are breaking generational curses, and are reunifying in a healthy way, and making sure we don't see them again.

One participant explained how their agency's response to the CFSR affected their job satisfaction. P02 stated, "I think my agency's response to the standards affected my job satisfaction." Other participants did not describe a connection between the CFSR performance standards and job satisfaction. P07 stated, "no." P10 stated, "I don't think so. Not for me personally, no." P11 stated, "Uh, no, I don't think it had any impact on my job satisfaction."

In addition to discussing CFSR's impact on caseworker decision making, workload, retention, and job satisfaction, participants also shared how they believed the CFSR impacts frontline casework. Most participants described a definite impact on child welfare casework from the CFSR. P02 stated, "I think it provides a guideline." P04 explained, "Well, I think it impacts its significantly in that, you know, when the CFSR comes out, obviously they have their findings, and you know, you've got to come up with a performance improvement plan." The perception of whether the impact was positive or negative was again nuanced, with some participants describing positive impacts and others questioning whether the CFSR process has changed much at all within the child welfare system. P07 described, "Oh, I definitely think it has positively influenced

practice in general speaking, you know? Because all states are held to the sort of same standards, it's not individualized, depending on, you know, if you're a county-led state or, you know, it's just everybody's got the same." P09 also explained seeing positive changes to casework from the CFSR. P09 explained,

> It's a mixed bag. Meaning that there are some changes that come down that are good. For example, changes about monitoring placement of children in foster homes, … they have to go out, and they have to do a home visit, face to face home visits, at a certain regular time. And then they have to do the foster home visits as well, at a regular time. And they have to meet with the families on a regular basis, and the case plans have to be done on a regular basis. And so I think it's really impacted that kind of thing, and making sure that children are safe, doing background checks. You know criminal background checks, and child abuse neglect registry checks, over the last five years, and all this stuff is meant to protect children. It's a good thing.

Although P09 also described the weight of the standards on caseworkers as they have evolved and increased. P09 stated,

> It's the burden of the caseworker to be able to comply with all these federal regulations as are delineated in policy and procedure manuals and because, now they have to do that much more. I remember, I heard this over the years is that, it really isn't social work anymore. It's documentation, about half of what you do is documentation. And compliance with the rules and regulations.

P04 questioned noted changes to practice, like many other participants, but questioned if those changes positively impacted the data or experience for children and families. P04 stated,

> But I think in the practice and what I've seen and what I continue to hear from people who are still in that fight is that we are still not close. We're not close to meeting that. I think if you look at the results from the child or from the CFSR, and I haven't looked at them, I have to be honest, I haven't looked at them in a few years. I would be interested to know right now how big of a difference if any has been made in the numbers. What have we seen? You know, and I used to delve into this quite a bit because not only did I work in this field, I was an adjunct instructor at one of the universities locally and one of the classes that I had taught was on child welfare. And so I was very much in tune with all of the numbers. I, you know, I consistently compared numbers from similar states to ours in [state] to see what the trends were, to see, what was going on in these areas. And the numbers never really changed. The numbers were always fairly consistent. It didn't matter what you looked at. If you looked at physical neglect, if you looked at sex abuse, if you looked at most, none of those numbers truly changed. And I would argue, and I could be completely wrong and that would be okay. I would hope that I would be wrong, but I would be willing to bet if I went in and looked at those numbers today, the numbers would still be very similar to what they were even 10 years ago.

While participants offered a range of perspectives regarding the impact of the CFSR on caseworker decision-making, workload, retention, job satisfaction, and child welfare frontline practice, one common concern emerged across interviews: many participants voiced the idea that the federal performance standards set by the CFSR are unreachable. This belief, shared by participants regardless of their specific experiences, added another layer to how the CFSR was experienced by child welfare caseworkers.

P05 explained, "I know that we're shooting for a 95% compliance rate, and I know that we almost never, I know that we have never achieved that." P10 stated, "I don't know that any state, in my experience, has ever actually met the federal standards because they're pretty impossible to meet." P11 described how this felt,

> Sometimes it felt like, after reviews, it almost kind of sometimes felt like it was impossible. That it was just impossible to meet the standards because it sometimes felt like the goal line kept moving. And as much as you would try, there was always something that was missed. And so that was hard.

One participant explained how it felt while understanding why the standard was so high. P08 stated, "Well, I mean it doesn't feel good to have [agency] you know, calling you out or, realizing that you're underperforming. I mean, it's a pretty stringent review. And I mean, it's important. It's for good reason." And another provided an explanation for why the standard is high. P07 shared,

> I think for the most part, everybody agrees that the requirements are outlandishly difficult to achieve, but it's meant to be that way, you know, to sort of continually improve practice. I think that's the national gist. … Yeah. I think, they're very

> high standards, because obviously we want to have the highest standards when it comes to children and families. for safety, their well-being, etc.

P07 also shared information about how the standards are hard for families to pass. P07 stated, "An adoption, you know, permanency in 12 months is really, really, really difficult. Given, the whole culture of society and families and drugs, alcohol, it's like, you can't even get a family in for a referral for six months at some places, you know, and so it's unrealistic time frames. Right." Other participants acknowledged the standard and questioned the point. P05 described,

> And I think at the time I was like, this is dumb, I'm drowning right now, I have brand new caseworkers who have no idea what they're doing. And you guys are trying to meet an outcome that you're never, we're never going to achieve anyway. So let's put our efforts towards something that actually benefits the children and families in our community.

P03 stated, "This is the federal standard, heads up, no one meets the federal standard. Is it maybe a problem with the rubric if everyone's failing?" P07 recommended that items possibly be adjusted so states can pass. P07 stated,

> Well, I mean, I think I would take a look at those items that no state has ever passed, and kind of take a look at whether or not, practically, it's achievable, given all the variables, you know, that are faced with caseworkers, with agencies. And maybe try and adapt it just a little bit, because when you feel like you're doing good and you pass a couple items, that is a really good feeling versus,

you're gonna want to do better versus you didn't pass any items. So what's the point, you know? Of improving. It's so hard to pass certain things.

In sum, participants' understanding and experience of the CFSR reflected both commonalities and differences. While many understood the intended purpose and outcomes of the CFSR, how they perceived the process was also shaped by their individual experiences with the CFSR. This resulted in a range of views on the impacts of the CFSR on caseworker decision-making, workload, retention, job satisfaction, and frontline child welfare casework. Despite these diverse experiences, the idea that the standards are unrealistic and difficult to achieve came through. The next theme explores how agency actions further shape caseworker experience with the CFSR.

Theme 2: Organizational Impact, Agency Response Shapes Caseworker Experience

This theme highlights how agency response to the CFSR impacts caseworker experience with the CFSR. From the training and information provided to the agency's response to CFSR standards, participants describe how these actions and the extent to which their feedback was considered determined how the CFSR was felt on the front line.

The agency's approach to providing information and training on the CFSR varied across participant experiences. Some participants reported not receiving any training about the CFSR. When asked if they received any training or guidance related to the CFSR, P02 stated, "No, no. Other than that they were happening again." P07 stated, "But as a new case worker, I don't think so. It's like, really off their radar." Some participants described not receiving training, but they were made aware that the CFSR case reviews were occurring. P02 shared, "Now, in [county], in particular, caseworkers weren't really

given a lot of information about that other than everybody was stressed around the case reviews." P06 explained, "I don't think it's any type of training. I think they do, like, a big mandatory heads-up, this is happening every year. … They don't do a great job of taking it and twisting it to layman's terms and explaining to frontline staff, the importance of these standards." P03 shared the experience of not being given information besides that an audit was happening. P03 shared,

> I worked at one agency, they did not talk about the CFSR, the CFSR itself was not talked about. It was we have a IV-E audit coming in… Make sure that everything, all your t's are crossed and I's dotted kind of thing. And that was very much the vibe of this is an audit. Make sure, like this is an audit. We don't want to get dinged. So, you know, tighten up.

P11 also shared that there was no formal training, but that their agency did talk about the CFSR. P11 shared, "Not that I can recall. I mean, it was talked about all the time, but I don't recall any, like, formal training. I mean, it's possible I may have gotten it and just don't remember, but I don't recall any formal training on the CFSR." P08 explained that they did not hear of the CFSR until they were in leadership. P08 explained,

> No. I actually never even heard of this. I never heard of a CFSR. I mean, maybe it's because it wasn't a thing when I was just a case manager. But the first time I was ever made aware of a CFSR was when I was on a level of leadership. And there was no training. We were just told this was a review that they were doing.

Other participants described that they received training from their agency about the CFSR. P04 explained receiving training when the CFSR reviews were happening.

P04 stated, “The only kind of [time] they ever really did training was when the QA folks were actually going to come or, you know, when officers started to scramble when, oh, CFSR review, you know, these folks are coming. That’s when the big push was from a state level.” When asked if they received training or information about the CFSR, P10 stated, “Okay, so that is that’s a firm, yes.” P10 went on to describe the various trainings their agency provided about the CFSR, the CFSR performance standards, and the impact that had on practice. P10 stated,

> So there’s a lot of training and I would say that was probably the biggest emphasis as far as all that goes with how we were documenting our cases, because I think in [county] and as a supervisor and even as a case worker, there wasn’t always a lot of question as to whether the work got done, but the quality of the documentation could make or break or case review.

One participant shared that they did not receive formal training, but that their agency did do a debriefing after a CFSR review. P03 shared,

> I did not. I did my own research, but I will say that one of the things that my county just did, we, so [state], is we just received ours back, and the state had a like a debriefing kind of thing, and I will say that the county informs social workers, hey, this is a thing that happens. Obviously, we don’t really talk about it a whole lot, or like, regularly, but it’s important for us to know that this is going on. And so it was a virtual meeting, and they actually invited all of the social workers to participate in the debriefing of the CFSR that we got back. And so it was a bunch of supervisors and direct line social workers that were able to come

> together to hear the results of what was found from the review, and then also think through like, what are some things that we can be doing to try to help address these, like, gaps, essentially?

One participant described how they were trained on the CFSR, but it was not impactful to them as a caseworker. P05 stated, "I did have CFSR training at [agency 1], but it was a very brief, like two-hour. Here's what the CFSRs are. Actually, I had multiple. I think I had one every single time there were CFSR results. And it was given by our CQI unit, and it was very boring."

A few participants discussed their belief that training was important, and as they moved into leadership roles, they provided training and information about the CFSR to their staff. P04 explained, "I will tell you that when I became a county office manager and was in charge of my own office, I used to hold brown bag meetings with my staff for the whole purpose of breaking down the different areas of the CFSR, particularly as it pertained to my office, to really train and teach people." P09 explained that they regularly provide training to agencies they have worked with. P09 stated,

> Okay, and I'll speak from that, is that when I was with [tribe], I regularly do that with them. I will sit down with them, because I wrote their policy and procedure, so I know them. I will regularly go fly to [state] sit down with them, and go through the training with them, and I will because their staff turns over, so, I will go up there and retrain them as well. This is what the policy and procedures say, and then with the caseworkers, what I try to do with them is try to educate them.

> This is why you have to do this. You know, not because it's our local policies, but you're funding depends upon you passing reviews.

P09 further explained, "I think it's really important that the case workers understand why. Why it is they're doing what they're doing and why is this the best practice? And why it makes sense because it's more effective for them to do their job."

Information and training provided by agencies impacted how participants experienced the CFSR. Participants also described how their agency acted in response to the CFSR impacted how they perceived the CFSR and its performance standards. P03 explained that their agency's messaging about meeting the CFSR performance standards was helpful to them. P03 stated,

> And sometimes, right, in some spaces, they [CFSR performance standards] feel so unreachable that it's, like, you know, if we're measuring 85% and the metric is 95, number one, my county also does a really good job of being able to remind folks that this is the federal standard, heads up, no one meets the federal standard. … I think that the leadership that I have is doing a good job of trying to place it in perspective of everything else that's going on.

P06 described how they believed their agency's response was reactive instead of strategic. P06 stated,

> I've observed in my time here, they are not a preventative agency. They're not good at strategic planning at all. They don't see something out in the future and say, we need to get ahead of this before it happens. Everything's knee-jerk, everything. All the policies change when a child drowns. All the policies change

> when a reunified visit happens and a death happens. You know what I mean? It's like, those are when the policies happen. Not because we can see this going in this direction, and then they take their time and roll it out properly. It is like this huge reaction, and then they draw it back. And so everybody's very confused with like two weeks ago, you told us this, and now you're telling us this. So, strategic planning is not their strength. at all. A federal or state level, in my opinion, for child welfare.

The agency's approach to the CFSR influenced how participants felt about the CFSR. For example, P02 stated they ultimately chose to leave their agency due to its response to the CFSR. P02 stated, "Ironically, I chose to leave because of [county] response and reaction to the auditing, to the CFSR regulations coming in from the state, and [county] response to them." Similarly, P05 shared that the way their agency handled information and decision-making around the CFSR felt imposed upon them, as if the process was happening to them and not with them. P05 explained,

> I think that they were never explained to me at [agency 1] in a way that I understood how much they impact our day-to-day and how hard the state in general is working to meet these achievements and implementing these performance improvement plans and doing all of these things. And so to me, it just felt like something that was happening to me, not with me.

P05 further described how it felt to receive a case review back. P05 stated,

> And now you thought you did a good job because you got that kiddo back home in six months safely and they haven't come back and, you know, the family was

> wrapped in supports and all these things, but then you get your case review back and you actually sucked according to the Feds, you know, the Children's Bureau says you don't actually know how to do your job. And so I think that can be really degrading for morale and not make people want to do this job that's already so hard.

One participant described perceiving the CFSR as more of a compliance test than a process that reflects the realities of their work with families. P06 explained,

> Yeah, we're actually our audit comes in August 4th, I believe, is when they're coming in. And it's when I tell you, I'm so tired of hearing about this audit, because it when I'm sure we'll get more into that when you ask more questions, but I feel like we're studying for the test and not real life. That's what it feels like to me. All the standards that they set in theory are great, but it's not applying to everything that we're doing right now. It's more of a knee jerk type of thing. Oh, my God, they're going to do an audit. Make sure you include this, this, this, and this. Versus, is a child safe? What's the permanency look like? Are they with a relative versus a traditional foster parent, things like that?

The agency's overall approach to the CFSR affected how caseworkers perceived the process. Participants also highlighted resources as a key factor shaping their experience with the CFSR performance standards and the support they received from their respective agencies. P04 described the difficulty of meeting the standards without adequate resources. P04 stated,

> You can't, there's no way that you can meet the standard of safety if you cannot adequately go out on every investigation and do a thorough investigation to assess safety, if you don't have the staff to do so. You know, in my office, just to give you an example, we averaged anywhere between 275 and 325 investigations a month. And on average, on average, I had 18 investigators.

P02 shared this perspective and gave another example when they shared,

> And one of the changes that happened after one of the CFSR one of those reviews was that if you were trying to assess a child, ages five and under, you had to see them within 24 hours or make that attempt. So originally, we would go out, we would make the attempt, we would leave documentation at the home, we would document that we did that. One of the changes they made was, okay, well, now you have to go back every day until you make contact. Well, that's all well and good, except you're still assigning cases to me. More cases to me, that may also have children, five and under. So, again, what they were not recognizing and in the meantime, they're not hiring more caseworkers. They're not recognizing that caseworkers were burning out. And that for those caseworkers who had high-risk cases, you know, they were losing people, which is sad.

On the other hand, one participant acknowledged that their agency provided what resources they could to support caseworkers in meeting CFSR performance standards. P03 shared, "I think for my perspective, it really goes back to county-to-county management, I think that our county does a good job of being mindful of, if we want quality work, it means that we can't give you, you know, a lot of cases."

The availability and provision of resources shaped how caseworkers perceived their capacity to manage caseloads and meet performance standards. Beyond resources, participants described diverse experiences regarding their ability to provide meaningful feedback about the CFSR to their agencies.

P01 described feeling like the agency's approach to obtaining feedback was political and performative. P01 explained,

> So the only time the feedback or your opinion is utilized is when a high-profile case happens, again, a little bit of my work was around that shocking and heinous, so a lot of those news articles about a baby having broken ribs or finding a dead infant, you know, in a trashcan are things that fell on my caseload. And so, the only time you were asked that is when a politician or a government official, got involved with the case, but it was really more performative, and there were sometimes where you just didn't feel like what we brought to the table was going to be used.

P02 describes feeling like the workforce tried to provide feedback that meeting performance standards was not possible without more resources. P02 stated,

> You know, sure, because, you know, we were persistently trying to advocate for more people, you know, lower caseloads and more people, because we knew we couldn't meet the standards as they're designed to be met, meaning that we couldn't keep up. … the timing or the timelines were, again, untenable. They were hard to meet from an assessment standpoint.

P04 shared this sentiment and described how it led them to exit the workforce. P04 stated,

> Quite honestly, [inadequate amounts of staff] was the primary reason why I ended up leaving, you know, my conversation with the [job title] at that point in time was that, you know, I could no longer continue to ask my staff to do something that we were not really equipped to do. We were not given the resources, i.e., personnel to adequately meet the requirements of the CFSR and we were missing the boat, and it was obvious that you cannot do that if you don't have the staff to do the work. And so I had probably three conversations with [leader] and ultimately it was my decision. At that point, that I could no longer ask my staff to do what we just could not do anymore. It just wasn't possible.

P04 also shared that, despite recognizing the challenges of balancing workforce resources with performance standards and requesting help, they did not receive meaningful solutions. P04 stated,

> And I would ask for suggestions from the team, from the leadership, all the way to the director and cabinet secretary. And there was never any real suggestions or remedies to say, this is how we're going to help. This is how we're going to address this. And at some point, you know, you have to make the decision either I'm going to stay in this and continue to beat my head at the wall or resign myself to the fact that it's an impossible task.

P05 gave an example of a time when feedback was provided during an agency meeting that was met with resistance, which felt harmful to the participant. P05 stated,

> I can distinctly remember one of the leadership CQI was giving and training in the conference room, and it was about CQI outcomes, and I don't remember all the details, but I remember one of the supervisors for permanency was like, hey, wait, they were implementing a new policy. They were rolling out this new policy, based on CFSR results. And one of the permanency supervisors said, "Wait, that contradicts this, which is what we're doing, and how are we supposed to achieve this new policy when we don't have X, Y, and Z?" And I remember this person saying, "You don't have to like it, but you have to do it." And I just was like, "Wow, what a punch to the gut." We're already making like I have been saying, like, this job is hard enough without being told to do things and not really having a say in those things. I think that there's, like, It's just... Yeah, again, it's something that feels like it's being done to workers and not with them, and they really don't get a voice in any of it.

One participant recognized that the federal government sets the performance standard but emphasized the importance of involving caseworkers in policy decision-making. P10 stated,

> I mean, honestly, it's like, once something is dictated, it comes down, right? It's like, okay, the legislature changed this law. The CFSR, the feds changed this law. Now we have to do this in compliance with the law. It's really kind of the management group going, Okay, how are we going to have this play out? I will say, there are work groups where workers have, you know, as policies need to be developed, we've done a lot of work groups where we say, hey, we need your

> input, you know, we want to write this policy. So there is worker input in those phases. When we have the kind that comes down that say, okay, this is what they said, we have to do this, here's how we're going to do it. We've had to figure out how to live with it. Obviously, not the best way to make organizational change. You want worker input and influence at the very beginning.

Another participant felt the agency did hear and honor caseworker feedback. P03 explained,

> It's also about having the feedback of, hey, we had this service or we had this therapist that helped see, that we contracted with to see clients who didn't have insurance, and that person left. We would really like to see that role filled. How can we do that? And, like stuff like that. I think that leadership, they try as much as they can, in the budget that they have, in the space that they have to be able to make those things happen so that work can get done.

Another participant had a similar experience and felt the agency's approach to the CFSR was collaborative and engaging. P11 shared,

> I mean, everyone wanted to pass the CFSR. They always wanted to pass the CFSR. The agency did care about making sure they were passing it, and so it was always talked about. And when they had the results, they would always bring it to management meetings and talk about it and go over it. And so I think it did, I think it always made the [agency] try and strive to pass them.

Participants' experiences demonstrate that the agency's approach to the CFSR, including providing information and training, balancing workforce resources with

achieving standards, and creating feedback channels, shaped how the process is experienced by the front line. The next theme explores how participants perceive tension between meeting CFSR performance standards and fulfilling their mission to serve children and families.

Theme 3: Metrics Versus Mission, Tension Between Performance Standards and Practice

This theme explores the nuance between meeting federal standards and engaging in family-centered practice. Participants acknowledged the importance of the performance standards and gave real-life examples of situations where requirements to meet the standard undermine the ability to practice in a way that is responsive to family needs. These reflections illustrate the complexity of balancing accountability through standardized expectations with professional judgment in child welfare casework. P01 explains, “Like the CFSR standards and the QA and the policy that are set, when you try to follow it, it’s not always exactly what in your best judgment as a worker, you think would be best for a family.”

Participants described that the standards were, at times, at odds with doing what is best for children and families. P02 describes, “There were a lot of caseworkers who were, you know, struggling with the idea that something might happen on one of their caseloads, and that they were not able to do as thorough an assessment as they would have liked, because of having to meet all the standards, if that makes sense.” P05 shared this sentiment and explained,

> And then I also, as I've looked more at CFSRs, I've wondered, how many people feel pressured to do things a certain way. Like, closed cases faster, maybe, rather than focusing on the true permanency and well-being, like the metrics over people. I sometimes wonder if, especially from the CQI unit at [agency 1], I always felt like they were more interested in those metrics versus what was actually happening with this family. It was so compliance-driven versus, what are we doing with the child and the family? And so that piece of CFSR, I think, really does impact overall casework. Negatively.

P06 shared concern that family-centered practice has been overshadowed by standards when they stated, "Their caseloads are out of control, and they're required to hit these standards versus truly being family centered, which is what it should be. I think these standards took away family-centered practice." P01 gave an example of how they felt the standards mattered more than the people when they shared,

> You know, it sounds like, a lot of workers have talked about it, is that we can be more like, these are human experiences and these are not just numbers. It really became numbers to the [agency] of how many cases we were able to close and I can say, going back to the district director, like this was my boss's boss holding me into their office, asking me, "[name], how long do you think you need to be in a family's home?" And I go, "It takes however long it needs to take, depending on how many kids." And then for them to say, well, you only need to be in a family' home for 30 minutes, cause you need to go back out there for the next case. And sometimes it depends on how many children, it depends on if the kids speak to

> you, if you're out on a choice response, you now have law enforcement, If you're at the hospital, so you're telling me, that I could tell a detective or a police officer, that we need to wrap this up in 30 minutes. You're telling me that I could tell a medical doctor who's about to do surgery on a baby's rib that we need to wrap this up in 30 minutes. And these were things I would say kind of snarky to them, and you can tell that they were like, [name], "you know what we mean." No, I don't know what [you mean], you are literally telling me that you are prioritizing the quantity over the quality of work that we're doing. So then yet there are complaints that are frivolous coming in on me that are not true, but yet if you're not giving me the time to go to build that rapport with the family, so I believe that you need to be more human-centered, more human experiences, not just numbers.

P09 identified how the metrics create work for the caseworker but take away from good practice, "I think the more you put on the caseworker, and you're taking away their ability to do good social work." P09 further provides an example of a colleague who left child welfare due to being heavily regulated to pursue a field where they could practice social work. P09 stated,

> And I have another friend of mine who actually worked with it's the same tribe, [name]. She's LCSW, and she does mental health work, exclusively, but she had left the tribe to go to work for [state], and as she worked in [state] for a while, and she said, you know, I really don't want to do this because of all, mainly because she was so heavily regulated, but what she did was social work practice. And so

> she went and worked for a tribe in [state], and she's now LCSW there and doing mental health treatment.

P06 felt the standard created extra work that did not help cases be successful. P06 shared, "It's just, it's a lot of extra work. In my opinion, it's to study for this test versus this is something that's going to continue because it's thorough and informative, where anybody could find this information, it's just for these auditors, and it's. It's pointless, in my opinion." P06 further shared,

> And it's a lot of it is checking boxes more than it is. Safety. I mean, safety permanency wellbeing is the kind of frame they can or the context they can frame it in, but in their mind, and kind of how I view it too, it's more checking a box than it is, making sure that this child has their needs met, the foster parent is not about to disrupt. Mom and dad are actually working a case plan. They have all their needs met. You know, it's just it's so much less social work, in my opinion, and it's more checking boxes.

Participants gave case examples of how the standards set by agencies collided with practice. P06 explained the changes to the foster care licensing process. P06 explained,

> So, a lot of those foster homes, we used to write, basically, like a relative caregiver place home study, which is kind of one-liner sentences. But since this audit, they look closer to a level two, which is somebody who's not had any, you know, relationship with a foster child. There's somebody coming off the street saying, "Hey, I want to be a foster parent. So I have to assess their motivation,

> their skills, right, all of the things, I have to put more effort into doing that with the relative or non-relative now because of these requirements coming down for this audit.

P01 describes a similar issue with a standard for safety. P01 stated,

> Like we step in with some of the families we didn't need to, because of the safety threshold. … However, if children are under the age of five, you automatically step in, period. And so there were times where we had kids that were not five and younger, but they were vulnerable, but we didn't step in. But there were cases where, oh, the family just really needed some preventative services, but because the kids we're five, we stepped in, and every time, I would speak up, and speak out, it was, "Well, [name], remember, our policy says that these kids are under five, and they're vulnerable," and they would throw policy back in our faces, and like, but you're not out there. I was in the home.

P06 describes the disconnect between family-centered practice and the reality of the federal 12-month reunification timeline, and CFSR Item 4, stability of foster care placement. P06 shared,

> I mean, that's the only three words I can give you is if they really looked at it through a family centered, trauma informed lens. And not... How many moves did they have? Okay, but sometimes I get it, but sometimes those moves were necessary. Right? Or we got them home in 12 months. Okay, I'm sorry, but Mom is still a full-blown addict. There is no way in God's green Earth you're going to be able to get Mom clean when she's been an addict since a teenager, and she's

> 40 now. Have her and her daughter rekindle their relationship and actually function in a healthy family unit. Get her a place to live and a full-time job while she's still dealing with addiction. Like, that is just insane, but that's a 12-month metric. But because we didn't hit that 12 months, we're failing our numbers, but we shouldn't be, because we're supporting her the way we should, 12 months, maybe when we start reunification. But we're looking at potentially 18 months to 24 months before we can finally let go of their hand and say, "You've got this," and we will always be here, be here with the post-reunification supports, if you need them. But that's not how our metrics are viewed.

A few participants described concern about applying the same CFSR standards to different geographic areas based on the people in those areas and their identified needs. P06 explained,

> I'll give you an example. Our three different counties are very diverse. They're so different. [county] is very bougie, very high end, a lot of retired rock stars and actors and things like that move to the [county], right? So you've got multimillions. Then you've got [county], who you have multiple families residing in the same three-bedroom home, because they can't afford rent by themselves. And then you've got [county], which is so rural. It is mostly migrant farmers, and it's a very few removals out there because they all kind of stick together and keep each other's out of trouble. But it's just so very different.

Another participant shared this similar sentiment and further explained concerns with believing the CFSR measurement when agencies and geographic locations vary, and the CFSR reviews only a sample of cases. P02 explained,

> Like, it's really hard for me to take anything seriously when you have that low of a sample size. Because, like, again, if you're looking at 45 cases, if you're looking at 45 foster care cases, over 10,000 children in foster care, like, that's not even one case per county, as we know that the work that's done from county to county varies because of the resources that they have, and because of how counties are managed and because of, like, a bunch of other things, right? Because of all the variances that go into things. And so you're not getting a clear picture of, is this actually a problem? Or is this the one that we picked out? And there was an issue, and it happens to be that this one has an issue, or is there genuinely a pattern and a problem?

Participants described the tension between meeting standards and doing what they, as child welfare professionals, deem necessary for family-centered practice. P02 then described the fear associated with personal liability should something go wrong on a case. P02 shared,

> And then, you know, people are held accountable, and the fear on the frontline caseworker is that the county or the county's not going to have your back. meaning, so from the frontline caseworker, and I don't know if this is how other people feel, but the idea is that if something happens on my caseload, they're not going to have my back. They're going to throw me under the bus. For sure. I

> mean, and look at the, we all know caseworkers are being arrested in California, in Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. ... So they tried to scare you, actually.

This account makes a strong connection to the high-stakes environment in which child welfare caseworkers operate. It also connects to another sentiment shared by another participant, who describes that when caseworkers feel like they are not making a meaningful difference, it can lead to turnover. P04 explained,

> And that's why I say, you know, that the system needs an overhaul. It really does. And I think that's why people leave, you know, when you talked about job satisfaction, retention, these are the reasons, you know, outside of the workload and stuff. If you're not happy doing your job, you don't feel like you're making a difference, if you don't feel like what you have to contribute is significant. If people in leadership positions don't listen to what you have to say, there's no reason to stay. Especially to do this job.

Lastly, P09 describes their opinion that setting standards cannot solve everything, and child welfare professionals need to be able to practice when they stated, "Congress, you know, the idea that you can fix all social problems through legislation, I think, is a little bit over the top for me. The states need to have flexibility. And I think Tribes need to have flexibility in doing good social work practice."

This theme illustrates the tension participants experience as they strive to meet the federal standard while providing family-centered practice to children and families. The participants highlight how rigid standards can sometimes constrain professional judgment or fail to align with the realities of frontline child welfare work. Building on these

experiences, participants offered suggestions for improving how caseworkers are supported in relation to the CFSR. This will be explored in the final theme.

Theme 4: Solutions from the Field, Caseworker Recommendations for Improvement

This theme explores the participants' ideas and recommendations for improving how caseworkers are supported in relation to the CFSR. The participants' range of professional experiences resulted in thoughtful and practical recommendations. Recommendations include increasing caseworker involvement in the CFSR process, improving caseworker understanding of the CFSR process with an emphasis on the "why" behind the standards, and providing adequate resources to the field to support caseworkers in achieving standards.

The participants in this study voluntarily gave their time to share their experiences in hopes of improving child welfare for caseworkers, which reflects their care and commitment to the work. P05 shared, "I actually truly enjoy child welfare. It's something I really like doing." P02 shared this sentiment and explained how they felt proud that they brought humanity to the work when they shared,

> Um, you know, listen, I valued my time in child welfare, and I actually enjoyed the role. I think that there's a lot of judgment that doesn't need to be there. You know, in terms of being able to do the job means we have to see people as people. And, you know, one of the things that I took pride in in the end was like, listen, this could happen to anyone. And so I hope that I, you know, in the work that I did in the families that I work with, that I brought some level of humanity to it and a level of compassion. But I think child welfare is a necessity for sure.

P11 echoed this passion, drawing a connection between passion for the work and commitment to doing right by children and families when they explained, “So, the CFSR, everyone wants to be able to meet standards. When you’re going out into the field, you really do, a lot of the workers I supervised, even myself as the worker and a supervisor, we wanted our cases to do well in the CFSR. We wanted to, everyone wants to be able to do the best they can for these kids.”

The first recommendation brought up by participants is to give those with lived experience and caseworkers a seat at the process table. P01, a former caseworker with lived experience, recommended including individuals with lived experience in the decision-making process. P01 shared,

> I know it’s controversial to say this, and I think a lot of us don’t lead with this anymore, but with our lived experiences, I’m about to be thirty-five. I was a youth from 2000. I entered the system in 2000 and aged out in 2009. So, there are, what, so many decades in between that. But when I would talk about, like, to me that practices, are like, hey, I have this lived experience, people will clutch their pearls and assume that I would be a problem or, well, he’s hostile. and it’s like, no, like, I’ve been there, I have this lived experiences, or they would say, well [name], do you have a bias? Well, I guess maybe I do have a bias, but you are doing the same thing that you all did to me as a child, and I’m trying to correct that. And so I think utilizing lived experiences, I think we should bring in more, you know, parents who have gone through the system who are doing better. I think there needs to be like, so many years far removed from whatever issues we’ve had to be

> able to come back to be like consulting or to maybe not be workers, but maybe we can utilize these individuals because the people that were at my disposals, yes, they were mental health experts, but they're coming in with their own privileged biases that they have never been in the field or they have never experienced that lived experience. But I think it will be really beneficial to bring in more voices from people who have been affected by the system today.

Participants recommended including caseworkers in the process when changes are being made and allowing for feedback from the workforce. P05 stated, "I think that Frontline Caseworkers should have a formal seat at the table when states or agencies are designing new programs, policies, PIPS, or system changes." P09 recommended creating a feedback process when policy or practices are being made, they explained, "I think they should allow for some sort of feedback process. through the state or through whatever office, they should allow for some sort of feedback process from the ground up, and I'm not even sure what that would look like, to be honest with you." A similar recommendation was made by P03 when they recommended an open commentary period where caseworkers can ask for and receive information. P03 shared, "I think having … an open commentary period would be helpful. As well as accessible information … For workers who don't really understand, I also think that it would be helpful to incorporate the purposes of CFSR into the trainings that are delivered."

Many participants recommended helping caseworkers understand the CFSR, its performance standards, and the "why" behind the standards. P04 stated, "But for me, I always came from a standpoint, if you teach people how to do this stuff, hopefully they

will practice and do things the way they're supposed to all the time." P08 explained that they believe it is helpful for workers to understand the why behind the standard when they shared, "I think we've lost kind of in translation, the ability to have the understanding communicated to frontline staff as to why we do the things we do. You know, it's just do these things. But it's important to really understand, like, why is procedure the way that it is, why are the laws written the way that they are, you know?" P04 shared this opinion and discussed the importance of explaining the why,

> So when these things come out, and they come out with their performance improvement plan, and now we're going to change policy because we didn't do well in this area and we want you to do this, that or the other, and from a caseworker standpoint, all they hear is now you have to do this different. We have a new policy and now you have to do X, Y, and Z. But there really was never a true explanation of why. It kind of goes back to your question of, you know, did the CFSR or any training around that ever take place to truly explain the importance of why you have to do this. Why did we look at these areas of safety, permanency, and well-being, and why were they so important, more from a standpoint of not just policy and not because these reviews are taking place, but ultimately for the overall well-being of the children we're entrusted to take care of, if you will.

P03 shared this sentiment about the importance of understanding the why as a current caseworker when they shared,

> But as a worker. If I've never been told why it's important. If those dots have never been connected for me, and people just say, go do the thing. Then it is another [thing], right, those standards are just another dot to say, this is the standard, this is the dot. Like, this is why you do the thing that you do. … I would say that being included in understanding the why and how it all connected definitely helps our job satisfaction because I was at a previous county where this was not talked about at all, and you just kind of, you know, you do the thing because you were told to do the thing and that's how it is.

P08 reiterated the importance of ensuring caseworkers understand the why when they stated, "I think it's really important that the case workers understand why. Why is it they're doing what they're doing, and why is this the best practice? And why it makes sense, because it's more effective for them to do their job."

Many participants recommended improved training on the CFSR performance standards for caseworkers. P07 explained, "You know, I've always thought that caseworkers need more training, because in the beginning, right, they get saturated. I get that, but, like, after they've been doing child welfare for a while, it's helpful to put the why to know the why behind why you have to do something, you know what I mean?" P08 shares this view and explains what it was like to learn about the CFSR as their case was being reviewed. P08 stated,

> Well, I suggest there be trainings on it. Like, if you did not have a sound understanding of operational procedure or child welfare statute, it would make no really no sense to you, in my opinion, because there is no formal training. You're

> just like, oh, there's this thing, there's this tool. That's literally how I found out about it. I was like, oh, there's this tool, and your case has been flagged, and this is the tool that they're using to review the case. And this is what they found.

A few participants who are current caseworkers shared the recommendation that caseworkers need training on the CFSR. They also described the significance of the agency communicating the importance of the training to the caseworker, so that the training is not just another thing to do that gets buried in heavy amounts of work, but a priority that the caseworker feels a part of and can engage with. P03 explains, "county workers are inundated with emails on emails from their job, and then they see a thing of open commentary on the CFSR. Girl, I don't even know what the CFSR stands for. It sounds important. If it was important, someone would tell me, right?" P05 explained,

> I've sat in the CQI presentations at [agency 1] so many times about the outcomes of CFSRs, and I've completely tuned it out. If it's online, I'm not paying attention at all, I'm there because I was required to be there, and that's it. They're rambling about numbers, they're rambling about how we didn't do this, and we didn't do that, and we didn't do this, but they're not telling us anything we did well. So I'm really trying to shift that. Like this shouldn't be something that happens to you. It's something that happens with you. And here's all the things you guys are actually doing really, really well.

A few participants shared the belief that training would be helpful and shared their experience that participating in the review was helpful to them in understanding the

process, when they recommended that frontline people get involved in case reviews. P10 shared,

> I think they should, instead of asking for volunteers to do the case reviews, it ought to be assigned [being a case reviewer]. Because that's where you learn the most, and it should be more workers involved and supervisors, more line staff. ... But I think there ought to be more of a requirement, which is hard to do because then, you know, you're going to have to have substitutes taking over their caseload for a period and supervisors. Like it's a lot of work. But it's so beneficial to understanding, oh, this is what they're looking for, and this is how I can prioritize, so much. I mean, a thousand times more beneficial than sitting in repeated trainings that you can zone out and be on your phone and get a handout or a PowerPoint emailed to you and never have time and never have the interest of looking at it again. So much better to actually walk through that experience. I go, "Oh, that's what they mean by that." You know? And it really made a huge difference for me as a worker and a supervisor, both, knowing this is what they're looking for.

A few participants recommended the need to focus on person-centered child welfare practice for both children and families, as well as the people working in child welfare. P05 shared,

> I think going back to the metrics versus people, it's like, let's shift from like compliance to meaningful outcomes. Like, let's look at not just frequency and quality, but the impact on what we're doing with families. And adding, I think,

> something that measures how the agency is supporting workers. Like, let's look at caseload sizes and staff retention and access to support some supervisors and those sorts of things also, because I mean, obviously, our job is child safety, but if we don't have workers that feel supported and feel safe and feel like they can do this job, then we can't support children and families in our communities. So, like, let's also have some sort of measures for work worker wellbeing and try to avoid that high turnover and burnout, and evaluate how well these agencies are supporting their workforce in order to, yeah, like shift that burden back to leadership instead of just blaming workers when systems fail.

P06 shared this perspective and recommended looking at outcomes on a case for a longer timeframe and aside from the CFSR standards. P06 stated,

> Get rid of the metrics. Like, get rid of whatever metrics that they have created at this point, just toss them all, and go and look at reunification efforts. Like, what does that look like? What does a successful, case look like? Like, they don't come, like, you can't just follow it for a year. You have to follow it from the second we found out about that family, and we were doing prevention and intervention services, and those failed. Okay, well, then now we need to really focus on why those failed. And then you need to follow the case all the way through up until, like, five years.

Many participants shared the need for providing adequate resources for the field so that standards can be achieved. P02 stated, "I think if they put more time and energy into supporting workers, making those caseloads more manageable, making sure that

everybody has the supports they need, that would be a lot more retention... And a lot more, you know, connection to staying longer in the role." P10 shared this opinion and recommended,

> So how do you support caseworkers that way? Um, I think that like any other legislation that says we want you to do better, you've there needs to be money, more money behind it, because to do those things takes time, you're already crunched for time. So caseloads need to be decreased. Staff needs to be increased. It's the age-old cry of social welfare. Less cases, more workers equals more time.. And that's the equation where we say, if you want our performance to be at peak, then give us the tools, which means money, in order to make that happen.

One participant shared a scenario that resonates with the realities of child welfare casework in their recommendation to support caseworkers. P11 shared,

> Honestly, I don't know if I have the answer. I think, sometimes, I know it just feels like the goal post is always moved. But I think that's also because hindsight's always 2020. You can Monday morning quarterback anybody, which is kind of what happens in any reviews. They're reviewing something that you were trying to do. So someone who was trying to do this, so you have a caseworker who is dealing with a removal, the child's upset, they're crying, they're screaming, the parents upset, they could be screaming. You know, you have law enforcement potentially involved. The caseworker is trying to find the placement, deal with everyone who's upset or crying, doing their icebreaker, you know, finding a placement, which by the time I left, could be anywhere in [state].

> It was not necessarily in our area. They're dealing with finding a placement. Hopefully getting them there, which could be six hours away. Getting back, trying to put in the report, potentially the [title] assessment, typing a court report, praying the court actually gives them the 72 hours to get it done, and potentially also redoing the warrant. If there was one, they're doing all of that, and then they're trying to get their [assessment] done. They're doing everything they can. There's a lot of workers that feel like they're trying to do everything they can. And I think sometimes that's hard to, sometimes it's just hard to catch every single thing you're doing when you've got that much going on at once. And you're always going to be able to find something that wasn't done. So I guess the only thing that I can suggest potentially is taking that into account, that there's a lot going on in that thing. It's easy to look at it sometimes when you are, you know, a year later, you're looking at it a year later, and you can say, oh, this, this, and this, and this didn't get done. But also the worker was dealing with this, this, this, and, you know, like 30 things in that case, plus God knows what was going on in their other cases. And so.. it's, I think that would be the one thing I can just address, which I don't know if it's possible, but that's probably the one thing I can suggest because there's just there's so much going on, sometimes in these cases, all at once. In addition to whatever's going on in the rest of their case load.

This is the undeniable truth of the job. As P02 stated, "I just wish that there was an acknowledgement that the job is hard." So, I'll say it plainly, the job is hard.

Summary

This generic qualitative study examined how child welfare caseworkers perceive the federal performance standards set by the CFSR to influence their practice, experience, and retention, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence. Analysis of 11 interviews identified four themes. Participants shared their understanding of and experiences with the CFSR and what they believe the impact on the front-line is. They explained how agency actions shaped their experience with the CFSR. They described the tension between achieving CFSR performance standards and meeting the needs of children and families through family-centered casework. Lastly, participants provided thoughtful and practical recommendations for improving how the CFSR is implemented and how caseworkers are supported. These findings provide insight into how the CFSR influences frontline practice and highlight potential mechanisms for positive and negative feedback effects. In Chapter 5, I interpret these findings within the context of the existing literature and the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This generic qualitative study examined how the federal performance standards set by the CFSR are perceived by child welfare caseworkers to influence their practice, experience, and retention, and what feedback effects, if any, emerge from this influence. Interviews were conducted with 11 participants who had been child welfare caseworkers who had served across 13 states and in varied agency types. Participants shared a wide range of understanding and experiences with the CFSR, highlighting how involvement, or lack thereof, shaped caseworker perceptions and experiences. After analyzing the data, I identified four themes as described by participants: (a) living the standards, caseworker experiences with the CFSR; (b) organizational impact, agency response shapes caseworker experience; (c) metrics versus mission, tension between performance standards and practice; and (d) solutions from the field, caseworker recommendations for improvement. In this chapter, I interpret these findings within the context of the existing literature and through PFT, which guided this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Living the Standards, Caseworker Experiences with the CFSR

Through interviews and the eligibility screening questionnaire, participants describe a shared understanding of the purpose of the CFSR, which is to ensure child welfare agencies are providing for safety, permanency, and well-being. Participants then shared various experiences with the CFSR process. Some understood it was more of a review or audit, while others understood it was a CQI process. While participants shared an understanding of its purpose, their perceptions of its impact on decision-making,

workload, retention, job satisfaction, and frontline practice varied throughout interviews. One consistent finding across participants was that the standards were believed to be unreachable.

P06 shared their understanding of the purpose of the CFSR: “I know it’s everything to do with safety, permanency, and well-being, which is what I’ve heard, like, preached into my brain since I started.” Some described the CFSR as a review or audit. P02 stated, “They pull files, they review all the cases, and then they dictate to the county what the implications of that are.” Others described it as more of a process with case reviews and PIP. P11 described the process as, “And so they review the cases, and then determine if we’ve met the standards, and if not, then usually the states have to be put on a program improvement plan or a PIP.” Participants described varied perceptions of the impact of the CFSR. For example, some participants reported that the standards did impact things such as caseworker decision-making. P11 described how the process helped with decision making, “I mean, yes, definitely, like, time frame-wise, it would help us make good decisions.” P07 described how it did not when they stated, “No, I don’t think it impacted [decision-making as a caseworker].” One common perception of the CFSR is that the standards are unachievable. P10 stated, “I don’t know that any state, in my experience, has ever actually met the federal standards because they’re pretty impossible to meet.”

This theme aligns with current child welfare literature. The findings support prior research suggesting that agency-level factors impact caseworkers (Burns et al., 2023; Radey & Wilke, 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2022). Mixed understanding of the CFSR

process affected how the participants believed the CFSR impacted them and child welfare in general. This finding is supported by PFT.

Theme 1 demonstrates that the policy does not solely create feedback effects; instead, it is created through the interaction between caseworker understanding, agency actions, and practical realities. When caseworkers are informed about the CFSR as a CQI process, positive feedback effects, such as not seeing a negative impact on retention or seeing that there is a positive impact on frontline practice, were observed. Conversely, when understanding is lacking or limited to the CFSR as a review or audit process, negative feedback effects emerged in the form of participants believing it was overwhelming, added workload, or did not improve practice. PFT literature supports this finding that caseworker experience and discretion shapes feedback effects (Moynihan & Soss, 2014). Additionally, feedback effects are created by both the policy and its framing (Béland et al., 2022).

Theme 1 illustrates that caseworker understanding and experience with the CFSR impacts perception and creation of feedback effects. These findings highlight agency power to put feedback mechanisms, such as training and support, in place to shape feedback effects. Agencies that provide training, information, and support around CFSR performance standards can help caseworkers navigate the process and achieve standards while decreasing negative effects on workload, retention, or job satisfaction. The impact of the CFSR is mediated by information provision to the frontline. This understanding lays the groundwork for the following themes, which explore organizational impact, metrics versus mission, and solutions from the field.

Theme 2: Organizational Impact, Agency Response Shapes Caseworker Experience

Participants described various ways their agencies approached the CFSR and how this shaped their experiences and perceptions of the performance standards and process. Some described agency practices that helped them understand the process and standards. P03 stated, "I think that the leadership that I have is doing a good job of trying to place it in perspective of everything else that's going on." At the same time, others experienced the CFSR as a reactive or audit-only type process that was stressful and overwhelming. One participant explicitly linked leaving the field to their agency's handling of audits and CFSR standards. P02 stated, "Ironically, I chose to leave because of [county] response and reaction to the auditing, to the CFSR regulations coming in from the state, and [county] response to them." Resources provided by the agency also influenced whether caseworkers felt the standards could be achieved. P04 stated, "You can't, there's no way that you can meet the standard of safety if you cannot adequately go out on every investigation and do a thorough investigation to assess safety, if you don't have the staff to do so." Overall, agency administration of the CFSR impacted the frontline experience of the CFSR.

Child welfare workforce retention literature supports the idea that organizational factors matter. In examining predictors of retention, Radey and Wilke (2023) found that individual characteristics made little difference, but agency-level items, such as workload and supervision, did. Burns et al. (2023) qualitatively analyzed the same dataset and found that workers who left or stayed primarily identified organizational factors as their

primary concern. McLaughlin et al. (2022) similarly found that organizational and job role issues were central to why caseworkers considered leaving or left the profession.

From a PFT perspective, how a policy is implemented and administered by the organization can shape the development of feedback mechanisms that create positive or negative feedback effects. This was demonstrated by Campbell (2012) when they examined the policy design for a social assistance program, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, that had low monetary benefits and discretionary caseworker decisions, which led to negative feedback effects for the public. Agencies are the bridge between federal standards and frontline practice. When agencies communicated, provided resources and support, and framed the CFSR as a tool for improvement, participants described more positive experiences. When agencies communicated the CFSR as an audit process or participated in a reactive way to policy change or implementation without providing sufficient resources, participants described negative experiences. This is supported by Valenzuela (2021), who described "audit culture" as a climate of surveillance and suspicion that can undermine caseworker confidence and well-being.

This theme demonstrates that feedback effects are shaped not solely by the CFSR but by how the agency handles the administration of the CFSR. Participants did not always connect their day-to-day requirements to the CFSR, but they described their experiences as influenced by how agencies implemented it. In other words, the organizational administration determined whether feedback effects were negative or positive for caseworkers, rather than the federal standards alone. This theme highlights the importance of agency leadership in shaping caseworker experiences with policy. This

aligns with Mettler (2019), who suggested in a conceptual analysis that policy design and visibility could significantly impact feedback effects. Agencies can influence the creation of feedback mechanisms through information provision, resource provision, and transparent communication, which affects caseworker engagement, satisfaction, and retention. The next theme discusses the tension between meeting performance standards and providing family-centered child welfare practice.

Theme 3: Metrics Versus Mission, Tension Between Performance Standards and Practice

Participants described a tension between meeting the CFSR performance standards and carrying out the family-centered and professional casework of child welfare. For example, P06 shared, “Their caseloads are out of control, and they’re required to hit these standards versus truly being family centered, which is what it should be.” Participants also described how the CFSR performance standards sometimes felt misaligned with the realities of working with families and their complex and real-world struggles. P06 shared, “But because we didn’t hit that 12 months, we’re failing our numbers, but we shouldn’t be, because we’re supporting her [the mother] the way we should.” Others described feeling torn between doing what was required for compliance and providing meaningful support to children and families. P01 shared, “These are human experiences, and these are not just numbers.” Participants described experiencing concern and apprehension due to the pressure to meet standards while not believing that the standard was best for children and families. P02 shared, “I don’t know if this is how other people feel, but the idea is that if something happens on my caseload, they’re [the

agency] not going to have my back." This theme illustrates the delicate balance caseworkers must navigate to meet performance standards and exercise professional judgment with families.

The PFT literature supports the finding that policy metrics can create negative feedback effects. Laenen et al. (2023) found that when policies or metrics do not reflect the real needs of the intended recipients of the policy, negative feedback effects are created. Moynihan and Soss (2014) highlight how frontline workers, through discretion and interpretation, influence how policy is enacted. Campbell (2012) found that program design and caseworker discretion influence feedback effects, showing that mistrust and negative policy feedback effects can result when policy design or implementation fails to foster trust within those implementing it. Participants' experiences in this theme reflect the child welfare literature on how rigid metrics and "audit culture" can undermine morale and engagement (Valenzuela, 2021).

This theme demonstrates participant experiences when CFSR metrics do not reflect the reality of the needs of children and families. PFT supports the participants' feedback that, while they understand and recognize the necessity of the CFSR performance standards, they did not always believe the standards are best for children and families. Participants valued using professional discernment in their casework practice when needed. While a policy can set parameters for a caseworker, there may be necessary deviations from metrics due to the human aspects of child welfare casework. Applying uniform standards to all children and families without accounting for real-world family, agency, or community struggles produces negative feedback effects. Metrics intended to

improve practice can unintentionally create negative feedback effects if they conflict with professional judgment or frontline realities. The child welfare caseworker is at the intersection of federal standards, agency administration, and professional practice; therefore, both agencies and agency leaders can influence feedback effects by acknowledging the conflict between metric and mission, and by recognizing that supporting professional judgment in caseworkers enhances rather than constrains meaningful work. By accepting and supporting caseworkers' professional judgment within policy parameters, agencies can reduce negative feedback effects of the CFSR performance standards while ensuring compliance, improving both caseworker experience and policy outcomes. The next theme offers recommendations from participants to improve CFSR implementation and support frontline practice.

Theme 4: Solutions from the Field, Caseworker Recommendations for Improvement

Participants shared how they valued their time in child welfare and provided recommendations for improving the use of the CFSR process with caseworkers based on their frontline experiences. Their recommendations included: increasing lived experience and caseworker participation in the CFSR process, improving understanding of the CFSR performance standards and the "why" behind them, and providing adequate resources to support caseworkers in achieving the standards.

Participants recommended increasing lived experience and caseworker participation in the CFSR and policy-making processes. P05 stated, "I think that Frontline Caseworkers should have a formal seat at the table when states or agencies are designing new programs, policies, PIPS, or system changes." Participants also recommended

increased training emphasizing the "why" behind the standards. P08 explained, "I think we've lost kind of in translation, the ability to have the understanding communicated to frontline staff as to why we do the things we do." Moreover, P04 shared, "Why did we look at these areas of safety, permanency, and well-being, and why were they so important, more from a standpoint of not just policy and not because these reviews are taking place, but ultimately for the overall well-being of the children we're entrusted to take care of, if you will."

Participants recommended providing training on the CFSR and its performance standards that is engaging and impactful to them. P07 explained, "You know, I've always thought that caseworkers need more training, because in the beginning, right, they get saturated. I get that, but, like, after they've been doing child welfare for a while, it's helpful to know the why behind why you have to do something, you know what I mean?" One participant recommended engaging the caseworker as a case reviewer to solidify learning. P10 stated, "I think they should, instead of asking for volunteers to do the case reviews, it ought to be assigned [being a case reviewer]. Because that's where you learn the most." Finally, participants recommended ensuring adequate resources are provided to the field to meet performance measures while providing quality service to children and families. P10 stated, "And that's the equation where we say, if you want our performance to be at peak, then give us the tools, which means money, in order to make that happen." Participants explained that achieving standards while maintaining quality family-centered practice is difficult without sufficient staffing, time, or tools. P02 stated, "I think if they put more time and energy into supporting workers, making those caseloads more

manageable, making sure that everybody has the supports they need, that would be a lot more retention."

The current child welfare literature supports this theme. Increasing child welfare caseworker participation and understanding makes sense when considering that the caseworker is the front-line street-level bureaucrat (Mischen, 2008) responsible for carrying out the performance standards as they trickle down from federal to state and agency levels (Carnochan et al., 2019). Participants' recommendation to provide the information to caseworkers and connect casework practice to outcomes aligns with research by Kothari et al. (2021), who found that connection and quality supervision were variables associated with the decision to stay. Many studies found that agency-level variables contribute to turnover (Burns et al., 2023; He et al., 2018; Murphy, 2023; Radey & Wilke, 2023), and the participants' recommendations for understanding the "why" behind the standards in connection to their daily practice reflect these findings. Finally, the recommendation to provide adequate resources for caseworkers to meet the performance standards is supported by current research that found agency variables such as high caseloads and staffing shortages have been linked to turnover (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Lizano, 2015).

From a PFT perspective, participant recommendations illustrate how agency decisions around involvement, information provision, and inclusion can influence feedback effects. By following the participants' recommendations and involving frontline caseworkers in decision-making, CFSR processes, and providing transparent, two-way communication, agencies can create positive feedback mechanisms that create positive

feedback effects such as caseworker engagement, trust, and understanding of policy goals. A lack of information, involvement, or support provided to caseworkers contributes to the creation of negative feedback effects. This finding is consistent with PFT literature that demonstrates feedback mechanisms create feedback effects that can be positive or negative, that can either support or undermine a policy's success (Béland et al., 2022; Pierson, 1993).

This theme examines participant recommendations for improving CFSR implementation with caseworkers. Their recommendations highlight that engaging the workforce, clarifying the "why" behind the standards, and providing adequate resources can create positive feedback effects and enhance policy effectiveness, reducing the risk of negative feedback effects on the workforce. The participants in this study demonstrate that caseworkers not only identify challenges with the CFSR but also propose solutions that could reduce negative feedback effects and strengthen both outcomes and frontline practice.

Limitations of the Study

This generic qualitative study has limitations typically found in qualitative research. It focused on a select group of child welfare caseworkers, so the findings are not meant to be generalizable to every agency or worker (Toma, 2011). This study explored caseworker experiences with the CFSR in a rigorous way but does not provide universal truths (Maxwell & Kiegelmann, 2023).

This study looked only at caseworkers' perspectives. It did not measure factors like burnout, years of experience, or overall job satisfaction that could shape how

someone experiences the CFSR. While participants shared how their agencies handled the CFSR, this study does not capture all agency-specific practices or provide a comprehensive comparison across agencies. Participants' experiences reflect a specific time and may have been influenced by workload, various organizational cultures, recent policy changes, or the participant's decision to stay or leave the field.

Recommendations

This research contributed a small amount to understanding a complex topic in a challenging field. The findings of this study offer recommendations for child welfare agencies, policymakers, and researchers. The voices and experiences of the participants ground these recommendations and provide opportunities for agencies to strengthen the impact of the CFSR in a positive way for caseworkers.

- Listen to caseworkers. Purposefully create opportunities for casework staff to share their perspectives and include them in decision-making regarding the CFSR process and other policy and decision-making processes.
- Provide two-way communication about the purpose (the "why"), process, and expectations of the CFSR in a transparent and accessible way.
- Acknowledge the tension between mission and metrics. Find a balance between ensuring performance standards are met and allowing the achievement of metrics to overshadow the child welfare caseworker's mission to ensure child safety, permanency, and well-being in a family-centered way.

- Respect and value the workforce. Prioritize retention through sustainable workloads and provision of needed resources.
- Continue research that amplifies the caseworker's voice and improves the sustainability of the field. Explore and implement strategies to make child welfare a field where professionals can remain long-term without experiencing high turnover and burnout.

This study's findings indicate that feedback effects of the CFSR are not determined solely by policy design, but by how agencies communicate, frame, and support policy administration with their workforce. Agencies are empowered to listen to caseworkers, balance metrics with mission, and foster sustainable conditions, which can shape more positive feedback effects and strengthen outcomes for children and families.

Implications

This study fills a gap in the literature by examining how the CFSR is perceived to impact child welfare caseworkers through the lens of PFT. Implications of this study may extend beyond the immediate findings. The results of this study highlight the importance of agency implementation and administration of the CFSR as a learning and improvement process rather than a compliance audit. The results suggest that child welfare caseworkers desire involvement in policy decision-making. The findings suggest that policy design and implementation should account for the realities of frontline work and provide adequate resources to support the workforce in achieving the set standards. This study raises the caseworker voice, experience, and perspective to demonstrate how federal performance measures shape practice on the frontline.

Conclusion

This study explored how the CFSR impacts child welfare caseworkers. It demonstrated that policy feedback effects are shaped through agency implementation, caseworker understanding, and the realities of practice with children and families. The findings show that caseworkers recognize the value of the CFSR while also experiencing the burden of unattainable standards, heavy workload, and complex work. PFT provided the foundation to ground this study and understand how positive and negative feedback effects emerged from the CFSR for caseworkers. Ultimately, the study concludes that caseworkers are active participants in carrying out the standards set by the CFSR, whose voices must be considered if the CFSR is to meet its intended goals.

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Appendix A: Eligibility Screening Questionnaire

1. Are you a current or former child welfare caseworker with direct experience in the child welfare system within the past ten years?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

2. In what state or states did you work in child welfare? _____

3. Do you have a general knowledge of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR)?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

4. The purpose of the CFSR is to? (select all that apply)
   - ☐ Review cases
   - ☐ Assess compliance with federal performance measures
   - ☐ Improve child welfare systems
   - ☐ Not sure
   - ☐ Other (Please specify):

5. Which performance outcomes does the CFSR assess? (select all that apply)
   - ☐ Child Safety
   - ☐ Well-being
   - ☐ Permanency
   - ☐ Not sure

6. Have you participated in any of these CFSR-related activities? (select all that apply)
   - ☐ Had your case reviewed
   - ☐ Participated in Program Improvement Plan activities
   - ☐ Been a case reviewer
   - ☐ Received direct or indirect feedback from the CFSR results
   - ☐ Other: (please explain) _____
   - ☐ Not sure

7. Do you speak English?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date:
Time:
Interviewee Code:
Location of Interview:

Parts of the Interview	Interview Questions
Introduction	Before starting the interview, ensure the participant has provided informed consent. Welcome and Introduction • Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is Molly Blanchette, and I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral studies with Walden University. I have been a child welfare professional for over a decade, working in state and local level public child welfare agencies in a variety of roles. • The purpose of this study is to explore how the federal performance standards set by the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process influence child welfare caseworkers' practice, experiences, and retention. This study also seeks to identify any policy feedback effects that arise from these influences. • Your insights will help me better understand the relationship between CFSR performance standards and child welfare caseworker experience. • Your responses will remain confidential. Identifying information will not be included in any reports or publications. • There is no expectation for you on how you answer the questions, there are no right or wrong answers, I am only hoping to hear your authentic truth as the expert in answering the questions. • This interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy, only myself and possibly my Doctoral Committee Members will have access to it. The recording will be securely stored. The interview and any notes or data will be securely deleted and shred five years after the study is completed. • Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. If

	at any point you feel uncomfortable, have questions, or wish to stop or discontinue please let me know, and we can pause or end the interview. • Do you have any questions before we begin? • Are you ready to begin? **Turn on the recording**
First, we are going to talk a little bit about your Background and Experience in child welfare.	1. Please tell me about your professional experience as a child welfare caseworker and how long you worked (or did work) in child welfare? 2. Tell me about the roles or responsibilities you have or had in your position?
Next, I would like to talk about your Understanding of the CFSR.	3. What is your understanding of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process and its performance standards? 4. Have you received any training or guidance related to the CFSR? If so, what was your experience with it? 5. Tell me about how the CFSR process and or the performance standards have influenced your work as a caseworker? 6. Has the CFSR process impacted your decision making as a caseworker? If so, in what ways?
Next, let's talk a little about the Perceptions of Policy Impact of the CFSR	7. In your opinion, how does the CFSR affect frontline child welfare practice? 8. Have you observed any changes in agency policies, procedures, or practices because of the CFSR? 9. Do you believe the CFSR has influenced decision-making at your agency? Why or why not?
Impact on Caseworker Experience and Retention	10. Have the CFSR performance standards affected your workload? In what ways? 11. Has the CFSR influenced your job satisfaction? If so, in what ways?

	12. Have you observed any consequences of the CFSR performance standards on child welfare workforce retention? If so, please tell me about that.
Policy Feedback Effects	13. Based on your experience, how do you think the CFSR performance standards have impacted child welfare practice? 14. What impact has caseworker feedback on the CFSR performance standards had on policies or practice?
Closing and Final Thoughts	15. If you could change any aspect of the CFSR to support caseworkers better, what would you suggest? 16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with the CFSR? 17. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share? 18. Would you be willing to participate in member checking, where you will review a draft of the research findings and speak with the researcher over the phone to hear the researcher's thoughts and interpretations and share your feedback?
Conclusion	Thank you for your time and insights. Your contributions are invaluable to this research. If you have any questions or concerns after this interview, please feel free to reach out to me at my email. As a reminder, your confidentiality will be maintained, and your participation remains voluntary throughout the research process. Thank you again for your participation.
Notes/Reflexive Journaling	