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# The Impact of Caseworkers' Educational Background and Placement Outcomes for Foster Children

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Abstract

The Impact of Caseworkers' Educational Background and Placement Outcomes for

Foster Children

by

Katrina Haynes

MS, William Carey University, 2008

BS, University of Southern Mississippi, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Decades of data document that permanent placements of children in the welfare system has been a concern in Mississippi. As foster care rates increase, more children are awaiting placement. Researchers have linked child welfare workers' educational background to placement outcomes for foster care children; however, researchers have not addressed the relationship between child welfare workers' educational backgrounds and foster care placement outcomes in Mississippi. This quantitative study examined the educational backgrounds of social work and nonsocial work child welfare caseworkers and other factors such as children's gender and race as predictors in placement outcomes for children in welfare custody. Attachment theory was used to explain parent-child relationships and the importance of permanent, safe, and nurturing homes for children in the child welfare system. Secondary data were used from the 2017 archival records for 176 child welfare caseworkers' caseloads in the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS). A simple linear and multiple regression analysis was used to examine child welfare caseworkers' educational background and children's gender and race as predictors for the length of stay in placement outcomes. The results revealed that caseworkers' educational backgrounds were not a significant predictor of placement outcomes but gender and race combined were significant in predicting the length of stay in placement outcomes for children in custody. Results from this study could promote positive social change within MDCPS by providing data to inform agency policy and procedures for child welfare practice, which could then result in more timely placements of reunification or adoption for children in the welfare system who are currently spending 36 months or more in traditional foster care.

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## Dedication

In dedication to my beloved mother, Vanessa Denise Haynes. You left this earth way too soon but your legacy still lives on. Thank you, mom, for loving me and teaching me the real meaning of love, faith and perseverance. Though our time together was short, I am thankful for every lesson you taught me and forever grateful for all the memories you left behind. I am proud to say that I am glad that God chose me to be your daughter. I miss you dearly and you are always in my heart. I will love you always!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Permanent placement for children in the child welfare system means having a safe and long-term living situation either through reunification, adoption, or another alternative long-term placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2013). Permanent placement has been an ongoing issue for child welfare workers, dating back to Maas and Engler's (1959) research on what they called *foster care drift*, a term used when a child remains in foster care for an extended period of time (Myers, 2011). As the issue of permanency became more prevalent in foster care, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Public Law 96-272 (AACWA), was enacted, making family preservation and permanent placement the focus of child welfare practice (CWIG, 2013). In addition, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, Public Law 105-89 (ASFA), provided support for permanency and child safety in child welfare practice. Despite these enactments, permanency is still problematic for Mississippi's child welfare caseworkers, with children spending an average of 36 months or more in care without a permanent long-term placement (Mississippi Adoption and Foster Care, 2015).

Previous studies of child welfare practice have been linked to educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers (Bagdasaryan, 2012; Barbee, Sullivan, Huebner, Fox, & Hall, 2009; Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, 1987; Cortis & Meagher, 2012; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Rubin & Parnish, 2012; Scannapieco, Hegar, & Connell-Carrick, 2012). However, research on educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers as a contributing factor in permanent placement outcomes (Albers, Reilly, &

Rittner, 1993; Chabot et al., 2013; Perry, 2006; Ryan, Garner, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006;) is infrequent and needs further study, particularly in Mississippi. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers in the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS) and permanent placements for foster care children. The results of this study narrow a gap in the literature by determining whether an association exists between MDCPS child welfare caseworkers' educational backgrounds, as measured by having a social work degree (i.e., family protection specialists) or not (i.e., family protection workers), and the length of stay for children in permanent placements compared to those who remain in traditional foster home. Further benefits are that the findings of this study can help determine whether a specific degree type (social work or nonsocial work) is a significant factor for child welfare practice and can be used to promote change within agencies to develop strategies to recruit and retain employees with such degrees.

This study could promote social change on a local, state, and federal level by informing child welfare policies and procedures focused on family preservation and permanency for children in the foster care system. Child welfare caseworkers, social workers, and other child protection workers directly involved with the care of foster children and families can collaborate on permanency planning, particularly that of parent-child relationships, to enhance social change within practice. This study is a step forward for MDCPS as they reform to meet federal demands of permanency outcomes by implementing strategies to decrease the time children spend in foster care. As changes are made within agencies regarding permanency and safety of children in foster care, this

study could help balance the social reform as families and professionals strive to achieve safe placements for children, preferably with birth parents.

The findings in this study could promote change in other states with similar demographics to make provisions for permanency outcomes for children in foster care.

This chapter focuses on the background of child welfare practice, policy and procedures, and child welfare workforce as it relates to permanency outcomes of foster care children. I will also provide an overview of the problem statement, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, and research questions for the study. In addition, I will explain the nature of the study, as well as the definitions, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and significance. I will conclude the chapter with a summary.

### **Background**

Children enter foster care as a temporary safe haven because of abuse, neglect, or other maltreatment that endangers their safety. The goal of foster care is permanency, whether by reunification with birth parents, adoption, or another permanent long-term living arrangement (CWIG, 2013). According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS, 2014), 402,378 children were in foster care in 2013; among these, 101,840 were waiting to be adopted at the end of the fiscal year in 2014. Therefore, permanency was not achieved for many children who therefore remain in the child welfare system. AFCARS also reported that 3,778 children were placed in Mississippi's child welfare system in 2013, with 1,000 waiting to be adopted at the end of the fiscal year. Based on foster care data, children awaiting permanent placements increased, both

nationally (107, 918) and in the state of Mississippi (1,184), by the end of 2014 (AFCARS, 2014).

Permanency for children in the child welfare system has been a concern since Maas and Engler's (1959) book *Children in Need of Parents*, written after extensive research of child welfare systems in the United States. During this research, over 600,000 children were in foster care. The researchers found that children were lingering in foster care and experiencing multiple placements after being removed from their birth parents (Lindsey, 2004, p. 32). This awareness brought attention to policy makers and practitioners to end what Maas and Engler identified as *foster care drift* and expedite permanency for foster care children.

Permanency or permanent placement means moving a child toward reunification with birth parents, adoption, guardianship, or long-term placement, when reunification is impossible (Myers, 2011, p. 71). Policy makers struggled with decreasing the time children spent in care; as a result, the AACWA of 1980 was enacted, placing family preservation and permanency at the forefront of child welfare systems. The goal of AACWA was to reduce the time children spent in foster care by mandating child welfare agencies to develop permanency plans and giving parents 18 months to address issues that resulted in separation (Talbot, 2005). Although policies were in place to benefit the well-being of foster care children, circumstances such as neglect and abandonment, economic hardship, substance abuse, and mental health issues of birth parents caused children to linger in foster care (Padilla, 2013). Several researchers have linked negative outcomes of impermanence to mental health issues, behavioral issues, educational issues,

developmental issues (Barth et al., 2007; Cushing, 2009; Stott, & Gustavsson, 2010), and severe attachment disorders (Gean, Gilmore, & Dowler, 1985) for many children in the welfare system. A child's overall well-being and development depends on the safety and security of family relationships (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2003).

Due to the rise in foster care numbers in the 1990s, legislation sought fit to reconstruct child welfare systems by enacting the ASFA of 1997. This act was an amendment to AACWA, mandating that state protection agencies promote the overall health and safety of children and timely permanent placements for all children in care. Within the provisions of ASFA, termination of parental rights decreased from 18 months to 15 months of the first 22 months of a child's initial placement to shorten the time for permanency decisions and adoptions for children (CWIG, 2013). However, the termination of parental rights involved in-depth permanency planning for child welfare caseworkers. Child welfare caseworkers should explore ways for adoption, guardianship or another long-term placement for children in care who are unable to reunify with birth parents (MDCPS, 2013). The permanency planning process also involves extensive psychological, social, medical, and developmental assessments with parents, families, and other adults involved in care that will serve the best interest of the child (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Researchers have found that successful permanent planning maintains safe family relationships, provides a sense of belonging, and gives children the need to thrive into a psychologically healthy human being (Apgar, 2015, p. 208; Brydon, 2004; Sanchez, 2004).

Other researchers have sought to understand the concerns of child welfare practice and successful outcomes for children in the child welfare field. Several researchers have argued that the problem lies in educational backgrounds of child welfare workers (Bagdasaryn, 2012; Barbee et al., 2009; Reilly & Rittner, 1993; Scannapieco et al., 2012). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. Children's Bureau built a child welfare system employing professionals who held a social work degree. Based on the results of this child welfare system, the preferred requirement for employment became the Master of Social Work (MSW) degree (Schorr, 2000). After the enactment of the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 1974, state welfare systems saw a massive increase of child abuse and neglect reports. Researchers found that the increasing number of children needing services and the lack of qualified professionals impacted the overall well-being of children and families (Ellett, & Millar, 1996).

In Mississippi, MDCPS is responsible for the safety of abused and neglected children. The state's mission is to "provide services to people in need by optimizing all available resources to sustain the family unit, and to encourage traditional family values, thereby promoting self-sufficiency and personal responsibility for all Mississippians" (MDCPS, 2014). However, the state has failed to uphold its mission by not providing the state's most vulnerable population with permanent, nurturing, and secure homes. In 2016, of the 4,931 children in the state's child welfare system, 999 were waiting to be adopted, and many of the children who were adopted had been in care for 36 months or more (CWLA, 2016). Since permanent placement is preferred in Mississippi and other states, there was a need to examine why children in MDCPS child welfare system are staying in

the foster care system for so long (MDCPS, 2013). This study was necessary in order to examine the educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and the impact that job titles (family protection specialist and family protection worker) based on degree types have on permanent placement outcomes of children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

### **Problem Statement**

For over a decade, Mississippi's child welfare system has faced challenges in achieving permanency for children in its foster care system. In 2004, a civil rights class action lawsuit known as *Olivia Y. v. Barbour*, brought charges against the state of Mississippi on behalf of all children placed in foster care. The state's welfare system failed to provide adequate care and permanent placements to abused and neglected children in custody. The state has been under pressure since the lawsuit to reform its child welfare system and meet the needs of all children in care. The problem is, children are still experiencing long lengths of stay in Mississippi's child welfare system without the likelihood of a permanent placement home.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship of MDCPS child welfare caseworkers' educational background and placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. The goal of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between the educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and length of stay in traditional foster home compared to length of stay in permanent placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. The timing of this research was significant because

the state was federally mandated and now legally pressured to reform its child welfare system by making necessary changes to policies and procedures to enhance the well-being of all children in its care. To address the current gap in literature, I gathered information using secondary data from MDCPS. Length of stay, or days in custody, was the dependent variable, and job titles of caseworkers, gender, and race of children were the independent variables.

### **Research Questions/Hypotheses**

This study consisted of two quantitative research questions (RQ) and hypotheses that I used to examine educational backgrounds and days in placement settings for children in Mississippi's foster care system.

RQ1: Is there a relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

$H_01$ : There is no relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

$H_11$ : There is a relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker)

and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

RQ2: Is there a relationship between gender and race and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

$H_02$ : There is no relationship between gender and race and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

$H_12$ : There is a relationship between gender and race and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory provided a theoretical foundation for understanding parent-child relationships and the importance of permanency for children in the welfare system. *Attachment* is defined as a "lasting deep connection between a child and adult" (Bowlby, 1969, p.194). Bowlby believed children must have a secure, nurturing and trusting relationship with an adult to develop into a healthy human being. Secure attachment is the emotional and physical safety that a child has to their parent or

caregiver and promotes a sense of love and belonging (Bowlby, 1988, p. 3). Children who experience secure attachments are more likely to have higher self-esteem, deal with stress more effectively, and more likely to develop into competent adults with positive life outcomes (Howe, Dooley, & Hinining, 2009; Shemmings, 2011). However, life experiences such as abuse and neglect can lead to insecure attachment relationships (Mikulincer, Ein-Dor, Solomon, & Shaver, 2011). An insecure relationship is when the child shows little or no emotion to their parent or caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). Children who experience insecure attachment relationships are often confused, frightened or have broken communications, either verbal or non-verbal, and have difficulty understanding their emotions as well as the emotions of others (Brhel, 2012). As child welfare caseworkers gain an understanding of both positive and negative aspects of parent-child attachment relationships, achieving timely permanency should be a priority in child welfare practice. Attachment theory will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was quantitative. I chose a regression analysis to examine the relationship among educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. I also examined demographic variables of gender and race of the child as contributing factors to the length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. Creswell (2003) described a quantitative approach as objective and identified by measurable factors that are independent of the researcher. Other studies have focused on qualitative data (Booz et al., 1987) and quantitative data (Cortis & Meagher, 2012; Perry, 2006; Rubin & Parrish,

2012) of educational background of child welfare workers; however, no previous researchers have analyzed and compared data to address the relationship between educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and permanent placements of foster care youth in Mississippi.

To complete the study, I conducted a secondary analysis of data using 2017 state administrative foster care data and agency archival annual reports. I used the number of days in traditional foster home and permanent placement outcomes as defined by (adoptive home, own home, relative foster home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home), demographic information of the child, and caseworker's educational background (job titles by degree level). Secondary data was used to examine whether educational backgrounds of child welfare workers and/or gender and race of the child were significant factors in placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. Data were analyzed using the most recent version (23) of IBM Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Greater details of the methodology are discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

*Attachment:* A deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another (Bowlby, 1988, p.3).

*Child Welfare:* Services provided to care for abused or neglected children, strengthen families, and provide permanency when a child cannot return to birth parents.

*Child Welfare Caseworker:* A person assigned to manage the cases of dependent children who are in the custody of a child welfare agency.

*Education:* The process of acquiring general knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits.

*Foster Care:* A substitute living arrangement for children who have experienced some form of abuse or neglect while in the care of birth parents, adoptive parents or legal guardian.

*Foster Child:* A child that is in the custody of a child protection agency raised by someone who is not its birth or adoptive parent.

*Permanency:* A safe and long-term living situation with an adult for children to continue relationships with family and friends (CWLA, 2012).

*Permanency Plan:* A goal-directed timely process to ensure children are in safe and nurturing long-term family relationships (CWLA, 2012).

*Social worker:* An individual who has earned a social work degree at the bachelors, masters or doctoral levels that promotes change for a government or private organization (NASW, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

This study included the assumption that permanent placements for foster care youth will remain a challenging process within the child welfare system. I also assumed that the sample that was used in this study was a representation of the population because MDCPS child welfare caseworkers work closely with foster care children and their families. All MDCPS child welfare caseworkers' information provided in the study was confidential because no personally identifying information was obtained. Secondary data

was the best instrument to collect data because records were retrieved directly from the agency for the primary purpose of the study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the study focused on the educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers currently employed with MDCPS. A delimitation of this study was the exemption of specific education and training for foster parents, biological parents, and children. This study was generalizable to only Mississippi's child welfare caseworkers in the United States. The reports used included information related to educational background of child welfare caseworkers, caseworker position within the company, placement outcomes and days in each placement for the child, in hopes that data for the study were adequate and accurate.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study. One limitation was that specific degree types were not accessible from the agency, which limited the examination of educational backgrounds and resulted in a change in the original research questions and data analysis procedure. Another limitation was that secondary analysis of data was obtained and limited the study's results of obtaining accurate information regarding specific degree types for caseworkers. Due to confidentiality of nonpublic information from the agency, some of the information requested was not available. A qualitative approach would have provided more up to date, reliable, and accurate information for caseworkers' demographic information and educational backgrounds.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since the term *foster care drift* was coined in 1959, child welfare laws have focused on improving timely permanent placements for children in foster care. This study was significant because the state of Mississippi is in a crisis to reform its child welfare system to increase the well-being of children all children in care. The 2008 settlement of the *Olivia Y. v. Barbour* class action lawsuit legally prompted the state to enhance the safety and overall well-being of children by increasing safe and timely permanent placements by hiring more qualified professionals with the agency. Undoubtedly, the state of Mississippi is the second worst state in the child welfare system for overall child well-being (MDCPS, 2014). The timing of this study was significant to help inform policy and practice by identifying concerns within MDCPS. In this study, I aimed to fill a gap in the literature by examining educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers as a contributing factor to timely permanent placements of foster care children.

The results of this study could provide insight into the professional field of child welfare and enhance the knowledge of workers by encouraging higher educations of child welfare caseworkers. MDCPS workers can gain insight into how foster care placement protocols can be improved, allowing for more stable and nurturing foster families in Mississippi. This information could benefit other social service professionals, foster parents, foster homes, children and the community by providing them with information that could contribute to more permanent loving and nurturing homes for foster youth.

## Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the problem relevant to the research on permanent placement outcomes for children in Mississippi's child welfare system. Researchers have shown that concerns for child welfare practice lies within the educational background of child welfare workers. I conducted a nonexperimental, quantitative research study to examine the relationship between the educational backgrounds of child welfare workers and permanent placement outcomes. Secondary analysis of data was obtained from MDCPS. Chapter 2 provides a review of the previous literature associated with foster care and permanency concerns on a national and state level. In Chapter 2, I also explain the gap in the literature regarding education backgrounds of child welfare workers and provide details about the issues related to Mississippi's foster care system. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methodology, research participants, and recruitment for the study. The instrumentation, data analysis and procedures used for the study are also discussed in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

This literature review chapter focuses on previous research related to issues of timely permanent placement for children in the child welfare system. Research documented that children are placed in foster care for maltreatment issues such as abuse, neglect, and other caretaker inability that endanger the well-being of a child. While foster care is generally for short-term placement, many children remain for extended periods of time (CWLA, 2013). The issue of permanent placement in Mississippi's child welfare system has been a concern for the state's child welfare workers for over a decade. An extensive review of the literature revealed that education of child welfare caseworkers has been explored (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993; Barbee et al., 2009; Chabot et al., 2013; Hankins, 2012; Scannapieco et al., 2012). However, I found no specific, current research related to educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers as a contributing factor of timely permanent placements for children in Mississippi's child welfare system. Examining timely permanent placements for children in the welfare system is important because children need safety and stability to thrive in life (Apgar, 2015).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To locate relevant research for this literature review, I used a variety of databases including EBSCOHOST, ProQuest, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, SAGE Premier, Academic Search Primer, SOCINDEX, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and Walden Dissertations. I also consulted Google Scholar,

Social Work journals and abstracts, and peer reviewed articles to search using the following terms: *attachment theory, child abuse, child welfare, foster care, foster child, foster home, permanent placement, foster care placement, foster care policies, foster care statistics, child welfare caseworkers, social workers, education, permanency planning, stability, maltreatment, relative, non-relative, therapeutic foster care and length of stay, Mississippi child welfare system, Olivia Y. Barbour, educational backgrounds, and child welfare workforce*. Additionally, I searched the websites of government agencies such as U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Mississippi Department of Human Services, Child Welfare League of America, and Child Welfare Information Gateway for the child welfare policy and procedures and foster care statistics cited within the paper.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory was the theoretical framework used in this study to understand the importance of parent-child relationships. Attachment theory could help child welfare caseworkers have a better understanding of attachment relationships and attachment related issues as they make timely decisions on permanency options for foster children. I also used attachment theory to explain how permanent placements impact a child's emotional and social development throughout life.

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is credited back to Bowlby (1958), who described attachment as a lasting psychological connection between human beings. Bowlby's interest came from wanting to understand separation and disruptions of children when they are away from their primary caregivers. Bowlby's definition of attachment more specifically

means having a deep emotional bond between a child and its caregiver and last throughout adulthood (McWey & Mullis, 2004). An attachment relationship is often developed within the first few years of a child's life as children explore responses within relationships. Individuals such as parents or other caregivers who provide most of the care are likely to become primary attachment figures. Schofield and Beek (2014) believed that younger children experience sensitive responses from attachment figures when feeling sad or anxious. These responses often help develop trust and security between the child and attachment figure (Schofield & Beek, 2014).

Bowlby (1958) described attachment relationships among children and caregivers as secure or insecure. Secure attachments are formed when a child can feel love and belonging from their parent or caregiver and often increases emotional and social development in the child (McWey & Mullis, 2004). Further examination of early mother-child relationships was conducted by Kok et al. (2013). The researchers examined the effects of early mother-child relationship quality and child temperament on the development of child compliance and active resistance. The study revealed that children with a more insecure attachment relationship showed higher levels of active resistance to parents than more securely attached children. In addition, the study revealed that child temperament was stronger for boys than girls and mainly driven by attachment avoidance. The study revealed that early attachment is an important factor to a child's socialization of behavior (Kok et al., 2013).

Zaevalkink, Riksen-Walraven and Bradley (2008) studied the relationship of the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment inventory for 0- to 6-year-old

Sundanese Indonesian children and the quality of the mother-child attachment relationship, attachment-related behaviors during play interactions, and characteristics of the Indonesian caregiving context. The researchers revealed that infants and toddlers with secure attachment relationships lived in higher quality home environments than children with insecure attachment relationships and that children with insecure-resistant attachment relationships lived in more unsafe and less organized homes (Zaevalkink, Riksen-Walraven & Bradley, 2008).

Children who develop insecure attachment relationships often have a negative perception about themselves and others (Howe et al., 2009). Researchers found that children who face experiences such as abuse or neglect often demonstrate insecure behaviors of anger and rejection towards a caregiver (Mikulincer et al., 2011). Foster care placement is generally associated with several problems in attachment relationships. As evidenced by Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, and Brenner (2008), children in foster care are at risk of insecure attachment and attachment disturbances and have difficulty adjusting to their new caregiver. Strijker and Knorth (2009) investigated the relationship between foster children's adjustments to the foster family and factors in the histories of the child and the parents, as well as the relationship between foster children and their biological parents while they are placed in foster care. The researchers found that prior history, particularly attachment disorders and the experience of replacements, impacted the adjustment with the foster family (Strijker & Knorth, 2009).

Understanding attachment theory and the impact of attachment relationships is relevant in the child welfare practice. Children in foster care who do not have working

relationships with their parents or caregivers are at risk for depression and anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, and other unhealthy risky behaviors (Brhel, 2012). The lack of permanent placement decreases a child's ability to form a secure attachment relationship with a primary caregiver. Child welfare caseworkers who understand the basis of attachment relationships can provide a more systematic and cultural sense in practice by advocating for visitations with biological parents of infants and toddlers who are in the primary stages of attachment bonds with caregivers (Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003). The study also revealed that increased involvement of biological and foster care parents in the treatment planning means having an established, collaborative relationship between the clinician, foster child, child welfare workers, and the court system (Shea, 2015).

Attachment theory was chosen for this study because attachment relationships are important for children in and out of the foster care system. The attachment bond between a parent and child is important and can have a significant impact on a child's emotional and social development throughout life. Child welfare caseworkers should understand that attachment relationships are often endangered the longer a child remains in the foster care system away from biological parents, siblings and other loved ones (Frey et al, 2008). Mapp and Steinberg (2007) explored potential permanency options of birth families and extended kin for children who linger in foster care while being free for adoption. The researchers found that while many families could not provide permanent placement, they could offer appropriate relationships with the child. The study also found that child welfare caseworkers should view family relationships as an option for children

that include letters, phone calls or visitations to biological family members (Mapp & Steinberg, 2007).

### **Historical Background of Foster Care in the United States**

Historically, placing children in foster care is dated back to 1601, developing in England from the English poor laws. These laws were established to place poor children into indentured service until they reached adulthood (Watkins, 1990). However, the first formalized foster care did not originate until mid-1800 by Minister Charles Loring Brace to meet the needs of orphans and poor children. In 1853, Brace and other social reformers created the first alternative care program, known as Children's Aid Society (CAS) or Placing out System. This system was established because of a large number of homeless children living on the streets in New York City. Therefore, Brace decided to start the "Orphan Train Movement" that sent 150, 000 orphaned children by trains to Midwest farms to work for a place to live (Cook, 1995). While these children were provided with homes, religious groups and charity workers were concerned with the overall well-being of these children due to the lack of supervision provided (Lindsey, 1994). In an article by Gish (1999), the researcher examined the CAS's western emigration program from 1853 to 1890. Gish (1999) revealed that very few children were abused and neglected and that adolescent males who volunteered to work were emigrants. While Brace hoped that a child's ties be severed from their family; the bond between the parent and child remained strong (Gish, 1999).

Following the Placing out System, Charles W. Birtwell, established the first modern foster care system, called the Boston Children's Aid Society in 1861. This foster

care system focused on the needs of children by providing them with temporary housing, investigating children situations, and running a probation agency for juvenile youth. Many Americans are unaware that Brace and Birtwell's foster care systems are prominent in saving abused and neglected children and are the foundations for today's foster care system (Kudshin, 1974).

A well-known child abuse case that was first handled under an established law was the case of eleven-year-old Mary Ellen. In 1874, (other sources reported late 1873), a church worker reported the abuse of Mary Ellen, a young girl seen shackled to her bed and badly beaten by her mother for years. Unfortunately, in 1874, there were no laws protecting children from physical abuse from their parents. During this era, daily whippings was considered as spare the rod and spoil the child and parents were not reported or punished for severe beatings of their children (Watkins, 1990). However, Mary Ellen's severe beatings were brought to the attention of a lawyer who fought for Mary Ellen's mother to be prosecuted under the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals law (ASPCA). Mary Ellen's mother was found guilty and sentenced to jail. Mary Ellen was then removed from her home and placed in foster care. The concern of a church member gave Mary Ellen a chance to survive and thrive in life. Mary Ellen lived to be 92 years old. This incidence brought attention to policy makers and practitioners that led to the first child protective service agency established in 1875. However, it was not until 1935 that federal laws were established to protect children in foster care (Trattner, 1999).

### **Foster Care Today**

Currently, the foster care system is designed to be a temporary safe haven for children who have been abused or neglected by a parent, guardian or another caretaker. A state's child protective agencies are responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect for children. Once allegations are investigated and evidenced; the placement of a child is arranged through a court and a social- service agency (CWLA, 2013). The goal of foster care placement is to protect the child while helping the parent correct problems for reunification with the child. When reunification is not possible, adoption or another alternative permanent placement is considered as the best interest for the child. There are several types of permanent placements for children in the welfare system. These placements include adoption within a family foster home, kinship foster home, non-kinship foster home, group home or institutional placement. (Administration for Children & Families, 2014).

### **Reasons for Foster Care Placement**

Foster care placement happens when a child has experienced some form of maltreatment inside their caregiver's home. Child maltreatment is defined as all types of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, and mental) and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or another caregiver role. Connell, Vanderploeg, Katz, Caron, Saunders, and Kramer-Tebes (2009) found that children who entered the foster care system due to maltreatment were more likely to be maltreated a second-time following reunification when compared to their counterparts without maltreatment history. Perry (2006) believed that early exposure to trauma; such as neglect, physical, sexual,

emotional or other traumas can affect a child's brain development. Other researchers found that maltreated children have a higher risk of experiencing mental health and psychological issues during childhood and adulthood (Munzer, Fegert, & Goldbeck, 2016).

The latest data from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) documented that over three million cases of child maltreatment were investigated and assessed in 2014. Among these, approximately 315,000 were evidenced victims of child maltreatment. Based on the data, 206,768 children were victims of sexual abuse; 58,952 were involved in physical abuse; 22,280 were victims of neglect and 21,020 were victims of emotional or some other form of child maltreatment. In Mississippi, the latest data reported that 23,582 cases of maltreatment were investigated and assessed in 2014. Among these, 2,691 were evidenced of child maltreatment and placed in the foster care system. The majority (1,418) of the children placed in the foster care system were victims of sexual abuse, 352 children were victims of physical abuse, another 29 were victims of neglect and 107 children were victims of emotional or some other form of maltreatment (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2016).

Based on the above statistics, children placed in foster care for childhood sexual abuse had higher rates than any other maltreatment type. Childhood sexual abuse is identified as a sexual act between a child and older person that involves penetration, force, touching, pornography, and/or child sexual poses (Brushas & Tessin, 2013). Researchers have found that foster care does not fully protect children against sexual abuse. In a study by Eusers, Alink, Tharner, van IJzendoorn and Bakersmans-Kranenburg

(2013) the prevalence of child sexual abuse was investigated in residential and foster care compared to the prevalence rates in the general population. Based on the results from 264 professionals who reported sexual abuse for the children they worked with and the results from 329 adolescents in residential or foster care who reported firsthand experiences of child sexual abuse, the prevalence rates were higher for out-of-home care than in the general population. The results also revealed that children and adolescents in residential care are at a greater risk of child sexual maltreatment compared to children in foster care.

While research documents sexual maltreatment as a significant reason of foster care placement for children and adolescents, the physical maltreatment of children is another significant factor for the removal of a child from its parent or guardian. Physical maltreatment is defined as non-accidental trauma or physical injury of a child and is the most visible form of child maltreatment (Bottom, Peter-Hagene, Epstein, Wiley, Reynolds & Rudnicki, 2016). In a study regarding prior experiencing of physical maltreatment or neglect of 110 foster care children in the child welfare system, Marquis, Leschied, Chiodo, and O'Neill (2008) found that children who experienced neglect prior to foster care placement were younger children whose caregivers were diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder and/or spousal abuse. The study also revealed that neglected children were more likely to return to foster care compared to those children who had experienced physical maltreatment. Furthermore, physical maltreated children displayed greater difficulties while adjusting to foster care compared to neglected children (Marquis et al., 2008).

Many children who enter and exit foster care often suffer from emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is the ongoing emotional maltreatment or emotional neglect of a child. This type of abuse is sometimes called psychological abuse and can seriously damage a child's emotional health and development. Emotional abuse can involve scaring or humiliating a child or isolating or ignoring them deliberately (Bottom et al., 2016). Research has reported that about eight percent of all children in foster care have serious emotional problems. In a study, Gokmen (2015) used structural equation modeling to examine the role of resilience and self-esteem between psychological maltreatment-emotional problems and psychological maltreatment-behavioral problems in adolescents. The results revealed that adolescents who have suffered psychological maltreatment were correlated with behavioral and emotional problems. Resilience and self-esteem played a significant role in emotional problems and behavioral problems in psychologically maltreatment individuals.

Similarly, Leventhal and Krugman (2012) found that the placement of maltreated children in foster care and services provided to the families when maltreatment occurred affect both children and families. Researchers also found that children who experienced one form of maltreatment often have experienced other types of maltreatment, such as violence or exposure to domestic violence with the consequences of maltreatment being lifelong and intergenerational. However, the study also revealed that treatment and prevention of maltreatment can be beneficial for both children and families (Leventhal & Krugman, 2012).

### **Historical Background of Permanency**

As evidenced by the *foster care drift*, Maas and Engler (1959) published their first book *Children in Need of Parents*, as a documentation of common welfare practice that allowed children to drift from foster home to foster home while languishing in foster care for extended periods of time or until they aged out the system (Myers, 2011). In 1960, the number of children in foster care increased, putting more children in out- of- home-care for a lengthy period of time. With a desperate need to end impermanence in foster homes and the concerns of children experiencing multiple placements over an extended of time, policy makers began establishing laws to help protect the needs of children and families. The Social Security Administration Act of 1935 was the first federal law established to help children in the child welfare system. Later, other established laws by policy makers mandated states to reform child welfare procedures to ensure the safety of all children and families and allowing children to maximize their full potential in life by providing them safe, nurturing and permanent placements.

Today, permanency or permanent placement is the framework that gives children a sense of belonging, security and commitment to a safe, nurturing and long-term home (Leathers, Falconnier & Spiefogel, 2010). Permanency is a principal factor for children in the welfare system, as many multiple placement changes can impact the overall well-being of a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The child welfare act of AACWA in 1980 first raised concerns about lengthy stays and delays for children in the child welfare system, since then, this concern has been ongoing for many states. While some changes have been in placed to provide adequate care and timely placements for

children in care, however, children are still experiencing extended length of stays in the child welfare system, without the likelihood of a permanent home (Myers, 2008). The innocence of children is often violated due to maltreated issues that result in foster care placement. While many of the children in the foster care system can reunify with parents, others are waiting to be adopted or waiting to be placed into long-term, kinship or non-kinship family foster homes, institutions and group homes (Leathers, Falconnier, & Spiefogel, 2010).

### **Legislative Background of Permanency**

#### **Social Security Administration Act**

As one of the first social programs aimed to benefit children and families; the Social Security Administration Act (SSA) of 1935 was enacted to restructure social welfare concerns of child welfare practice. This enactment implemented a Title IV-E program that allowed states to provide financial assistance to foster care families who cared for needy dependent children. Title IV-E is an annual federal funded program with specific eligibility requirements rewarded to individual states for child welfare service to provide adequate care and supervision of eligible children in foster and adoptive home settings (Social Security Administration, 2011). The U. S. Children's Bureau administers this program for the federal government to ensure that states are properly implementing services, such as hiring and training child welfare workers to investigate and arrange secure and safe placements that meet the overall well-being of abused and neglected children (Hitchcock & Mulvihill, 2011). In Mississippi, a child who is removed from their home voluntarily or through the judicial determination, becomes the responsibility

of CPS and are considered to be Title IV-E eligible. The contribution of this enactment has allowed financial aid to child welfare agencies to help fund foster children, families and foster care worker's needs. However, with restrictive and limited funds of the program annually, child welfare workers are still struggling with protecting abused and neglected children by not adequately placing them in permanent and safe homes (McGowan, 2010).

### **Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272)**

The AACWA was signed by the President on June 17, 1980 to the response of the *foster care drift*. This law was enacted to establish a program of adoption assistance, to strengthen the program of foster care assistance for needy and dependent children, to improve child welfare, social services, and aid to families with dependent children programs. The significance of this law focuses on family reunification or adoption for a child who is removed from their home. The law also requires all states, including the state of Mississippi to make adoption stipends to adopting parents caring for a child who is Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) eligible and a child who is special needs. The law defines a child who is special needs to be ineligible to return home, has a special condition and cannot be placed without appropriate assistance. AACWA also brought about regular judicial reviews for children in foster care to be returned home as soon as possible. The focus of the law is based solely on family preservation efforts to help keep families together and children out of foster care or other out-of-home placement options (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Bowman (1996), found that several child welfare agencies struggled with obtaining placement for children after

the enactment of AACWA; as the number of adoptions increased, so did the number of children waiting to be adopted. Although the AACWA was in place to provide support for family preservation services and prevent out-of-home placement for foster care placement, undoubtedly, even after the enactment of this law, many children still experienced placement issues while in the child welfare system (Bowman, 1996).

### **The Abandoned Infants Assistance (AIA) Act of 1988**

In the early 1980s, hospitals were faced with challenges of lengthy infant hospital stays for abandoned children who were victims of substance abuse parents and HIV/AIDS. The issue brought attention to Congress and the Abandoned Infants Assistance Act (AIA) was passed in 1988. This law was established given the Secretary of Health and Human Services permission to develop and provide grants to local governments to deal with the placement and permanency of abandoned infants in hospitals, particularly those infants diagnosed with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Currently, social service agencies are responsible for recruiting safe and permanent placements for all abandoned children, including those children abandoned because of HIV/ AIDS and substance abuse Townsend and Dawes (2007) found that 62.2% of existing foster and adoptive parents were willing to care for a child with HIV/AIDS. In 2001, a safe haven law came into effect in the state of Mississippi. This law allowed parents to anonymously leave children up to 3 days old without any signs of physical abuse, with an employee at a hospital, health care agency, a licensed adoption agency or another safe location if they are unable or unwilling to provide care for the child. Parents are not required to seek counseling or face any

criminal charges for surrendering an unharmed child (CWLA, 2013). Asai and Ishimoto (2013) believe that the enactment of this law violates a child's rights to a relationship with their biological parent and allows parents to not fulfill their obligations of raising their children. Although the child abandonment law was initially enacted to protect innocent children from their biological parents, however, the results of this law has induced abandonment of infants and unfortunately increased the number of infants waiting to be adopted (Asai & Ishimoto, 2013).

### **Family Preservation and Family Support Services Program**

Family Preservation and Family Support Services Program (FPFSSP) was established in 1993 (P.L. 103-66) providing states with federal funding to coordinate and develop service programs to preserve and support families and children who are at-risk or in a crisis situation. This program was later expanded in 1997 putting focus on family preservation and family reunification by allowing states to keep children at home with their biological families or caregivers rather than in institutions and foster homes (CWIG, 2016). O'Reilly, Wilkes, Luck and Jackson (2010) found that intensive family preservation services are the most effective interventions currently used by child protection services for child abuse and neglected children. The contribution of this program has allowed more children to remain or return home with biological parents or caregivers.

### **The Federal Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994**

Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) (P.L. 103-382) of 1994 and its amendment the Interethnic Adoption Provisions Act (IEP) of 1996, prohibits child welfare agencies

from delaying or denying foster care or adoptive placements based on race, color or national origin of the potential foster parent or the child (Myers, 2008). In Mississippi, very few children in the foster care system are adopted transracially. Based on the most recent data, about 4.5% of adopted children were African American adopted by white parents with 1.2% were white children adopted by African American parents and a small percentage of 0.2 % were African American children adopted by parents of color who were a different race than the child (Mississippi Adoption Facts, 2015). Although MEPA and IEP focused on decreasing the discrimination of transracial placements in the child welfare system, unfortunately, the law failed to identify established interventions and resources for child welfare caseworkers to increase placements and adoptions for more children to be adopted transracially (de Haymes & Simon, 2003).

### **The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997**

The ASFA Act of 1997, PL-105-89 was signed into law by President Clinton on November 19, 1997 as an amendment to improve the 1980 Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96-272). With an increase of foster care children in the child welfare system in the 1990's, the new act was established in an attempt to reduce the number of maltreated children lingering in foster care by enhancing their overall well-being through quicker placements into safe and stable homes (Ross, 2006). AFSA was also implemented to reduce the timeframe of terminating parental rights by mandating timely permanency plans to serve the best interest of the child. This act also allowed child welfare caseworkers to collaborate with all individuals involved directly in the care of the child to implement timely permanency plans, with the both child and family in mind (Kernan & Lansford,

2004). Since the overall goal of foster care is reunification for children, unfortunately Kernan and Lansford (2004) found that developmental research suggests that foster care often results in better outcomes for children than reunification with their biological parents. The researchers also revealed that adoption of a child often leads to better life outcomes than regular foster placement for many children in the child welfare system. In addition, the researchers found that the overall goals outlined in AFSA are appropriate and likely serve the best interests of many children through permanency. However, while the result of this act allows for children to remain with birth families; the problem of timely permanent placements is still a concern in child welfare practice for many children in foster care (Kernan & Lansford, 2004).

### **Court Appointed Special Advocates**

A non-profit organization program in the state of Mississippi that helps with the care of children in the child welfare system is Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) or Guardian ad litem as known in some jurisdictions. CASA was established in 1977 in Washington and formalized in 1985 in the state of Mississippi. This program was established to support and promote court appointed volunteers to advocate for abused and neglected children for children to have safe and permanent homes. The oldest CASA program established (1985) is in Jackson County and the newest program is in Harrison County, one of the largest counties in Mississippi. The state organization of CASA also provides technical support, training, education, and other invaluable assistance to the local program staff and volunteers. CASA Mississippi recently created the Fostering Mississippi Youth Connections (FMYC) project to support emancipated foster youth and

those victims aging out of care. The result of these programs provide youth with assistance in affordable housing, scholarship and tuition assistance, child care, health care, employment services and human service organizational support (CASA Mississippi, 2013).

### **Permanency/Adoption Rates**

According to AFCARS (2015) as of September 30, 2014 there were approximately 413,129 children in foster care nationwide, of these children 107,918 are waiting to be adopted. Of those waiting to be adopted; 24,360 are African Americans, 24,938 are Hispanic and 45,543 are White. The ages of these waiting children range from 0-17 years; however, the majority (10,250) of children waiting to be adopted are infants and toddlers, between the ages of 0-3 years. Several studies have identified that age is a significant factor relating to placement instability for children in foster care. Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers (2007) found that an increase in the child's age at the time of placement is positively associated with placement disruption. Similarly, Wulczyn, Hislop & George (2000) found that an increase in age is related to the risk of children being in placement longer.

In 2014, there were 4,931 children in Mississippi's foster care system. Of this number, 1,148 children were waiting to be adopted. African American children and infants and toddlers are many of the children waiting to be adopted in Mississippi (CWLA, 2015). Frame (2000) found that African American children were the most common group of children removed from their caregivers and the least likely to reunify with their parents. There remains a concern for the length of stay that children are

spending in foster care. While many of the children in foster care can reunify with birth parents, others on average, spend about 36 months or more in care before adoption (AFCARS, 2016). Research suggests that gender may play a significant role in placement stability for children in foster care. In a study by Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley (2001) found that adolescent girls experience greater probability of placement instability than adolescent boys.

### **Permanent Placement Settings**

There are several permanent settings for children who cannot return home to their biological parents after parental rights are terminated. These placement settings for children in foster care include adoption into kinship care with biological family members or non-kinship care with other families, group homes and institutionalization placement or a long-term foster placement either with kin or non- kin families (CWLA, 2015). Perry (2012) conducted a study on placement in kinship and non-kinship foster care. This study was conducted over the time frame of two-years. The results from the study revealed that non-kinship care was four times more likely to end within a month's time frame of placement compared to kinship care placement and that the child's age or level of abuse affected the difference between placement time frames. In addition, the researcher found that long- term kinship placement is more stable than non-kinship long-term placement. While long-term placement allows a child to have a permanent home until they age out the system, adoption provides the child with a more stable and permanent loving relationship with families (Perry, 2012).

Similarly, Denby, Alford and Ayala (2011) used a qualitative study to examine the motivations, expectations, preparation and experiences of nine prospective adoptive families whether to continue or discontinue adoptions of children in the child welfare system. The results revealed that the adoption outcomes of whether to continue or discontinue adoption pursuits of children in the welfare system was different for all nine families and that the decisions would weigh heavy on negative experiences. Several researchers have argued that behavioral problems, the child's age and level of maltreatment play a significant part in impermanence for children in the foster care system (Hill, 2012; Stott, 2012; & Carochan, 2013). In a National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, 729 children were studied who entered foster care continuously. The study was conducted to determine direct impact of children's behavioral problems on permanent placement in foster care. The results indicated that 52% of the children achieved early placements, 19% achieved later placements and 28% remained without a permanent placement. Case managers noted that mental health services, care giving services and child care assistance and developmental disability services would be helpful in maintaining the stability of a child's current placement (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013).

Another study by Testa, Synder, Wu, Rolock and Liao (2015) studied 346 caregivers who finalized an adoption or guardianship between 1998 and 2002. The caregivers completed surveys about child behavior problems, the adequacy of financial assistance and thoughts about maintaining the permanency relationship. The results revealed that on post permanency discontinuity rates, many distant related kin, and single

caregivers have considered ending an adoption or guardianship based on the child's behavior problems and inadequate expenses to care for the child. While long-term foster care gives children a permanent home until they age out the system, adoption provides the most permanent and stable option for all children in foster care (AFCARS, 2015).

Today, an adoption is held when children in the public child welfare system are placed in permanent homes by public, government operated agencies, or by private agencies contracted by a public agency to place children waiting to be adopted (CWLA, 2013). In 2014, the AFCARS report documented that 99,251 children were adopted in the United States. Of those adopted, 50,644 were adopted through public welfare agency. In Mississippi, 354 children were legally adopted through the public child welfare agency (AFCARS, 2015). In a cross-sectional study of public child welfare adoptions, Wood (2013) examined adoption outcomes from both the adoptive parent and the adopted adolescent. The researcher used a secondary analysis of survey responses from 146 adoptive parents and their eldest adoptive child, and the factors that contributed to three different conceptualizations of success as measured by adoptive parent satisfaction, adoptive parent perception of the parent-child relationship and child perception of the parent-child relationship. The results revealed that many of adoptees and their adoptive parent viewed their adoption relationship very positively as parents learned the child's past to provide them with adequate care. It is evident that adoptions can lead to successful relationships and outcomes for many children in care (Wood, 2013).

### **Child Welfare Workers and Permanent Placements**

The number of children in foster care has increased significantly since the 1990s; placing pressure on child welfare systems to address the concern of children lingering in foster care without a permanent home. It was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that researchers and policy makers recognized child welfare worker's qualifications as a significant factor in child welfare practice (Schorr, 2000). The U. S. Children's Bureau and the collaboration of universities and other local agencies collaborated to establish the first child welfare system that employed only professionals who held a social work degree. As a result, the child welfare system was successful and the social work degree became the standard qualification for child welfare practice (Schorr, 2000). With the high demands of children needing placements, child welfare agencies began to reduce their standards of child welfare workers to quickly place children in care after the enactment of the CAPTA of 1974. The enactment of CAPTA lead to a massive increase of child abuse reports and therefore more child welfare workers were needed (Schorr, 2000).

During the enactment of AFSA, child welfare workers are mandated to create permanency plans for all children in care. The permanency plans are timely, goal-oriented plans aimed to provide children with the best permanent placement option whether it is reunification, adoption or another long-term placement. With the child in mind, child welfare workers are required to include, family, caregivers and other close individuals involved directly in care to help create an effective permanency plan that will meet all the child's needs (CWLA, 2015). Several researchers have argued that child welfare workers with a BSW and MSW degree are more effective in developing

successful permanency plans for children who have been in foster care for a lengthy period compared to those without a BSW and MSW degree (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993).

In addition, Cortis and Meagher (2012), examined social work education and the climate of work environment for satisfaction in helping children in the child welfare system. The results revealed that having a bachelor's degree or higher in social work had the greatest effect in improving preparedness more than any other job or organization characteristics. The findings also renew support for social work as the key foundation for practice in a governmental sector. With the concerns of children lingering in foster care in Mississippi, the educational requirements for child welfare workers are different depending on the child welfare position of an individual (MDCPS). Although, all CPS child welfare workers are required to have a bachelor's degree, some of the positions do not require a social work degree (MDCPS, 2015).

According to MDCPS (2015) employment website, CPS, front line social work positions include: family protection specialist, family protection specialist senior and family protection specialist advanced are required to have a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or License in Social Work (LSW) and/or years of direct related experience to obtain a job in these positions. However, no front-line position, including area supervisor are required to have a MSW degree or LCSW to obtain and/or hold their position. The state's website also reports that CPS requirements of a family protection worker I and family protection worker II are not required to have a social work degree, although these positions are working directly with foster care children and placements. Individuals

employed or seeking employment in the positions of family protection worker are required to have a behavioral of science degree in psychology, sociology, nursing, criminal justice, counseling, marriage and family therapy, family studies or other related degrees and/or years of direct related experience (MDCPS, 2015).

A study conducted by Bagdasaryn (2012) found that newly- hired child welfare workers with a MSW reported to be more knowledgeable about child welfare practice compared to those with other degrees. Similarly, another study found that children assigned to a MSW caseworker spent significantly less time in out of home placement (5 months less) than children who were not assigned to a MSW caseworker. The researchers concluded that having a MSW was a significant factor in child welfare outcomes and those child welfare systems should recruit and retain employees with a MSW (Ryan, et al. 2006).

However, in a study conducted by Perry (2006), the researcher examined whether the educational backgrounds of child welfare workers in Florida impacted performance evaluations of their work. The researcher used a proportionate, stratified random sample of supervisor and peer evaluations of child protective investigators and child protective service workers. The results showed that the ratings of social workers' skills and competency do not statistically differ from those workers with other educational backgrounds and that educational backgrounds of child welfare workers are a poor predictor variable of performance. The study also showed that more research was needed to determine if performance evaluations of workers are positively correlated with successful service outcomes with clients (Perry, 2006).

Since the *Olivia Y. v. Barbour* lawsuit in 2004, the state of Mississippi has been under pressure to hire and retain social workers to reform child welfare practice by moving all children in foster care to permanency quickly. While there are several factors such as age, race, judicial decisions and the lack of foster families that hinder the permanent placement process, the lack of qualified staff also hinders this process tremendously for the state (MDCPS, 2015). Researchers have focused on the trainings and education of social workers compared to non-social workers practicing in child welfare field (Scannapieco, Hegar, & Connell-Carrick, 2012). In a study conducted with 10,000 public child welfare workers in Texas, the researchers found that workers with social work degrees compared to those workers with non-social work degrees reported being more knowledgeable about community resources, perceived their training as more beneficial and reported a more complex understanding of the foster care system. In addition, the workers with social work degrees were also more likely to remain with the agency and stay committed to the field of child welfare (Scannapieco et al., 2012).

The Title IV-E programs are in place to help child welfare agencies hire adequate staff, unfortunately in Mississippi this remains a concern. In a study, Franke, Bagadasaryan and Furman (2009), conducted a multivariate analysis of training, education and readiness for 469 newly-hired child welfare workers at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. The results revealed that participants who participated in the Title IV-E programs performed significantly better. Similarly, the results revealed that both education (Master's degree) and program (social work) predicted better performance in public child welfare than workers without the Title

IV-E training and education. Furthermore, research by Chabot et al., (2013), suggest that agencies that have access to more workers with social work education might reduce the likelihood that a child will be placed in out-of-home care after an initial investigation.

The literature review indicates there is a gap in the research between educational backgrounds of child welfare workers and timely permanency outcomes for foster care children. The studies that exist lack nonprobability samples and comparison outcomes to place children more quickly in permanent homes. However, there is research that suggests that child welfare workers with social work background are better suited for practice in the child welfare field compared to workers with non-social work background. This study intends to expand on the research gap and add data regarding educational backgrounds of child welfare workers and timely permanency outcomes for foster care children. Further research examines if child welfare workers with social work backgrounds are likely to achieve permanency outcomes for children in custody compared to child welfare workers with non-social work background.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of chapter 2 was to provide an overview of attachment theory and its relevance to attachment relationships and permanent placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. This chapter also aimed to help child welfare caseworkers understand the importance of parent-child relationships through the lens of the attachment theory as they strive to reach permanency as quickly as possible for children in the child welfare system. This chapter explored the history of foster care, foster care policies, permanent placement options and adoption rates of children waiting to be placed

in permanent homes. Chapter 2 also described child welfare worker's educational backgrounds and standards within the child welfare practice. With the increasing numbers of children entering foster care daily, it is important for child welfare agencies to employ staff that has the adequate education and training to help the nation's most vulnerable children obtain permanent placement as quickly as possible. Although there are studies regarding the education backgrounds of child welfare workers, there is no research regarding the education background of child welfare workers in Mississippi. This study is an opportunity to fill the gap in literature that will provide relevant statistics and research on the educational levels of child welfare workers and permanent placement outcomes for children in care.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology and research design of this study. The chapter also provides a description of the instrumentation, research participants and data collection and analysis process. Chapter 3 also explores the limitations and credibility of the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers employed with MDCPS and placement outcomes for children in the state's child welfare system. This study is important to explore the impact of educational backgrounds as measured by social work degree caseworkers (family protection specialists) and nonsocial work degree caseworkers (family protection workers) and length of stay in traditional foster home compared to the length of stay in permanent placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. This chapter will include the research design, methodology, sampling and sampling procedures, instruments, data collection and data analysis, threats to validity and ethical procedures related to the study. This chapter will conclude with a summary and transition to Chapter 4.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this study, I used a regression analysis to test the hypotheses for the research questions regarding the associations between the independent variables of educational backgrounds measured by specific job title and demographic variables of gender and race of the child and the dependent variable of length of stay, measured by days in custody for the child. A simple linear and multiple regression analysis were appropriate for this study because I was allowed to test whether there was a relationship between the independent and dependent variables (Creswell, 2005). I did not conduct an experiment; therefore, I used a descriptive quantitative design to determine whether educational backgrounds or

other predicting factors increased permanent placements for foster care children served by MDCPS. According to Babbie (2010), quantitative research is utilized to measure data and generalizes results to effectively determine a relationship between two or more variables using questionnaires, surveys, or pre-existing statistical data. While other quantitative research designs might provide information to determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, using a regression analysis will provide an extensive analysis of statistics that will add to the existing body of research by providing numbers if the results show that a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables exist (Babbie, 2010, p. 6).

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The population used for this study was 176 child welfare caseworkers currently employed with MDCPS working directly with foster care children and placements. The study also used 1,192 children statewide currently in custody placements of MDCPS. Permanent placements are determined by court hearings that review the status of children who have been placed in out-of-home care and foster care. There are 85 counties in Mississippi that serve foster care children in the welfare system; within these counties several levels of position require individuals to work directly with foster care children and families.

### **Sampling**

This research study used a sample of child welfare caseworkers and children in the state of Mississippi. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was the most

appropriate method to use for the study. I purposefully chose child welfare caseworkers in the state of Mississippi to represent the target population of child welfare caseworkers who are currently working directly with foster care children and placements. Child welfare caseworkers may hold several degree types in the behavioral science or other related fields, which include but are not limited to social work, psychology, sociology, criminology, education, business, and other related degree types. MDCPS representatives requested that all employees provide up-to-date information to ensure that data regarding individual caseloads are accurate to prevent any discrepancies within the study. Once data was updated and requested, I was provided with an excel spreadsheet of all child welfare workers currently employed with the agency with an active caseload working with foster care children, the placement outcome, age, race, and gender of each child from MDCPS.

### **Procedures for Recruitment**

The participants for the study had to be currently employed with an active foster care caseload to participate in the study. The study did not exclude participants based on the employee's gender, age, or race/ethnicity of MDCPS. For the protection of the individuals and to ensure confidentiality, no identifying information was requested; however, each caseworker and child was identified by identification numbers provided by the agency to distinguish individual caseloads and demographic information of the child relevant to the study. I did not make direct contact with the child welfare caseworkers; therefore, informed consent was not required. The demographic information requested (See Appendix A) regarding each participant included worker ID, job title of each

caseworker, age, race, gender, and county where each caseworker was employed, as well as the placement outcome and number of days currently, age, race and gender for each child in custody. A staff member employed with MDCPS was assigned to provide data that was responsive to the researcher's request. Any records that fall under the Mississippi Code Annotated 43-21-257 are exempt from the provisions of the Mississippi Open Records Act. For example, many records that identify a child are exempt under 43-21-257 and 43-21-261 but records that identify a caseworker's caseloads are not (MDHS, 2016). MDCPS requires payment for any non-exempt documents upon production of the data. A notice of the cost of any nonexempt data requested was provided to the researcher prior to the production date. I agreed to provide MDCPS with statistical results of the data analysis once completed and approved by the university.

### **Archival Data**

In this study, I used secondary data obtained from MDCPS, a state agency that provides social services to the state's most vulnerable children and their families. Data used were collected from the most recent compiled archival annual reports (2017) of child welfare workers' agency information and permanent placement outcomes and length of stay for all children in care. Secondary archival data was chosen for this study because this method allowed for confidentiality of the population (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachimas, 2000). While some of the data was accessible publicly on the state's website, I had to complete a public records request to retrieve secondary data that was not publicly accessible to complete the study. The public records request was submitted directly to the Public Relations/Communications Director of MDCPS who then submitted the request to

the attorney general's office. I received a letter from the attorney general's office stating that the public records request was received (see Appendix A). Upon approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I obtained all requested data from MDCPS direct contact person.

### **Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs**

I used the Mississippi Department of Human Services Public Records Request form to obtain demographic data from child welfare caseworkers currently employed with MDCPS. I requested permission from MDCPS to obtain the demographic data to complete the study. I requested information regarding educational backgrounds of child welfare workers, demographic information, and county of employment, as well as demographic information about foster care children's placement outcomes, including the type of placement, the number of days in each placement, age, race, and gender. The data collected provided insight into factors that could affect permanent placement outcomes for children in Mississippi's foster care system.

The independent variable (educational background) and dependent variable (length of stay/days in custody) for the study are defined as follows:

*Degree level* (independent variable) is defined as a degree awarded at varying levels: associate, bachelors, masters, or doctoral degree.

*Traditional Foster Care* is the placement of a child with a nonrelative or close family friend (CWLA, 2012).

*Adoption* is the process by which an adult, someone other than the biological parent assumes the parenting role of a child. Adoption is often with kinship or non-kinship families.

*Reunification* is the process by which a child in foster care is reunited with their birth parents (CWLA, 2012).

*Kinship care* is the placement of a child with a relative or close family member (CWLA, 2012).

*Relative foster care* is a long-term living arrangement with a family relative for a child when adoption is not an option (CWIG, 2013).

*Therapeutic foster home* is a clinically effective alternative to residential treatment and provides a more restricted setting with a nurturing and individualized family environment (CWIG, 2013)

*Residential/Institution* is long-term care given to adults or children with disabilities, mental health problems, or other difficulties, who stay in a residential setting other than their own family home (MDHS, 2016).

*Group home* refers to a private residence for children or young people who cannot live with their families or people with chronic disabilities who may be adults or seniors (MDHS, 2016).

*Length of stay/Days in custody* was identified in this study by the number of days each child has been in the placement setting (MDHS, 2016).

## **Data Analysis**

The data included demographics about the caseworker and the caseworker's caseload. The agency provided an excel spreadsheet for all caseworkers and children statewide in foster care with the identifying placement and number of days in each placement. Demographic information for children included, age, race, gender and county were also included in the spreadsheet. The caseworker's caseload was categorized by job titles based on degree subject (social work, non-social work) to examine for children in permanent placement outcomes and traditional foster homes. Caseworkers had more than one child in the dataset and therefore blocking was used for the data. The use of blocking categorized the groups of caseworkers and children in placement outcomes that are like one another (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Once the groups were categorized, I performed a regression analysis of caseworkers, placement outcomes, gender and race to determine if there is a relationship among length of stay/ days in custody for children in placement (Campbell & Campbell, 2008).

I analyzed data obtained from MDCPS statistical annual reports by entering the data into the latest version (23.0) of the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) Windows software. SPSS is one of the most commonly used statistical instruments to analyze, sort, and report data (IBM Corp, 2013). Once the data was entered, the researcher performed a descriptive analysis to get a numerical output for the study's participants. A post hoc power analysis using the program G\* Power 3.1.92, based on the mean, between-groups comparison effect in the present study ( $d = .5$ ), a sample of approximately 176 (88 each group of family protection specialist and family

protection worker) was used to obtain statistical power at the recommended .80 level (Cohen, 1988). The power to detect a medium effect of this size was determined to be 0.95 as significance at the .05 level.

I used descriptive statistics to screen the results for any outliers, missing data and any inconsistencies of the variables that might interfere with the study results. The mean, median, mode, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages of the data were calculated for nominal variables and continuous variables in the dataset. The data was then interpreted to provide an accurate representation of the chosen sample population. Cases with missing data will be examined and removed from the dataset.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: Is there a relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

$H_01$ : There is no statistical relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

$H_11$ : There is a statistical relationship between a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection

worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

RQ2: Is there a relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

$H_02$ : There is no statistical relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

$H_12$ : There is a statistical relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

### **Threats to Validity**

The threats to validity of this study could include data collection method and sample size. I used secondary data for the study. This method could limit accuracy of information provided due to the number of children entering foster care daily and the number of caseworkers hired, resigned or terminated throughout the process. The sample size and participants for the study could be significantly unequal depending on the degree type of the sample population and may affect the reliability of the study. Some of the

information requested might not be accessible to the researcher and could limit the study results. For example, I was not able to obtain specific degree types based on data not being available by agency.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I submitted the proposal to the Walden University IRB for approval before accessing and obtaining any data from MDCPS. All participants, both child welfare caseworkers and children in placements were not identified by name or any other personal identifying information. The participants were identified by a unique number given by the agency to protect confidentiality. I was the only person analyzing and interpreting the data that was retrieved. Data will be stored and then destroyed after 5 years per Walden University guidelines. All data was submitted to MDCPS in a larger report providing an overview of the study results.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 presented the introduction to the research method and procedures that was conducted for the study. The chapter included the population, participants, instruments and procedures and variables that were examined in the study. The data analysis plan, research questions, threats to validity and ethical procedures were discussed within the chapter. I also elaborated on the recruitment and permission process to obtain participants and data to complete the study. The independents and dependent variable described in the chapter helped the researcher to determine if there was a relationship between the predicting variables as well as addressed the research question of the study. Chapter 4 consists of the results of the findings. The demographic

breakdown into descriptive statistics describes if there is a relationship among the independents and dependent variable or if other contributing factors influence the research hypotheses.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between the independent variable of educational backgrounds of caseworkers and the dependent variable, which was length of stay for children in Mississippi's child welfare system. I also examined the relationship between the independent variables of gender and race of each child and the dependent variable. The outcomes for children who remain in traditional foster homes were compared with outcomes of children in permanent outcomes. The findings in this study is described according to demographics of the study's participants and the research questions and hypotheses.

In this chapter, I describe the research findings according to demographics of educational backgrounds (social work degree and nonsocial work degree) of caseworkers coded as family protection specialist and family protection worker and demographic data of gender, race, and placement outcomes of the child in custody, including measures of the means and standard deviations. This chapter also includes a detailed description of the data collection process, the data analysis, the statistical results of the study, and a summary.

### **Data Collection**

I obtained secondary data from MDCPS, the agency responsible for collecting data on children in custody of the agency. The process for obtaining the data took about 6 months after the University Institution Review Board (IRB) approval. Several changes in administration at MDCPS delayed the receipt of the necessary data for the study. After

many months, some of the requested data for caseworkers, such as specific degree types, demographic information of age, race, gender, and years employed with the agency was not available and resulted in a change in the original research questions and data analysis. The data obtained for children included demographic information on gender, race, age, county, placement types and days in custody for children during the 2016 calendar year. The data obtained for caseworkers included worker identification number, social worker caseworkers with the job titles of family protection specialist, family protection specialist advanced, family protection specialist senior, and nonsocial work caseworkers with the job titles of family protection worker I and family protection worker II.

The sample size for caseworkers ( $N = 176$ ) was based on the power analysis to determine the appropriate sample size for the study. I included caseworkers in the study based on the children in their caseloads being in traditional foster care or the permanent outcomes described above. After examining for outliers in the dataset, using SPSS by examination of a boxplot, caseworkers with the job title family protection specialist represented those with a social work degree and caseworkers with the job title family protection worker I represented those with a nonsocial work degree. The other job titles for caseworkers were excluded from the study because the number of children in placements was smaller and were identified as outliers. The sample size for children ( $N = 1192$ ) was determined after removing extreme outliers of children in placements and days in custody.

I examined data analysis for the study using the SPSS 23.0 version. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were used to analyze the demographic variables of educational

backgrounds, gender, race, placement outcomes, and length of stay for all children in the study. The research questions and hypotheses were analyzed using a simple linear regression and a multiple regression analysis. A regression analysis is a statistical test used when the researcher wants to determine whether one or more predicting variables are related to the dependent variable (Campbell & Campbell, 2008).

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The sample population for the study consisted of  $n = 176$  caseworkers employed with MDCPS as of March 2017. Of those, 50.0% ( $n = 88$ ) had the title family protection specialist and represented those caseworkers with a social work degree and the remaining 50.0% ( $n = 88$ ) had the title family protection worker I and represented those caseworkers without a social work degree employed with MDCPS as of March 2017. The sample population also consisted of  $n = 1,192$  children under the custody of the agency. The study revealed that the gender of children was nearly equal for male ( $n = 597$ , 50.1%) and female ( $n = 595$ , 49.9%). As for race, Caucasian ( $n = 686$ , 57.6%) and African American ( $n = 457$ , 38.3%) children accounted for the largest percentages with Mixed Race children accounting for ( $n = 49$ , 4.1%). Children whose race was identified as undetermined, Pacific Islander, and Asian were removed from the study because of the small number in the sample. The frequencies and percentages of participants' demographics are presented in Table 1.

Among placement outcomes, the analysis revealed that children in traditional foster homes ( $n = 565$ , 47.4%) accounted for the largest placement outcome compared to those in a permanent placement outcome. Of the permanent placement outcomes, those in

relative foster homes ( $n = 301$ , 25.3%) accounted for the largest group in the sample. Children who were reunified in their own home with a parent or other caretaker accounted for the second largest group ( $n = 212$ , 17.8%). Children who were adopted ( $n = 63$ , 5.3%), placed in a therapeutic group home ( $n = 14$ , 1.2%), and placed in a therapeutic foster home ( $n = 37$ , 3.1%) represented the other percentages of the population in a permanent placement outcome. Analysis of the results revealed that only 17.8% of the children in the sample population were reunified with a birth parent or other relative, and only 5.3% had been adopted. Children in other placements (e.g., acute care, residential treatment, runaway, training school, or institution) were excluded from the study based on the small number in those placements. The analysis also revealed that more females were in permanent placements of a relative foster home ( $n = 157$ ) and an adoptive home ( $n = 33$ ) than males. The results were consistent with national statistics (AFCARS, 2015). The frequencies and percentages of placement outcomes are presented in Table 2.

Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Characteristics of the Study's Participants*

Demographics	<i>N</i>	Percentage
Caseworkers		
Family Protection Specialist	88	50.0%
Family Protection Worker I	88	50.0%
Gender of child		
Male	597	50.1%
Female	595	49.9%
Race		
Caucasian	686	57.6%
African American	457	38.3%
Mixed Race	49	4.1%

Table 2

*Frequencies and Percentages of Placement Outcomes for Children in Custody (N=1192)*

Placement outcome of children in custody	<i>N</i>	Percentage
Foster home	565	47.4%
Relative foster home	301	25.3%
Own home	212	17.8%
Adoptive home	63	5.3%
Therapeutic foster home	37	3.7%
Therapeutic group home	14	1.2%

The length of stay for children in a placement was coded by days in custody. The analysis showed that ( $n = 479, 40.18\%$ ) were reported to be in a placement between 43-364 days, indicating that many of the children had been in placement for less than one year. The second largest group of children ( $n = 316, 26.51\%$ ) were in a placement between 365-759 days, less than two years. The frequency of the children did decrease as the length of stay increased (Table 3). The results also showed ( $n = 105$ ) of the sample population were in foster home for 3 or more years, indicating that many of the children are still waiting for reunification or to be adopted. The longest length of stay for a child in the sample population was 2, 311 days, more than 6 years in a placement (therapeutic foster home). The analysis also revealed that nonsocial work caseworkers had more kids in foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home placements ( $n = 844, 70.8\%$ ), than social work caseworkers ( $n = 348, 29.2\%$ ). The sample had a mean length of stay of 640.52 ( $SD = 497.67$ ).

Table 3

*Frequencies and Percentages of Length of Stay for Children in a Placement (N=1192)*

Days in Custody	<i>N</i>	Percentage
7- 364	479	40.18%
365- 759	316	26.15%
760- 1, 094	182	15.27%
1, 095- 1, 459	109	9.14%
1, 460- 1, 824	64	5.4%
1, 825- 2, 189	35	2.9%
2, 190- 2, 554	7	1.0%

### **Research Question 1**

Is there a relationship between the educational backgrounds of a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree case worker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home, therapeutic foster home and own home (reunification) for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

$H_0$ : There is no statistical relationship between the educational backgrounds of a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home, therapeutic foster home, and own home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

$H_1$ : There is a statistical relationship between educational backgrounds of a social work degree caseworker (family protection specialist) and nonsocial work degree caseworker (family protection worker) and the length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home therapeutic foster home and own home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

Research question one was tested using a simple linear regression to predict if educational background of caseworkers significantly predicted length of stay/days in custody for children in placement outcomes. The predictor variable is educational background and the criterion variable is length of stay. The null hypothesis tested was that the regression coefficient was 0. The data was examined for outliers and violations of

assumptions of homoscedasticity, linearity and normality prior to analysis. The analysis revealed there were no missing data.

### **Homoscedasticity and Linearity**

One of the assumptions required for the regression analysis is testing homoscedasticity, meaning, variances of residuals are consistent across the regression line and linearity means the relationship between the variables should be linear (Campbell & Campbell, 2008). An analysis of the homoscedasticity and linearity was carried out in SPSS by examination of a visual scatterplot. The scatterplot of standardized predicted values showed linearity is reasonable because none of the values fall outside of the line greater than 1 and less than -2. The spread of residuals appeared consistent across the regression line, indicated the assumption of homoscedasticity were met. Figure 1 shows the scatterplot.

### **Normality**

Another assumption of the regression analysis is normality which means that all errors should be normally distributed identically and independently (Campbell & Campbell, 2008). The analysis of normality was carried out in SPSS by examination of standardized residuals. An examination of skewness (-.344) and kurtosis (-.461) for each variable suggested no significant degrees of skewness and kurtosis in the data. The examination of a visual normal P-P plot showed that the points closely follow the normal line (see Figure 2) and the histogram appears to have a bell shape curve, indicated that the assumption of normality were met (see Figure 3).

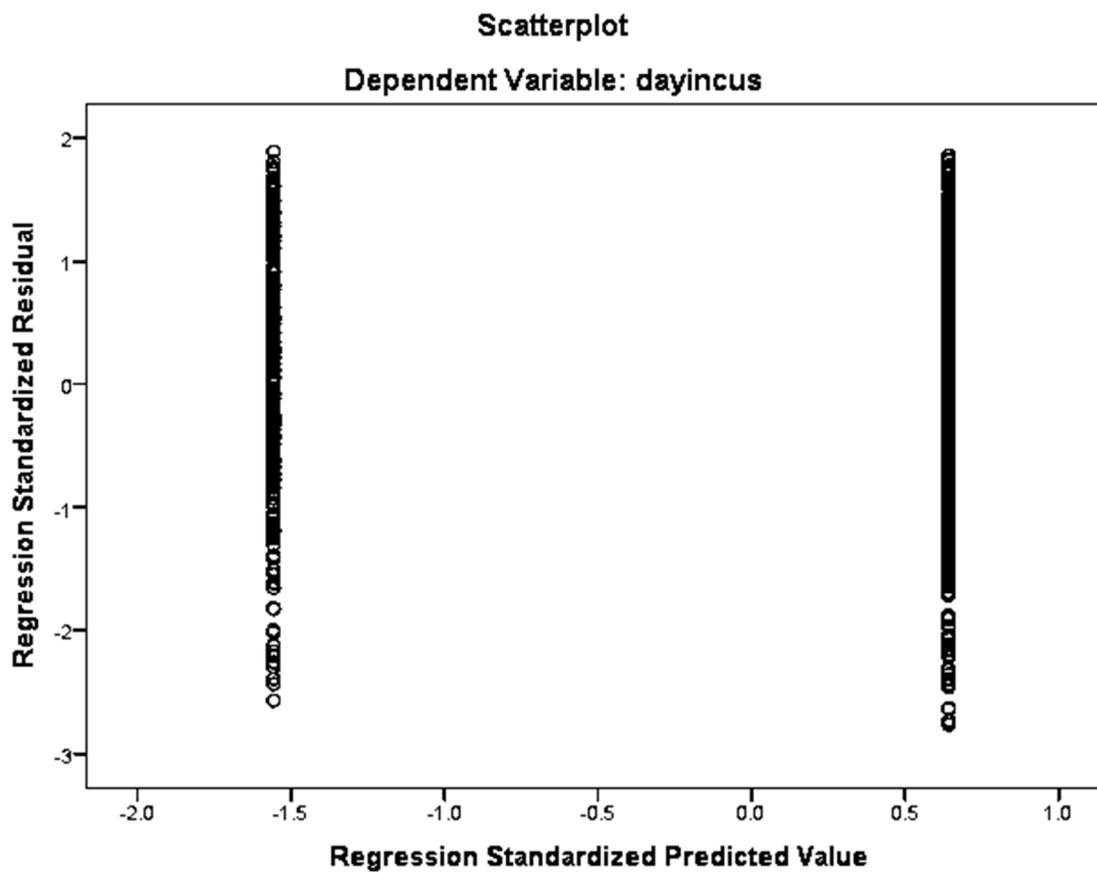


Figure 1. Scatterplot of standardized predicted value for simple linear regression

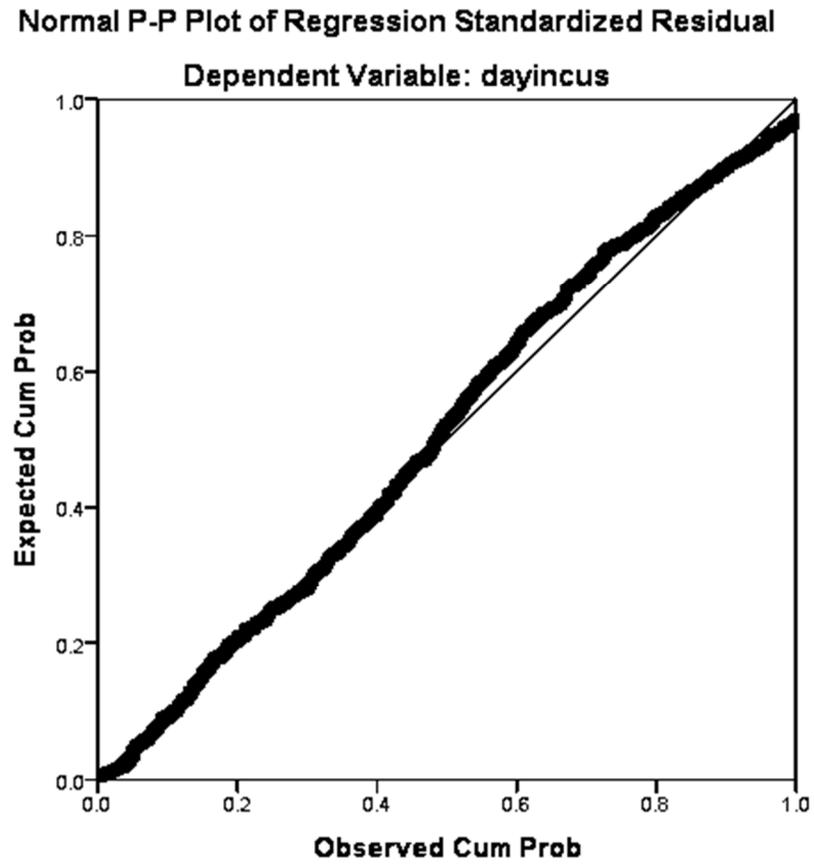


Figure 2. Normal P-P plot for simple linear regression model

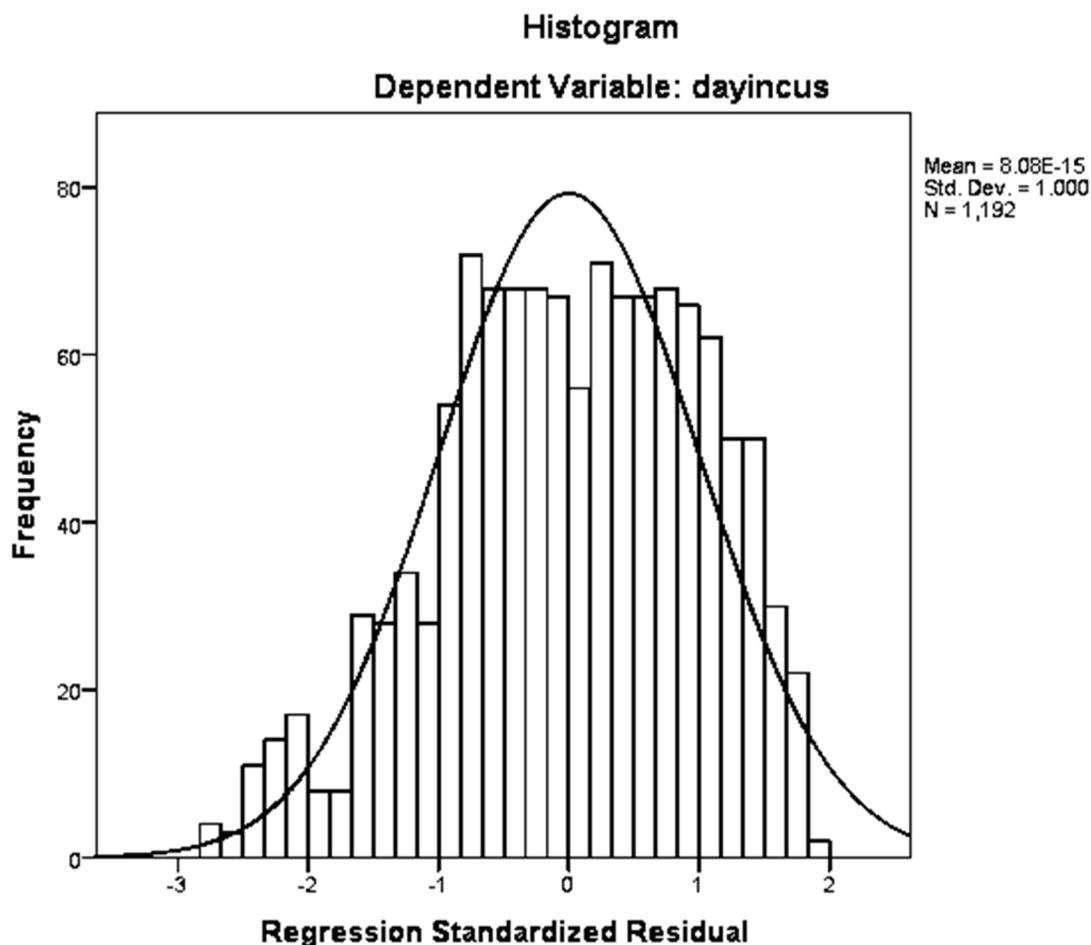


Figure 3. Histogram for simple linear regression model

**Results of the linear regression.** Simple linear regression was utilized to predict if educational backgrounds of caseworkers significantly predicted length of stay in placement outcomes. The results of the overall model were not statistically significant,  $F(1, 1190) = .416, p = .591, R^2 = .000$ , and accounted for 0% of the variance in length of stay in placement outcome. The results indicated that educational background of social work caseworkers and nonsocial work caseworkers was not a significant predictor in length of stay of placement outcomes for children in custody ( $\beta = .019, p = .519$ ),

therefore, we failed to reject the null hypothesis. Table 5 shows results of the linear regression model.

Table 4

*Linear Regression of Educational Backgrounds Predicting Length of Stay/Days in Custody (N=1192)*

	Unstandardized $\beta$	SE	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Educational Background	.015	.024	.019	.645	.519

Note:  $F(1,1190) = .416, p > .05, R^2 = .000$

### Research Question 2

Is there a relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system?

*H<sub>0</sub>*: There is no statistical relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster home, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

*H<sub>1</sub>*: There is a statistical relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes of foster home, relative foster, adoptive home, own home, therapeutic group home, and therapeutic foster home for children in Mississippi's child welfare system.

Research question two was utilized using a multiple regression to test if gender and race of a child significantly predicted the length of stay in a placement outcome. The predictor variables are gender and race and the criterion variable are length of stay/days in custody. The null hypothesis tested was that the regression coefficient was 0. The data was examined for outliers and violations of assumptions of homoscedasticity, linearity, normality and multicollinearity prior to analysis. The analysis revealed there were no missing data.

### **Homoscedasticity and Linearity**

An analysis of the homoscedasticity and linearity was carried out in SPSS by examination of a visual scatter plot (Figure 4.). The scatterplot shows linearity is reasonable because none of the values fall outside of the line that is greater than 2 and less than -3. The spread of residuals appeared consistent across the regression line, indicated that the assumption of homoscedasticity was met.

### **Normality**

An analysis of normality was carried out in SPSS by examination of standardized residuals. A visual examination of the Normal P-P plot (Figure 5) shows that the points closely follows the normal line and the histogram appears to have a bell shape curve, indicated the assumption of normality was met (see Figure 6).

### **Multicollinearity**

An analysis of multicollinearity was carried out in SPSS to determine if the predictor variables of race and gender are highly correlated. The analysis reveals that

there is no significant relationship between the predictors of race and gender ( $r = -.046$ ), indicated that multicollinearity is not an issue.

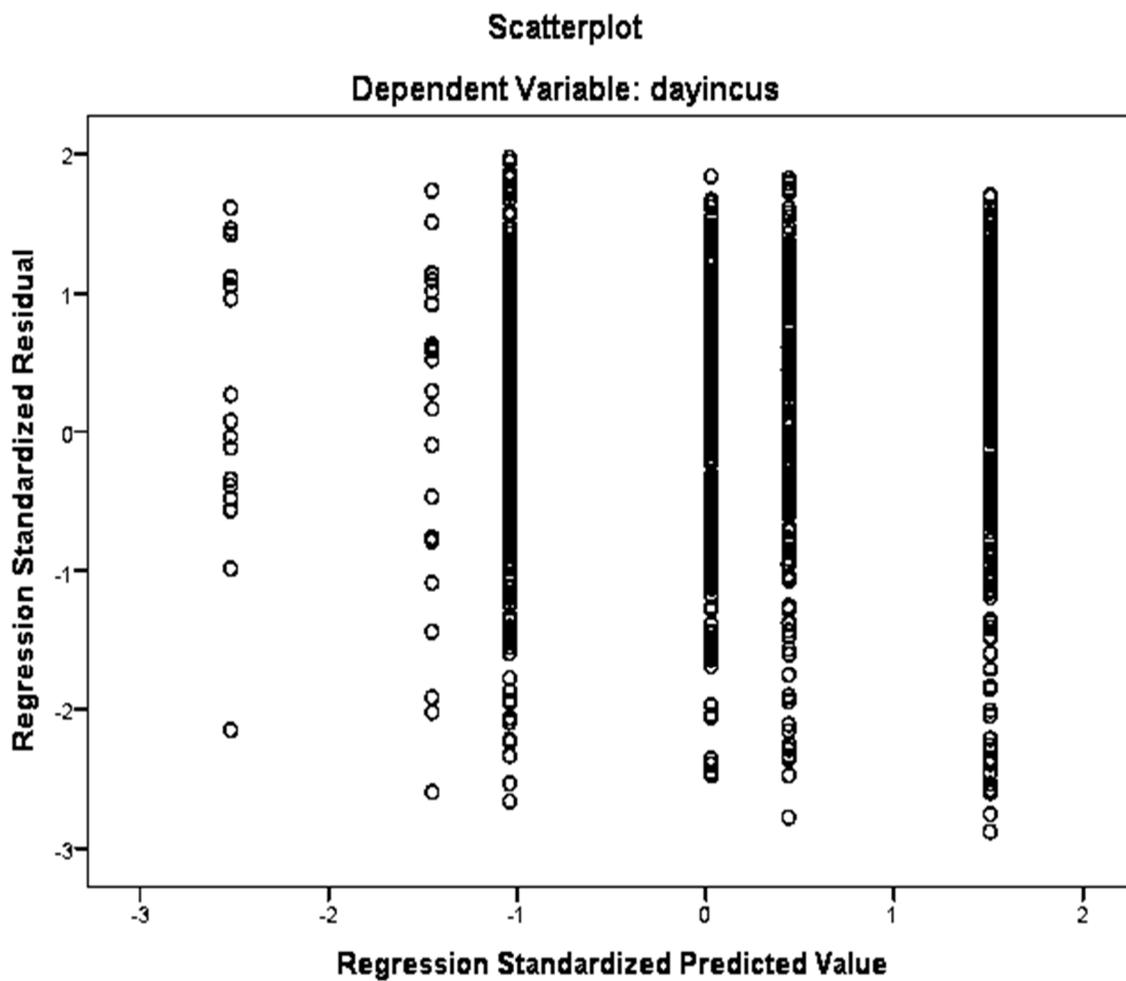


Figure 4. Scatterplot of residuals for multiple regression

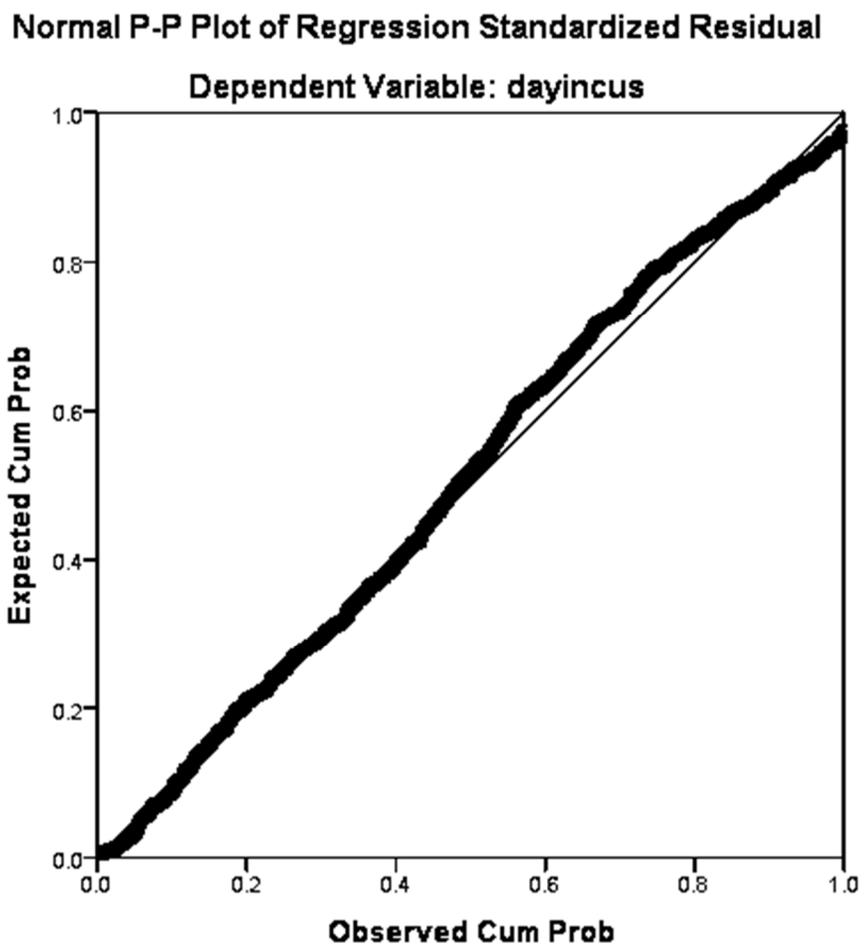
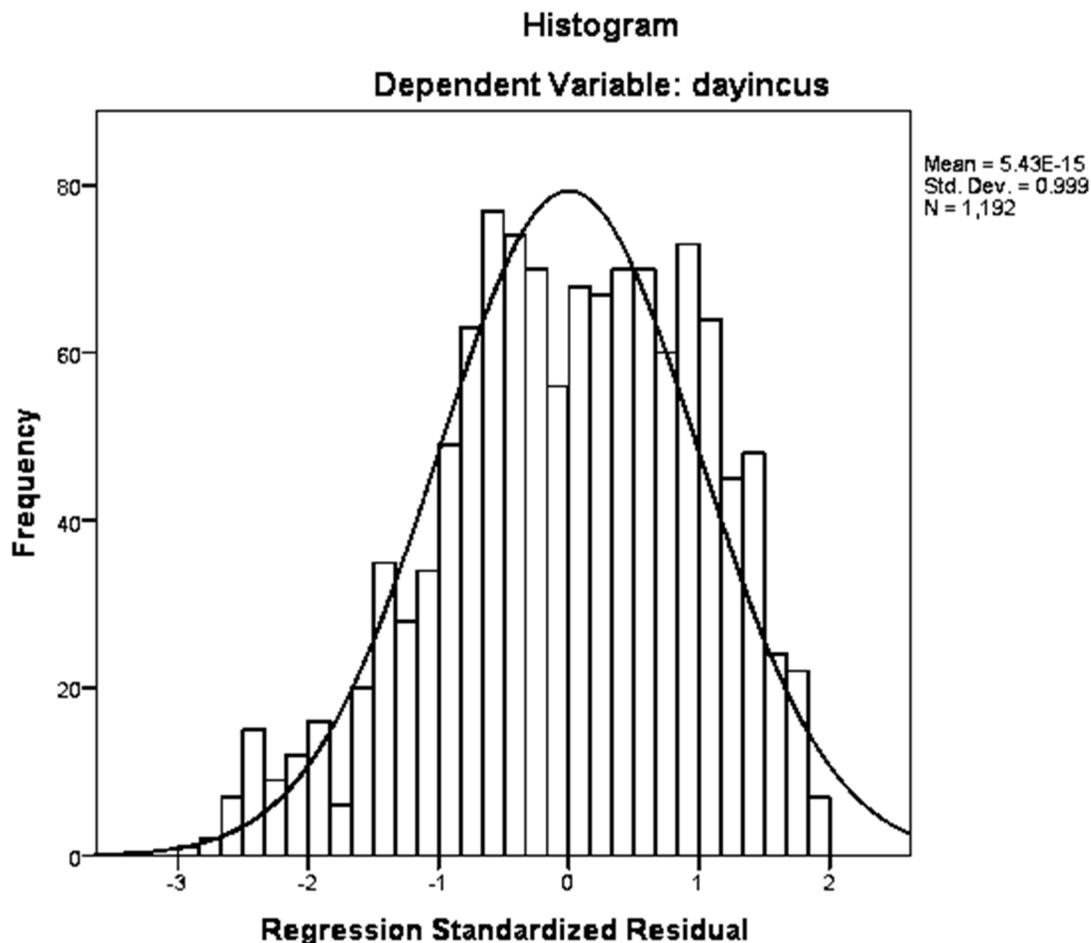


Figure 5: Normal P-P plot for multiple regression



*Figure 6:* Histogram of Residuals for multiple regression

**Results of the multiple regressions:** Stepwise multiple regression was used to test if gender and race significantly predicted length of stay in placement outcomes. The results of the overall model were statistically significant,  $F(2, 1189) = 14.438, p = .000$ ,  $R^2 = .012$ ), and accounted for 12% of the variance in length of stay in placement outcomes. The results of the regression indicated that race of child significantly predicted length of stay in placement outcomes ( $\beta = -.110, p = .000$ ), however, the results found that gender was not a significantly predictor of length of stay in placement outcomes ( $\beta =$

-.015,  $p = .598$ ). Thus, for every 1 unit increase in race of child, a .110 unit increase in length of stay in placement outcome is predicted. For every 1 unit increase in gender of child, a -.015 unit decrease in length of placement outcome is expected. The results indicated that the relationship between the two variables were due to random variability. Based on the results of the overall model, we rejected the null and accepted the alternative hypothesis. Table 6 shows the results of the multiple regression models.

Table 5

*Stepwise Multiple Regressions of Gender and Race Predicting Length of Stay/Days in Custody*

	$\beta$	t	p
Race	.110	3.80	.000
Gender	-.015	-.527	.598

Note:  $F(2, 1189) = 14.438, p < .05, R^2 = .012$

### Summary

This chapter presented the results of the findings of the research study. Demographic characteristics of the sample were described using descriptive statistics of frequencies, means, and standard deviations. To address the research questions and hypotheses a regression analysis was conducted. The assumptions and violations of the regression analysis were also examined prior to the analysis.

Research question one examined the relationship between educational backgrounds of caseworkers and length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. A simple linear regression was conducted to examine the

relationship of the predictor variable, educational background and the criterion variable, length of stay, coded as days in custody. The findings revealed that educational backgrounds were not a significant predictor of length of stay in placement outcomes, therefore, we failed to reject the null hypothesis.

Research question two examined the relationship between gender and race and length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. A multiple regression was conducted to examine the relationship of the predictor variables gender and race and the criterion variable length of stay. The overall findings revealed that a statistical relationship between the variables and therefore we rejected the null and accepted the alternative hypothesis.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed interpretation of the findings as they relate to other statistical findings of similar research. Chapter 5 will also address the limitations, recommendations, and implications for positive social change, and a conclusion of the research study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this quantitative study, I examined the relationship of child welfare caseworkers' educational backgrounds as well as the gender and race of the children as predicting factors of length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. The intent of this study was to identify factors for children being in traditional foster care for longer periods of time without reunification or being placed in another permanent placement. Findings of the study revealed that educational backgrounds of the MDCPS workers were not a significant predictor, but a combination of race and gender have some significance to children being in traditional foster care for longer periods of time. This chapter includes interpretations of the findings, limitations, recommendation, social change and the conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Secondary data from MDCPS was obtained to address the research questions in this study. The information received was caseworkers' job titles based on educational backgrounds and demographic information for children currently under the supervision of the agency. I compared findings in this study to previous studies.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was examined using a simple linear regression analysis to examine educational backgrounds of the caseworkers as a predicting factor for length of stay in placement outcomes of children in the child welfare system. Educational background, the independent variable in this study, was identified as either family

protection specialist (social work caseworkers) or family protection worker I (nonsocial work caseworkers). The dependent variable, length of stay, was defined as days in custody for children in placement outcomes. The findings revealed that educational backgrounds were not statistically significant in predicting the length of stay for children in a placement outcome. The results of the regression model were not significant ( $p > .05$ ). Based on the overall nonsignificance of the regression model, we failed to reject the null hypothesis. The results of the findings were similar to that found in a study conducted by Perry (2006) who examined educational backgrounds of child welfare workers in Florida. The results showed that the ratings of social workers' skills and competency do not statistically differ from those workers with other educational backgrounds and those educational backgrounds of child welfare workers are a poor predictor for successful outcomes for clients in child protective services. There are some mixed findings in the research literature, Chalbot; et al. (2013) found that agencies that have access to more workers with social work education might reduce the likelihood that a child will be placed in out of home care after an initial investigation. The findings in this study differed and showed that the agency had more non-social work caseworkers employed than social work caseworkers.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was examined using a multiple regression analysis to examine gender and race as predicting factors for the length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. The findings of the multiple regressions showed that the overall model was significant for the combination of gender

and race being predicting factors for the child's length of stay in a placement outcome. Individual results showed that race significantly predicted length of stay ( $p = .000$ ) but gender does not ( $p = .598$ ). Based on the overall results of the multiple regression model, we rejected the null and accepted the alternative hypothesis. The results in the model appear to be inconsistent with information presented in the literature review by showing that race and gender can be significant predictors for children being in traditional foster care longer. Frame (2000) found that Caucasian and African American children removed from their caregivers are the least likely to reunify with their parents compared to other ethnic groups. However, my findings revealed that Caucasian and African American children were reunified more frequently with their own parents compared to other ethnic groups. Whaley (2001) found that adolescent girls experience greater probability of placement instability than adolescent boys do. However, results of this study revealed that more females were in permanent placements with relatives and adopted compared to males.

### **Theoretical Framework and Finding Interpretations**

Attachment theory, the theoretical framework used for this study, focuses on understanding separations and disruptions of children when they are away from their primary caregivers. Attachment theory was used to explain how being in a permanent placement can have a significant impact on a child's emotional and social development throughout life. In this study, I measured length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the welfare system. Previous research showed that foster care placement is generally associated with several problems in attachment relationships and puts children

at risk of insecure attachments and adjusting to new caregivers (Zaevalkink et al., 2008). In this study, I found that 47.4% of the children were in traditional foster care, and 105 children of the sample population were in care more than 3 years, indicating that these children were at greater risk of having problems with attachment relationships to a foster parent or other caregiver.

The literature also shows that children in foster care who do not have a relationship with their parents are at risk for depression and anxiety and other unhealthy behaviors (Brhel, 2012). The findings in this study showed that some of the children had reunified with parents or caregivers and been adopted, but others were still waiting to be placed in a long-term, permanent placement. Prior research also showed that child welfare caseworkers who view family relationships as an option for children often allow children to include letters, phone calls, or visitations to biological family members (Mapp & Steinburg, 2007). The results of this study revealed that caseworkers are not the contributing factor to longer stays in traditional foster care. The literature showed that attachment relationships are often endangered the longer a child remains in the foster care system. The findings in this study revealed that many children have been in foster care for more than six years away from biological parents and other loved ones and could be at risk for poor attachment relationships. Previous research also revealed that an understanding of secure and insecure attachment relationships for foster care children should motivate child welfare workers to advocate permanent placements outcomes (Frey et al. 2008).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations in this study that were unavoidable. First, specific degree types for caseworkers were not accessible by the agency and resulted in a change in the original research questions and data analysis. Not being able to examine specific degree types of caseworkers limited the study's findings for caseworkers' educational background. Secondly, I used secondary data for this study, due to confidentiality of nonpublic information, so some of the information requested was not obtained. A qualitative approach using interviews with caseworkers would have allowed me to gather information in a more natural setting. A qualitative approach would have also provided the necessary quantitative information needed for the original research questions.

### **Recommendations**

In this study, I aimed to address the gap in the literature by examining the educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and gender and race of children as predicting factors for length of stay in placement outcomes in Mississippi's child welfare system. There are several areas for further research as a result of the findings of this study. Further research addressing other contributing factors affecting placement outcomes such as limited foster homes, court proceedings, and relative involvements may help to determine quicker placements for children.

Further research using a mixed methods approach would help to fill the gap in the literature on placement outcomes for foster care children. While this study used a quantitative approach to obtain educational backgrounds and demographic information

for child welfare caseworkers, a qualitative research study would provide more accurate information on placement outcomes from the caseworker's point of view.

The findings in this study showed that some caseworkers had 40 or more kids on their caseloads compared to their counterparts with smaller caseloads. Reasonable workloads for caseworkers should be further examined to prevent neglect of children in custody due to larger caseloads. More training should be implemented to understand attachment relationships and concerns for children who remain in foster care for longer periods of time. Additionally, it is recommended that demographic information is maintained for all caseworkers including specific degree types for positions employed. Maintain such information can help provide successful counseling and placement services for abused and neglected children.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The foster care rates in Mississippi has increased over the years; leaving more children in traditional foster care without reunification, adoption, or another permanent placement (CWIG, 2013). The goal of this study was to promote positive social change regarding permanency outcomes for children in Mississippi's child welfare system. There are several implications that can promote social change for the child welfare system. Considering the number of children currently in placement, child welfare caseworkers, social workers, supervisors, foster caregivers, families and community leaders can help inform policy and procedures on a local level by collaborating on family preservation and permanency planning to help move kids to reunification or permanent placements quickly.

Since attachment issues are a concern for foster care children, this study can promote social change to foster care parents by enhancing knowledge and guidance on how to respond to children with attachment issues. Foster care parents, social workers, other child welfare workers can benefit from evidenced based training to help enhance the safety and development of children and families involved in the child welfare system. Policy makers can increase effective trainings to ensure that children and their biological, adoptive, or foster care families have the appropriate support and services needed to handle issues of the child.

This study can promote social change on a national and organizational level to all child welfare agencies across the state and surrounding states by influencing change within the child welfare field. As a contribution to positive social change, states' foster care agencies can license more relative placements and community families to prevent children from being distant from biological families. Positive social change can be implemented on a societal level for foster care children as they learn through loving and nurturing families, to be productive citizens while overcoming traumas and challenges.

Since many children are without permanent homes, this study can promote change within families, either single individual homes or two parent family homes to foster and/or adopt children to provide a safe and nurturing environment to enhance the quality of a child's life. Foster parents should work collectively with biological families to ensure that a child continues a relationship with the family if permitted by the judge to avoid attachment insecurity. The findings and the literature show that children are spending more than two years in a traditional foster placement. This study should promote social

change to the state's agency by adhering to policy and procedures of federal mandated laws by moving kids to permanency as quickly as possible after being in a traditional foster placement for longer periods of time.

One of the main purposes of this study was to examine the educational backgrounds of child welfare workers and placement outcomes for foster care children. The analyses revealed that educational backgrounds were not significant in predicting the length of stay for children in a placement outcome. These results can contribute to positive social change on an individual level as child welfare caseworkers rely on personal judgments, agency policy and resources when making placement decisions for children in the welfare system. Caseworkers can implement possible social change as they develop permanency plans for children to accommodate individual needs.

The second main purpose of this study was to examine gender and race as predicting factors for the length of stay in placement outcomes for children in the child welfare system. The analyses revealed an association between gender and race of children being predicting factors for the length of stay in a placement outcome. The individual findings revealed that race significantly predicted length of stay but gender does not. These results can contribute to positive social change by informing agency resources as caseworkers and the judge consider the appropriate placement outcome that best meet the child's needs based on gender and race. The findings revealed that Caucasian and African American children were more likely to reunify with birth parents than other races. The study's findings also revealed that females were more likely to be adopted and placed in relative homes than males. These results have implications for

possible social change on the organizational level for implementing more resources of foster homes availability across the state. The state's agency can contribute to possible social change by complying with the legal complaints set forth by the *Olivia Y. v. Barbour* lawsuit by addressing permanency issues of children of all racial backgrounds and both male and female in the child welfare system.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to fill a gap in the literature by examining educational backgrounds of child welfare caseworkers and demographic of children as contributing factors to longer length of stays for children in Mississippi's child welfare system, were met. The findings presented, reflected some of the findings in the literature review. The findings in this study have indicated that children are spending 3 or more years in traditional foster homes compared to those in permanent placement. However, some of the kids have been reunified with birth parents or adopted and females were reported to be in more permanent placements than males. Mississippi statistics don't differ much from any other previous statistics based on the findings revealed in the study.

While MDCPS work to reform their child welfare system, the educational background of caseworkers should not be excluded as majority of the caseworkers employed hold a non-social work degree rather than a social work degree. Hence, educational backgrounds were not considered to be a contributing factor in the length of stay for children in care, but further findings can help the agency to identify contributing factors of permanency issues to meet the needs of all children in the state's care.

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## Appendix A: Public Records Request

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI



ATTORNEY GENERAL

May 12, 2016

Re: Public Records Request

Dear Spansel:

The Department of Human Services received your Mississippi Public Records Act Request in which you requested some information. Your request used a great deal of abbreviation and so I have written out what I believe your request to be. Number of caseworkers and their degree level and titles; the county that each worker is assigned to and the amount of case load at the present time; the number of children the Division of Family & Children's Services has in permanent placement and length of time in months those children have been in permanent placement.

If this is not what you are seeking, please contact human resources or me immediately so that the search for records can be changed to accurately reflect the information you are requesting. The Department of Human Services will begin to search

for any documents they have which may be responsive to your request and which are not subject to any exception created by the Mississippi Code. For example, any records which might fall under Mississippi Code Annotated §43-21-257 (1972, as amended) are exempt from the provisions of the Mississippi Open Records Act. In addition, many records which identify a child are exempt under § 43-21-259 and § 43-21-261.

Any non-exempt documents in our possession will be produced to you upon payment of the costs of the production of the documents. You will receive notice of the costs prior to the production date. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Special Assistant Attorney General

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI 39205

## Appendix B: Certificate of Completion

