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Experiences of Child Welfare Workers in Ohio Serving Justice-Involved Youth Who Exhibit Aggressive Behaviors

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Charnella Boykins

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

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Experiences of Child Welfare Workers in Ohio Serving Justice-Involved Youth Who
Exhibit Aggressive Behaviors

by

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MSW, Cleveland State University, 2005

BSW, Cleveland State University, 2003

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

December 2025

Abstract

Social workers with high work demands and low resources are likely to experience burnout. The specific social work practice-focused research problems that were addressed in this project were job demands, available resources, and perceptions of burnout in child welfare social workers. The focus was on burnout in social work practice from the perspectives of child welfare social workers providing services to justice-involved children with aggressive behaviors. The practice-focused research questions for this project concerned the participants' descriptions of job demands and employer-provided resources and their feelings of burnout when working with justice-involved youth who have aggressive behaviors. Bakker and Demerouti's job demands-resources model underpinned this study. A basic qualitative design was used. The participants were 10 child welfare social workers in the state of Ohio who were employed in their field for at least 3 years and provided direct services to justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors aged 12–17 years; they were chosen through snowball and purposive sampling. Findings showed that participants perceived high levels of blame and responsibility placed on them, a lack of collaboration, and unequal job responsibilities among colleagues. There was a lack of support for these workers on all levels, meaning from other professionals and the agency. The participants felt they are unprepared for their job responsibilities, and there was a notable difference between the perspectives of seasoned and amateur workers. Results from this project may promote positive social change by providing insights into self-care and policy change that stakeholders can use to help retain social workers working in child welfare.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the social workers in Ohio working in child welfare with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors. I hope this will show my son, Malik, that anything he dreams of in his future is possible with prayer, hard work, dedication, and commitment.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge my parents, who have supported my educational journey for many years. Thank you to my family and friends who helped me celebrate the milestones of completing my doctorate. Lastly, I acknowledge the professors who assisted and encouraged me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Job demands and a lack of resources are problems among child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth displaying aggressive behaviors. Both issues have a significant impact on social work practice. This research project focused on the perceptions of job demands, resources, and burnout among child welfare social workers who work with these youth. I used basic qualitative methodology to better understand problems related to social work, such as job demands and a lack of resources, as well as how child welfare social workers who work with these youth perceive burnout. Identifying gaps in the literature informed the study aim.

This research project contains four sections. Section 1 is the Foundation of the Study and Literature Review, which includes the following subsections: Problem Statement, Purpose Statement and Research Questions, Key Terms, Nature of the Doctoral Project, Significance of the Study, Theoretical/Conceptual Framework, Values and Ethics, Review of the Professional and Academic Literature, and Summary. Section 2 is Research Design and Data Collection, which includes the following subsections: Research Design, Methodology, Data Analysis, Ethical Procedures, and Summary. Section 3 is the Presentation of the Findings, which includes Data Analysis Techniques, Findings, and Summary. Section 4 is the Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change. Subsections here are Application of Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice, Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Implications for Social Change, and Summary.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this qualitative study was a lack in knowledge of how job demands, available resources, and burnout affect child welfare social workers who service justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors. These social workers play a vital role in providing services for these youth. However, the average turnover rate for child welfare workers was estimated to be between 20% and 40% in 2015–2019 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). According to Ong and Johnson (2023), research on employee stress and well-being has increased over the past 20 years. Some research suggests that coworker support, organizational support, supervision, and self-efficiency lead to retaining child welfare staff (De Guzman et al., 2020). Ong and Johnson found that low autonomy, high workload, low social support, and emotional demands lead to exhaustion in workers. Park (2023), using the job demands–resources (JD-R) model, showed that intrinsic work values and motivation in employees are stronger when autonomy is granted.

An example of a job resources issue is the boundary between who delivers, who pays, and who regulates services, which can impede effective interventions for clients (Evans, 2019). One concern reported by Berko (2021) is that youth who have been abused and neglected tend to lack trust in adults, which causes them to resist treatment and makes it more difficult for social workers who are charged with implementing interventions for these youth. Other demanding aspects for social workers working in child welfare include stigma, funding, and disagreement over proper interventions (Dillard & Beaujolais, 2019). Working with aggressive clients can be challenging for

social workers and can result in their feeling unprepared for the job, high turnover rates, and a lack of job satisfaction (Myers et al., 2019). Although researchers have examined aspects of working with aggressive clients, they have not focused on aspects of working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors.

Child welfare social workers play a critical role in rehabilitating and supporting justice-involved youth. Turnover among these workers negatively affects the agencies and the families served (Hermon & Chahla, 2019). Findings from the present research could inform the development of effective strategies, support mechanisms, and policies that could lessen burnout and retain social workers in child welfare. Conducting this study provided an opportunity for child welfare social workers to share their perspectives on both the job demands and resources that impact them when servicing justice-involved youth. Understanding and addressing the factors that lead to burnout can be vital for curbing high turnover rates and the negative impact that these rates have on workers, their agencies, and the children and families they service.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The aim in this qualitative study was to understand how child welfare social workers experience job demands, available resources, and burnout when serving justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. Another aim was to explore work-related stressors these social workers face and identify resources for better supporting them in their roles. Research on this segment of the social worker population is lacking, particularly regarding how they perceive their job demands and available resources. A

greater understanding of these perceptions could be used to improve social work's effectiveness in this context.

Existing research shows a connection between work stressors and burnout in child welfare workers (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022). Adequate resources could help mitigate job demands and associated stressors. Although there have been many quantitative studies on burnout, few qualitative studies have been conducted on child welfare workers' experiences with justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. I conducted this project to address this gap in the literature. The research questions (RQs) addressed in this study were the following:

RQ1: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the job demands experienced on the job?

RQ2: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors perceive job burnout?

RQ3: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the employer-provided resources available to address these stressors?

Key Terms

The following terms are used in this study. Terms such as "aggression" and "youth" have many definitions. Their definitions here reflect their specific use in this study.

Aggression: Hostile, destructive, or harmful behaviors (Farley & McWey, 2021).

Aggressive behaviors: Physical aggression, acts of anger, verbal aggression, and hostility (Aleissa et al., 2022).

Burnout: Fatigue due to physical and emotional stress resulting from a lack of coping strategies (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Job demands: Social, physical, and organizational components of a job where it is mandatory to maintain physical and mental ability. These demands relate to cognitive distress due to work requirements and stressful work environments (Crawford et al., 2010).

Job resources: The area of job demands that encourages self-fulfillment and learning (Hobfoll, 2002).

Job satisfaction: An evaluation of the pros and cons of one's job (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Justice-involved youth: Persons younger than 18 years old who have been detained, arrested, or involved in juvenile court (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2024).

Social worker: A person with a bachelor's or master's degree in social work who demonstrates the ethics of a social worker and supports social change (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], n.d.).

Youth: For this study, adolescents aged 12–17 years.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

I used basic qualitative methodology to conduct this study. Researchers use this methodology, which intertwines constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic

interaction, to understand how people explain their experiences, construct their worlds, and perceive their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Simply put, qualitative research focuses on how people perceive their lives and experiences and the meaning they attribute to these experiences (Worthington, 2013). Choosing this methodology aligned with the study purpose of exploring how child welfare social workers providing services to justice-involved children with aggressive behaviors describe the impact of their demands and resources on burnout. It was an appropriate choice for understanding work resources, demands, and burnout among this segment of the social worker population.

I conducted 10 interviews with social workers working in child welfare. This sample size reflected recommendations in empirically based research for the number of participants needed to reach saturation (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. These sampling approaches allow researchers to recruit participants who are unknown to them or who are not easily accessible (Leighton et al., 2021).

All participants were employed at a child welfare agency serving justice-involved children with aggressive behaviors. I emailed prequestionnaires to interested participants to obtain preliminary information. Individual online interviews were conducted with 10 participants who worked directly with these youth. I assigned each participant a pseudonym. Interviews allowed the participants to narrate their work experiences, as described in Doucet et al. (2022). I used thematic analysis to identify, organize, and offer insights into themes across the data set, as detailed in Braun and Clarke (2012). This approach allowed me to make sense of the participants' shared meaning and experiences.

Significance of the Study

Research was needed to gain new insights into how child welfare social workers providing services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors perceive their job demands and available resources. The study results addressed the gaps in the literature reflecting these issues and provided a greater understanding of the experience of burnout in child welfare social workers who serve justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. Increased awareness of these workers' experiences may result in improved support, resources, and expectations for them, which may also improve social work's effectiveness in this context.

The significance of the study is the potential to obtain a greater understanding of how these child welfare social workers experience job demands and resources and how their experiences affect their perceptions of burnout. Findings from this research project contribute to the existing literature because there is limited extant research on the perceptions of job demands and resources among individuals who work with these youth. This research could be beneficial to upper management in child welfare as it provides insights into how to support child welfare social workers who provide direct services to juvenile justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. Insights from this study may also be used to foster discussions about developing programs and changing policies for social workers in this arena. Finally, the findings from this study may create more opportunities for child welfare social workers to have a voice in being supported by their agencies while working with these youth.

This research supports professional practice because it allowed the study participants to explain their experiences of job demands and resources and their perceptions of burnout. Sharing these encounters and experiences could lead to positive social change. Furthermore, this study raises awareness of the need to improve programming and policy in the child welfare field through identifying barriers and challenges in the field.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theory underpinning this study was the JD-R model. This model was created by Demerouti and Bakker as an alternative to other models for determining employee well-being (Janse, 2025). The JD-R model is based on the effort-reward model, created by Sigrist in 1996, which posits that job strain is an imbalance of effort and rewards (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The model also reflects the demand-control model, created in 1979 by Karasek, which states that job strain comes from high job demands and low job control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model states that stress occurs from the imbalance between job requirements and employees' available resources to meet the criteria (Janse, 2025). It reflects two work conditions: job requirements and resources. If job resources are limited and job requirements are high, stress and burnout increase (Janse, 2025). However, if job resources are plentiful and work requirements are high, work involvement and performance are improved (Janse, 2025).

I used the JD-R model to help explain child welfare social workers' experiences servicing justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. This model consists of two

elements: demands from the profession and resources to cope with the demands (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023). Job demands can lead to exhaustion and a lack of motivation (Park, 2023). Employing the JD-R model can help to explain the opposite—job satisfaction—in many professions (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023).

Because the JD-R model incorporates many working conditions, it was an apt choice for exploring how to improve child welfare social workers' well-being and performance while serving justice-involved children with aggressive behaviors. Using this model helped to give the participating child welfare social workers a voice on their perceptions of job demands, resources, and burnout when working with these youth. Using it in the field can provide hope to social workers about being successful in assisting this population. This model can also help these workers enhance their personal growth, learning, and development when working with these youth (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model aligned with the RQs for the present study, as it focuses on the motivational potential of job resources such as autonomy, feedback, and task significance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model indicates that proper feedback fosters learning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which directly aligned with the study purpose of developing a greater understanding of the experiences of job demands, resources, and burnout among social workers in child welfare providing services to justice-involved youth displaying aggressive behaviors.

Values and Ethics

Social workers must follow the NASW code of ethics. One of the principles relevant to this study is 1.01, which is commitment to clients (NASW, 2021). The experiences of social workers working in child welfare who serve justice-involved children with aggressive behaviors were explored in this study. This exploration can potentially assist the practice of social work in meeting the needs of this population by social workers being better prepared for the demands of the job.

The second principle relevant to this study is competency, as social workers should remain proficient in the area in which they are employed (NASW, 2021). I considered this an important principle for this study as I investigated factors that could lead to burnout and explored burnout prevention, both of which can affect social workers' abilities to adequately serve their clients. This study is also relevant to 1.15 in the NASW code of ethics, which is the interruption of services. Findings from this study provide insights into stressors and the lack of resources that can result in social workers feeling depleted and ultimately not working to their capacity or terminating their employment.

The NASW code of ethics states that social workers are to confront social problems and assist people in need (NASW, 2021). Child welfare workers have a vital role to play in protecting children from abuse, neglect, and dependency. This study supported the code of ethics by prompting social workers to explain challenges in their jobs that could interfere with their ability to provide sufficient services and assist people in need. The hope is that the information gathered from this study will help to address

burnout among social workers and create policy change so that they can consistently fulfil their duty to provide services and assist clients.

Last, Principle 5.02, which discusses social workers increasing their knowledge and contributing to the field of social work (NASW, 2021) applied to this study. By exploring the experiences of social workers and documenting their perceptions of working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors, I sought to provide insights that could improve retention in the field. This research contributes to the gap in the literature by furthering the understanding of job demands and resources in the profession, which ultimately may help to decrease staffing problems and improve the outcomes of working with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The following section is a review of the professional and academic literature that informed this study. I begin with overviews of the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system, followed by job demands of the practice, consequences of the job demand, and strategies to minimize stress and burnout. The keywords used to identify literature to review were as follows: *social work, juvenile delinquency, juvenile offenders, youth offenders, violent youth, burnout, job satisfaction, job demands, job resources, barriers, obstacles, challenges, perceptions, justice-involved youth, aggressive youth, and social work experience*. The following databases were searched: SOCIndex, Thoreau Advanced, APA PsycNet, and APA PsycInfo. The search was limited to peer-reviewed full articles in journals published within the last 5 years.

The literature reviewed included articles on job satisfaction with child protective social workers, and barriers to social workers' engagement. The key focus was on child welfare workers who work with justice-involved youth. However, I chose to include findings on similar research with teachers using the JD-R model.

Youth Involved in the Child Welfare System

In the United States, an estimated 1 in 3 children will be involved in the child welfare system by 18 years of age. Statistics also show that approximately 250,000 children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care annually (Farley & McWey, 2021). In the United States, youth become involved with child welfare due to an allegation or finding of abuse and neglect (Connelly et al., 2024). In 2017, over 4 million child welfare investigations were conducted in the United States, and 674,000 of these cases were identified as victims of child maltreatment (Kim et al., 2023). National studies in the United States have shown that 40% of youth who come to the attention of child welfare have significant emotional and behavioral problems, which increase their chances of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system (Kim et al., 2023). Youth in the child welfare system have an increased likelihood of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system (Eastman et al., 2023).

Concurrent Involvement in Juvenile Justice System and Child Welfare

The juvenile justice system was established in the United States in 1899 to rehabilitate juveniles and avoid destructive punishment from adult courts (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001). Many youth involved in the juvenile justice system have a history of involvement or concurrent involvement with child

welfare (Modrowski et al., 2023). As a result, significant rates of abuse and maltreatment can lead youth to dual involvement in the juvenile system and the child welfare system (Parrish, 2020). Dual involvement also can require social workers to be involved with youth in both systems.

Job Demands of Social Work Practice

Social work practice is demanding. There are high workloads and conflicts with clients and managers (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Edwards and Wildeman (2018) also noted that child welfare has high caseloads, is understaffed, has strict deadlines, and has limited training, which adds to the work challenges.

Job demands or job expectations in social work include time pressure, emotional strain, and social interaction, all of which requiring consistent physical, cognitive, and emotional efforts that can affect workers' physical and mental health, increase burnout, and affect employee performance (Khorakian et al., 2024). De Carlo et al. (2022) completed a quantitative study with 185 remote and in-person workers using self-report questionnaires over 4 months to investigate whether smart work affects the association between perceived work characteristics and workers' health and well-being over time using the JD-R model. De Carlo et al. (2022) reported that ongoing job demands require effort from workers and take away from their resources (i.e., social support, protective factors), ultimately leading to burnout over time. Not having adequate resources to meet job demands can impact social workers' health and motivation (Khorakian et al., 2024).

Job demands such as red tape, job insecurity, and organizational politics can negatively impact work engagement. So too can issues such as high caseloads,

understaffing, strict deadlines, and limited training. The daily demands of social work jobs, including meeting deadlines, can become more stressful when social workers are unable to adequately recover emotionally from day to day (Gur et al., 2022). As a result, working with certain populations, such as children who have experienced maltreatment or who are involved in the justice system, can be even more challenging (Domon- Archambault et al., 2020).

Job Demands of Working With Children in the Child Welfare System

Demands on child welfare social workers can fall into many categories, such as system pressures, working with youth who have traumatized and aggressive behaviors, and work-related stressors. These workers can experience strain from community work, a lack of trust in the child welfare system, and a lack of authority compared to other professionals (Skotte, 2023). Social workers working in child welfare have many job stressors as they investigate allegations of abuse, neglect, and dependency. After the investigation is final, the social worker will have to close the case, monitor the situation, or remove the child from their current environment due to the findings of the allegations.

Cuseglio (2021) analyzed a therapist's countertransference with a client she found challenging. The expectation of making positive changes in children who have experienced childhood trauma can also create stress, as can issues of countertransference (Cuseglio, 2021). According to Cuseglio, who studied countertransference issues that the social worker profession faces when working with traumatized children, if the social worker is not self-aware, these issues can interfere with client treatment.

Child welfare workers are often tasked with working with children who are placed in foster care and children with high rates of anger and aggression (Farley & McWey, 2021). Heightened aggression, disruptive behaviors, and violence toward others can be related to maltreatment (Domon-Archambault et al., 2020). Children who are exposed to aggression while young learn to use aggression to meet their needs (Harris et al., 2021). Also, children in foster care are likely to exhibit anger and aggression as a reaction to stressors such as being removed from their home and are likely to have placement disruptions (Farley & McWey, 2021). Aggressive behaviors in youth can be challenging for social workers as they are often called names and disrespected (Pelech et al., 2021).

Job Demands of Working With Justice-Involved Youth

Social workers play a critical role in the criminal justice system regarding minors. They collaborate with various stakeholders to ensure that justice-involved youth receive needed services to increase chances of rehabilitation (Biriş & Feher, 2024). They are also key players in multidisciplinary teams to ensure proper assessment and referral at all interaction points with the juvenile court system, which can be time consuming (Parrish, 2020).

When working with justice-involved youth, child welfare social workers are entrusted with the crucial tasks of assessing risk factors and creating prosocial environments with other agencies to prevent the youth from reverting to previous levels of dysfunction (Winters, 2020). This can include removing youth from their homes even though relationships with family and peers are significant for justice-involved youth (Gair et al., 2024). Also, child welfare social workers are recommended to advocate for

the justice-involved family regarding court issues since they know the family's dynamics (Snyder & Duchschere, 2022). Much pressure is put on these social workers to prevent justice-involved youth from acting out again (Pelech et al., 2021). They are also under significant pressure to influence changes in the population of youth who are sexually aggressive (Pelech et al., 2021).

Justice-involved youth have reported feeling fearful and targeted in the community, which can cause a lack of compliance with social workers (Gair et al., 2024). Justice-involved youth also often meet many service providers and can have difficulty forming trusting relationships (Snyder & Duchschere, 2022). While the youth may have trouble connecting with their social workers, social workers are still required to interview and work with the youth despite the lack of participation. Justice-involved youth need to feel supported, safe, and not judged by their social workers (Gair et al., 2024).

Research has shown that some youth in the juvenile justice system bond with social workers who share similar identities (Gair et al., 2024). Also, justice-involved youth benefit from providers meeting their needs by considering cultural differences and being nonbiased (Snyder & Duchschere, 2022). Justice-involved youth use social workers in child welfare to understand their needs and how to meet them. Job demands include system pressure and challenges for child welfare social workers providing services for justice-involved youth. As previously noted, working with traumatized children is one of the challenges that social workers face. Many juvenile-involved youth have experienced trauma that negatively affects their behaviors and mood (Snyder & Duchschere, 2022).

Consequences of Job Demands for Child Welfare Social Workers

Child welfare social workers' retention and occupational stress are influenced by various factors, including long hours with limited resources, public perception, lack of organizational support, moral stress, and the severity of cases (Beer et al., 2021; Kothari et al., 2021; Stahlschmidt et al., 2019; Zeitlin et al., 2019). Consequences include high turnover, high stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. I discuss each of these consequences in more detail next.

High Turnover

Turnover, which refers to the rate at which employees leave an organization and are replaced, can lead to overworked staff (Hermon & Chahla, 2019). Interestingly, child welfare is one of the social work fields with the highest turnover rates (Bowman, 2019). As a result, insights into social worker's needs and experiences are imperative to support the profession in assisting youth, especially those with aggressive behaviors (Pelech et al., 2021).

Child welfare social workers typically have strict deadlines, high caseloads, are understaffed, and receive limited supervisor support, which leads to decreased worker well-being and low retention (Radey & Wilke, 2023). Abdelmoteleb (2019) conducted a quantitative study with a three-wave longitudinal design with 252 employees in two industrial organizations. The intent was to investigate a model involving mutual relationships between job stress and organizational commitment, in which job satisfaction partially mediated this mutual relationship. Similarly, Bigras et al.'s (2021) qualitative analysis of 14 frontline workers found that workers reported experiencing a significant

increase in stress and burnout and perceived stressors as new/increased job duties, fear of inadequate staffing/training, heightened vigilance, and fear of safety. Both studies showed that job stress affects a worker's commitment to the organization and leads to burnout, necessitating increased staff due to turnover. Thirty percent of child welfare workers in Phillips et al. (2020) left their jobs within 2 years because of high stress levels, discussed next.

High Stress Levels

The negative impact of excessive stress on job performance and successful outcomes is well documented (Trumello et al., 2020). Research indicates direct links between job stress and negative implications on case workers' lives (Link et al., 2023). The pressures of earning the trust of juvenile-involved youth by showing empathy, respect, and demonstrating concern about what happens to them can be stressful for child welfare social workers (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023). Skotte (2023) conducted a qualitative study using an ethnography exploratory methodological approach to evaluate a previous study of two frontline child welfare offices that involved intermittent observation of everyday work experiences. McFadden et al. (2019) authored a paper revealing the results of a hierarchical linear regression analysis using a cross-sectional survey of 162 social workers measuring resilience, burnout, and organization subscales and calling for interventions to support resiliency in social workers. Both Skotte and McFadden et al. found that high caseloads, along with a lack of resources and individualization of responsibility, pressure child welfare social workers.

Engell et al. (2020) studied job satisfaction, job stress, and implementation climate among 233 participants employed in three Norwegian child welfare services who were implementing an academic intervention for children and families receiving support from caseworkers. Data were collected before and 20–24 months after the initial implementation, and confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the intercorrelations of translated measures and factor structures (Engell et al., 2020). Scores on the Implementation Climate scale was compared with caseworkers in the United States, which showed a significant difference educational support, recognition, and rewards for evidence-based practitioners.

Engell et al. (2020) found that job stress was negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Larsen et al. (2023) had similar findings in a quantitative study examining the work-related and non-work-related stressors and perceived social support from 2013 and 2017 using an analytical sample of 9,194 participants. The findings showed that work situations can induce stress, but that stress can be mitigated by a controlled schedule, support from the supervisor, and health-promoting management on the job. These findings underscore the need for further research in this area, which could provide more insights and potential solutions to the issue of job stress in child welfare social workers overall and particularly those serving justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors.

Research also highlights the potential of significant job stress leading to problems with workers' physical and mental health. The JD-R model is used to determine employee well-being. This widely used theoretical framework in occupational health psychology posits that job demands and job resources are the two main categories of

factors that influence employee well-being and performance (Janse, 2025). According to this model, job demands can cause physical and psychological strain when resources are inadequate (Khorakian et al., 2024). Working long hours and experiencing excessive stress can significantly impact social workers' physical and mental health (Tesi, 2021). Schwartz Tayri (2023) further detailed the effects of stress on social workers' health in a study involving 2,542 licensed social workers, where 70% reported at least one health issue related to their work. Schwartz Tayri's findings highlighted the need for awareness and understanding of occupational stress to prevent burnout in the social work profession. The findings showed that the greater the job restrictions, the greater the job dissatisfaction, stress, and health-related problems (Schwartz Tayri, 2023).

In a secondary analysis of teaching and learning data from 24 European countries using the JD-R model on teachers, Admiraal and Kittelsen Røberg (2023) found that their careers had more negative impacts on their mental and physical health. Teachers were more satisfied with the school they worked at than their chosen career (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023). When the job impacted teachers' mental and physical health, they were less likely to be satisfied. Study findings also showed that teachers were pleased when job resources were sufficient and when the job fostered support, shared beliefs, and trust (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023).

The JD-R model also explains how the organizational environment significantly impacts employee well-being and performance (Tummers & Bakker, 2021, p. 2). Organizational environment is particularly relevant for child welfare workers, who are often victims of psychological and physical aggression, leading to high levels of stress

(Lamothe et al., 2022). Research has shown that social workers often experience high levels of stress on the job, including secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout, which is when social workers feel emotionally and physically exhausted (Holmes et al., 2021). Distress in child welfare workers can increase their risk of becoming victims and lead to emotional unavailability when servicing clients (Lamothe et al., 2022). Working with youth with aggressive behaviors can be emotionally challenging, as discussed next, and can shift the worker's professional and world views (Pelech et al., 2021).

Emotional Exhaustion

Working with youth with aggressive behaviors can impact workers emotionally and lead to emotional exhaustion (Lamothe et al., 2022; Pelech et al., 2021). In Pelech et al.'s (2021) study, which involved 116 participants across eight studies, the workers disclosed powerful emotions when working with this population such as fear, stress, powerlessness, shock, discomfort, anger, disgust, and frustration. When the youth disclosed sexualized behaviors where they were the perpetrator, the worker reported feeling shocked and discomfort (Pelech et al., 2021). Many justice-involved children are victims of trauma, and workers reported feeling emotionally challenged to hear about the abuse experience (Pelech et al., 2021). As a result, workers reported emotionally shutting down as an emotional response (Pelech et al., 2021).

Research has shown that much emotional exhaustion for child welfare social workers comes from traumatic experiences on the job. Lamothe et al. (2022) used a cross-lagged panel analysis and administered standardized questionnaires to 117 child protection workers who experienced traumatic situations by clients in the month prior to

the study. Data from follow-up questionnaires administered 2, 6, and 12 months later showed that the workers were revictimized (Lamothe et al., 2022). The researchers also conducted a generalized linear model analysis to test the influence of sociodemographic variables and of supervisory support's diminishing influence. Based on the findings from this analysis, Lamothe et al. concluded that the agency could support the workers by preventing aggression in its clients.

Emotional stressors were also the focus in Kranke et al. (2022), who addressed the need for emotional preparedness among social work leaders and inpatient social workers who experienced damaging hurricanes in 2017. Kranke et al. identified emotional preparedness as emotional anticipation, being emotionally present on the job, capable of withstanding a disaster, and anxiety about providing services that are out of the scope of practice. Findings from this study suggested that emotional preparedness is crucial for reducing work-related stress and burnout and enhancing job performance. They also highlighted the importance of a supportive network in managing burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary stress (Kranke et al., 2022).

Kranke et al. (2022) and Lamothe et al. (2022) are similar as they explored work-related stressors. In an earlier study, Klusmann et al. (2021) explored how daily and work life affected emotional exhaustion in beginning teachers. This study identified emotional exhaustion as a significant factor in causing burnout.

Klusmann et al. (2021) conducted a 14-consecutive-day diary study involving 141 beginning teachers to investigate whether daily life domains relate to emotional exhaustion beyond work-related ups and downs. Multilevel analyses showed that work-

related boosts were negative, and work-related stress was positively related to emotional exhaustion (Klusmann et al., 2021). Findings also showed that adverse work events led to emotional exhaustion, a component of burnout (Klusmann et al., 2021). Also, private boost was related to a statistically significant decrease in positive stress and increased emotional exhaustion outside work-related events (Klusmann et al., 2021).

Klusmann et al.'s (2021) findings are congruent with the JD-R model as they showed consistent associations between work-related stress and emotional exhaustion. A limitation of this study was that missing data needed to be included in the diaries. Klusmann et al. also suggested more research in other professions and with participants with more experience in the field to compare results.

Burnout

Social workers in child welfare working with youth with aggressive behaviors have reported feeling emotionally and physically unwell, which are symptoms of burnout (Pelech et al., 2021). Burnout is a condition of fatigue due to physical and emotional stress caused by a lack of coping strategies (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Similarly, Bakker and de Vries (2021) described burnout as a chronic stress syndrome that includes a negative attitude toward work, chronic feelings of exhaustion, and lowered professional efficacy. Researchers have found that job stress relates to an imbalance between job resources and demands, which can lead to burnout (Sokal et al., 2020).

There is a high risk of burnout among social workers in child welfare, as is the case in many professional healing fields as a result of job pressures and time constraints (Shadik et al., 2023). Burnout is also a concern in child welfare as it can result in

turnover, which some research (Phillips et al., 2020) has reported as being as high as 30% of child welfare workers leaving within 2 years. According to the JD-R model, high job demands, and low resources lead to burnout (Bakker et al., 2023). When experiencing burnout, there are variations of fatigue after experiencing long periods of high job demands, which can be rectified after a lengthy recovery period (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Nevertheless, burnout is prevalent in occupations where workers must be selfless, and it is their job to put others' needs before their own (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

There is a significant body of research on the causes of burnout in the social worker profession and many different causes identified, including a lack of awareness and understanding of occupational stress (Solomonidou & Katsounari, 2022); multisystemic causes (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022), time strain, lack of supervisory support, lack of self-care, and job stress (Phillips et al., 2020). An expansive discussion in this area is beyond the scope of this review. As such, the following discussion focuses on a group of studies reflecting recent research conducted on burnout in the social work field.

In a study on work stress in 12 social workers working at a nongovernmental agency in Cyprus, Greece, Solomonidou and Katsounari (2022) examined the variables impacting work performance and the causes of stress and burnout. Qualitative data were collected using semistructured interviews. Analysis of the findings showed excessive workloads, negative public perception of the profession, working overtime, having to confront unmet personal expectations, role ambiguity, ethical dilemmas in the workplace, and lack of support from the supervisor as the contributors of occupational stress and

burn out (Solomonidou & Katsounari, 2022). Solomonidou and Katsounari suggested that awareness and understanding regarding occupational stress can prevent burnout in the social work profession.

Chiarelli-Helminiak et al. (2022) used qualitative methodology and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective to investigate burnout factors among full-time social work educators in Council on Social Work Education-accredited programs. The researchers implemented stratified random sampling to recruit social workers from 18 states who were full-time faculty, all of whom completed a cross-sectional electronic survey. Although there were 535 respondents, they represented only a 21% response rate (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022).

Findings showed that the factors leading burnout were job demands; insufficient time or resources; and engagement with students, faculty, and administrators (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022). The participants reported declines in self-care and interpersonal relations due to work expectations and pressures. However, relationships with colleagues and students helped to reduce burnout (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022). Based on these findings, Chiarelli-Helminiak et al. (2022) concluded that burnout is common among social work educators due to multisystemic causes.

Phillips et al. (2020) used the Copenhagen model of burnout and the JD-R model to investigate how factors associated with client-related and work-related burnout among caseworkers differed by the number of years in employment. Study participants were 1,823 caseworkers divided into four lengths of stay at the agency. Phillips et al. used multivariate linear regressions and cross-model z tests to investigate burnout by cohort.

Findings indicated that time strain and job stress led to burnout. A lack of supervisory support was connected to burnout in caseworkers at the agency for less than 2 years, and lack of self-care was associated with burnout regardless of tenure (Phillips et al., 2020).

The studies discussed in this section (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2020; Solomonidou & Katsounari, 2022) are similar as they all examined factors contributing to job burnout. The need for further research to determine effective strategies for minimizing burnout in social work was also identified in each study. I discuss some of these strategies in the next section.

Strategies to Minimize Stress and Burnout for Social Workers

There are numerous strategies for minimizing stress and burnout in social workers. For employers, these strategies include increasing job resources, reducing job demands, and encouraging personal growth and development (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Job demands can be reduced by support from colleagues, the ability to work from home or in the office, and the opportunity to be promoted (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). I discuss these strategies and others in more detail next.

Improving Job Resources

There is a significant body of research on how job resources can lower burnout and retention (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Social workers who receive organizational support such as good supervision have reported lower stress levels in the workplace, reducing the likelihood of burnout (Holmes et al., 2021). Nielsen et al. (2023), in a qualitative study using a cross-sectional probability sample of child welfare workers, examined emotional dissonance and organizational support as protective factors

regarding burnout among child welfare workers. Study findings showed that stress-buffering resources are helpful in reducing the detrimental impact of emotional demands in child welfare work and have practical implications for the design of support systems for these workers. Having a positive relationship with coworkers is essential because, as previous studies have shown, coworker support reduces symptoms of burnout (Nielsen et al., 2023).

Tesi (2021), who described work well-being as the absence of stress and burnout with work engagement and job satisfaction, found a relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. Tesi completed quantitative research with 302 health care professionals using anonymous self-reports to investigate if trait emotional intelligence could target burnout and work engagement. Using the JD-R model, Bakker and de Vries (2021) synthesized the literature to investigate how acute job strain causes severe burnout. According to Bakker and de Vries, when employees need more control, do not receive regular feedback, and have no resources for developing themselves professionally, they lose interest in their careers and develop negative attitudes.

Job resources can assist with reaching work goals and reducing job demands. Supervisory and peer support helps to build commitment and encourage resilience to combat burnout (Skotte, 2023). Workplaces can increase work engagement by increasing resources and selecting staff with proactive personalities (Borst et al., 2019). When workers experience burnout, they have no desire to make a positive change (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). If agency leaders knew about the causes of burnout, retention could be increased (Radey & Wilke, 2023).

There are several strategies for improving job resources. Quality improvement strategies, for example, are beneficial and necessary in child welfare services, where the job is demanding and the clients are numerous (Engell et al., 2020). As highlighted by Engell et al. (2020), in an earlier section of this study, these strategies address job characteristics and demands, increasing job satisfaction and reducing high levels of job stress. Social workers, who are often at the forefront of caring for justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors, are in a unique position to implement and benefit from these strategies.

Satisfaction surveys should be used to check in with staff regarding job satisfaction (Edwards-Dandridge et al., 2020). Satisfaction surveys can help to address social workers' job satisfaction and prevent burnout. They can also be helpful in assessing the effectiveness of quality improvement strategies. Also, Edwards-Dandridge et al. (2020) suggested that those in leadership roles should create strategies to consistently assess their employees' degrees of job satisfaction and that supervisors receive training on knowing when employees are not satisfied with their jobs to prevent turnover.

While satisfaction surveys are a valuable resource, the importance of other strategies for social workers, such as self-help training, cannot be overstated. These resources are not only crucial but also necessary for these workers' well-being and job satisfaction. Training is one method to prepare social workers for their demanding work (Kranke et al., 2022). Social workers can be trained to manage their personal and work lives so that one does not negatively impact the other.

Kranke et al. (2022) noted the importance of agencies playing a significant role in supporting social workers in managing their self-care, thereby demonstrating their value and integral role in the system. Furthermore, interventions for emotional intelligence can be implemented to increase awareness about emotional intelligence and regulation (Tesi, 2021). Kranke et al. also recommended that organizations implement disaster-based training and that social workers should receive education and training on navigating potential trauma and engaging in self-care.

Strategies for minimizing stress and burnout for social workers include training in various areas, as described next. Of note, the studies discussed in this section do not necessarily focus specifically on strategies for addressing the daily stressors of social workers providing services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behavior. This gap in the research underscores the need for more research in this area.

Trauma-Informed Care. Research on practical training and techniques for social workers working with aggressive youth is abundant. However, conversations on best practices continue. Schmid et al. (2020) suggested that when working with traumatized children, trauma-informed care (TIC) can reduce countertransference and clients' physical aggression. Training on TIC, therefore, is a resource that employers can provide social workers. Social workers in child welfare often work with children who have mental health issues, poor self-regulation, and unmet emotional needs, which can result in high stress levels, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Schmid et al., 2020). Some youth come with many traumas in their past, which can be overwhelming for child welfare social workers regarding where to start (Snyder & Duchscher, 2022).

TIC conceptualizes problems and behaviors and contains techniques to avoid trauma reenactment (Jäggi et al., 2021). Justice-involved youth have high rates of complex trauma; therefore, TIC is needed to meet their needs (Malvaso et al., 2024). Schmid et al. (2020) examined the effects of TIC practices on psychological stress in staff members in youth welfare institutions and on clients' physical aggression toward their caregivers. Data were collected from a longitudinal study assessing TIC in 24 residential youth welfare institutions, which included 47 youth welfare workers ages 23–60 years. Hair cortisol concentration and client physical aggression occurrences were assessed annually for 4 years (Schmid et al., 2020).

Findings showed that hair cortisol concentration in Year 4 was lower in staff who received TIC training, which suggested lower physiological stress levels (Schmid et al., 2020). Schmid et al. (2020) discussed the emotional toll professional caregivers face, suggesting that TIC may help reduce the emotional burden of professional caregivers working with aggressive youth. They also recommended that staff should be trained to implement TIC and called for more research on TIC's benefits and efficacy of TIC.

Aggression Replacement Training. Other types of practical training that employers can offer social workers include aggression replacement training. A qualitative study using purposive sampling with 44 students assessed the effectiveness of aggression replacement training used to promote the well-being of student offenders (Almakhamreh et al., 2020). This study showed reduced aggression when using aggression replacement training with aggressive youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The students in the

study reported that after taking the training, they learned how to manage situations that would have otherwise resulted in aggression (Almakhamreh et al., 2020).

Mentalization-Based Training. Domon-Archambault et al. (2020) suggested that mentalization-based intervention can be used to work with this population, as childcare workers reported that these techniques assisted with minimizing aggressive behaviors in children. In child welfare residential care settings, aggression, hostility, and defiance are prevalent and cause significant challenges for childcare workers (Domon-Archambault et al., 2020). It is essential to understand that aggression in children is not necessarily caused by defiance but can be a loss of mentalizing capacity in children (Domon-Archambault et al., 2020)

Cultural Sensitivity Training. Lack of cultural sensitivity can be seen as a result of limited resources for social workers (Howard, 2021). Howard (2021) noted out that social workers should be prepared to assess trauma symptoms and approach Black children with an understanding of resilience and an appreciation of the culture. As such, cultural sensitivity training is another possible strategy for minimizing stress and burnout in social workers.

Reducing Job Demands

Handling high caseloads for extended periods can interfere with social workers' abilities to complete their obligations effectively and lead to high burnout levels (Ahmad et al., 2021). Reducing job demands could encompass lowering caseloads and having supportive leadership (Kranke et al., 2022). Also, maintaining regular routines and having adequate resources can promote social worker well-being (Kranke et al., 2022).

Encouraging Personal Growth and Development

Personal resources refer to how much control individuals have over their environments (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023). Bakker and van Wingerden (2021) used a quasiexperimental research design to determine when personal resources intervention combined with strengths can increase work engagement using the JD-R model. Participants were 102 individuals enrolled in personal resource training. Multivariate analysis of variance showed that personal resources such as resilience, self-efficiency, and assertiveness can significantly impact work engagement (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021). Bakker and van Wingerden used the JD-R model in discussing personal resources as a critical factor in improving work engagement. Findings here showed that social workers can use their strengths to increase work engagement (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021).

Social workers with high resilience, self-efficiency, and assertiveness are confident they can advocate for themselves, handle unforeseen events, and recover from failure and adversity (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021). Social support from supervisors not only increases employees' personal resources and stress reactions (Jolly et al., 2021) but also plays a crucial role in promoting work-life balance and self-efficiency while enhancing work engagement (Wolter et al., 2019). Personal growth and development in social workers can be encouraged in various ways. I describe some of these approaches next.

Interventions for Work-Related Stressors. Orsi-Hunt et al. (2023) and Cummings et al. (2020) studied STS and burnout, discussed next. Neither found effective

interventions for working with this population. Cummings et al. suggested increasing protective factors for social workers, and Orsi-Hunt et al. found that social workers using the Resilience Alliance (RA) still needed multiple interventions.

Cummings et al. (2020) investigated coping mechanisms concerning burnout, STS, and vicarious trauma in 228 protective service workers. Study participants stated that insufficient attention has been paid to the stress reactions that protective service workers experience. Cummings et al. administered the Brief COPE to measure coping styles and frequencies of stressful events and reactions to work-related events. Using regression analysis, they found that socially supported coping was the only strategy that predicted less burnout, but no coping strategies combated STS or vicarious symptoms. The findings revealed a need to increase protective factors in child protective workers to combat work-related stress instead of focusing on traditional coping strategies. Based on their findings, Cummings et al. suggested researching interventions focusing on work-related stressors.

Orsi-Hunt et al.'s (2023) study added to the conversation on what method best assists with enhancing protective factors for child welfare workers dealing with STS. The RA model was developed to help workers create skills and behaviors that support physical and psychological well-being, which enable workers to execute successful child welfare practices. RA is a 24-week facilitated program designed to alleviate the impact of STS among child welfare workers, promote job satisfaction, resilience, and optimism, and decrease stress, burnout, reactivity, and turnover (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2023). The program was developed to create a healthier work environment after acknowledging the

link between STS and turnover (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2023). RA proposes acknowledging that STS will expand resilience while burnout and STS will minimize and decrease worker attrition (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2023).

Participants in Orsi-Hunt et al. (2023) were supervisor units of caseworkers and superiors were randomized to the RA treatment condition or controlled condition. Findings showed that the program helped lower the case workers' intent on searching for a new job. However, Orsi-Hunt et al. reported that the RA model did not significantly reduce caseworker turnover and recommended using multiple interventions in the future. Orsi-Hunt et al. stated that using a cluster randomized control trial design to evaluate the effectiveness of the RA model was a limitation in this study. The authors further noted that the cluster design movement occurred between treatment and control groups due to the workers transferring (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2023).

Reflective Practices. Given child welfare social workers' many responsibilities, their workdays can often be long and overwhelming. Reflective supervision is critical in managing the emotional demands of working with aggressive youth (Pelech et al., 2021). Implementing reflective practice has been shown to significantly reduce stress by providing crucial emotional support on the job (Strumm, 2023). Moreover, reflective practice is a powerful tool in enabling social workers to remain in the field for longer, thereby reducing the risk of burnout and turnover (Curry & Epley, 2022).

In an exploratory study, Strumm (2023) examined reflective practice using semi structured individual interviews sought to explore the benefits of reflective practice on social workers practicing social work in a global development capacity. The participants

were 13 female social workers ages 23–63 years who worked for the government and nongovernment organizations and as consultants in the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Strumm used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit and identify participants for the study. The data were thematically analyzed and offered insights into reflective practice with social workers practicing global development work.

Strumm (2023) found that reflective practice can be used for self-care and to reduce stress, fear, uncertainty, and feelings of exhaustion when working in challenging and complex conditions that lack formal supervision and support. She also found that this strategy can assist with working abroad and away from their home communities.

Findings also showed that workplace leaders needed to see the importance of reflective practice opportunities when combating environmental and workplace stressors (Strumm, 2023).

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore and identify how child welfare social workers who service justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors perceive job demands, resources, and the impact of these factors on their social work practice. The JD-R model, which Bakker and Demerouti (2007) created as an alternative to previous models to focus on the well-being of employees (Janse, 2025), was suitable for this study. The JD-R model framework is founded on the effort-reward imbalance model, created by Sigrist in 1996, which posits that job strain is an imbalance of effort and rewards (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

There are several challenges among child welfare social workers working with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors, such as job demands, stress complications, retention, and job resources. The problem that drove this study was a lack of knowledge regarding the perceptions of job-related stressors such as job demands, available resources, and burnout, among child welfare social workers in Ohio working with justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. Child welfare social workers are crucial in assisting these youth, and their efforts are invaluable. They are relied on heavily as they are the profession responsible for investigating trauma, making appropriate referrals, coordinating care, and assisting with keeping children safe from further harm or harming others.

This study was significant in that minimal research on this particular segment of the social work population has been conducted. This study brought awareness to the field of social work of the need to improve work conditions for this population. Racine et al. (2020) recognized challenges in assisting traumatized youth as these youth often have trouble with emotional regulation and difficulties naming their dissociative behaviors. They are also often reluctant to talk about the trauma in what they view as an unsafe environment.

The significance of the study to the social work practice was in allowing child welfare social workers to provide their perceptions of job demands and resources and in bringing awareness to the support needed by child welfare social workers when they work with justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. Further, there is a gap in the research specific to the perceptions of this segment of the social work

population in the state of Ohio. Findings from this research could significantly impact professional practice by providing a platform for these social workers. The findings could also pave the way for positive social change when social workers successfully intervene with these youth. Furthermore, social workers may be able to influence policy change to support frontline workers' success in their jobs and interventions, thereby fostering a more supportive and effective system. In Section 2, I discuss the methodology used to conduct this study and gather the data to address these knowledge gaps.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The experiences of child welfare social workers in Ohio working with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors were examined in this study. Child welfare social workers face stressful jobs and heavy expectations to protect children. Social workers in child welfare have essential needs that must be met for them to be successful in the field of child protection and to carry out their job responsibilities. Investigating how child welfare social workers face adversities and how turnover rates might be reduced is crucial since child protection is a vital governmental entity. Section 2 contains descriptions for the research design, methodology, data collection, and ethical procedures.

Research Design

I conducted this qualitative study to explore the perceptions of child welfare social workers in Ohio who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors. I explored their experiences to understand the feelings of burnout among them as well. Three RQs underpinned this study:

RQ1: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the job demands experienced on the job?

RQ2: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors perceive job burnout?

RQ3: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the employer-provided resources available to address these stressors?

I engaged in basic qualitative research for this study. Interviews were conducted to understand the social workers who provide services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors who experience daily stressors on the job. The goal was to develop a greater understanding of the following: what resources are available to these individuals through their employer, how these social workers perceive burnout, and how they perceive the impact of their work on their personal lives. Given this goal, a basic qualitative design was determined the best fit for this study. This research design involves collecting data on how participants explain their experiences, construct their worlds, and process their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), with the goal of revealing and clarifying experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This goal was accomplished through interviews with 10 child welfare social workers, all of whom provided insights into the demands of their jobs and the resources needed to decrease burnout. Their insights increased the knowledge of what child welfare social workers experience when working with aggressive, traumatized youth. Social workers are first-hand witnesses of the effectiveness of programming or lack thereof. The open-ended questions allowed social workers in this study to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Methodology

Recruitment

This basic qualitative study consisted of gathering data from child welfare social workers who have worked with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. I collected data from individual virtual interviews with social workers who were working in child welfare at the time of this study; specifically, who were working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors.

I used flyers and emails to recruit social workers who work in child welfare. I accessed the email addresses of the child welfare social workers in Ohio from their agency's main website. I used snowball sampling and purposive sampling to recruit prospective participants. According to Hassan (2024), purposive sampling allows the researcher to recruit participants that will inform the study based on their position. Almost all research has purposive sampling, which is when the participant's characteristics are defined for the purpose of the study (Andrade, 2021).

Snowball sampling relies on word-of-mouth participant recruitment. When I spoke to prospective participants, I asked them to forward my information to colleagues they believed would match the criteria for study participation. By using snowball sampling, there was the potential that social workers who were most interested in this study would provide helpful, detailed information.

When I spoke to potential participants, I asked them to give the flyer to other social workers. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study contacted me by phone or email. I sent them an informed consent form via email and asked them to

reply, “I consent.” Once the informed consent was received, I emailed screening questions to determine study eligibility. This approach resulted in the desired sample size of 10 participants, which was determined the size to achieve saturation.

Participants

The participants were full-time social workers with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and currently working in a child welfare agency in the state of Ohio. I have a work history with one of the agencies in this study dating back to 2010. Eligibility questions identified the child welfare social workers who had worked with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Appendix A contains the eligibility questionnaire sent to potential participants.

Once the eligibility questionnaires were completed and the participants were determined to be appropriate for the study, I assigned them pseudonyms to ensure their identities would be unknown. I then sent them emails to schedule their interviews along with several appointment options.

I conducted the interviews using Secure Video, a videoconferencing platform that is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). All the interviews were audio recorded and conducted in a setting convenient for the participants. Online interviews provided more flexibility when scheduling, eliminated travel for participants, was more time efficient, and eliminated my having to pay for secure, private interview space.

The interviews were semistructured and included open-ended questions. Asking these questions can lead to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon; in this case child

welfare social workers' perceptions of job demands and resources based on their experiences and understanding. Collecting data from these participants aligned with the research study as they were able to share their experiences and perceptions of job demands and resources.

Instrumentation

As the researcher, I was also the study's primary data collection and analysis instrument. I conducted individual interviews to collect data from the study participants. Individual interviews allow for participants to share their experiences, beliefs, and views (Gill et al., 2008). The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of how child welfare social workers who service justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors interpret job demands and resources. I used findings from the literature reviewed for this study to develop an interview protocol, which was a nine-item questionnaire designed to prompt responses from the study participants. The interviews included open-ended questions to allow feedback and elaboration on responses, as recommended in Boon (2020). Appendix B contains the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

I used Atlas.ti to transcribe the data from each interview. I then took notes on each interview. Next, thematic analysis took place through coding the interviews, which identified the common themes in the social workers' comments. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), there are seven steps for the analysis of an interview, but these steps are not always taken in sequence and may not apply to every study. The steps I took included the following:

1. Transcribed each interview verbatim.
2. Defined, found, and marked excerpts in the transcriptions with relevant themes and concepts.
3. Found excerpts marked with the same code and sorted them in a single data file; then summarized the contents of each file.
4. Sorted and resorted the material in each file. Compared the excerpts between the different subgroups and then summarized the results of each sorting.
5. Integrated the descriptions from interviewees after weighing the different versions to create a complete picture.
6. Combined concepts and themes to generate themes to answer the RQs.

Qualitative interviewing produces highly credible results as every conclusion is tightly linked to solid evidence and is embedded in a context (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Credibility is achieved by showing that one has talked to informed people about the research concerns (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I performed member checking by sending emails to the participants, inviting them to discuss the transcripts and provide their feedback regarding the accuracy of the information. This step helps to ensure credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). If a participant determined an incorrect interpretation, I corrected the wording during the follow-up meeting, as recommended in Korstjens and Moser (2018). By performing member checking, I ensured that the data were accurate and reliable.

Transferability refers to the findings being applicable should readers want to transfer the findings to their own settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure

transferability, I provided descriptive data such as adequate sample size, criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and the interview procedure, again following guidance in Korstjens and Moser (2018). Quotes from participants were used to provide richness and variety in the findings.

Trustworthiness is the truthfulness, authenticity, and quality of qualitative research (Stahl & King, 2020). It can be increased through in-depth interviewing and by asking the participants why they believe something is as it is (Saldaña, 2016). As part of ensuring trustworthiness, I performed in-depth interviews and audio recorded the interviews. I also completed member checks. Dependability was achieved by having in-depth interviews and asking questions to more than one person independently to see if the results were the same, as recommended in Babbie (2015). This study included 10 participants who were asked the same questions. I achieved dependability by providing enough information so that the research can be performed again, as detailed in Maher et al. (2018). Furthermore, dependability and confirmability were documented by providing the research steps throughout the project, as recommended in Korstjens and Moser (2018).

Ethical Procedures

The three main principles of ethics in research are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for participants includes not revealing their identities or statements they speak and do not want to disclose (Surmiak, 2020). The present study's participants were not identified, and they were allowed to omit any statement they did not want recorded. They were also advised that they could opt out of the study at any point.

Beneficence challenges the researcher to minimize the risk to the participant while maximizing the benefit (Siddiqui & Sharp, 2021). Beneficence was demonstrated by allowing the participants to choose the most comfortable settings for their virtual interviews. Lastly, justice was a guiding principle in this study. All participants were treated with fairness and equality, thereby upholding the integrity of the study.

I obtained an approval number from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting this study. The informed consent form was sent to the selected participants via email once each participant expressed an interest in participating in the study. The participants sent back the completed consent form to my email address. The informed consent explained the purpose of the study and its procedures. Other details included sample questions, the voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of the study, that payment would be provided to some of the participants, confidentiality, contact information, how to contact me with questions, and the acknowledgment of participant consent to participate in the study.

This study involved some risk of minor discomfort that can be encountered in daily life, such as sharing sensitive information while discussing their experience of working in child welfare with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors. I limited potential stress by allowing the participants to take breaks if needed and by allowing them to share their feelings. Furthermore, the number to the Research Participant Advocate at Walden University was provided on the consent form in case participants had questions about their rights.

I emailed participants the eligibility questionnaire. Once the participants completed this form, they received a pseudonym via email to protect their identity, and individual interviews were scheduled. The interviews were completed online through the HIPAA-complaint Secure Video. The interviews were about 20 min long and audio recorded to maintain confidentiality. I reiterated to the participants that the interviews were entirely voluntary and that they could opt out at any time with no consequences.

The data were kept confidential throughout this study and only accessible to my committee chair and me. I followed Walden University's IRB rules regarding the storage and discarding of data. The data from this research project were downloaded on a secure flash drive and will be secured in a lock box for 5 years. After 5 years, the data on the flash drive will be removed, and the drive will be demolished. Furthermore, any hard copies of the data will be professionally shredded and demolished. The research from this project will only be used for this study.

Summary

This qualitative study, aimed at understanding the experiences of job demands, resources, and burnout among child welfare social workers, had the potential to significantly impact the social work field. I specifically focused on social workers who provided services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. The study findings could lead to developing targeted interventions and support systems, thereby improving the well-being of social workers and the quality of services provided.

The research design involved selecting 10 child welfare social workers who serve justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors to participate in individual

interviews. All participants were employed by a child welfare agency that provided services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors, and they had a minimum of 3 years of employment within the system. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants. The data were collected through audio-recorded individual interviews using Secure Video, a HIPAA-compliant platform, ensuring the confidentiality and security of the process. Atlas.ti was used to discover emerging themes during data analysis. In Section 3, I present the findings from analyzing the data that were collected for this study.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of job demands, resources, and burnout among child welfare social workers who provide services to justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. Another aim was to understand work-related stressors that child welfare social workers experience when working with justice-involved youth and how resources can assist social workers. Basic qualitative methodology was used to collect data through semistructured interviews with 10 study participants working with these youth in the state of Ohio. The RQs were as follows:

RQ1: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the job demands experienced on the job?

RQ2: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors perceive job burnout?

RQ3: How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the employer-provided resources available to address these stressors?

This section begins with a discussion of the data analysis conducted for this study, including details on data collection timeframe, data analysis procedures, validation procedures, and limitations encountered when conducting this study. Following this is a section on findings, including descriptive statistics and a findings report, organized by RQ. The section closes with a summary.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Collection

I employed purposive sampling by contacting every child service agency in Ohio via email and requesting that the email be shared with their workers. I also made a post in the NASW Ohio chapter newsletter requesting participants who met the study criteria. Lastly, I emailed research invitations to various university staff in Ohio, requesting that they share the invitation with individuals they believed would meet the study's criteria. I employed snowball sampling, where participants were asked to refer others who met the study's criteria and were willing to participate.

The invitation email provided included a brief explanation of the study with my contact information for potential participants. Individuals interested in the study contacted me via my email address or phone number, as provided in the invitation email or recruitment flyer, to express their interest. They were then emailed a consent form that outlined the study's purpose, expectations, benefits, and possible risks. Respondents who remained interested in participating responded to the consent form by emailing "I consent." Next, they were sent an eligibility questionnaire, and those who met the criteria were informed via email that an interview needed to be scheduled. I emailed participants possible dates and times to interview. Also, participants were informed that the interview would take place on a HIPAA-compliant platform, which Zoom manages.

I collected data after receiving approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (approval no. 03-03-25-1001407). Data recruitment and collection were conducted from March 4 through July 21, 2025. Twelve individuals expressed interest in this study.

However, only 10 showed up and completed their scheduled interviews. Two participants completed all necessary forms but failed to schedule an interview, despite follow-up emails encouraging participation.

Because of recruitment difficulties, a participation incentive (\$25 Amazon gift card)was added to attract more participants. Walden University's IRB approved this incentive toward the end of the recruitment period, and the recruitment flyer and consent form were updated to reflect the incentive. Additionally, the criteria were revised to eliminate the licensing requirement for study participants, which broadened the participant pool. Furthermore, while my initial intent was to focus on child welfare social workers at one child welfare agency in northeast Ohio, recruitment was extended to all child welfare agencies in the entire state in order to obtain more participants.

I conducted semistructured interviews with all study participants, using an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions designed to gather data related to the study purpose and to help ensure reliability and consistency. I asked the same questions during each interview. I also asked probing questions to gain clarity, gather additional information, and collect in-depth insights.

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the study purpose, confidentiality, and obtained consent for an audio-only interview. I took notes during each interview for accuracy. There were no unusual circumstances during the interviews. The same procedure was followed for all interviews, and there were no interruptions. The agreed consents and audio recordings were all kept electronically on a password-protected computer. My notes were kept in a fireproof and waterproof safe at my home.

Data Analysis Procedure

I used Atlas.ti to transcribe the interviews before beginning data analysis. After transcription, I reviewed each document to correct grammar and spelling issues that were not detected during transcription. I also checked the transcriptions for any identifying information, such as the names of specific child welfare agencies, and redacted this information. Each transcript was labeled with the pseudonym assigned to the participant, for example, Gracen, Casey, Cameron.

I listened to the interviews and read the transcripts several times to highlight important responses from the interviews. I then organized the data and used thematic analysis to code them. This analysis reflected the recurring themes that emerged from the participant interviews. The following are the steps I undertook as part of this process:

1. Reviewed and analyzed the data.
2. Categorized each statement under a broad code, and deleted any that did not fit.
3. Grouped similar statements, and identified specific themes.
4. Identified (a) common themes that related to the experiences of the participants and (b) participant quotations that illustrated each theme.
5. Interpreted the results to answer the RQs.

Table 1 shows the main themes and codes that I identified.

Table 1

Themes and Codes

Theme	Code
Emotional demands	Burnout

	Posttraumatic stress disorder
	Inadequacy
	Case management
	Fear
	Not sleeping
	Youth behavior
	Physical confrontation
	Frustration
	Stress
	Health problems resulting from stress
	Perception of injustice
	Emotional burden
	Emotional toll
	Emotional challenges
	Confusion
	Verbal de-escalation
	Anxiety
	Lack of safety
Desire to be helpful	Motivation
	Job performance
	Compassion
	Job focus
	Complexity
	Ineffectiveness
	Not doing enough
Lack of support from other systems and collaterals involved with this population	Juvenile court systems
	Case navigation
	Inconsistency
	Changing demands
	Accountability
	Collaboration
Lack of preparedness	Work overload
	Job demands
	Lack of training
	Job performance
	Clarification
	Career development
	Resource limitation
	Safety measures
	Complexity
	Not prepared to deal with aggressive behaviors
	Inadequacy

Table 2 includes interview excerpts associated with the themes.

Table 2

Themes and Illustrative Participant Responses

Theme	Example quote
Emotional demands	<p>“Maybe management does not make it easy for us in providing a work environment that is supportive to us meeting those demands.”</p> <p>“To balance it out, that work–home life. To separate the two. And some people never learn how to ... To balance it, and it’s sad, and that’s how, burnout happened, and some people develop different diseases, and ... It’s sad to say some even die in the process.”</p> <p>“If you don’t know how to balance everything and manage your time.”</p> <p>“It does take a toll on you. You become physically overwhelmed; you can become fatigued.”</p> <p>“I was coming home every day with headaches, tired, exhausted. Because you take the job home with you.”</p> <p>“I could say for me, I have experienced secondary trauma.”</p> <p>“Because it feels like you have all the pressure of the world on you after dealing with everybody else ... You’re trying to help everybody process their things, their emotions, their feelings, um, their trauma. And then at times. You feel like you don’t have an outlet.” So, I think you feel consumed. Or at least I feel consumed at times ... It is hard, and it’s an emotional toll on you.”</p> <p>“Making sure that I meet with all the people involved in the cases. So, all the providers, all the parents, the foster parents, the court involvement, attend court hearings, documentation, of course, treatment plan, safety plans, and continue to hold engagement with the family.”</p> <p>“And that’s my job also to empower them to be parents. You know? And sometimes they don’t know how to be parents.”</p> <p>“I would say that it becomes it can become taxing.”</p> <p>“It was very taxing and stressful.”</p> <p>“I think in the past, it made me defensive and bitter.”</p> <p>“I’m hyperfocused on safety now.”</p>
Desire to be helpful	<p>“Are the parents willing to take them back in? That’s often a major issue.”</p> <p>“To the point where you question whether or not did I do enough?”</p> <p>“You’re steady trying to help a child that needs help.”</p> <p>“A very punitive and oppressive environment when all we’re trying to do is do the right thing by our kids.”</p> <p>“And it does take a toll on you because you really wanna help some of these kids where you see that they have a lot of potential, but they just don’t know it.”</p> <p>“And they’re going down a road of destruction, and you trying to prevent them from going there, but you also have to realize that you only can control one person, and that’s you in the process of trying to help them.”</p> <p>“Questioning if you gave enough to that child.”</p>

Validation Procedures

I used member checking to validate the accuracy of participants' shared experiences. Participants were invited to partake in this process. To systematically manage the data, I created a comprehensive Microsoft Word document that outlined the participants' responses to the interview questions, as well as the emerging themes, codes, and quotes. This document was then reviewed with the participants, who confirmed the accuracy of the captured information. Their additional feedback was also incorporated into the final findings, further enhancing the credibility of the research.

Limitations

One study limitation was the difficulty in recruiting participants. As a result, more extensive recruitment was conducted, and revisions were made to the inclusion criteria. Initially, participants were required to have a license as a social worker, which was subsequently omitted. Instead of focusing recruitment on one child welfare agency in Ohio, I instead sought participants from every child welfare agency in the state. I also contacted colleges in Ohio, and the NASW Ohio Chapter. I initially relied largely on snowball sampling and subsequently implemented an incentive for participation to attract more participants.

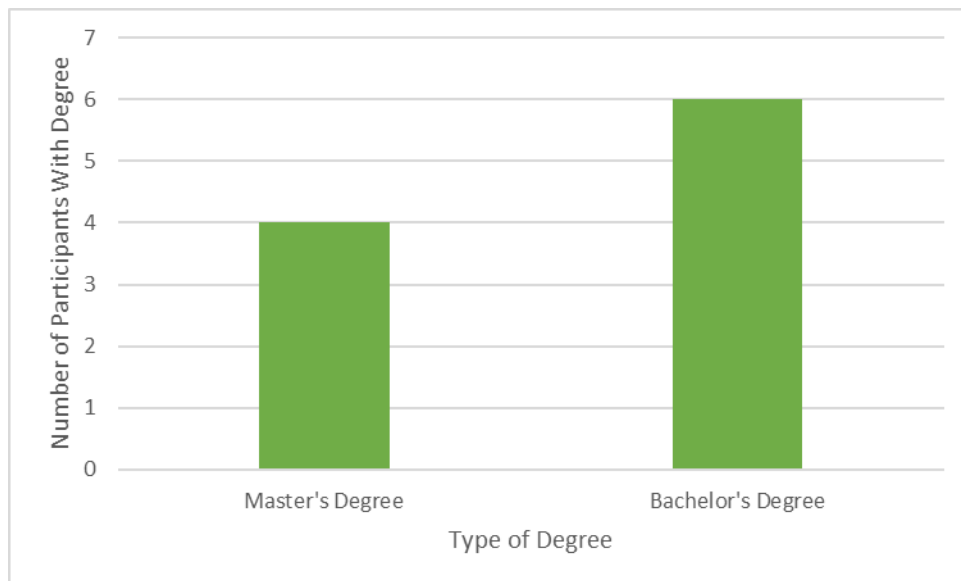
Because of these issues, the sample size was not as large or as inclusive as I initially intended. Twelve social workers completed the necessary paperwork but did not schedule an interview, resulting in a sample of 10 participants. Only female child welfare social workers agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, the experiences of male child welfare social workers are not presented.

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

I conducted a qualitative study, interviewing 10 child welfare social workers who serve justice-involved youth in Ohio. All participants met the study criteria: They were child welfare social workers employed by a child welfare agency, had at least 3 years of experience as a social worker, and held at least a bachelor's degree in social work. Additionally, the inclusion criteria included individuals who had personally or socially experienced negative impacts while working with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors and burnout. Exclusionary criteria included individuals not currently employed by a child welfare agency and those who did not have at least a bachelor's degree in social work.

Notably, the years of employment ranged from 5 to 40 years in child welfare (average years of experience = 23.8), showcasing a diverse range of experiences. The years with child welfare for each participant were as follows: 5 (Participant 1), 10 (Participant 2), 21 (Participant 3), 23 (Participant 4), 24 (Participant 5), 26 (Participant 6), 27 (Participant 7), 30 (Participant 8), 32 (Participant 9), and 40 (Participant 10). Figure 1 shows education levels for the study sample. The highest educational level reported was a master's degree in social work, with four of the 10 participants holding this degree. The others held bachelor's degrees.

Figure 1*Participant Education Levels***Findings for Research Question 1**

RQ1 was, How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the job demands experienced on the job? The participants identified a variety of job demands such as logistical, emotional, desire to help, and independent accountability. Demi described job demands as “So, like, we may go to court and not represent them but definitely support them and know what’s going on and making sure that they follow-up. So, I’d say a lot of demands.” Adrienne provided a more detailed description:

Making sure that I meet with all the people involved in the cases. So, all the providers, all the parents, the foster parents, the court involvement, attend court

hearings, documentation, of course, treatment plan, safety plans, and continue to hold engagement with the family.

About logistical demands, Erin said, “Sometimes it can be the stressful time constraints and deadlines for meeting the guidelines of maybe referring for services and all the paperwork that comes with it.” Harper described the emotional demands in her job in stating, “I come home drained in that aspect emotionally with dealing with the kids.”

Gracen also described emotional demands:

I’ve been doing this for 30 years, and I’m 64 years old. And, while I think I’m in really good shape and I go to the gym, I am not able to physically stop anyone.

I’m not supposed to anyway, I did have a situation just 2 weeks ago where a client got in my face and body checked me, pushing me backwards. And I have to say that’s made me very nervous because that’s honestly the first time that something like that has happened in 30 years, and it’s scary.

Casey described the desire to help: “I think it’s beyond stressful. At times, it seems depressing and sometimes hopeless. I think it places a lot of worry on the outcomes of these young adults or these youth and what their lives will look like.” Cali talked about the logistics and emotional demands of the job and said,

I am concerned for their own safety and welfare. I am concerned for whether or not their placements are going to exacerbate any of their behaviors. I am concerned about whether or not we have the ability to find a placement for that youth. It’s anxiety provoking.

Finally, Blair described independent accountability as the following:

You're the one held accountable. You're the one blamed when something goes wrong. It's all on you as the case worker, and that's part of the frustration too. All these other systems get to sit back and point fingers, and you have these meetings with all these other systems. And you're the one that walks out with a giant to-do list, ain't nobody else but you. Job demands can be stressful and can be related to burnout.

Findings for Research Question 2

RQ2 was, How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors perceive job burnout? The participants reported mental health conditions, lacking preparedness for their jobs, having too many demands, and not having enough resources. They also reported having very demanding job with few supports.

Adrienne simply stated that "I would say that it [her job] can become taxing," which reflected all themes identified. Blair stated that her work was "very taxing and stressful" and that in the past "it made me defensive and bitter." She added that her work has "a very punitive and oppressive environment when all we're trying to do is do the right thing by our kids" and that "not having staff to really know how to engage children" concerned her.

Harper identified several key concerns in the following comments: "I could say for me, I have experienced secondary trauma. If you don't take care of yourself, you can develop high blood pressure and diabetes. You're leaving the job frustrated." Demi described mental health distress:

You definitely can get depressed, tired, anxiety, just making sure you did everything, making sure you are caught up. So, yeah, I'd say the big one's depression, tired, drained mentally, and anxiety. So, it's overwhelming with all the work that has to be done.

Erin's comments were in a similar vein:

At times, you can become very mentally fatigued, overwhelmed, and feel like you just maybe not making a difference at that particular time. But then you know that you are, but it's still frustrating and overwhelming. ... Sometimes having to do excessive visits to make sure that you are providing the services that they need, it can become more cumbersome.

Finally, Cali talked about being unprepared for the job: "But there's not really anything in our onboarding process to prepare you specifically for working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors." Child welfare social workers have discussed their perception of burnout, and below, they will report employee-provided resources to address work stressors.

Findings for Research Question 3

RQ3 was, How do child welfare social workers who work with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors describe the employer-provided resources available to address these stressors? The participants reported having limited resources or the proper resources given the demand. Adrienne stated, "The agency offers a lot of different trainings." Blair said, "I know they provide supervision hours for people getting their LISW [licensed independent social worker credential]."

Cali said, “We can use agency vehicles. We also have these I don’t even know what they’re called. I call them like life alert buttons.” Demi provided a more detailed response:

We have cell phones. All of us have agency issued cell phones if you want it, or we can use our own cell phone and have a stipend that they pay. Safety would be ... We used to, not all of us now, but we had a fob that we could keep on our key ring, or around our neck or anything. And you can push it and alert the police to come for you.

Safety concerns were also reflected in Erin’s comments: “Sometimes I feel that our safety can be at risk. You know, when you’re out by yourself conducting visits or, home visits and, you know, with, children having aggressive behaviors, you just don’t know what could be next.” The child welfare social workers reported employer-provided resources, and the next section will discuss unexpected findings in the research.

Unexpected Findings

There were many unexpected findings in this study. One was the mismatch between child welfare workers’ resources and the job stressors they face as one of the most pressing issues. This lack of resources not only affects workers’ well-being but also their ability to effectively carry out their duties.

Another unexpected finding was that the study participants questioned if they were making a difference. This uncertainty appeared to be a direct result of inadequate support for their jobs. Based on their comments, agencies are not preparing workers for

the emotional strain of the jobs. There are few safeguards in place to ensure worker safety, and they feel they must take extra precautions even when not in the field.

Comments from the participants reflected feelings that substantial blame and responsibility is placed on the workers, and there is not much collaboration. Further, they perceived that job duties are not equal among colleagues. They also voiced concerns about a lack of support for these workers on all levels, meaning from other professionals and the agency. They noted concerns about workers are unprepared, and there is a notable difference between the perspectives of seasoned and amateur workers, such as on the reasons behind the aggressive behaviors of juvenile justice-involved youth. They also noted that many child welfare workers do not have a social work degree or are not licensed.

Summary

Section 3 presented the perception of job demands and resources among child welfare social workers. The 10 interviews conducted were audio recorded and confidential. Permission from all participants was obtained. The participants electronically signed and provided consent by responding “I consent” to the email.

All participants worked with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors and shared their experiences with job demands and resources. All participants were female. They all held a bachelor’s degree in social work or higher. The length of time as a child welfare worker ranged from 5 to 40 years, with the average length of employment in child welfare being 23.8 years. Themes emerged from the data as I listened and read through them, using open coding and thematic analysis. The

participants reported an overall desire to be helpful. However, they lacked the resources to be as impactful as they would like to be. Eight participants reported experiencing burnout.

Section 4 is a brief overview of the interpretation of the themes, emphasizing the implications for social change. The chapter provides applications for professional ethics in social work practice and recommendations for social work practice and underscores the crucial need for social change. The research findings discussed in Section 4 point to the necessity of addressing resource limitations and burnout among child welfare social workers and highlight the importance of this work for the future of child welfare.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore and identify how child welfare social workers who serve justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors perceive job demands, resources, and burnout and how these issues impact their social work practice. This study was significant in that many researchers have studied stress in children's services workers, but few have focused on job demands and resources among this population of child welfare social workers. Social workers are key players in assisting traumatized youth. They are relied on heavily as they are the profession responsible for investigating trauma, making appropriate referrals, coordinating care, and helping to keep children safe from further harm.

The insights gained from this research could significantly enhance professional practice. By providing a platform for child welfare social workers to articulate their experiences when dealing with justice-involved youth exhibiting aggressive behaviors, this study offers valuable guidance for improving support systems. Key findings, such as the emotional demands, systems and collaterals, lack of preparation, and desire to be helpful, can inform the development of more effective strategies and interventions. Furthermore, the study findings can contribute to the broader field of social work by enriching the understanding of a population of social workers that has been underresearched.

In the following section, I share insights on how the research findings impact social work practice. I explain how the findings reflect or relate to specific principles or values from the NASW's code of ethics. Lastly, I offer implications for social change.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

In 2021, NASW updated its code of ethics to include self-care as a fundamental aspect of managing stress, burnout, and trauma exposure in the social work profession. NASW emphasized that self-care is not just a personal choice but a professional obligation, as it can significantly lower the risk of STS and enhance the effectiveness, emotional availability, and competence of social workers in serving their clients. Furthermore, NASW urged organizations to actively promote self-care, recognizing it as a key strategy in preventing burnout and acknowledging the importance of personal well-being. This underscores the responsibility of agencies in ensuring the well-being of their staff (NASW, 2021).

Findings in the present study highlighted that the study participants often lacked self-care while working in child welfare. There was little mention of promoting self-care. However, some participants reported that self-care was something they learned on their own because of psychosomatic illness, a new mental health diagnosis, as a result of stress or being sick and tired of feeling like they had nothing left for themselves or their families after leaving work. Although the average participant had worked in the child welfare field for 23.8 years, there were still participants being newly diagnosed with mental health illnesses because of job demands. However, study participants who started

implementing self-care felt like they could navigate the stress of the job and still give the clients the best care.

As identified in the NASW code of ethics (NASW, 2021), self-care is essential to job performance and the prevention of burnout. Child welfare agencies should ensure that their workers understand self-care through training and actively engage in self-care discussions during supervision. This will not only provide a platform for sharing experiences and ideas but also foster a culture of well-being and support among colleagues.

Another aspect of the NASW code of ethics that this research reflects is the set of guidelines that researchers must follow, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant welfare, assessing participants' ability to use the technology effectively, maintaining ethical integrity, and demonstrating cultural competence (NASW, 2016). All participants were emailed informed consent forms that explained the purpose of the study, potential risks or benefits, and the procedures involved. All of the participants responded "I consent" to acknowledge that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Participants were informed of the potential risks of this research. They acknowledged that they were able to use the technology to complete the audio-recorded interviews. All interviews were confidential, and participants were made aware of the research methods. Cultural competence was demonstrated by inviting participants from all child welfare agencies in Ohio to participate in the study, provided they met the

criteria, and were not selected based on race, gender, age, religious beliefs, or any other demographics.

This research can support social work practice as it allowed child welfare social workers to explain their experiences with job resources and demands when encountering justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. The findings may lead to positive social change and reduce burnout rates. Additionally, this research may contribute to policy changes that bolster the success of child welfare social workers in meeting their job demands.

Findings from this study can bring about positive changes in the field of social work. Results from evaluating job resources and demands can be used to help inform initiatives for improving resources for child welfare social workers serving justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. Providing an opportunity for child welfare social workers to share their perspectives on job demands and resources resulted in findings that raised the awareness of the support child welfare social workers in these challenging roles need.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

I next discuss an intervention for child welfare social workers and organizations to address job demands and resources. This intervention calls for child welfare agencies to establish committees to review the social workers' job duties and ensure that there are adequate resources to support the social workers in their roles. Child welfare agencies should review the impact of their practices and policies to ensure that they provide positive support for social workers (Rubinia et. al, 2025). Child welfare agencies should

work to build better support systems for their workers, both internally and externally, through various collaborations. Establishing committees to provide this review can be an important first step in building these systems.

Child welfare social workers are the key players in delivering favorable outcomes for children. As such, more of a team approach is needed (De Guzman et al., 2020). When meetings are held regarding services provided for justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors, all agencies involved need to leave with something to do to enhance the well-being of the youth, not just the child welfare social workers.

Policies should be implemented to guide the support of justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors that outline the necessary resources for child welfare social workers. In fact, Spratt and Kennedy (2021) suggest that future research should focus on social workers reporting what services work best under which circumstances to influence policy changes for children who face adverse childhood experiences. Also, training should be put in place for child welfare workers on how to not only de-escalate behavioral problems in these youth but also how to care for social workers' emotional and social needs (Tesi, 2021). Also, extra supervision for these workers should be allowed in order to gain insights into these cases, share ideas, and create a more supportive workplace (Mack, 2020).

Child welfare workers should have allotted time during supervision for debriefing, where the supervisor offers suggestions and collaborates on brainstorming collateral that may enhance the case's success (Mack, 2020). Lastly, safety should be addressed not only in the office but also in the community. Agencies could consider

establishing safety committees to develop ideas and create policies and protocols for addressing aggressive behaviors in justice-involved youth (Lamothe et al., 2022). Such committees should investigate incidents where child welfare workers felt unsafe and provide support and intervention to ensure the safety of these workers.

The findings from this study will impact my social work practice as an advanced practitioner. I now understand the crucial balance between resources and demands in the workplace (Janse, 2025). Having adequate resources to meet the job's demands is essential for ensuring that social workers can perform their roles effectively. Without this equilibrium, emotional distress and burnout can occur.

As an advanced practitioner, I am committed to a team approach, ensuring that no one person is overwhelmed with all the responsibilities and accountability. I will also implement scheduled supervision to allow workers to check in and for supervisors to encourage supervisee self-care. During these sessions, supervisors will be empowered to link supervisees with resources, assist them with job demands, and teach them how to prioritize job responsibilities, thereby enhancing their capabilities and confidence (Mack, 2020).

Transferability

Job demands of and resources for child welfare social workers servicing justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors were investigated in this study. A key aspect of the methodology was using interviews to triangulate the findings, which helped to ensure the robustness and reliability of our results. The study findings can be applied to various

fields of social work and other professions, and the rich data and detailed methodology make it replicable for future research.

Usefulness of the Findings

This research filled gaps in what is known about the job demands and resources that impact how child welfare social workers in Ohio work with justice-involved children exhibiting aggressive behaviors. The findings in this study have practice, research and policy implications. Overall, these findings can encourage social workers, supervisors, children service agencies and other stakeholders to evaluate job demands and resources to maintain the longevity of child welfare social workers in the field.

Limitations to Usefulness

In qualitative research, generalization is not the goal, as the goal is to provide rich data regarding the experience of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). There were sampling limitations, as the study included only female participants, with an average work experience of 23.8 years. Consequently, no workers with less than 5 years of work experience were represented. The sample size was 10 participants, which represented only a few child welfare agencies in Ohio; therefore, this can be seen as a constraint. Time constraints were a significant factor, as the study was conducted during my doctoral program and was limited to being completed prior to my graduating the program.

Recommendations for Further Research

Given the recruitment challenges, it is crucial to encourage more social workers, especially males, to participate in future research studies. Despite the eligibility changes and the eventual offering of compensation, many qualified social workers did not take

part. I believe this was partly due to the reluctance of child welfare agencies to be scrutinized in the analysis of study findings. Additionally, I had hoped to interview at least one child welfare worker from every agency in Ohio.

Furthermore, there is a need for more in-depth studies on the safety and support of child welfare social workers. This is a crucial area that, if addressed, can significantly improve the working conditions and, consequently, the outcomes for the children they serve. Additionally, I recommend conducting more studies on the job demands and resources required when working with justice-involved youth who exhibit aggressive behaviors. Also, it will be beneficial to investigate the perceptions of child welfare social workers with under 5 years of experience regarding how prepared they feel for meeting the needs in their jobs. Lastly, getting the word out regarding a research study and gathering more participants can include recruitment through social media and podcasts.

Implications for Social Change

At a micro level, the findings from this study can encourage social workers to support each other and initiate dialogues with their supervisors about the support they need. They can also help them understand that they are not alone in their job-related stress and promote the importance of self-care to prevent burnout. By doing so, social workers can feel valued and cared for, fostering a sense of well-being and resilience in the face of challenges.

On a mezzo level, social workers should advocate for more comprehensive training and resources to better prepare them for the demands of their jobs. Child welfare agencies should provide training that simulates real-life job demands and teaches social

workers how to take care of their emotional and physical well-being. By advocating for these changes, social workers can feel more supported and equipped to handle their responsibilities, reducing the risk of burnout and increasing their effectiveness.

At a macro level, this study underscores the need for policies and procedures that address job demands and resources. These systemic changes are crucial in promoting positive social change, increasing morale, and deterring burnout. The study findings, particularly the participants' reports of a lack of training beyond de-escalation, should initiate discussions among stakeholders and social workers. These discussions should focus on the lack of resources and enable social workers to share their insights into the necessary resources they believe are lacking.

Summary

My aim in this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of job demands and resources among child welfare social workers providing services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. Conducting this study enabled child welfare social workers to share their perceptions of job demands and resources in the field of child welfare. The study findings suggested that child welfare social workers who serve justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors experience emotional demands, desire to be helpful, lack preparedness for work expectations, and lack support from other systems and collaterals involved with this population. Child welfare social workers feel that resources are limited outside of the training provided by child welfare agencies. However, this research also holds the potential to significantly impact the development of

effective strategies, support mechanisms, and policies that could lessen burnout and retain social workers in child welfare, offering a hopeful outlook for the future.

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Appendix A: Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

1. Have you obtained a bachelor's degree or higher in social work?

2. How long have you been employed in child welfare?

3. Have you worked as a social worker for at least three
years? _____
4. Do you currently work as a child welfare social worker servicing justice-involved
youth with aggressive behaviors? _____
5. Have you experienced negative impacts personally or socially as a social worker
working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
6. Have you experienced burnout? _____

Thank you for completing the participant eligibility questionnaire. The researcher will
contact you to schedule an interview if you qualify to participate in the research.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introductory Script

Hello, my name is Charnella Boykins. I am the researcher for this study on child welfare social workers' experiences when working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of job demands and resources among child welfare social workers providing services to justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors. I will ensure that this interview is confidential and that only the researcher will have access to this recording. For this research study, the interview will be audio recorded. Do you consent to the recording?

Questions

1. What physical demands does your workplace on you when working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
2. What emotional impact do you experience when working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
3. What do you find demanding about your work environment working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
4. What requirements does your work environment place on you when working with justice-involved youth with aggressive?
5. How has working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors affected you emotionally and mentally?

6. How has working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors effected your work behavior?
7. What resources does the agency provide to support your physical safety when working with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
8. What training does your agency provide to help you work with justice-involved youth with aggressive behaviors?
9. What resources do your agency provide to assist with your personal and professional goals?

After the transcription of this interview, I may reach out to you to verify that the transcription captured your responses accurately. This is also known as member checking. Thank you for participating in this interview.