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Social Workers' Perspectives on Why Stepparents Kill

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LaQuitta Simms

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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by

LaQuitta Simms

MSW, California State University, Long Beach, 2014

BS, California State University, Dominquez Hills, 1996

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

The term accidental filicide refers to the death of a child that occurs inadvertently due to abuse or neglect. In this category of child homicides, death was not the intended outcome. Stepparents outnumber biological parents as the primary perpetrators of accidental filicide based on data collected nationwide. There is limited research on how child protection social workers perceive the risk and safety associated with accidental filicide by stepparents. The objective of this study was to investigate the safety and risk factors related to accidental filicide and the perceived barriers through the lens of child protection social workers who investigated allegations of abuse in households containing stepparents. This study utilized social learning theory to examine how observation and imitation affected learning. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 social workers from a California metropolitan area child welfare agency using a generic qualitative study design. Four overarching themes and their subthemes were identified through thematic analysis. The themes developed were (a) family-centered worries, (b) family strengths, (c) personal and professional conflict, and (d) work–life balance. The findings of this study are essential for social workers when conducting safety and risk assessments of at-risk and abused children. Child welfare agencies, external stakeholders, and community partners can use the study to improve positive social change through existing policies & practices. Through the use of this data, society could ensure the safety and well-being of stepchildren who are susceptible to such threats.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the memory of Gabriel Fernandez, Anthony Avalos, Noah Cuatro, and the countless children who have lost their lives because of abuse and neglect. If this research study plays a small role in the prevention of future tragedies, your sacrifice will not be in vain.

I dedicate this study to child protection social workers everywhere, fighting tirelessly to save our children. Thank you for your service and sacrifice. My hope is this study will help to answer these essential questions: Who saves the savers? Who protects the protectors? Who heals the healers?

"To him who has had the experience, no explanation is necessary. To him who has not, none is possible." ~Ram Dass~

Acknowledgments

All praises to the Most High! Thank you for allowing me to walk in my purpose.

To my husband: You will never know how your words of encouragement when I faced self-doubt saved me. Thank you, King!

To my sons: My prayer is that my pursuit of higher education inspires you to pursue your own dreams relentlessly.

To my parents: From elementary school spelling bees to college graduations, the depth of your love never ceases to amaze me.

To my extended family & friends: I pray that I have made you proud.

To my best friends, Ericka & Shannon: I could not have dreamed of a better sisterhood than ours.

To the "Queendom of Doctors" who came before me: You make me proud to spell my name W.O.M.A.N.

To Peggy Selma, Bunny Withers & Jacques Bordeaux: Through education, you showed black and brown students in south central Los Angeles that anything is possible. Thank you!

To my dissertation chairs, Dr. Gilkey & Dr. Cole: Thank you for always showing me grace! I am forever grateful!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Filicide is a term that describes the killing of a child at the hands of a biological, adoptive, or stepparent (Dixon et al., 2013; Putkonen et al., 2016; Sedumedi & Winter, 2020; Sim, 2018, p. 71). Records going back to 430 B.C. depict the religious and mythical killing of children by their parents (Putkonen et al., 2016). In 1969, Resnick classified five categories of filicide: altruistic, acutely psychotic, unwanted child, spousal revenge, and accidental filicide. *Altruistic filicide*, also known as *pathological filicide*, has two distinct motives, and both are determined to be out of love (D'Orban, 1979). One explanation involves the parent not wanting to leave their child alive after the parent has decided to commit suicide. Another involves children diagnosed with a debilitating ailment, and the parent's motive is to relieve that child of pain and suffering (Putkonen et al., 2016; Resnick, 2016). The second category of filicide, *acute psychotic filicide*, refers to parents who kill their child (ren) while having a mental health crisis (D'Orban, 1979; Putkonen et al., 2016; Resnick, 2016). *Unwanted child*, infanticide, or *neonaticide* occurs at the hands of a mother who, for several reasons, does not want to raise their newborn or infant child (D'Orban, 1979; Resnick, 1969). *Spousal revenge* or *retaliation filicide* is where biological parents kill their children to enact revenge on the other parent due to infidelity or divorce (Dawson, 2015; Resnick, 1969). Lastly, *accidental filicide* (Resnick, 1969) or *beating-abusing mother filicide* (D'Orban, 1979), or *battered child syndrome* (Resnick, 1969), is the death of a child when abuse or neglect is the contributing factor.

I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to recruit participants from the social work profession. This study explored the perceptions of child

welfare social workers regarding risk factors associated with perpetrators and victims of stepparental filicide. Furthermore, I examined the barriers social workers perceive as hindering their ability to assess those risk factors for impending fatal child abuse at the hands of stepparents.

Child welfare social workers must assess, prevent, and intervene in child-abuse-related cases (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019). However, they often face the consequences of their actions or inactions during the aftermath of a child maltreatment death (Etehad & Winton, 2017; Zorzut, 2022). Researchers have previously examined the risk posed to children by stepparents sharing parenting responsibilities. However, obtaining the perspectives of child welfare social workers may help shed additional light on these issues (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019). Failure to understand these risk factors could exacerbate child abuse and neglect, increasing child maltreatment deaths.

The central organization of this section is as follows: The problem statement will bring attention to the prevalence of filicide, including stepparental filicide. The purpose statement details the aim of this study, which is to understand better the scope and challenges associated with stepparental filicide through the lens of child welfare social workers. The Nature of the Doctoral Project section will focus on the methodology used and how the findings are significant to social work practice. The Theoretical/Conceptual Framework section will provide the foundation of how the theories and concepts grounded this study. This section will also provide an in-depth look at how the social learning theory grounded this study. The Values and Ethics section will detail how the study aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics. Lastly, I present a thorough Review of the

Professional and Academic Literature on filicide, stepparental filicide, risk factors, and social worker challenges.

Problem Statement

One issue that often receives attention in the national discussion and data inquiry of child protection is filicide. Stöckl et al. (2017) reviewed data on child homicide reported from 44 countries. It was determined that 7.2% of child deaths were at the hands of stepfathers. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2023), the United States leads the civilized world with 1712 reported child maltreatment deaths. Further, Texas and California lead all states in child maltreatment deaths at 255 and 143, respectively. The reported incidence of child deaths in the states of Alabama (47), Oklahoma (42), Mississippi (38), and Arkansas (30) are also cause for concern. Unfortunately, when analyzing perpetrator data, this child maltreatment report does not differentiate between biological, adoptive, and stepparents.

For this reason, I reviewed additional pertinent data from Statista (2022), which revealed that, as of 2020, five children die a day because of maltreatment. Almost 81% of perpetrators of fatal child abuse involved at least one biological, adoptive, or stepparent, and 2.5% involved an unmarried partner of the parent. In Hunter et al. (2019), using data from the National Violent Death Reporting System, 61% of the 1,023 documented child deaths were from abuse or neglect. The study also identified stepfathers as the perpetrators in 22% of those child deaths.

On a local scale, Webster et al. (2023) revealed that 416,313 children had one or more child abuse or neglect allegation in California. Out of the 58 counties in California, Los Angeles County leads in the number of children with child abuse allegations at 93,112. According to the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (2022), the child protection hotline received 301 reports of child deaths in 2021. The 301 reports of child deaths included 157 children with a history of child welfare intervention and 144 without. Based on a detailed analysis, child abuse was confirmed or suspected in 66 cases of the 301 documented child deaths. Four cases were where parents and their significant others perpetrated the crimes.

Besides the reported data, many studies have examined the characteristics of perpetrators of child abuse-related deaths. Biological parents disproportionately commit unwanted child, altruistic, psychotic, and spousal revenge filicide (Eriksson et al., 2014; Resnick, 2016). Alternatively, studies have demonstrated that stepfathers, significant others, intimate partners, and paramours of the child's biological parent are disproportionately responsible for accidental filicide (Daly, 2022; Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1988, 2001, 2005). Lastly, research on filicide perpetrators revealed that stepchildren were one hundred times more likely to endure physical abuse before their death (Daly & Wilson, 1994; Morris et al., 2018; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004).

In contrast, Schacht et al. (2021) studied the difference in survival rates between stepchildren versus half-siblings, while Nobes et al. (2019) replicated Daly and Wilson's 1994 study. Both research studies concluded that stepparents do not increase the risk of

stepchild mortality compared to the survival rates of half-siblings. Nevertheless, there is an urgency to address this matter as relevant statistics have shown that stepparents contribute to the increased dangers to children compared to biological parents (Roach & Bryant, 2015).

Child deaths are impactful regardless of the circumstances or perpetrators. Therefore, understanding stepparental filicide and social workers' challenges in identifying risk and safety concerns are worthy of independent research. Awareness of where these phenomena intersect is equally essential and may aid in increasing child protective capacities by improving social workers' assessment processes (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Through semi-structured interviews, I collected comprehensive, knowledge-rich data based on the experiences of child protection workers regarding the assessment of risk factors associated with stepparental filicide. Evaluating that data may help develop social workers' ability to implement assessment approaches that support cognitive awareness of the risk some stepchildren face. The current child protection practices and procedures investigate the actions or inactions of the victim's biological parents when there are allegations of child abuse or neglect (Feely et al., 2020; Wulczyn et al., 2005). However, the findings of this study may improve social workers' understanding of the decision-making processes that guides them in assessing the safety and risk associated with stepparents. These improvements are necessary, as stepparents are often not engaged

when the social worker conducts the initial and ongoing assessments of the child's risk and safety (Pryor, 2020).

Research Questions

While annual reports of child fatalities in California show a decline, the effects of child deaths on families, the community, and social workers are traumatic (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, 2022). In exploring this phenomenon through the lens of child welfare social workers, we may understand how social workers can enhance their protective capacity over this vulnerable population. The research questions posed for this study are as follows:

RQ1:   What are the learned experiences of California metropolitan area child welfare social workers regarding the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide?

RQ2:   What do California metropolitan area child welfare social workers perceive as barriers to identifying and addressing risk and safety factors associated with stepparental filicide?

The research questions provoked in-depth responses among social work professionals regarding the red flags present when children are in situations that expose them to the dangers of stepparental filicide. Participants also responded to how social workers assess risk and safety between the child and the stepparent and the barriers that affect their ability to provide practical assessments. By addressing the question regarding the perceived barriers, the findings of this research may highlight areas for growth in social worker assessments of stepparents.

Key Terms and Concepts

Filicide: The murder of a child under 18 by a parent. There are five distinct categories of filicide: spousal revenge, unwanted child, acutely psychotic, altruistic, and accidental (Granic, 2003; Putkonen et al., 2016; Resnick, 2016).

Accidental filicide: The killing of a child by a parent during the act of committing child abuse and neglect. These deaths are accidental as this is the only category of filicide where the perpetrator did not intend the child's death (Bourget et al., 2007; Hellen et al., 2021; West, 2007). In addition, for the purposes of this study, child fatality and child maltreatment deaths will be referred to as accidental filicide.

Stepparental filicide: Throughout the study, the use of this term will encompass not only those perpetrators who are stepparents in the strict sense of the term but also those who are not married to the parent, such as cohabiting partners, intimate partners, and significant others (Debowska et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2007; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004).

Continuing services social worker: Child welfare social workers who provide ongoing protective and supportive services to abused and neglected children and their families.

Emergency response social worker: Child welfare social workers who investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect in families and determine the outcomes of those investigations.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

For this study, I used a qualitative research method. The qualitative inquiry focuses on the importance of meaning and context when gathering and deciphering information (Babchuk, 2016, p. 71). One of the benefits of a qualitative study is extracting subjective ideas, knowledge, and perceptions about a phenomenon (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). This qualitative method allows the researcher to ascertain the perceptions and experiences of the participants studied (Skinner et al., 2000). According to Babchuk (2016, p. 71), the social work field manages people and groups affected by various issues. This study used qualitative data to explore universal insights about social work experiences by collecting rich and in-depth viewpoints.

I employed a generic qualitative design to address the research questions. A generic design allows the researcher to understand how people infer, construe, and make meaning of their experiences within their world (Kahlke, 2014). Kahlke noted that generic qualitative research is appropriate for topics in which the research is not broad in scope. In spite of the many facets of filicide that have been studied over the decades, accidental filicide has not been widely researched from the perspective of child protection social workers. Through this study, I sought to identify characteristics, patterns, and themes identified by exploring social workers' lived truths about protecting children (Hamilton & Finley, 2019; Kahlke, 2014).

In the past, research on stepparental filicide has primarily utilized case studies and data analysis from national homicide and forensic databases that provide information about the household's perpetrators, victims, or characteristics (Brewster et al., 1998;

Cavanagh et al., 2007; Frederique et al., 2022; Friedman et al., 2008; Herrmann & Martin, 1988; Kauppi et al., 2012; Kunst, 2002; Stroud, 2008). Researchers have interviewed perpetrators in limited studies (Barone et al., 2014; Dekel et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2014; Smithey, 1997). Conversely, studies that have utilized interviews of social workers regarding child deaths are few. In those studies, researchers sought to understand how child deaths affect social workers mentally and emotionally (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2002; Pollard, 2017).

I used semi-structured interviews to explore the topic of stepparental filicide. A key component of semi-structured interviews is that they allow the researcher to present a scheduled group of interview questions while permitting the participant and interviewer to engage in a flowing conversation. This conversation flow can be a conduit for developing other relatable themes (Evans & Mathur, 2018). Further, open-ended semi-structured interview questions leads to intimate encounters that elicit detailed participant accounts and stories (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Given this, it was ideal to use semi-structured interviews to gain insight into how social work professionals perceive this phenomenon (Munro, 2018).

I recruited participants from within an agency that provides child protection services in the California Metropolitan Area and holds the title of children's social worker (CSW) and is employed in the emergency response (ER) or continuing services (CS) sections. The primary duties of the ER social worker are to investigate child abuse referrals called into the child protection hotline. The CS social workers provide prevention, intervention, and aftercare support to abused and neglected children and their

families. Social workers with ER or CS experience are ideal participants in the issue of

stepparental filicide as they are the ones who work firsthand with the affected families

(Munro, 2018).

Social work staff received the recruitment flyer from the regional administrators

who manage the 18 regional offices. The recruitment flyer introduced the research topic

and outlined the study's details, qualifications, exclusion criteria, participation

requirements, confidentiality issues, and contact information to schedule the interview.

Social workers had the ability, discretion, and privacy to decide whether to volunteer for

the study.

I also targeted social workers who met the participant qualifications by sharing

the research flyer on my Facebook page and the partnering agency's virtual billboard.

The end goal was to recruit participants using multiple methods (Weller et al., 2018). I

reached saturation at 12 participants and applied thematic analysis to the transcribed data

to identify emergent themes.

Significance of the Study

To better understand the perceptions of child protection professionals as well as

their perceived barriers to conducting effective and efficient assessments of stepparental

filicide, this study seeks to provide insight into their perceptions of their abilities to

measure children's exposure to stepparental filicide. Researchers have argued that current

assessment strategies used by social workers do not provide additional protection against

stepparental filicide because of their inability to recognize whether stepparents constitute

an actual threat (Feely et al., 2020). Nevertheless, social workers should be the first line

of defense in preventing abuse by stepparents during the initial engagement and subsequent reassessments (Munro, 2018).

I expect the findings presented in this study will contribute to fostering positive societal change. To achieve this, it will be necessary to gain a better understanding of the assessment methods used by social workers to investigate cases where there is a potential for stepparent filicide to occur. Further, by acquiring this insight, it may be possible to improve the ability of social workers to protect children who are at risk and increase the protective capacity of families (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The study was rooted in the framework of the social learning theory. Social learning theory fits within the behavioral change model as it provides a framework for understanding how an individual's learning environment may affect their thoughts and actions (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This research used social learning theory as a theoretical framework to explore how child protection social workers perceive their ability to assess for risk factors associated with fatal child maltreatment at the hands of stepparents.

According to Bandura's social learning theory, people acquire new habits and ways of behaving through their interactions with others, whether observantly or by mimicking the activities of those they aspire to emulate (Anderson & Kras, 2005). Additionally, one of the tenets of social learning theory is that individuals gain knowledge by interacting with others. Further, the theory incorporates a social factor by

suggesting that one might learn new behaviors and information by observing others (McCullough Chavis, 2011).

Social learning theory also proposes that learning depends on one's environment and interactions, specifically from observing those around them. Watching other people behave and observing what happens is one way to learn something new. As a result, the rewards received based on their current actions determines future outcomes. In addition, the theory postulates that individuals' cognitive processes shape their actions, and learning may not facilitate behavioral change (McCullough Chavis, 2011).

Examining the current perspectives of child protection social workers through a social learning theory framework provided the opportunity to explore how the seven constructs of social learning theory intersect with the assessment process of child protection social workers (Munro, 2018). Through *observational* learning, one can gain knowledge and alter maladaptive behaviors. Therefore, social workers learn from observing and modeling more experienced colleagues and supervisors, regardless of their policies or standard practices (Grant & Kinman, 2013). *Reproduction* promotes learning by providing supportive and motivating environments. Therefore, social workers are more likely to reproduce desired behaviors in environments that encourage risk and safety assessments. Moreover, as social workers gain *self-efficacy*, they become more confident conducting practical child abuse assessments (Chu & Tsui, 2008).

The ability to cope with negative thinking in stressful situations is known as emotional coping, whereas self-regulation is the ability to control behavior, despite adverse circumstances. Hence, continuously conducting solid child abuse assessments

improves decision-making in stressful environments (Mette et al., 2020). *Reinforcements and expectations* predict whether one will increase or terminate one's behavior (Bandura, 2011). Social workers' expectations of the positive and negative consequences of their investigations and subsequent decisions about child abuse drive their current assessment practices (Turtiainen et al., 2017). Using these constructs, social workers can retrieve information from their persons, environments, and experiences to guide their actions. The responses can help develop unobstructed, adaptive, functional, and efficient assessments to prevent child deaths (Singer et al., 2019).

In this study, social learning theory was used to examine the influence knowledge has on social workers' choices in child welfare. However, it is crucial to show how adverse childhood experiences influence victims and perpetrators. There are several risk factors for child maltreatment, and the social learning theory helped to explain some of these, namely the stepparent's history of maltreatment. According to research by Felson and Lane (2009), childhood maltreatment often results in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has a profound effect on a person's adult life.

Data from the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities by Felson and Lane (2009) suggest that offenders emulated the actions of those who influenced them as children. Therefore, stress and trauma can lead to maladaptive behaviors later in life, such as perpetrating child abuse. Using a sample of Illinois welfare-eligible mothers, Yang et al. (2018) investigated mothers' history of physical abuse and neglect. Results indicated that aggressive adult behavior may be rooted in childhood trauma.

Social learning theory explains these actions, positing that abused children are at risk of adopting violent or antisocial attitudes as adults (Currie & Tekin, 2012). Currie and Tekin's research on child abuse filled two significant gaps in previously published studies. The authors used a large national sample to evaluate the effects of childhood abuse. The research showed that a history of neglect or abuse in childhood dramatically increases a person's likelihood of delinquency and arrest as an adult.

Social learning theory explains how the long-term effects of childhood maltreatment may result in the victims' exhibiting the same behaviors as adults. According to the social learning theory, abuse, violence, and criminal behavior are learned behaviors (Anderson & Kras, 2005). Evidence from studying maladaptive actions suggests that adverse effects of childhood maltreatment persist into adulthood. Therefore, social workers should assume that people who abuse children may have been abused themselves as children or witnessed it happening to other children.

According to research examining the effects of childhood violence on adults, men who have witnessed violence in the home are more likely to behave aggressively as adults. In contrast, women who observe their mother's abuse are more probable to choose abusive partners (Abbassi & Aslinia, 2010). Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020) provided another explanation of human resilience. The study revealed that kids and teens learn by witnessing their parents and other significant adults and applying those same ideas and behaviors to their situations. Children whose parents or guardians' resort to hostility or violence to resolve conflicts have a higher risk of developing those same traits as adults. According to social learning theory, people learn abusive and violent features by

observing others. Hence, when investigating allegations of child abuse, social workers should concentrate and prioritize their evaluations on caregivers who have suffered adverse childhood experiences (Warner-Rogers, 1999).

A study by Warner-Rogers (1999) presented 16 vignettes of abused children to study participants. Researchers instructed participants to determine whether physical abuse was a contributing factor when contacting child protection authorities. Warner-Rogers argued that social workers should start by evaluating the parents' foundational capacities, current experiences, and the family's current living situation. Also, social workers should take note of the parents' histories, levels of development, ability to regulate emotions, and the quality of their interactions with their offspring as factors that make up their backgrounds and abilities. Warner-Rogers concluded that an assessment of risk should include an investigation of the child's behavioral issues and the parents' approach to discipline. Furthermore, the assessment should examine the caregivers' childhood maltreatment occurrences and precursors to abusive behaviors. Parents' frustrations, marital conflict, and the child's misbehavior contributes to these precursors (Warner-Rogers, 1999).

Social workers can best serve their clients by helping develop and implement rehabilitation and prevention programs grounded in social learning theory to address the underlying causes of problem behavior. The prevention and rehabilitation programs should promote positive parenting styles since this will help children learn adaptable and positive practices they can carry into adulthood (Smallbone et al., 2013).

Social workers tend to focus on cases where their approach has a negative impact or has gotten negative publicity, such as a child maltreatment death. Consequently, social workers enter a state of flight, fight, or freeze because of the unfavorable outcomes of these crucial incidents. They develop a trauma response when remembering details about a child fatality or critical incident. Historically, decisions made out of fear as opposed to evidence are counterproductive for social workers (Whittaker & Havard, 2015). Workers can effectively recall and replicate practical decisions by creating initiative-taking learning environments. By replacing fear with empowerment social workers can learn to confidently recognize, assess, and prevent stepparental filicide in this setting (Cook, 2019b).

A study conducted by Scourfield et al. (2012) used social learning theory to evaluate a training course for child protection social workers to improve father engagement when assessing and intervening in child abuse cases. The results illustrated the role that paternal involvement has in ensuring child safety by (a) increasing social workers' understanding of how to collaborate with fathers, (b) improving the personal skills of social workers when collaborating with challenging fathers, and (c) enhancing social workers' confidence in their ability to collaborate with all fathers. When assessing for risk of harm, this study aids in understanding the pertinent knowledge and skills of child welfare workers when collaborating with fathers to prevent abuse. Social workers can apply those same findings when collaborating with stepparents in this regard.

Social workers in the field of child protection have traditionally provided services to mothers but have played a limited role in supporting fathers. This disparity lies

between the social workers' interpersonal biases and the organizational culture in which

they work. Scourfield et al.'s (2012) research pointed out that fathers may not be as open

to services due to their hesitancy, exacerbated by mothers who seek to hinder their

involvement in the case. This interference furthers influences social workers' negative

attitudes towards fathers. Fathers' participation is critical to improving risk and safety

assessments so children can receive the best support and resources possible. By

integrating theory and practice, social workers can improve their proficiency by

challenging their thought processes and behavioral responses when assessing safety and

risk associated with stepparental filicide.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) developed their Code of

Ethics to guide social workers in adhering to its fundamental values, principles, and

standards (NASW, 2022). The code of ethics challenges social workers to reflect upon

the importance of ethical tenets that align with the primary mission of improving

humanity's well-being, emphasizing empowering society's oppressed, vulnerable, and

poor citizens. Providing service to vulnerable and oppressed people is one of the core

values of social work. The ethical principle of service is to aid those in need by

addressing social problems. Another core value of social work is to improve social

justice. A social worker's moral compass gives them the responsibility to challenge social

injustices (NASW, 2022).

The core values of service and social justice are particularly relevant to this study.

Child protection social workers provide advocacy, services, and support that impact the

ecosystems surrounding vulnerable children and their families. To demonstrate, Bezeczky et al. (2020) examined the impact of family preservation services on child maltreatment deaths. Researchers emphasized how collaborating with community and agency partners helps ensure children grow up in a safe, nurturing, and loving home. These results are consequential to the child protection practicum, as understanding the risk factors associated with stepparental filicide is essential when engaging, assessing, and providing interventions designed to ensure the safety of at-risk children (Karpetis, 2017).

Research conducted in this area supports the core values and ethical principles of the NASW in that it examines how failing to identify these risk factors can negatively affect the welfare of children and communities. By highlighting the results of this study, social workers can challenge the apathy of child protection agencies, community advocates, and society regarding the socioecological consequences of stepparental filicide (Sedumedi & Winter, 2020).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I searched the Walden University Library databases, EBSCO and EBSC, for professional and academic literature related to this topic. (Academic Search Complete and Social Work Abstracts), APA PsycInfo, SocIndex, and Criminal Justice. Additionally, academic literature was retrieved using the Google Scholar search engine, which utilizes the following databases: Researchgate, Hud. Ac.UK, Academia.edu, Sagepub.com, Oup.com, Springer.com, Semanticscholar, Nih.gov, Wiley.com, Bournemouth.ac.UK, Usfca.edu, Sea. Ac.UK, Uvm.edu, Tanfonline.com, and Science

Direct. More than 110 peer-reviewed academic articles primarily dated between 2016 and 2022, with older articles used as historical context.

The key terms included *filicide, history of filicide, the prevalence of child abuse fatalities, paternal filicide, stepparental filicide, filicide risk factors, child abuse fatalities, child maltreatment deaths, social workers and child abuse fatalities, stepparents, and child abuse, stepparent, child maltreatment deaths, social learning theory, social worker assessment.*

History and Prevalence of Accidental Filicide

There have been murders committed by filicide since the beginning of humanity. Palermo (2002) undertook a historical case study to understand filicide better and found that, in the eighth century B.C., it was acceptable to kill children. Furthermore, West (2007) reviewed the literature on the causes, types, effects, and analysis of filicide. According to the study, filicide has been tolerated since at least the Greco-Roman period. Beattie (2020) also conducted a cross-sectional survey on filicide in medieval England and concluded that it was a frequent and acceptable method of birth control. It can therefore child abuse has its roots in ancient times, and unfortunately, the practice of exercising power over children persists to this day. According to West, there was a significant shift in perspective toward child murder in the 17th century because of scientific investigation into the correlation between postpartum mental disorder and infanticide. At this time, advocates for children's rights began to gain traction, and laws were passed making it unlawful to punish or otherwise abuse a child physically. These

laws eventually spread over the world, making it illegal to do so in most nations, including the United States.

Deaths caused by accidental filicide or child maltreatment have nevertheless been studied in the current era. Foto Ozdemir and Evinc (2020) conducted a psychodynamic-based review of articles written between 1960 and 2020 on the complex and multidimensional patterns of filicide. These studies indicate that approximately 95,000 children are fatally injured each year, and that more than half of those deaths are caused by adults caring for the children. Foto Ozdemir and Evinc recorded incidents of filicide in industrialized countries varied from 2.4% to 7.0% per 100,000 people. Compared to other industrialized countries, the United States has the highest filicide rate, with parents being the primary offenders (Resnick, 2016).

Jacobs et al. (2020) further highlighted the significant prevalence of child maltreatment by using a quantitative diagnostic design posing challenges to the collaboration of social workers and law enforcement. This study noted that maltreatment was the primary reason for the referral of 4.4 million children to child welfare agencies. The findings of this study are consistent with those of an earlier study by Font and Maguire-Jack (2020). This study examined measurements of child maltreatment, specifically, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being to examine current comprehensions about the scope, nature, and causes of child maltreatment. According to research, reports of child maltreatment to child protection authorities may be overstated, especially in cases involving physical abuse. These numbers show the prevalence of accidental filicide.

Despite the fact that child abuse is on the rise, not all studies have observed an increase in fatalities due to child abuse. According to Klier et al. (2018), who conducted a literature review on filicide in the 21st century, global estimates of filicide deaths have declined in recent years. According to West et al. (2009), this decline may be attributable to new laws and stricter sentencing criteria for those responsible for these murders of minors. Hedlund et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative analysis of child homicide rates in Sweden over 21 years. The research aimed to establish a link between the decline in child homicides and the disappearance of criminals' depression symptoms. Although the study verified a 20-year trend of declining filicide rates, there was no link between the two factors.

Font and Maguire-Jack (2020) analyzed three national child abuse datasets to determine shifts in child maltreatment mortality. The results suggested stricter penalties for perpetrators of child abuse significantly decreased acts of abuse. Font and Maguire-Jack also noted that initiatives to raise public awareness and prevent child abuse also contributed to the decrease.

Methods and Motivations of Filicide

Understanding the five types of filicides: altruistic, unwanted baby (infanticide), psychotic, spousal revenge, and accidental is just as crucial as understanding why people commit these acts, which can help us comprehend the phenomenon better. By highlighting the risks to newborns when mothers are not supported, Sieff (2019) presented a psychodynamic, evolutionary, and anthropological perspective on "death

mothers." Sieff hypothesized that approaching these mothers with compassion may help those living through this toxic energy.

A quantitative study by Putkonen et al. (2016) used binational data on filicidal deaths in Finland and Austria between 1995 and 2005. Putkonen et al. used age, gender, circumstances surrounding the incidents, socioeconomic background, criminal background, and childhood conduct disorder of the offenders to reclassify filicidal subtypes. Putkonen et al. warned that a lack of prenatal support for mothers, mothers' ability to disappear from society after giving birth, and unresolved psychosis play essential roles in maternal filicidal behavior. In addition, Sieff (2019) stated that these maternal problems had not been studied in great detail due to the perception that women who give birth develop maternal instincts.

Moen and Bezuidenhout (2022) examined the perpetrator characteristics of spousal revenge filicide. In that study, researchers conducted a document analysis of newspaper articles and court filings of 20 murders that occurred in South Africa between 2003 and 2021. Results indicated leading motivations for this crime were social rejection, an internal center of control, severe wrath, and even sadism. These reasons were verified by Sedumedi and Winter (2020), in that qualitative study, researchers sought to recruit 20 perpetrators who were convicted of murdering their children out of vengeance. Six of the 20 possible participants had taken their life and eight were awaiting sentences. Among the remaining six, only four provided consent and were interviewed in a semi structured manner.

Other causes of filicide were highlighted by Carruthers (2016), including jealousy and vengeance from spouses. A review of the research and literature on marital revenge and filicide concluded that parents involved in such crimes do not view the child as an individual human being. Using their child, as a pawn is their primary goal, the findings revealed a common thread involving the perpetrator's expectations of what "Till death do us part" meant to them, specifically, the victim's feelings of rejection and stigma following a divorce.

Resnick (1969) invented the term *altruistic filicide* to describe the killing of children out of pure selflessness. In his analysis of more than 130 cases records of child murders spanning the mid-1700s to the 1960s, Resnick (1969) took notice of such mercy killings. In this examination, Resnick describes two types of filicides. The first is altruistic filicide, which is murder in which the parents' main goal is suicide, but they also kill their child so that the child won't have to deal with the grief of losing them. The second type, euthanasia, is if a parent cannot bear seeing their child in pain due to a terminal illness or sickness, they may choose euthanasia.

Resnick (1969) also introduced psychotic filicide, which occurs when a parent has psychosis-like hallucinations. Valença et al. (2011) examined two cases of psychotic filicide. In those cases, both offenders were found not guilty due to insanity after being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. The researcher noted the parents' psychotic tendencies, including hallucinations, delusions, and impulsivity, before the murders. Among the implications of the study was the importance of identifying these dangers before the loss of the child's life.

To better comprehend the experiences of mothers who have been victims of these crimes, Milia and Noonan (2022) conducted a qualitative study to collect and analyze relevant data. The mothers who committed infanticide or psychotic filicide were found to have experienced periods of delusion and hallucination. The study found that psychiatric histories were not recognized at the time of their murders. These results support that pregnant woman be checked for depression and other mental illnesses.

The term *accidental filicide*, also known as *battered child syndrome* or "child maltreatment deaths," were introduced by Resnick (1969). While abusive or negligent treatment sometimes led to children's deaths; accidental filicide is classified as an accident because death was not the intended outcome. Nonetheless, Myers et al. (2021) conducted a descriptive research study of 62 filicide cases from nine countries and found that males perpetrate these crimes disproportionately compared to females. This example includes intentional and unintentional filicide cases and other child maltreatment deaths.

These violent deeds often result from explosive tempers or excessive punishment. The article summarizing filicide in the United States by Resnick (2016) corroborated the idea that the child's persistent sobbing drove the perpetrator to commit accidental filicide. The full extent of the problem may be unknown since not all cases of accidental filicide may be reported (Myers et al., 2021). This report is especially true if no siblings are left in the home, or the family has never received intervention from a child protection agency.

Child deaths, a worldwide epidemic, are a typical result of child abuse. Schnitzer and Ewigman (2005b) used the Missouri child fatality data collected over 7 years to analyze household compositions and victim characteristics. According to the reports,

suffocating, drowning, car accidents, burns, and falls are the leading causes of death for children under the age of five in the United States. Schnitzer and Ewigman (2005a) found that most fatal injuries in children younger than five years old were caused by maltreatment.

These findings were confirmed by subsequent research studying victims younger than five years old. Seriously injured or deceased victims were the focus of a case study conducted by Daly (2022). Researchers found that bruising was the most common injury and advised doctors to take any unexplained bruises seriously. Subsequent case-control research by Schnitzer and Ewigman (2005a) further underscores that preventable child fatalities occurred when the responsible adult was absent. The results demonstrate that incidents of unintentional filicide, including neglect and maltreatment, are avoidable.

There has been a lack of consistency in reporting on the motivations and techniques of filicide. Traditionally, the media portrays females as the perpetrators of filicide. However, evidence suggests that paternal and maternal filicide are equally common, according to a qualitative review of 20 years of filicide cases in the United Kingdom (Niblock, 2017). Therefore, compared to unintentional maternal filicide, paternal accidental filicide is significantly more prevalent. Niblock hypothesized that men are more prone to using forceful or excessive discipline than women, which could explain why fathers are more likely to commit accidental filicide. While this is the case in most instances, research over the past 3 decades suggests that mothers are more likely to achieve filicide due to neonaticide and infanticide rates (Bourget et al., 2007). In a literature review conducted by Bourget et al. (2007) that examined studies on filicidal,

their review identified studies with a total of 80 fathers and 37 mothers and found that mothers were likelier to commit filicide than fathers.

Michaels and Letson (2021) aimed to investigate fatal non-accidental physical abuse of children seventeen and younger. Michaels and Letson analyzed 285 forensic records between 2006 and 2015. The findings show that men are more likely to commit filicide than women, and when they do, they employ violent methods such as smothering and beatings. Resnick (2016) added to the understanding by writing an editorial to his fellow forensic psychiatrists about how filicide is committed. This article contrasts the way fathers and mothers engage in filicide. While smothering, strangulation, and drowning are the most common methods of infanticide committed by mothers, violent crimes committed by dads against their older kids include physical force by hitting, stabbing, or shooting (Resnick, 2016).

Perpetrator Risk Factors

Research has found that depressed parents are likelier to kill their children in a planned, organized manner. Marleau et al. (1999) investigated 10 male filicide perpetrators and examined their mental health records, criminal histories, and other factors. Most of these murders had been categorized as pathological filicides. The results showed several situational elements, such as the likelihood of separation or financial troubles, were present in the time leading up to the crime. These findings were corroborated by a Finnish study by Kauppi et al. (2010), which found a frequency of 5.09 deaths per 100,000 live births and the following breakdown of perpetrators: 59% of filicides were perpetrated by mothers, 39% by fathers, and 2% by stepfathers. For more

context, Bourget et al. (2007) conducted a comprehensive literature review of the available information regarding the differences between filicidal offenders. They confirmed that suicidal parents, including fathers and mothers with depressive symptoms, were more likely to commit filicide.

Flynn et al. (2013), who examined previously published works on paternal filicide to uncover commonalities among these fathers, also showed the correlation between mental illness and filicide. Yet some occurrences of filicide did not involve mental disorders. Most filicide cases have underlying psychopathologies, as shown by Azores-Gococo et al. (2017) research on the neuropsychological characteristics of the killers of children. This study used a heterogeneous group of people ($N = 33$) referred for a forensic neuropsychological evaluation after allegedly killing one or more children.

Although mental illness is a key contributor, several studies have focused on other psychosocial aspects. According to Sim's (2018, p. 71) analysis of the paper "When Parents Kill: Understanding Filicide," three main themes arose from studying this tragic phenomenon. Although the article mentions mental illness as a risk factor, it also draws attention to male aggression in domestic violence, child abuse that results in death, and "patriarchal terrorism." Some other risk factors identified relate to a person's socioeconomic situation, such as difficulties related to money, culture, marriage, and other relationships.

Because of the stress poverty produces, persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to commit acts like infanticide, neglect, and abuse. Putkonen et al. (2016) agreed with this context through an international study that used official

records to account for every filicide occurrence in Austria and Finland between 1995 and 2005. Results indicated that victim and perpetrator characteristics, such as offender socioeconomic status, criminal history, and a diagnosis of conduct disorder, were significant predictors. It is evident from these data that filicide is not solely a result of economic factors. Despite unemployment, poverty, and a lack of education being risk factors for filicide, marital strife is a major driving force.

Dawson (2015) thoroughly analyzed Canadian statistics on filicidal cases over the past 50 years. The statistics involved 1,612 children murdered by their parents between 1961 and 2011. The researchers compared maternal and paternal filicidal acts based on the victim's gender, age, and offender's marital status, type of parental relationship, cause of death, motives, and history of family violence. Data analysis revealed that fathers who murder their children are more likely to be employed, older in age, have a criminal record, and abuse alcohol and drugs.

Additional evidence suggests that a father is likelier to kill a child if he doubts the child's paternity or views the child as a hindrance or a burden. Parental manipulation, in which parents attempt to exert power and pressure over their children, is cited as an explanation for filicide by evolutionary psychologists (Resnick, 2016).

Brewster et al. (1998) also investigated the factors causing filicide, where 32 infanticide instances were studied from multiple angles, including the perspectives of the victims, the offenders, the families, and the events themselves, and found that a history of childhood abuse was a predictor of parental filicide. Similarly, Aho et al. (2017) reviewed and analyzed 34 studies on Western homicide culprits' risk variables over 10 years. One

significant theme that emerged is parents who murder their children and may have a history of violence, rage, and envy. A father may murder his child if he feels hatred or resentment toward the child's mother because of marital problems, separation from the marriage, or sexual jealousy. Parental filicide may also be caused by life pressures, such as marital issues or financial difficulties. Historical data and research on filicidal perpetrators' risk variables also support these findings.

Substance abuse and drunkenness were identified as significant risk factors in a study of 26 men serving life terms for filicide. Chronically intoxicated parents, for instance, pose a threat of accidental filicide due to their propensity to neglect their children. A retrospective study of maternal and paternal filicides completed by Kauppi et al. (2010). Results of that study indicated that most filicidal dads have a history of substance addiction, marital violence, and suicide attempts and often target the victim's siblings. Karpetis (2017) explored this topic using a narrative research method to conceptualize their human experience. The study found that suicidal thoughts in parents are linked to parental depression, aggression, and antisocial traits.

Reviews of past child mortality incidents have uncovered numerous dangers and takeaways. Most notably, male youths often fall victim to these parental risk factors. Most killers in these cases were male and lacked basic parenting skills, specifically proper child-to-adult bonding, and awareness of the child's unique medical requirements. Dekel et al. (2018) reported similar risk factors after their study systematically analyzed 37 articles on the same topic. Experts agreed that addressing community risk factors and other external issues were equally crucial in stopping filicide.

Font and Maguire-Jack (2016) also examined the low-income areas of 50 cities to learn more about the connection between poverty and child maltreatment. Living in low-income communities is stressful and difficult because of the inflated cost of living. Dekel et al. (2020) agreed that constraints in responding to reports of child abuse, the nature of the local community, and the high population density all contribute to a lack of support for needy families. Additionally, the analysis of 200 filicidal instances revealed systemic risk factors, much like the inability of communities and social institutions to notice child abuse and neglect and report it (Kauppi et al., 2012).

Victim Risk Factors

Children are at an increased risk for child maltreatment due to several circumstances. Schnitzer and Ewigman (2005a) conducted a population, case-control study of children below five years of age who died in Missouri between 1992 and 1999. The research aimed to understand the significance of family dynamics in the development of fatal childhood injuries. According to the results, the probability of fatal injuries among children living with non-biological adults is higher in such families. Over a 13-year period, Kajese et al. (2011) analyzed 170 filicide cases in Kansas between 1994 and 2007. Children of single mothers are at disproportionate risk of traumatic brain injuries and suffocation due to their inconsolable crying.

Geoffroy et al. (2016) analyzed the results of a 1958 British cohort study of 8928 participants from birth to 50 years old and sought to understand if childhood maltreatment has a long-term effect on cognition and mental health. Geoffroy et al., found that children whose families struggle financially and who have parents with mental

health issues are more likely to experience fatal child maltreatment than children whose families are not in either of these categories. There is emerging evidence that parents are more likely to kill their children when they are unemployed, have financial problems, or have mental health concerns, according to Font and Maguire-Jack (2020).

More than 2,000 reports of child abuse were examined by Font and Maguire-Jack (2020) from 10 counties in Pennsylvania's Children and Youth Services (CYS). Risk variables for severe and deadly child abuse were sought in the study. In this study, children under five, boys, and stepchildren were at the highest risk for fatal child maltreatment. According to Sari Gokten et al. (2016), child abuse is an almost inevitable outcome for children with chronic health problems, such as severe abnormalities. Children with special needs, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism, were at an even higher risk in a case-control study comparing 104 children with ADHD and 104 healthy children who were treated at the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Unit of Bursa Yuksek Ihtisas Training and Research Hospital between January and June 2015 (Sari Gokten et al., 2016).

A study by Fingarson et al. (2019) examined bruising and other psychological factors in children younger than four years of age. The quantitative study of 1615 patients found the risk of abuse increased when children were in the care of their mother's boyfriends whom they had recently met. To better understand the victim risks factors, Damashek et al. (2013) analyzed over 600 child abuse records from Oklahoma to determine whether physical child abuse or accidental harm was more likely to occur in each situation. The study found that having a male caregiver present during the abuse,

having a nontraditional caregiving arrangement, and having a primary caregiver who had just begun caring for the child all increased the likelihood that the child would suffer physical abuse.

A Deeper Dive into Stepparental Filicide

Over 30 years ago, pioneers in the study raised red flags on the risk children face when a stepparent is present in the home or has access to them (Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984; Herrmann & Martin, 1988; Lightcap et al., 1982; Sariola & Uutela, 1992; Scott, 1973; Wilson et al., 1980). Researchers sought to determine whether stepchildren were represented in cases of accidental filicide caused by physical abuse in these studies.

There were approximately 11 studies on victims of accidental filicide where stepparents either were the sole perpetrators or played a role in the child's demise (Adler-Baeder, 2006). Seven of those studies concluded that stepchildren are overrepresented in stepparental filicidal cases (Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005; Lightcap et al., 1982; Malkin & Lamb, 1994; Sariola & Uutela, 1992; Wilson et al., 1980). Three determined no overrepresentation (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Herrmann & Martin, 1988; Malkin & Lamb, 1994), and one defined their results as inconclusive (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). Those studies determined risk factors such as financial issues or marital discourse were the cause of the abuse. Therefore, it could not be ruled out that social-environmental stresses were the culprit as opposed to stepparents (Adler-Baeder, 2006).

Daly and Wilson's research has been the standard when examining stepparental filicide. As early as 1980, Daly and Wilson used case studies and reviewed national homicide and forensic databases within the framework of social evolutionary theory to determine the nature and severity of child abuse caused by stepparents. (Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005; Wilson et al., 1980). Daly and Wilson's (1994) study determined that stepchildren are 100 times more likely to be victims of accidental filicide when a stepparent is in the home. Daly and Wilson's research is crucial because they have been the prominent pioneers in examining this phenomenon.

Over the past 20 years, research on filicide has consistently concluded that children were at increased risk when a stepparent was present. Weekes-Shackelford and Shackelford (2004) reviewed 400,000 national databases of homicide as a means to replicate Daly and Wilson's (1994) study. Their results replicated the 1994 study and highlighted the methods of filicide. Other studies conducted resulted in similar findings. There is a greater risk to children when there is an unrelated pseudo-father living in the home (Adinkrah, 2001; Fein, 1979; Finkelhor, 1997; Goetting, 1988; Kung, 1996; Lord et al., 2002; Lucas et al., 2002; Lyman et al., 2003; Marleau et al., 1999; Morris et al., 2018; Smithey, 1997; Somander & Rammer, 1991).

It is important to note that not all researchers were convinced of these findings and felt that the research conducted by Daly and Wilson created a stigma surrounding stepparents. Nobes et al. (2019) attempted to replicate and analyze Daly and Wilson's 1994 study. Researchers used homicide population data from three surveys. They found that while stepchildren aged five and younger were overrepresented, the risk was only

16x greater for children over five. As a result, Nobes et al. (2019) asserted that stepchildren were no more at stake than genetic children were.

Nobes et al. (2019) also concluded that when non-legal stepparents were excluded, the risk was only 16x greater instead of 100x greater. Nobes et al. (2019) claimed that individuals such as live-in companions, significant others, intimate partners, etc., should not have been counted in the original sample. Nobes et al. (2020) continued the study by evaluating evolutionary psychologists' claims that stepfathers abuse their children more severely than biological parents do and coined it the Cinderella effect (Daly & Wilson, 2007).

However, interviews with 86 stepfathers concluded that the prevalence and frequency of abuse toward stepchildren were, in fact, more significant than the abuse endured by biological children (Nobes et al., 2020). Daly (2022) counter-argued Nobes et al. (2019) premise that the Cinderella Effect was not factual and disadvantaged stepparents. Daly implied that such rhetoric was dangerous to children who are at risk and significantly downplays the brutal killings stepchildren have historically endured.

In Daly and Wilson's (1994) study, the term stepparent included legal stepparents, intimate partners, and significant others who lived with the victim or had access to them. Study results on unrelated perpetrators indicate that in addition to stepparents, the significant other, live-in companion, and intimate partners of the biological parent should be assessed (Berger et al., 2009; Daly & Wilson, 2005). Numerous studies also support the claim that perpetrators of homicidal violence against children of any age are non-

biologically related men having a relationship with women with children (Block & Kaplan, 2022; Debowska et al., 2021; Dixon et al., 2013; Obenson & England, 2015).

Studies have sought to understand the motivations behind stepparental filicide. Evolutionary psychologists believe stepfathers are more likely to kill because they view the child as an obstacle to their career, a threat to their resources, and a burden. Furthermore, stepmothers are likely to kill their husbands' sons as they view them as an impediment to the wealth inheritance (Morris et al., 2018; Resnick, 2016; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004).

The topic of "Parental Socio-Emotional Investment" was crucial in understanding the reasons and motivations behind step-parental filicide. Several studies discussed this phenomenon by addressing the issues, prevalence, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data. Parental socio-emotional investment suggests that stepparents tend to lack parental investment in their stepchildren (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1994; Debowska et al., 2021; Hamilton, 1964; Pierce et al., 2017). The main contributor to parental investment includes stepparents' innate need to invest in their genetic offspring. The consequences can result in a refusal to invest time, finances, and energy. This lack of bonding can result in resentment, jealousy, parental antagonism, and abuse or neglect, which may be a mitigating factor in step-parental filicide (Cicchetti & Toth, 2016; Nobes et al., 2020; Sidebotham et al., 2016; Stith et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2013; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). Čvorović (2022) refuted these findings with a secondary analysis study of 1200 children between the ages of three and five on the parental

investment of genetic fathers and stepfathers. Based on the results, there was no difference in parental investment influence between biological and stepfathers.

The intended or unintended fatal injury of children by the stepparent due to a lack of genetic connection with the child has been studied over the past 40 years and confirmed (Alexandre et al., 2010; Berger et al., 2009; Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1988, 1996; Pierce et al., 2017; Stiffman et al., 2002) and challenged (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Miller, 2017; Nobes et al., 2020; Nobes & Smith, 2000; Temrin et al., 2004). In contrast, others have put forward alternative explanations of stepparents' overrepresentation among perpetrators (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984; Malvaso et al., 2015; Nobes et al., 2019; Temrin et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2007).

Jex and Burgess (2016) warned that stepparents do not have an innate bond or unconditional love for the child that biological parents do. Consequently, child abuse is perpetrated on young children who are beaten to death at rates 100 times greater than that of generic parents (Daly & Wilson, 1994). The marital status of these perpetrators may be irrelevant, as many of these child deaths are also committed by "live-in companions." This conclusion supports earlier reports that perpetrators go beyond the title of "stepparents."

Tooley et al. (2006) continued to study the Cinderella effect by examining data from the Australian National Coroners' Information System on children killed under five years old over 3 years. Findings confirmed that children living with stepparents were at greater risk of fatal child abuse. According to Tooley et al. (2006), both biological and stepfathers have a similar likelihood of killing their children. This depends on factors

such as living separately from the child, perpetrator's histories of violence, criminality, childhood abuse, substance abuse, low education level, and mental health (Blair, 2007; Boduszek et al., 2016; Debowska et al., 2017; Frederick et al., 2022; Hare et al., 1991; Hicks & Gaughan, 1995; Kasim et al., 1995; Nobes et al., 2019; Segal et al., 2021; Sim, 2018, pg. 71). Environmental factors include stressors such as divorce, poverty, living in poverty & large families (Berkout & Kolko, 2016; Bourget et al., 2007; Eriksson et al., 2014; Krugman & Korbin, 2022; Stith et al., 2009; West et al., 2009). To mitigate these environmental stressors, recommendations for providing resources should be considered (McLeigh et al., 2018).

The literature on step-parental filicide also revealed other unique risk factors. Daly and Wilson (1996) indicated that young children sustained seven times more physical abuse at their stepparent's hands than children living with biological parents. The victims were killed using blunt force trauma to the head (Debowska et al., 2015; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Nobes et al., 2019; Obenson & England, 2015; Shackelford et al., 2008). These findings corroborated previous studies that indicated stepfathers used brutality and callousness to kill their children, while biological fathers used less assaultive means (Daly & Wilson, 1994, 1996).

Social Workers' Assessment of Risk Factors Associated with Stepparental Filicide

There is a need for social workers to be aware of the childhood issues of new caregivers or partners when there is suspicion of abuse. Moffitt et al. (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of 457 male cohorts aged three to 18. The study aimed to determine if behavioral problems developed during childhood as opposed to adolescence. Results

confirmed that adolescent abuse may result in anti-social conduct problems such as unsafe sex practices, substance abuse, unemployment, and dangerous driving. That same study also sought to determine if impulsive or shy behaviors as children lead to adult psychiatric disorders. Results indicate the impulsive participant group was at risk of adult criminal behavior, and the shy behavior group was at elevated risk for depression (Moffitt et al., 1996). These characteristics suggest that social workers should screen parents suspected of child neglect or abuse for antisocial personality disorder and similar conditions. Personality disorders can lead to increased harsh parenting and, in extreme cases, filicide (Kauppi et al., 2012).

Through an exploratory and descriptive study using a study sample of children below 12 years old, Claasen and Spies (2017) argued that social workers must establish a trusting, supportive connection with the at-risk children and their families to identify and mitigate the risks of maltreatment. Social workers should learn about families' capabilities and strengths by analyzing their treatment needs and encouraging parental participation in service-related decisions. To reduce client hostility, social workers should be compassionate, tolerant, understanding, and courteous (Spies et al., 2015).

Additional information was provided by Stroud (2008), who used the pre-crime experiences of the 68 adults (primarily parents or careers) who killed or attempted to kill a child and were analyzed psychosocially, revealing a complex, intricate, and heterogeneous processes in terms of their interpersonal relationships, stress, and mental health and the relationship between these factors and the crime.

Some parents, according to Stroud's (2008) qualitative research on the psychosocial analysis of 68 child abuse offenders' lives before the offenses. Results indicate perpetrators' interpersonal relationships, stress, and mental illness are complex and, if not addressed, can lead to child abuse, neglect, and even murder. Comparatively, through systematic analysis, Vogus et al. (2016) illustrated the importance of a whole-person approach to understanding child abuse and filicide to help children and families obtain safe and effective help.

Bourget et al. (2007) comprehensive literature review discovered that having stepchildren in the house increases the risk of filicide, even though genetics reduce the crime risk. Social workers should know the signs of a spouse prone to commit filicide. These signs include a lack of attachment to the stepchild, irritation with the stepchild, and jealousy of the stepchild's attention from the original mother.

Additionally, Eriksson et al. (2014) noted that male filicide perpetrators tend to have attachment issues from an early age. For this qualitative study, researchers interviewed 231 Australian murders convicted between 2010 and 2013. Fourteen participants admitted to having committed filicide. The results revealed female perpetrators of filicide often have unhealthy attachment styles and go on to mistreat their children. Observing caregivers' parenting, including mothers, fathers, and stepparents, requires social workers to pay close attention to their childhood experiences.

McCarroll et al. (2020) examined publications from 165 child death reviews. As a conclusion, the paper suggests that social workers use insights from child death reviews to determine causal variables, perpetrator characteristics, contextual pressures, and

socioeconomic status of the deceased. The researchers determined that analyzing such data systems may help reduce child mortality by determining the root causes of these tragedies by setting up protections against the causes, triggers, and contributing factors of child maltreatment fatalities.

The means to effectively investigate allegations of child maltreatment by stepparents have been the subject of numerous studies. Berkout and Kolko (2016) sought to understand the features associated with filicide perpetration. These features are environmental risk factors, physical and emotional harm, the types of maltreatment, parental risk factors, police calls to the home, and the intensity of the child's injury. For this reason, social workers evaluating risk factors for deadly child abuse should pay close attention to identifying these predictors.

Johnson and James (2016) conducted a qualitative case study to determine the long-term impact of childhood abuse and neglect. Researchers found social workers play a crucial role in preventing child maltreatment if they intentionally assess the psychological implications of an adult abused in childhood. The researchers concluded social work agencies should focus on improving assessments of those in close contact with children. Recommendations further suggested that educational institutions adapt father-based parenting programs to deter stepparental abuse.

Child protection social workers are vulnerable to secondary traumatization, which hinders their capacity to assess maltreatment accurately, as determined by Dagan et al. (2016). The study used the conservation of resources theory to investigate child protection work's role in developing secondary traumatization. Dagan et al., discovered

that social workers with superior training and experience could mitigate the risk of developing post-traumatic stress. Researchers concluded that frequent childhood exposure to traumatic events and occupational stress exacerbate those risks. Consequently, it is crucial to ensure that social workers have the necessary training, experience, and resources to deal with the trauma that may arise during their work on child abuse cases (Dagan et al., 2016).

In addition, research on social worker trauma included Bullinger et al. (2020), who proposed looking at different strategies for improving macro-level elements involving government policies. Sethi et al. (2018) encouraged improving child abuse prevention methods and procedures to support social workers. The study used data from the WHO European Child Maltreatment Prevention Action Plan between 2015 and 2020. Vogus et al. (2016) studied social worker safety culture in an anonymous cross-sectional survey of 1719 Tennessee-based social workers. Results indicated that social workers employed in an organization that prioritizes safety reduces interpersonal risk, and recognizes stress are prone to provide improved child abuse assessments.

Social Workers' Challenges when assessing Stepparental Filicide

Social workers in child welfare are responsible for protecting the lives of children who have been victims of abuse or neglect. It is also the social workers' responsibility to ensure biological parents will protect them. Douglas (2017) analyzed data on child maltreatment fatalities in the USA in this study. The study's outcome revealed professionals working in child protection often respond poorly, analyze incorrectly, and make faulty decisions when faced with challenging situations.

Researchers found that some social workers, despite their education and experience, made inaccurate assessments of child bruises. Matthews et al. (2017) discovered that practitioners in the field of social work lacked the confidence and training necessary to effectively assess the cause of bruises in children who were victims of child abuse. In this study, participants included 39 child protection social workers along with 16 pediatricians from around South Wales and Southwest England who participated in semi-structured, in-person interviews. The authors also found that a chaotic home environment combined with negative perceptions of the parents influenced the decision to refer children for medical exams. Lastly, Matthews et al., found that communication between doctors and social workers were affected based on some social workers' lack of knowledge of the stages of bruising.

Social workers may be responsible for a phenomenon known as "Invisible Child Syndrome." According to Ferguson (2016), the term refers to children who have perished partly because of the social worker's inability to connect with them personally. The failure to connect may be caused by the emotional and psychological demands of the job, the unpredictability of interactions with hostile and resistant parents, and the pressure to meet unrealistic deadlines, and the lack of adequate organizational support. Consequently, these elements may prevent a "child-focused" approach when conducting child abuse investigations (Ferguson, 2016). Research suggests that social workers risk developing "Invisible Child Syndrome" from working with the same family for a lengthy time. Social workers who provide continuous child protection services may lose sight of their primary responsibility to assess the family for signs of abuse and neglect. Instead,

the focus shifts to "maintaining" the family's current situation. As a result, social workers

get bored with routine monitoring and maintenance and fail to conduct the always-

important risk assessment for child abuse (Ferguson, 2016).

Cook (2019a) used data from a qualitative investigation into initial home visits

from the United Kingdom's child protection agency. Researchers used a combination of

interviews and focus groups to capture social workers' narratives about their post-visit

feelings. Cook contend that emotional responses play a pivotal role in home visits,

significantly affecting how professionals understand and handle home visits.

Child welfare workers can better identify, analyze, and prevent child maltreatment

deaths if they know what factors place children at risk for step-parental filicide. When a

stepparent is present in the household, child welfare social workers must take action to

safeguard children from abuse and mistreatment. It is possible to enhance these

protections during the initial engagement and subsequent evaluation by increasing social

workers' knowledge of the causes and potential solutions to stepparental filicide. Cook

(2019a) reports the current evaluation strategies of stepparents are inefficient in

determining if they pose a substantial risk and do not offer protections to stop

unintentional filicide.

Social workers should develop decision-making processes grounded in the core

tenets of social learning theory (Bandura, 2011). Social learning theory suggests that

violence and maltreatment can be learned behaviors; therefore, social workers must

investigate the childhoods of stepparents, including uncovering any history of abuse,

neglect, or other maltreatment, which may lead to them becoming perpetrators of stepparental filicides (Munro, 2018; Plate et al., 2019).

Filicide is a complex criminal offense requiring a multidimensional preventive approach. Several disciplines engage in the study of filicide, ranging from psychiatry, criminology, and economics. Using multi-professional tactics to improve social workers' understanding of this social phenomenon is an effective strategy (Putkonen et al., 2016; Solem, 2012; Spies et al., 2015).

When developing and implementing social work policy and practice, it is essential to understand and explore the social workers' learned experiences that guide their thoughts and behaviors when assessing for risk factors associated with step parental filicide. Additionally, improving child welfare social workers' role in protecting at-risk children will help to solidify their protective capacities (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019; McLeigh et al., 2018; Solem, 2012).

Summary

The Review of the Professional and Academic Literature Review in this chapter sought to identify conclusions captured in research findings that would eventually assist social workers in executing their mandate to protect potential child victims from stepparental filicide. In this section, I reviewed the literature on accidental filicide that examined stepparents. This chapter reviewed literature relevant to this study, including the history, prevalence, and causes of accidental filicide. Further, the literature review provided an in-depth examination of stepparental filicide, including existing literature regarding perpetrators and victims. The literature review also examined social work

assessments of stepparental filicide and how it relates to the theoretical framework of social learning theory.

In Section 1, I described the Foundation of this Study, which sought to examine, through the lens of child welfare social workers, their learned experiences of the safety and risk factors associated with child abuse fatalities at the hands of stepparents, and their perception of barriers in identifying and assessing such risks. There is a significant gap in the literature on stepparental filicide, and the role child protection workers play in preventing child maltreatment deaths. This study contributes to the existing gaps in practice, knowledge, and understanding of stepparental filicide regarding assessing, mitigating, and avoiding harm to at-risk stepchildren.

In Section 2, I will discuss the exploration of the Research Design, Methodology, Data Collection methods and Instruments, Participant pool, Data Analysis, and the Ethical Procedure supporting the research.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

This study aimed to examine child welfare social workers' perceptions of accidental filicide, in which a child under 18 is killed because of abuse or neglect by a stepparent. This research study examined stepparental filicide under the backdrop of a California metropolitan area child welfare agency and the social workers they employ. In line with previous research, this study may improve social workers' decision-making process, thereby protecting vulnerable children from becoming victims of stepparental filicide (Daly, 2022; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004).

The section is organized with a discussion of the study's method, design, data collection, analysis, and ethical procedures. Research Design describes the research questions and why a qualitative genetic design was selected for this study. In the Methodology section, I discuss the participant pool, recruiting strategies, data collection, and instrumentation methods. The Data Analysis section describes the process used to analyze the collected data. Following the Trustworthiness section is the Ethical Procedures section.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used to assess social workers' learning experiences in evaluating the safety and risk factors contributing to children's deaths caused by abuse or neglect by stepparents. An objective of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and experiences constructed in contributors' lives and social settings. Qualitative research is successful when it illuminates the meanings, actions, and contexts of research participants, as they perceive them (Fossey et al., 2002).

Qualitative research analyzes data from direct fieldwork observations, in-depth, open-ended interviews, and written documents. Qualitative researchers construct case studies based on naturalistic inquiry by generating detailed narrative descriptions of real-world settings. Using thematic analysis, qualitative researchers can identify patterns and themes across cases (Patton, 2005). A qualitative inquiry is ideal since the study aims to examine and understand the perceptions about this phenomenon through the lens of child protection social workers.

According to Kahlke (2014), a generic qualitative approach is a descriptive methodology that seeks to comprehend how individuals understand a phenomenon or situation based on "what works best" in answering the questions under investigation. Generic qualitative research aims to understand how individuals make meaning of a phenomenon or a situation. This method is advantageous when little is known about a phenomenon; a detailed description is desired.

A generic qualitative approach was used to investigate the methods social workers use to identify and assess stepparental filicidal risk. This approach was chosen since few studies have examined, from a social worker's perspective, the methodologies, motivations, reasons, and protective factors involved in the fatal abuse of children by stepparents. Moreover, due to the critical nature of these kinds of child deaths, a generic qualitative approach provided a rich opportunity to discuss the circumstances in which these tragedies occur. A generic qualitative design is not without criticism, explicitly regarding questions surrounding the inaccurate interpretation of the research findings caused by a weak theoretical basis (Kahlke, 2014).

For this study, other qualitative designs were considered. Case studies, for example, are versatile and adaptable to support various research settings (Kitchenham et al., 1995). However, for this exploration, analyzing a sole case would limit the scope of the study. Analyzing multiple case studies would also require comparing them in different settings, which is not the format of this study. In this study, using participants from the same department within this particular metropolitan child welfare agency was helpful.

A phenomenological research design was also considered, as the goal was to understand the meaning and construct the participant has lived experiences (Kennedy, 2016). Although the researcher aimed to provide greater understanding of the perceptions of child welfare social workers, participants may or may not have had lived experiences with child deaths. However, participants were asked to pull from their experiences, successes, lessons learned, supervision, and training to understand their collective perceptions.

I used semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the learned experiences of California metropolitan area child welfare social workers regarding the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide?

RQ2: What do California metropolitan area child welfare social workers perceive as current barriers in identifying and addressing those risk and safety factors associated with stepparental filicide?

Methodology

Recruitment

Social workers were recruited from a California metropolitan area child welfare agency that employs 9000 social workers across 18 regional offices and is one of the largest child protection agencies in the country. More than 2 million children in 88 cities are under the supervision of the social workers in this agency. Further, the mission of this agency is to promote the safety, well-being, and permanency of at-risk children, while strengthening families through community collaboration (McCroskey et al., 2012).

To recruit social workers from this agency, regional administrators provided the recruitment flyer to social work staff in their respective offices. Detailed information about the study, qualifications, exclusion criteria, and how to schedule an interview was included on the recruitment flyer. This recruitment strategy was ideal because social workers received the flyer directly in their outlook inbox. Social workers had the ability, discretion, and privacy to decide whether to volunteer for the study. In addition, I shared the recruitment flyer on my personal Facebook page and the partnering agency's virtual website to inform social workers of this study.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit social work participants for this research study. Purposeful sampling is essential in qualitative research as it allows the researcher to interview information-rich subjects who bring an in-depth understanding of the research topic to interpret, explain and describe the phenomenon studied (Staller, 2021). The participants selected from this California metropolitan area child welfare agency

have the knowledge, experience, and insight regarding child protection issues, including

identifying victims and perpetrators of child abuse and neglect. Social work participants

employed at this agency must possess a bachelor's degree and some may hold licenses as

clinical social workers. For inclusion, participants were required to hold the title of CSW

with positions in either the ER or CS. The study excluded participants who worked in my

regional office.

The ERCSW's primary duties include investigating allegations based on child

abuse referrals from the child protection hotline. These allegations include physical

abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and caretaker absence or incapacity (Saini

et al., 2020). As part of their investigation, an ERCSW conducts face-to-face interviews

with the alleged victim(s), the alleged perpetrator(s), and collaterals, such as school

officials, medical professionals, and neighbors. Additionally, they observe the

child(ren)'s physical well-being and the appropriateness of their home environment. The

ERCSW concludes with the disposition of their investigations by determining if further

interventions and services to stabilize the family (Aadnanes, 2017).

CSCSW provides various protective services to the child victim(s). These include

monthly face-to-face visits, ongoing assessments, and referrals to mental health services,

developmental services, family preservation services, school support, and financial

support. If subsequent allegations of abuse or neglect are reported, the CSCSW must also

investigate those allegations in concert with the ERCSW (Lewis & Ewin, 2022). Any

safety and risk issues must be assessed and investigated to protect the child (ren) under

their jurisdiction. Due to their access to children, parents, and other caregivers (such as stepparents), social work participants are ideal.

A sample size of 10–15 participants was determined to be adequate to achieve thematic saturation. The sample size ensures that all relevant data are captured in the interview question responses (Weller et al., 2018). According to Guest et al. (2006), nine participants is the least acceptable sample for generic qualitative research. Other researchers have indicated that more than 20 interviews do not reveal new information.

The sample size was also determined by evaluating peer-reviewed articles with similar participants, data collection methods, and data analysis approaches. An evaluation of how many participants are required to reach saturation was conducted by Hennink and Kaiser (2022). In 16 qualitative studies, in-depth interviews were used to collect data. According to the results, thematic saturation was reached with between nine and 17 participant interviews.

In two studies, Young and Casey (2018) used semi-structured interview questions to interview social workers. The first study challenged social work strategies for engaging men in preventing gender-based violence, and the second examined social work perspectives on success in working with the U.S. justice system. In both studies, a sample size of 15 and 27 respondents was employed, with saturation reached after nine interviews.

Data Collection

The study's research questions were answered using semi-structured interview questions. Using semi-structured interview questions, the interviewer can follow the

conversation as it develops (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). A semi-structured interview emphasizes the shared experiences and interactions between the interviewer and the participant by asking predetermined questions and allowing the discussion to form naturally (Husband, 2020).

Beddoe and De Haan (2018) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to understand social workers' experiences regarding their perceived role in responding to child abuse and neglect in the school systems. Two major themes emerged from the research. First, a stigma is associated with reporting child abuse and neglect, negatively affecting social workers' attitudes toward reporting. Secondly, schools need better guidance regarding how to respond to child abuse or neglect reports.

Instrumentation

The interview process included screening, demographic, and open-ended semi-structured questions. Participants were asked about their race/ethnicity, gender, and age in the demographic questions. The background questions asked about the applicant's licensing status, years of field experience, and current position. Open-ended interview questions were developed based on the seven constructs of social learning theory and how social workers assess filicide risk.

There are seven constructs of social learning theory. *Observational learning*, which allows one to gain knowledge through observation of others. *Reproduction* facilitates the retention of knowledge by placing individuals in environments that encourage the retention of that knowledge. A measure of *self-efficacy* is social workers' confidence in replicating the knowledge by putting it into practice. *Emotional coping*

refers to acquiring positive coping skills amid a stressful environment where social workers regularly find themselves. *Self-regulation* refers to the ability to control harmful behavior in stressful situations. By using *reinforcement,* social workers can determine whether certain behaviors will be continued or terminated based on the consequences of the behaviors. Finally, *expectations* refer to the known consequences social workers will encounter that will either influence or deter certain behaviors. (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

During the preparation of the data collection instrument (see Appendix), two subject matter experts from the agency's "Child Fatality/Near Fatality" (CF/NF) section were consulted. These experts served as consultants on the formation of the interview questions. The CF/NF section analyzes the deaths and critical incidents of child(ren) under this California Metropolitan child welfare agency's supervision, care, and custody. The CF/NF section's case reviews aim to identify individual, operational, and systemic issues that may have contributed to the child's death or critical injury. As part of this section, recommendations are made for improving training, amending policies, and identifying child safety dangers. The CF/NF section contributes significantly to identifying lessons learned through these case reviews, and that information is circulated among staff to assist with improving practice. Some examples of the interview questions are:

- As an emergency response (ER) or continuing services (CS) social worker, what relationship dynamics have you observed between a child and stepparent that have helped you to determine if a child (ren) is safe or at-risk in their home?

- Considering your experience as an ER or CS social worker, what aspects of the job have assisted you in retaining information important for assessing the child's relationship with his or her stepparent? What aspects have been a barrier?

The interviews were conducted via Zoom (https://zoom.us), a video conferencing platform, as part of the data collection process. Zoom is user-friendly and can be accessed by participants who do not have a subscription. Further, a video conferencing platform allowed the interviews to be recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and preserved (Park et al., 2021). Whiting (2008) wrote about the importance of maintaining a permanent interview record; therefore, this platform was ideal.

Social work participants who completed the interview process were offered a $25 gift card as a thank-you gift. Based on the findings of Kanter and Schrandt (2022), it is essential to thank the participants for their feedback, cooperation, time, and honesty after the interview. The practice of thanking participants comes in various forms. Some researchers give a heartfelt verbal thank-you, while others provide a thank-you gift for their participation. Head (2009) researched the ethics and implications of paying interviewees for their involvement. Thank-you gifts are expected to be used for research purposes, according to the study. Reflexive consideration should, however, be given to these gifts. Despite this warning, Head acknowledged that incentives effectively recruit study participants and may not impact the truthfulness and effectiveness of the participant's responses.

Data Analysis

To achieve the qualitative research goal of understanding this phenomenon, I used thematic analysis to identify themes within and across the responses of California metropolitan area child welfare social workers regarding the risk factors associated with stepparental filicide (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The main characteristic of qualitative research is the commitment to explore multiple realities by conducting a comprehensive approach to understanding the participants' viewpoints about the phenomenon studied (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Researchers often use thematic analysis when analyzing qualitative data to provide a detailed, social contextual interpretation of a research topic (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Thematic analysis in qualitative research is a tool that delivers a complex and rich understanding of the data by identifying common trends across data sets (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Themes represent the participants' subjective viewpoints and social realities embedded within their responses. Developing themes while conducting a thematic data analysis is critical to answering the research question. Extracting themes is essential as data are more than a cluster of words; they entail multifaceted explicit and implicit meanings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Evans and Mathur (2018) outlined factors to consider when conducting thematic analysis on semi-structured interviews. Researchers should determine whether the thematic content analysis is helpful for their study, what counts as a theme within the study context, and how the researcher represents the themes identified in the data. This qualitative study aimed to examine the meaning social workers attach to their experiences

with stepparental filicide, its significance in their professional lives, and how social constructs constrain or enable their ability to assess filicide.

A thematic content analysis can be conducted manually or using software such as MAXQDA. As part of their review of interview transcripts, researchers look for descriptive texts that represent significant issues across multiple responses. To gain a deeper understanding, raw data is reduced into codes derived from the participants' words (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Codes are categorized and grouped into second level codes. Second level codes are categorized, defined, and grouped according to themes. Researchers can develop storylines associated with established literature by using these themes. Clarifying the process of developing themes from data collection enhances the credibility of qualitative thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

I conducted the thematic analysis manually, using the two research questions as a guide in determining what data was worthy of becoming a theme. According to Evans and Mathur (2018), themes should capture something important about the patterned responses concerning the overarching research questions. In order to develop themes, a statement must appear more than once, and its significance must be related to the overall goal of the study. This qualitative study further identified the represented themes and relevant subthemes by giving a detailed description and emphasizing them with the results of interviews with social workers.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Developing trustworthiness involves establishing confidence in the results of the research. Establishing trust and confidence requires addressing credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability (Johnson et al., 2019). Credibility refers to the credibility of the conclusions drawn from the research. Credibility reflects the truthfulness, accuracy, and reality of the results of the issue being examined (Nassaji, 2020). Triangulation of data sources from both ER and CS social work participants helped provide credibility. Further, using analyst triangulation from the partnering agency research department, which will review the findings, also helped to ensure credibility. The participants' statements were incorporated into the final report as an additional assurance (Johnson et al., 2019).

It is important to ensure that the conclusions of a research study can be transferred to a similar study in order to ensure transferability. Transferability is achieved by providing specific details about activities and expectations (Nassaji, 2020). I addressed transferability by describing in detail the selected social work demographic and their job function allowing for the research process and findings to be used within similar child welfare agencies across the state (Daniel, 2019).

Dependability ensures the research process, and interpretations can be duplicated by comprehensively documenting any activities, conclusions, and changes in assumptions that may evolve throughout the study. Dependability can be achieved by ensuring consistent data collection methods, resulting in data-based decisions (Nassaji, 2020). Dependability was captured by describing in detail the purpose of the study, information on participant recruitment, data collection & analysis, and discussing how the findings were interpreted (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Confirmability ensures that others can confirm the interpretations and conclusions of the research. Confirmability is reached by describing the data and findings to the extent that others can establish them. Further, confirmability is achieved by creating an audit trail of records that describes the rationalization of the decisions and steps made by the researcher (Nassaji, 2020). During this audit trail, critical reflections were conducted on how biases and preconceived notions influence the interpretation of research findings.

Ethical Procedures

All required ethical procedures were followed in alignment with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the NASW Code of Ethics. Each participant was provided with informed consent. The informed consent outlines the data collection procedures, the voluntary nature of completing the questionnaire, and the risks, benefits, and methods of protecting participant confidentiality (NASW, 2022). Confidentiality was established by the use of identifiers consisting of letters and numbers. The identifiers were derived from the participant's age, initials of their first and last names, years at the department, and gender, for example (50LS25F). No identifying information was stored, such as employee numbers, email addresses, or employee file numbers. There is no public access to these records.

The recruitment of participants was conducted at the California metropolitan area child protection agency, in which I am employed. There was no direct supervision or responsibility of the participants recruited for this study. Despite this, there exists a culture of fear surrounding social workers due to the sensitive nature of the job. This culture of fear derives from the real and perceived consequences of their professional

actions or inactions that could result in the injury or death of a child. In a research study assessing the journey from working in a protective to a fearful climate in social work education, Raine (2021) evaluated this fear-based climate. The responses from participants revealed that in various aspects of the social work profession, there are underlying feelings of hesitation, conflict, and negative perceptions that may affect how they carry out their duties.

These fear-based feelings may be amplified once the participants became aware of my role as an administrator. Addressing participants' concerns regarding their ability to speak freely was important. Privacy and confidentiality issues were addressed when the participants were provided with informed consent.

Further, my employment at this California metropolitan area child protection agency presented the risk of participant bias. Although, Whiting (2008) acknowledged that participants favor interviewees professionally or culturally like them. As a means to address participant bias, exclusion criteria were established for potential participants in this study. While there are 18 regional offices under the umbrella of this agency, participants who work in the same regional office as me were excluded from this research study.

The issue of ensuring the beneficence and non-maleficence of social workers was addressed. The topics of filicide and child maltreatment deaths can be emotionally taxing. Child fatalities contribute to the risk of social workers developing vicarious trauma. Vicarious or secondary trauma is the emotional cost social workers pay for helping others (Singer et al., 2019). Ashley-Binge and Cousins (2019) examined 10 years of literature

on the practices of individual and organizational responses to vicarious trauma in social work professionals.

Researchers concluded that organizations must take equal responsibility in supporting individual social workers when addressing vicarious trauma. Therefore, each participant received the agency's Employee Assistance Program, the mission of which is to provide emotional support to social workers on a range of issues such as stress manage, mental well-being, interpersonal and relationship conflict, grief, and addiction by providing access to support groups and individual counseling.

Summary

In this section, I discussed the research and data collection methodology. A generic qualitative research design was utilized to answer the research questions concerning the learned experiences of child welfare social workers about their decision-making process when assessing for risk factors associated with stepparental filicide. Purposefully sampling was used to recruit participants from a California metropolitan area social work agency. Data were collected using semi-structured interview questions, and thematic analysis was used to analyze participants' responses. The data were coded to identify relevant themes and subthemes regarding the issue of stepparental filicide.

Based on the interpretation of the emerging themes, the findings developed may provide the social work community with a better understanding of this phenomenon. Understanding the seriousness and urgency of this matter may lead to the development of social work-based training, advanced practice, and improved policies. Additionally, the research findings can be used to assist in identifying appropriate next steps in addressing

the issues of stepparental filicide. In the next section, the Presentation of the Findings will

be addressed.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The deaths of stepchildren due to abuse and maltreatment is a social problem affecting the victims' families and communities (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019). Evolutionary psychologists Daly and Wilson (1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005) have spent decades calling attention to children's risk at the hands of stepparents. Other studies have tackled this social issue by bringing to the forefront those victim and perpetrator characteristics that place stepchildren at risk of child maltreatment deaths (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2020). Child welfare social workers protect at-risk, abused, and neglected children (Vogus et al., 2016). Any child death threatens to destabilize the social work community. Therefore, when a child dies, the ramification of those deaths infiltrates the policy, procedures, and practices of child welfare agencies (Douglas, 2017). Additionally, the lack of research on the ways and means by which the social work community identifies, assesses, and prevents child maltreatment deaths at the hands of stepparents is the driving force behind this research study.

I conducted a generic qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from the child welfare system to answer the following research questions:

RQ1:   What are the learned experiences of California metropolitan area child welfare social workers regarding the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide?

RQ2:   What do California metropolitan area child welfare social workers perceive as barriers to identifying and addressing risk and safety factors associated with stepparental filicide?

In this section, I detail the Data Analysis Techniques, including analysis processes, a description of the sampled population, the initial coding process, and the final themes uncovered concerning the posed study research questions. Further, I present the Findings, including participant characteristics, thematic analysis, and Unexpected Findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Recruitment

I received full IRB approval on March 17, 2023 (#03-14-23-0995897). I started my recruitment efforts on 3/22/2023. I recruited participants for this study at a child welfare agency in southern California. The first step in my recruitment process was to contact the regional administrators in each of the 18 regional offices. I requested to distribute the flyer to all social workers in the ER or CS sections. I encouraged the regional administrators to send the recruitment flyer without mandate or influence. I posted the flyer to my Facebook page and the virtual billboard of the partnering agency. The flyer sought participation from 10–15 social workers in the child welfare agencies' ER or CS sections. I instructed potential participants to contact me via email from a personal email address. Upon receiving the email from social workers who expressed interest, I sent the demographic questionnaire, which served as an inclusion tool to ensure the participants met the guidelines. Using the online meeting scheduling tool Doodle (https://doodle.com), I sent qualified candidates a link to schedule individual interview appointments, which allowed participants to schedule their interview date and time according to their convenience. I conducted face-to-face interviews via the Zoom video

conferencing app. I reached saturation at 12 interviews. I downloaded the audio recordings and compared the recordings to the transcripts of each interview. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer drive. Per Walden University requirements regarding university-approved research projects and collected data, I will retain the audio recordings, transcripts, demographic questionnaires, and other paper documents for 5 years.

Data Collection

I developed the interview questions based on Bandura's seven key concepts of social learning theory. The second and third questions addressed the use of observation by social workers as a learning tool. The fourth and fifth questions examined how participants reproduced the information they retained on this topic. In answering Questions 6 and 7, social workers could gauge their confidence in applying their knowledge. Questions 8 and 9 assessed the participant's ability to use the lessons they have learned in stressful situations. In contrast, Question 10 allowed participants to discuss how negative and positive consequences affected their behavior. Lastly, Questions 11 and 12 solicited information regarding implicit and explicit barriers social work participants face when assessing stepparental maltreatment risks.

It is important to note that by developing the interview questions based on the theory's key concepts, I was able to capture the essence surrounding the social work participants' experience and insight regarding the risk factors associated with stepparental filicide and the barriers participants feel hinder them from assessing those risk factors.

Thematic Analysis Process

I used Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis to arrive at the study's findings. Braun and Clarke described thematic analysis as an essential and standard method of identifying and analyzing qualitative patterns. Braun and Clarke's approach effectively examines research participants' perspectives, highlights similarities and differences, and generates unexpected findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis are (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming the themes, and (f) producing the write-up. I decided to analyze the data manually because although manual coding is time-consuming, it assisted me with streamlining the process using deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding allows the development of a predefined set of codes based on the overarching research question(s). In contrast, inductive coding enables the codes, themes, and subthemes to emerge from the raw data (Azungah, 2018).

I began to familiarize myself with the raw data during the interview process. I was deliberate in my notetaking by jotting down the participants' buzzwords, reactions, and compelling statements. After downloading the Zoom-generated transcripts, I carefully compared the transcripts to the audio recordings. I reduced the speed of the audio, which assisted me in finding mistakes within the transcripts. I completed this process to ensure accuracy by contrasting the edited transcripts with the buzzwords.

Further, based on the overarching research questions, I used deductive and inductive methods to highlight explicit statements and created two separate categories.

Those categories highlighted participant perceptions of two meaningful conceptual experiences. The categories developed were "victim red flags" and "perpetrator red flags." In the Findings section, I will discuss this information in detail regarding the themes relevant to the posed research questions.

Problems and Limitations

There were no technical difficulties with the use of Zoom. The ability to log on, screen share, audio record, and download the transcripts went smoothly. For the past 3 years, social workers have used virtual communication platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams for work meetings; therefore, they were familiar with this type of meeting platform.

An identified limitation in my data collection process was failing to request the cell phone number of the participants who scheduled an interview date and time. On the recruitment flyer, I asked that interested social workers contact me via a personal email address. Unfortunately, when participants were a no-show to the interview, I had no direct way of contacting them to remind them to log on for the interview. I lost five potential interviewees because I could not contact the participant other than emailing them. I believe that if I had obtained the cell phone numbers of the participants before the interview, my data collection efforts would have gone smoother.

Findings

I conducted Zoom-recorded interviews with 12 participants over 3 weeks in the spring of 2023. The table below provides participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Section	Social work experience	LCSW
1	Female	33	Black	CS	17 years	No
2	Female	45	Black	ER	11 years	No
3	Female	56	Black	ER	10 years	Yes
4	Female	42	Hispanic	ER	17 years	No
5	Female	67	Black	CS	18 years	Yes
6	Female	49	White	CS	17 years	No
7	Female	53	White	CS	12 years	No
8	Female	42	Black	CS	5 years	No
9	Female	41	Hispanic	CS	8 years	Yes
10	Female	35	Hispanic	CS	5 years	No
11	Female	48	Hispanic	CS	10 years	No
12	Female	42	Hispanic	CS	8 years	Yes

Note. LCSW = licensed clinical social worker; CS = continuing services; ER = emergency response.

Of the 12 participants, all identified as female. There were five Hispanic and Black participants and two White participants. Two participants were in their 30s, seven were in their 40s, two were in their 50s, and one was in her 60s. Three participants worked in the ER section, and nine in the CS section. Four participants had less than 10 years of experience, and eight had more than 10 years of experience. Four participants were licensed clinical social workers.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 1 hour to 1.5 hours. After I conducted the interviews, I downloaded the audio and transcripts and saved them under the

participant identifiers. Fifteen interviews were scheduled; however, I reached saturation

at 12 participants. I canceled the remaining three interviews planned.

Emergent Themes Identified

In the analysis process, several themes emerged that are worth highlighting before

I start my discussion of the themes relative to the posed research questions. I analyzed

participants' statements regarding risk factors based on the highlighted data when

examining the data relative to my first research question. I created two subcategories

titled "victim red flags" and "perpetrator red flags." Starting with the victim red flags, I

identified similar statements from the participants and categorized them as "child

characteristics" and "child's response to the stepparent." Similarly, I divided the

perpetrator red flags and classified them as "stepparent characteristics" and stepparents'

response to the child." Additionally, I created a third subcategory of "environmental red

flag," which speaks to the home atmosphere.

Additionally, I analyzed data relevant to my remaining research question,

perceived barriers. I highlighted mutual statements and developed subcategories titled

"personal dynamics," "family dynamics," and "work dynamics" Some interview

questions yielded additional data that represented those positive attributes social workers

feel are beneficial to their ability to assess risk and safety. I then used color highlights to

analyze implicit statements and categorized them under "green flags," "support," and

"recommendations."

I filtered out commonalities in the data and developed codes. I further refined the

data and established Level 2 coding. From there, I connected patterns coherent and

meaningful to the research questions and constructed the overarching themes and relevant subthemes. Furthermore, the data collected, and the preliminary literature review allowed for a deeper understanding of the perspectives of social workers regarding the risk and safety factors associated with stepparental filicide and the perceived barriers that hinder assessment processes.

Research Question 1 and Identified Themes

The first research question this study aims to answer is: What are the learned experiences of California metropolitan area child welfare social workers regarding the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide? The main themes identified were family-centered worries and strengths.

From the participant's perspective, the themes suggest that it is necessary to understand the core dynamics within families to assess children's health and well-being. Those dynamics may include parents and alternative caregivers struggling with mental illness, addictions, and extensive criminal records, further complicating the situation. To mitigate these risk factors, social workers must identify and utilize those strengths to develop case plans that serve as a blueprint for mitigating safety concerns. (California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, 2017). The following tables provide a depiction of initial codes to emergent themes as related to the stated research question:

Table 2

Major Themes, Subthemes, Level 2 Coding, and Initial Coding for Research Question 1

Codes	2nd level codes	Themes	Subthemes
Defiant, mental health issues, LGBTQIA, special needs, history of abuse.	Child characteristics Traumatization	Family-centered worries	Vulnerable
The child tries to be perfect, is afraid of the stepparent, and avoids the stepparent reaction when the stepparent speaks.	Child's non-verbal cues Child's physical cues		Child's trauma response
History of abusive behaviors, mental health issues, abuses substances, bused as a child, poor coping skills.	Criminality Maladaptive behaviors		Stranger Danger
No empathy for the child, no emotional attachment to the child, the child is an inconvenience, no experience with raising children, bio father not involved.	Lack of connection with child No concern for the child's needs		Parental divestment
Police and child abuse calls were made to the home, the child was not given space to make a mistake, the child was described negatively, and the child was isolated.	The child is not protected. Unsupportive home environment		When a house is not a home
The child is comfortable with stepparents, public displays of affection, and the child trusts the stepparent, positive interactions between child and stepparent, the child seeks affection from stepparent.	Bonding and attachment Nurturing	Strengths	Relationship dynamics
Stepparent sees the good in the child, is concerned with the safety and welfare of the child and is committed to the child's needs; the child is allowed to speak to social workers, and the child feels safe and secure.	Supportive Protective		Parental investment

Theme 1: Family-Centered Worries

Social workers need to identify family-centered concerns after assessing risk and safety. Those characteristics of the children, caregivers, and home environment that concern child protection professionals and social workers are considered family-centered worries in this study. These characteristics describe stepchildren's vulnerability and trauma response. They also describe the unknown dangers stepparents pose to stepchildren and biological parent's lack of concern for their children. The final worry is that environmental risk factors may be detrimental to the well-being of the stepchild.

This study found that child welfare social workers give particular attention to family-centered worries when a stepparent is involved. The perspectives presented here are based on social work participants' experience and lessons learned when working with families whose child welfare concerns involve a stepparent.

When examining the data, six participants identified worries as characteristics of children that make them susceptible to abuse and neglect. Others described how children respond to trauma as a point of concern when assessing risk in families with a stepparent. Eight participants said that stepparents might be predisposed to harming stepchildren due to their maladaptive characteristics. Several participants echoed this opinion, stating that environmental risk factors are detrimental to children's well-being and that parents' actions or inactions significantly affect their children.

The concerns mentioned above were categorized as family-centered concerns based on their responses to interview questions about perceptions of risk during a visit with the family. According to Participant 3, for example, recognizing nonverbal cues is

essential to the assessment process: "If I've noticed the child was scared. I've noticed the whole time over there that the child never goes where the stepparent is. When the stepparent talks, what's the effect on the kid?" An example was provided by Participant 5, who warned biological parents that they place their children at risk when they ignore specific characteristics of the stepparent:

> We had returned the kids to this mom, who had been horrifically beaten. And then she, you know, turns out that she was still with the boyfriend, and he was still in a life of crime and still using drugs.

According to Participant 9, family-centered concerns are further emphasized by the fact that a child with developmental challenges and a stepparent who is ill-equipped with parenting skills can pose a significant risk to the stepchildren's safety:

> So, if you have, like, a kid that has ADHD or autism, or something like that, and they're just like, I'm just here. Maybe they went from like no kids to kids, and now these kids are having these tantrums, and they can't cope. They don't have any parenting skills.

Participant 12 added:

> Does he see her as family, or does he just see her as someone else's daughter? You know, not getting involved because this comes up a lot with stepparents. They say we have our own; I'm not going to meddle with that child.

As a result of these comments, it is evident that participants are paying particular attention to those factors that impact risk assessment and what they see as a focus area that should be mainly considered based on their own past experiences. Family-centered

worries provide a general overview of how participants perceive child welfare risks and safety factors when a stepparent has access to the child. The family-centered theme was further supported by subthemes identified as part of this general scope. In the next section, I present the identified subthemes associated with this central theme.

Subtheme: Vulnerable

In this study, vulnerability is defined as the emotional or physical characteristics of the stepchild that render them susceptible to abuse and neglect. As part of the theme of family-centered worries, the subtheme of vulnerable implies specific worries such as age, sexual orientation, and mental health challenges.

Six of the 12 participants stressed the importance of identifying those characteristics of children that make them vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Participant 1 observed that the stepchild's maladaptive behavior posed an elevated risk to their safety, "I know that a lot of these kids obviously come with behaviors that they can't handle." Participant 9 agreed with this sentiment and stated, "If they have developmental delays or learning disabilities, they're at higher risk, for, in my opinion, being abused. They're more vulnerable."

Further examination of participant responses suggested that the stepchild's mental and emotional health should also be considered as a risk factor for being vulnerable to abuse or neglect. Participant 12 stated:

> He kept having, like, suicidal ideations. So, there was a lot of P.E.T. team
>
> involved with him. He was; he was really out of control. So, it came to the point
>
> that she couldn't handle this kid anymore and was like giving him up. And then

that's when I got involved because there was abusive history with that ex-

boyfriend.

In addition, Participant 7 noted that risk also applies to the age of the stepchildren. In

discussing a case where the child was in contact with a new stepparent, this social worker

revealed the way she assessed for risk to the child, "And so, I'm assessing that, but also

taking into account that I have a non-related male, that may not feel comfortable caring

for this 4-year-old."

In addition, participants expressed concern about the possibility of abuse due to

the sexual orientation of a stepchild. Participant 5 affirmed:

If there, for any reason, I sense that the people caring for the kid for whatever

reason, homophobia whatever, are not loving and understanding of that kid, like if

you have a boy who got some feminine traits, he might be being bullied at school.

I want to know that you're out there defending your kid.

In the opinion of participants, the statements above illustrate the characteristics of

a vulnerable child. When a stepparent is in the home, social workers should assess the

child's vulnerability to abuse or neglect. Several factors contribute to the decision,

including the child's age, behavioral issues such as defiance, mental health issues, special

needs, developmental delays, and a child identifying as LGBTQIA can all contribute to

the vulnerability of a child being abused or neglected by his or her stepparents.

The issue that the child may be vulnerable due to specific characteristics and that

the stepparent may exert harm as a result of these characteristics appears to concern study

participants who seem to be constantly aware of this when responding to child welfare

concerns pertaining to abuse and neglect as part of the central theme of family-centered worries.

Subtheme: Child Trauma Response

This study defines trauma as a child's emotional and physical response to a distressing event or situation that breaks their sense of security (Evans & Graves, 2018). As part of the family-centered worry theme, the subtheme of the child's trauma response illustrates specific concerns, including the physical response to trauma that affects a child physiologically, as well as the implicit and explicit ways in which stepchildren show that they are suffering from trauma.

Participant 1 describes the trauma response of a child on their caseload "And one of the girls because I think her trauma response like she would hold in her poop a lot, and when it was time she would like poop for like a day or two." The social workers in this study noted that by asking the appropriate questions, children may be able to express their fears directly. Participant 4 explained, "This is mostly like after I talk to the kids. It's like they tell me directly, 'Oh, they're not nice to me, or they're always making me feel bad or stuff like that.'"

Alternatively, participants stressed the importance of social workers paying attention to unspoken cues when assessing clients. Participant 5 corroborated this sentiment:

Nonverbal cues are number one. Are they drawn to the person or not? Do they show a little bit of resistance to any effort to show interest or affection? When things are a little bit quiet, when the kids seem withdrawn, maybe afraid to talk or

look, you know, for permission kind of thing. When things are too neat, and you

feel like there's a rigid presence somehow.

Participants indicated that the statements above describe the relationship between

a child and a stepparent, suggesting a lack of security for the child. According to several

participants, children's behavior indicates they are afraid or uncertain about their

stepparents; they avoid them, speak negatively about them, and withdraw from them.

Further, participants noted that changes in the child's personality and body language

around the stepparent may indicate trauma. The effects of trauma on school behavior and

normal bodily functions have also been observed. In assessing safety and risk,

participants believe linking a stepchild's trauma responses to the family-centered worry

theme is crucial.

Subtheme: Stranger Danger

In this study, stranger danger refers to traits that warn of potential danger in the

stepparent. The biological parents may or may not be aware of these characteristics when

they allow access to the stepchild. Participants expressed concern about these specific

characteristics of some stepparents that may threaten their children's safety and well-

being. Among these characteristics are criminal and child abuse histories, mental health

concerns, and behaviors that could endanger the safety of stepchildren. Participants are

highly concerned about stepparents with a history of violence.

Participant 3 asserted their concern about domestic violence*:* "We do have a

significant amount of domestic violence between the stepdad and mom. The child was

able to disclose some of it." Participant 10 shared firsthand knowledge regarding the

consequences of a stepparent with violent tendencies, "The first referral was just a spanking. The next two, there were actually marks, and then the last one, there was limping."

Participants also stated that stepparents with a history of sexual abuse posed a greater risk to children. Participant 4 stated, "I have plenty of them, but one in particular was a sexual abuse referral, and it was pretty recent, the abuse from stepfather towards the stepchild, not his biological child."

Among the red flags highlighted by Participant 9, a lack of familiarity with the stepparent aligns with the family-centered worry theme, "The mom doesn't give them the opportunity to get to know each other. So then, boom! You got this, man. He's in the house. But you really don't know him."

The biological parent may not have access to these characteristics and personality traits before committing to a relationship and bringing that individual around their child. Through their experiences, social work participants in this study have expressed that assessing what is unknown about the stepparent is as essential as analyzing what is known.

Subtheme: Parental Divestment

For this study, parental divestment refers to how stepparents and biological parents demonstrate behaviors that signify a lack of concern for their children's well-being and life. Several participants indicated that social workers should consider parental divestment.

Social workers are concerned when parents deny or refuse to accept the risk and safety present to their child. According to Participant 4, parents are often left to make tough decisions without considering the safety of their children:

> Mom was in complete denial and typical DV mom. She was like, 'Well, I don't work. How am I going to leave him? How am I going to take care of my girls?' So, since she was in denial, we had to do a safety plan. What are we gonna do? You need to protect your child, and she was in complete denial.

Another primary concern that should not be overlooked when assessing child safety is medical neglect, according to Participant 5:

> When a kid has asthma, and they miss an appointment, you better go get that kid. And I went in, and I grabbed that baby. Put that baby in my car seat and said, this is a detention, and I was out of there, and that baby wound up in the hospital for like 2 weeks because she had been medically neglected.

As noted by the participants, stepparents who do not wish to be involved in their stepchildren's lives are also indifferent to their well-being. Participant 12 addressed this issue:

> Does he see her as family, or does he just see her as someone else's daughter? You know, not getting involved because this comes up a lot with stepparents. They say we have our own; I'm not going to meddle with that child.

Participants report that stepparents who refuse to cooperate with social workers or in certain aspects of their child's life pose a risk. Furthermore, biological parents who deny abuse or are not involved in their children's lives, such as an absent father, can also

place their stepchildren at risk. Similarly, participants believe that medical neglect is one of the most significant red flags when determining parental divestment. In their statements, social workers expressed the importance of identifying behaviors and characteristics that may lead to stepparent filicide.

Subtheme: When a House is Not a Home

Social worker participants define this subtheme as household and environmental concerns contributing to the child's emotional instability. In addition, participants concluded that parents who coach and retaliate against stepchildren should be thoroughly investigated. Participant 7 cited:

The oldest child reported that the boyfriend, you know, kind of reared up on them and threatened to fight them. Mom didn't necessarily intervene. They experienced a lot of homelessness and not going to school with mom. So just not a stable environment. Well, Mom asked them to lie about the situation and then pretty much verbally attacked them when they told the truth.

Participant 4 described how the environment at home reminds them that stepchildren are unwelcome:

They only buy their kids good things, but not the stepchild. Or they'll buy them brand-name stuff, and the step kid gets the generic stuff. As I had mentioned earlier, do they treat the kids the same as their biological kids? I always look around to see the same if the kids sleep in the same room or different rooms; I always pay attention to decorations and stuff like that. Why does this kid have

more stuff than this one? Or why does this kid have a television in his room, but the other one doesn't?

In contrast, Participant 2 expressed concern over believing stepchildren without probing questions. Their doubts were based on their own experiences as stepmothers:

When they just come out and say, 'I don't like my stepmom, or I don't like my stepdad,' and I ask some questions like, okay, how's it at home? Or how are they treating you? Are you scared of them? You know, are you alone with them a lot? Are they nice? Are they demeaning? You know, holding anything over your head? I mean, it's hard with stepparents, you know. I mean, I'm a stepmama, so I get it.

Based on the participants' statements, the study enables readers to understand the stepchild's insecure attachment to their home and living environment. Social workers should examine how stepchildren are treated in their homes as part of this environment assessment. It is also essential for social workers to consider disciplinary issues, parental alienation, and coaching as a concern.

Theme 2: Family Strengths

In order to mitigate family-centered worries, it is essential to identify family strengths. Over the years, social workers have evolved from using a deficit approach to assess and provide services to at-risk children and families. During the past decade, the child welfare community has shifted its focus and provided interventions focused on clients' competencies and resources within their immediate family and community (Pulla, 2017). The participants in this study defined family strengths as positive qualities within

families that social workers can use to counter their concerns. Among these strengths are the dynamics of family relationships and parental involvement in the child's well-being.

The following are the attributes of family dynamics that illustrate stepchildren are safe and well cared for at home, according to Participant 1:

I think, not necessarily attachment but being comfortable. Being able to, I guess, be comfortable around a stepparent, nurturing, being able to hug or be close, just being comfortable, being secure, being able to trust and go for like safety or security, and feeling just like safe around their stepparent, I think that's a green flag for me.

The environment described by Participant 6 supports the well-being of the stepchild:

If the child is in a happy environment, you know he's fed, and he is loved. Is there space for him to make that mistake? Or a space to, you know, come and play, and when the kid sees his Stepmom, he runs to her, and you know they hug.

Participants indicated that child protection has shifted to a strengths-based approach in their statements. This study identifies positive family interactions and supportive home environments as elements of strength. Having these strengths may mitigate worries and positively impact the well-being of families.

Subtheme: Relationship Dynamics

For this study, relationship dynamics refers to the forces that stimulate growth and safety within the family. Identifying positive dynamics in a stepchild's relationship with a caregiver can be achieved by assessing interactions between the child and their caregiver. Analysis of family verbal and non-verbal cues can provide insight into those interactions.

Thus, social workers can be confident that the stepchild-stepparent relationship is nurturing, trustworthy, and secure. Participant 6 cited an example of this dynamic:

> If the child is in a happy environment, you know he's fed, and he is loved. Is there space for him to make that mistake? Or a space to, you know, to come and play, and when the kid sees his stepmom, he runs to her, and you know they hug.

According to Participant 12, it is crucial to observe these signs of attachment:

> If the children appear bonded to the stepparent. I think you can't fake that, and you can't teach someone how to fake bonding, right? So, if you're able to get this statement from the child or from the parents, and you're able to see them genuinely having, like, a good relationship at whatever age that the child is in. I think that's one of the things that I look for.

The statements of social work participants demonstrate the importance of understanding stepparents and stepchildren's interactions and communication to determine whether they feel comfortable and safe with their stepfamily. As it pertains to this study's primary research question, these attributes relate to the theme of strengths.

Subtheme: Parental Investment

According to participants, parental investment refers to the attributes that biological and stepparents possess. As a result of these attributes, they likely have the best intentions regarding the welfare of their children. Knowing that stepparents care about the safety and overall well-being of the children is an essential component of that assessment. When evaluating families, Participant 1 summarizes what they look for:

I think I would be comfortable knowing that a stepparent knows what's going on

or asking questions like, 'Hey, you know we observed this, and this is kind of like

concerning, you know. What can we do?' You know, the stepparent being

involved. I think that's a good thing.

As recalled by Participant 11, the stepparent went above and beyond to maintain a

relationship with the stepchild:

She wanted to do more with this step minor than her own children because she

wanted to gain the trust and confidence and show her that she's gonna be another

daughter to her. She doesn't want her to be seen as a stepmother.

Participant 8 added to the discussion by acknowledging the role biological fathers play in

preventing stepparent filicide:

Father's involvement as a whole helps to protect kids against stepparents that

mean them harm because I know you got a dad. You have some paternal relatives.

They wouldn't hurt these children like that, right? And so, I have always tried to

look for fathers.

The participants described attributes that further enhance the family's strengths.

An essential aspect of this subtheme is the involvement of non-custodial biological

parents and extended family members in the child's life. Participants further believe that

stepparents may also invest in the life and development of their children by being

involved at various stages of their development.

Research Question 2 and Identified Themes

This study aims to answer the following research question: What do California metropolitan area child welfare social workers perceive as current barriers to identifying and addressing stepparental filicide risk and safety factors? Work–life balance and personal and professional conflicts were the main themes identified.

In the participants' view, the themes suggest identifying barriers social workers encounter when providing services to abused children and preventing abuse and neglect of at-risk children and their families. Obstacles may arise from work-related trauma, such as perceptions of incompetence, bullying, and retribution from colleagues and supervisors (Oates, 2019). Families may also present additional barriers by refusing to collaborate with social workers and denial of abuse (Sudland, 2020). Based on the initial and second-level codes, the following table illustrates the process of developing themes.

Table 3

Major Themes, Subthemes, Level 2 Coding, and Initial Coding for Research Question 2

Codes	2nd level codes	Themes	Subthemes
Lack of training about stepparental risks, no court mandate to assess stepparents, social worker concerns not heard, social workers forced to close cases/referrals, and recommendations overturned by supervisors.	Departmental policies and procedures Lack of support	Personal & professional conflicts	Organizational Culture
The stepparent is reluctant to participate in assessments; the child refuses to disclose abuses, recants previous statements, and the bio-parent hinders the child from speaking to the social worker.	Resistant Non-compliant		Family Interference
Afraid of making a mistake, the impact of child deaths, fear of being arrested, being overlooked, not feeling protected, burnout, discouraged, and having no self-care routine.	Fear-based social work. Vicarious trauma		Emotional Cost of the Job
Job is rewarding, understands the big picture, has a self-care routine, listens to their instincts, personal experiences with stepparents, intentional with the work, and love for the job.	Resilience Dedication to child protection	Work–life Balance	Personal Fulfillment
Professional experience, training, case consultations, mentors, supportive supervisors, colleagues holding each other accountable, assessment tools	Teaming Supportive services		OTJ Practicum

Theme 3: Personal and Professional Conflicts

The participants identified personal and professional conflicts as interpersonal and job-related challenges that prevent them from assessing stepparent abuse and neglect with confidence. Social workers define personal conflicts as individual attributes and occupational duties. Further, participants described professional conflicts as workplace

policies and practices contrary to the provision of adequate and efficient assessments of child risk and safety. According to participants, another aspect of professional conflict revolves around the families and children that social workers protect and support.

Upon reviewing the data, all 12 participants believed that the organization's culture contributed to the professional conflict. The emotional cost of the job, such as secondary trauma and implicit and explicit bias, was cited by five participants as an impediment to determining stepchildren's safety during social workers' assessments.

According to Participant 3, professional conflicts contribute to the barriers social workers endure, "First and foremost, bring it to our attention because it's not. And then some training on what kind of things can you look for with stepparents that might mean that they're not a good stepparent." The focus of Participant 2 was on the resistance of stepparents, "Or that person {stepparent} could be resistant like, you know, I don't have anything to do with this, but you know they do, you know. But there's nothing that you can do." Similarly, Participant 4 noted that children may also resist, "And I always say, if a child doesn't disclose anything or say anything. We can't do anything. It's tough, especially when they're verbal."

Participant 1 acknowledged their biases:

I think, and maybe I have to change this, but I'm very biased. I think it's my internal bias when it comes to stepparents. Because again, I think it's what I've learned, and what I've grasped, and how politics are, and what everything is. I don't think I give a chance to that stepparent.

As well as their own triggers, according to Participant 6:

I have watched the (Gabriel Fernandez) documentary, but until the 4th part, I

personally couldn't take it anymore because, you know, having an active

caseload. I started losing sleep, and I was overeating, and I said, No, this has to

stop.

Participants identified individual values, beliefs, and organizational practices as

barriers to proper assessment during investigative and routine home visits. These

statements are based on the social workers' experience with families and the subsequent

development of work-related trauma. In order to understand how these conflicts relate to

the secondary research question regarding barriers, subthemes were identified and

explained in the following section.

Subtheme: Organizational Culture

Participants identified organizational culture as the barriers within the business

that are customary to its employees but pose the greatest hindrance to this process.

Participants focused heavily on the subtheme of organizational culture when considering

the theme of barriers. According to Participant 1, assessments are not focused on

stepparents:

They're ignored. There's a stepparent there. But we're going to focus on bio

parents, and we're missing that opportunity. Yes, because that happened to me in

one of my cases where the stepdad was the aggressor, we got an open case

because he was a DV perp. I've seen a lot of that we forget about the stepparent;

we don't assess the risk. And then we're here, like. Well, you guys can't be

together. Okay? But yeah, we don't give services to that stepparent to assess for risk if they've changed or anything like that.

Having their recommendations overturned or ignored was another organizational conflict participants reported; Participant 3 cited:

But we are noticing that a lot of kids are being released back to the parents at the detention hearings. And in a sense, it's kind of heartbreaking as a worker, especially because you're like all this work that I put in as far as like when you have to do the warrant system. You work hard, but then the court doesn't follow your recommendations.

It was acknowledged by Participant 12 that the timeframes for closing child abuse investigations or cases are incompatible with child safety:

We get a lot of complex families. We social workers have a lot of work, and I think that there is a big push for them to close out by the time that they're over 30. The pressure comes from administration, and it's put on supervisors, so they put it on the workers.

As an organizational barrier, participants cited a lack of awareness and training regarding the risks stepchildren may encounter. Participant 3 said, "First and foremost, bring it to our attention because it's not. And then some training on what kind of things can you look for with stepparents that might mean that they're not a good stepparent."

This subtheme is associated with the central theme of personal and professional conflict. Participants discussed the failure to mandate stepparent-focused services, the need for more training, departmental policies and procedures, management, timelines,

and assessment tools. Regarding barriers, they are aligned with the overarching research questions.

Subthemes: Family Interference

Participants described family interference as a lack of truth or cooperation by the children and the stepparent, who may harm them. Several social workers expressed frustration with assessing safety and risk when the perpetrators and the potential victims pose barriers.

Participant 2 focused on the lack of control social workers feel when a stepparent resists them, "Or that person (stepparent) could be resistant like, you know I don't have nothing to do with this, but you know they do, you know. But there's nothing that you can do." The fourth participant expressed frustration when the at-risk child interfered with their investigation, "And I always say, if a child doesn't disclose anything or say anything. We can't do anything. It's tough, especially when they're verbal."

In consideration of this subtheme, as it relates to the theme of personal and professional conflicts, participants were direct in describing the family interference caused by non-cooperation, withholding information, and the refusal of the child to disclose abuse to the family. According to the participants, these attributes are critical to identifying safety and risk.

Subtheme: Emotional Cost of the Job

Some of the barriers to assessing stepparental filicide are personal and do not have anything to do with the organization or family for which they are supporting.

Subthemes within this category include overt and covert signs of emotional stress caused by secondary trauma and burnout in social workers.

According to Participant 2, both positive and negative effects of the job were considered, *"Of course, as everyone knows, it's super up and down. Sometimes you feel really good for what you're doing with the family, and then sometimes you're stressed out."*

According to Participant 3, a lack of protection from management is also a source of stress, "Maybe not feeling protected because I remember when I got here, and I heard the director say. He was like, oh, the social workers are horrible! Let's get rid of them."

Participant 9 described how job stress acts as a barrier:

Yeah, and not only was it (Gabriel Fernandez's death) scary, but we were all scared to know, like, okay, then, what does that mean for the number of people we have on the line because they're not gonna be okay. They might say, 'I don't need this. I don't need that kind of stress. And then, you know we're already short staff. And now this is making the problem worse.

According to Participant 12, secondary trauma can adversely affect the confidence of social workers:

And then I honestly think, and this is something that comes up a lot is this: They don't trust their own assessments as they question themselves, they doubt themselves, they think that they're not doing good enough. They question as to whether they are really doing this job the way they should be because they realize that it's such an important job.

Due to the job's stressful nature, participants believe it is difficult to assess these risks adequately. By identifying bias, trauma, reluctance, burnout, insecurities, and avoidance of blame as examples of internal deficits among social workers that create barriers to professional and personal conflict, this subtheme contributes to the theme of professional and personal conflict.

Theme 4: Work–Life Balance

Participants defined work–life balance as the balance between the ways in which social workers are empowered to prioritize their well-being and the support they receive from their social work organization. As part of this study, we examined participants' experiences of work–life balance as well as policies, practices, and supports offered by the child welfare organization. Participant 7 cited:

They've cut our cases back down. I think I'm at 18 right now from 24, and I feel the difference. It's still a lot, though, because in CS, we have to be responsible for so much, and not just for the child but for both parents.

The third participant expressed an internal barometer that supports the work:

It's experienced and sometimes it's your gut, and I tend to follow my gut cause if I walk into a house, I don't feel cool. I leave right, and then I come back with somebody else. But yeah, to me, and maybe it's because I'm a little older and I've seen more, that just makes sense to me.

Due to the stress of being on the front lines in this war to protect children, secondary trauma, burnout, and high turnover are common in this field. Combining this with the personal challenges of social workers is a recipe for disaster. Secondary trauma

can be mitigated by maintaining a healthy balance between personal and professional responsibilities. As a result of the subsequent subthemes, participants can develop self-care strategies on a personal and professional level, supporting the theme of work–life balance (Collins, 2021).

Subtheme: Personal Fulfillment

An individual's fulfillment can be defined as the attributes that describe his or her strengths. In both their professional and personal lives, social workers have acquired skills that enable them to recognize the characteristics of others. Participants believe that a social worker who has more experience is better equipped to cope with stress. As a marker of progress, Participant 4 lauded their experience:

> I think it's my experience. I have to make sure that my job is child safety. I have to make sure a child is safe. Because if a child is not safe, then that means it's my responsibility to protect this child.

In order to fulfill their obligations, Participant 1 contributed their assessment process:

> Yes, and I mean as far as safety and assessing for risk. I mean, I interview my children all the time. And then again, I don't know if it's my bias. But when there is a stepparent here, and especially a male that lives in the home. I'm very alert.

Participant 12 explained that personal experience about stepparents has helped to understand this phenomenon "But to me, what I think is the most important is my own personal life experience because I am a stepdaughter like I have a stepfather." Participant 9 highlighted the need for self-care, noting:

You know it's rough at times. It's good times, but mostly rough because in ER,

you know, we're the ones making the decision to remove, and that's not always

the easy thing to do. So going through that. And then, when I started, the caseload

numbers were higher. So that was stressful to balance, too. So, in that time, I

learned the value of self-care.

The interpersonal supports identified by participants provide a foundation for social

workers to build. This foundation comprises experience, listening to their instincts,

education, and recognizing the need for self-care. Comparatively, these supports

contribute to the consolidation of work–life balance.

Subtheme: On-the-Job Practicum

This subtheme aims to describe policies, practices, and procedures that social

workers can use to assess the risks and safety of stepchildren. According to the raw data

analysis, experienced workers who serve as mentors and sounding boards, subject-

specific training and protocols, and supportive supervisors and managers are of great

value to participants. Participant 5 specified,

Oh, here's one thing I do, and again I've learned to do this by listening to

experienced workers. Often when there's a boyfriend, and there's any indication

there are issues; whether there was any issue about who he was or what kind of

person he was, you got to meet him, especially if he has significant contact.

According to Participant 12, the training helped make their jobs easier:

And I think if we have these monthly in-service training where we're like actively

examining real cases, we're learning what was right, what was wrong, and areas

for improvement. I think If this is something that's continuous, I think that is

really gonna help to improve workers.

The participants indicated which managers and supervisors provide a support system for

employees. Participant 4 touted:

I've had a couple of supervisors, and, like I said, most of them were {dependency

investigators}. So, their questions are very different than our questions." But I

think it comes down to your supervisor and if they trust you. But, like I said, I

understand we do have 30 days, but I will tell my supervisor. No, I need more

time in order to make sure that we covered everything and that it's not going to

come back for the same thing.

Several participants cited these practices supporting their ability to provide

adequate child maltreatment assessments on stepchildren. Some practices used are

assessment and investigation skills, consulting and teaming, subject-specific training,

supervisors, mentors, and reducing caseloads. In addition to directly aligning with the

theme of work–life balance, the participant's statements also help answer the overarching

research question regarding the barrier's social workers face.

Unexpected Findings

The majority of the participants' responses were in alignment with each other.

However, I noticed that three of the 12 participants supported stepparents. They indicated

that biological parents often "coach" the kids into disclosing negative aspects about their

stepparents. These social workers expressed empathy for the stepparents' treatment.

Participant 2 warned social workers of the dangers of believing children who are

coached, "I have seen kids talk about the stepparent in very negative terms, and sometimes it seemed, what's the word I'm looking for? Coached. You know what I mean from the other biological parent."

As stated by Participant 10, social workers must be careful when verifying the veracity of statements made by alleged victims:

I was investigating this referral with these children, saying, you know, there was physical discipline at the hands of the stepparent, but every time we would go out, there were no marks and bruises present anymore, and mom would contribute to the idea of that! The kids were misbehaving, but the discipline wasn't as violent as they described.

Participant 1 sympathizes with the stepparent:

That's how you know it's a big deal because then they got her (stepmother) children's father involved, and he threw a fit. Once, she called me saying, "See, this is like disrupting my life," it was. I was very, very understanding because she called me, and she was crying, and she was like, "I didn't sign up for this."

While these sentiments may appear outliers, it is imperative not to minimize their significance. Whether social workers had experience as stepparents, grew up with them, or had positive experiences with them on their caseloads. The participants disagreed that all stepparents threaten children. Otherwise stated, there is a danger in having only one viewpoint on stepparents' abuse of children.

Summary

The analyzed data concluded that child welfare social workers believe it is critical to assess for specific child and perpetrator characteristics, maladaptive interactions, and harmful environments that increase the risk of fatal maltreatment to stepchildren. Further, social workers conveyed the professional and personal barriers that hinder their ability to assess if a child is safe in the presence of a stepparent. Some professional barriers include organizational policies and practices, work culture, and family dynamics. I found that social workers were intrigued and passionate about strategies that could help them identify, assess, and prevent stepparental filicide, starting with bringing awareness, implementing policy mandates, and providing clinical-like assessment training.

Participants were asked about high-profile child death cases such as Gabriel Fernandez. Participants familiar with those cases expressed deep sadness and reflected on how stepparents with bad intentions pose a severe risk to children. Child maltreatment deaths caused by unrelated caregivers are less frequent than those caused by biological parents (Putkonen et al., 2016). Even so, the impact on the victim's families, their communities, and the profession of social work is catastrophic

The themes and subthemes were developed according to the participants' statements. Accordingly, family-centered worries and family strengths are key themes in support of research question one. Research question one focused on understanding, through the lens of child welfare social workers, the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide. There are several significant subthemes associated with family-centered worries, including stranger danger, parental divestment, and when a house is not

a home. Additionally, family strengths include the dynamics of relationships and the involvement of parents.

The participants identified personal and professional conflict and the need for a balance between work and personal life as themes. The themes are relevant to the second research question, which seeks to understand the barriers social workers believe prevent them from assessing risk and safety factors. There are three subthemes under the heading of personal and professional conflicts: Organizational culture, family interference, and the emotional cost of the job. In addition, the subthemes under work–life balance include personal fulfillment and on-the-job practicum.

The discussion in Chapter 4 explores the Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change. Additionally, I discuss the Professional Ethics of Social Work Practice, Recommendations for Social Work Practice, and the Implications for Social Change.

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

This qualitative study aimed to understand the risk some children face of becoming victims of fatal child abuse at the hands of stepparents. Additionally, this study aimed to examine the perceived barriers that social workers face when assessing risk to stepchildren when a non-biological caregiver has access to them.

I used purposeful sampling to recruit 12 child welfare social workers who conduct child abuse investigations or provide ongoing protective services to abused and neglected children and their families. I used semi-structured interview questions to gain meaningful insight into the personal and professional experiences, supports, and barriers social workers believe exist within this social work realm. Research has previously examined the characteristics of victims and perpetrators of stepparental filicide (Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2005; Lightcap et al., 1982; Malkin & Lamb, 1994; Sariola & Uutela, 1992; Wilson et al., 1980).

However, as a child welfare social worker, I wanted to fill the knowledge gap by giving voice to the individuals who have dedicated their careers to protecting these vulnerable children. The following section details the key findings relevant to the two research questions, Applications for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice, Recommendations for Social Work Practice, and Implications for Social Change.

Key Findings

Research Question 1

The research revealed two major themes relating to the first research question examining the learned experiences of California metropolitan area child welfare social

workers regarding the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide. The two themes centered around the red and green flags social workers identify to determine whether stepchildren are safe: (a) family-centered worries and (b) family strengths.

Theme 1, family-centered worries, reflects a cluster of attributes social workers observe amongst the child, stepparent, and biological parent within their home environment. In their evaluation of safety and risk when a stepparent has access to a child, social work participants identified these characterizations as red flags that they consider. Key subthemes were also identified, namely: (a) protect the vulnerable, (b) child trauma response, (c) stranger danger, (d) parental divestment, and (e) when a house is not a home. Subthemes were selected to reflect specific aspects of those red flags participants considered to be significant.

In assessing the child, participants considered their age, developmental challenges, and maladaptive coping skills that could lead to victimization. Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of recognizing how children respond to trauma, especially the nonverbal and physical signs that stepchildren display when distressed. Studies have demonstrated that children under the age of five (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2020) with difficulty controlling their emotions (Resnick, 2016), chronic health conditions (Sari Gokten et al., 2016), or behavioral issues (Sari Gokten et al., 2016) are more likely to become victims of child maltreatment homicides. In assessing for red flags concerning the stepparent, responses from social workers indicate potentially dangerous characteristics that the biological parent may not be aware of.

These characteristics include mental health challenges, violent criminal backgrounds, addictive personalities, and a history of abuse as a child victim or perpetrator. The results of this study are consistent with previous research conducted, which indicated that perpetrators with a history of substance abuse, violent tendencies (Aho et al., 2017), criminality (Putkonen et al., 2016), or mental illness (Sim, 2018) were significantly more likely to abuse and neglect stepchildren.

In research regarding the social-emotional investment of parents, it is hypothesized that stepparents may not invest their time, emotions, money, and energy in children who are not genetically related to them (Debowska et al., 2021; Nobes et al., 2020). Participants in this study referred to this as a concern as well. As part of the parental divestment identified in this study, parents refused to cooperate with investigations into child abuse. They showed no concern for their stepchildren's education, health, and overall well-being.

In previous research, environmental risk factors have been defined as large families (Berkout & Kolko, 2016) living in highly populated, poor communities (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2016) with insufficient resources for supporting families in need (Dekel et al., 2020). Families in these communities are often reluctant to report child abuse and to speak with social workers (Dekel et al., 2020). However, participants' statements regarding the environmental red flags focused on the dynamics that prevent supporting the stepchild inside the household. Considering that social workers conduct most of their assessments within the family home, they become concerned when encountering an atmosphere of isolation, scapegoating, and unhealthy discipline practices.

As part of Theme 2, family strengths, participants identified several green flags that confirm the child's needs are being met within the family, specifically among the caregivers. Among the subthemes developed under family strengths are (a) relationship dynamics and (b) parental investment. These subthemes collectively identify positive domestic aspects that illustrate stepparental investment in the child's life. They also identify positive family dynamics that are inclusive and supportive of the child's well-being.

When assessing the family dynamics, the participants seek to observe positive interactions that demonstrate bonding and attachment. Social workers also examine the relationship between the stepparent and child to determine whether the child is being nurtured. Junewicz and Billick (2018) investigated the relationships between the environment, interpersonal relationships, and genetics. In that study, it was determined that children who have a strong relationship with an attachment figure have the potential to positively impact their brain development.

The investment the biological and stepparents make to ensure the child feels supported and protected was another strength identified by participants. As a result of these investments, the stepparent is concerned for the child's safety and well-being. They see the good in the child and is dedicated to providing for the child's needs. As a result of Zhong et al.'s (2020) study on the intersection of parental beliefs, parental investment, and child development, they concluded that parental investment plays a decisive role in ensuring the health and well-being of children.

There is a correspondence between the themes and subthemes developed under research question 1 and the existing literature. Safety and risk factors identified as characteristics of the child and perpetrator are aligned. The environmental factors differ between the existing and current research; however, it is beneficial to understand better the positive and negative atmospheres within the homes and communities where stepchildren and their families reside.

Research Question 2

In response to the second overarching research question, this study explores the perceived barriers that California metropolitan area child welfare social workers believe hinder their ability to identify and address the risk and safety factors associated with stepparental filicide. Participants' interpersonal and career-related challenges are encapsulated in two major themes: (a) professional and personal conflicts and (b) work–life balance.

Theme 3, personal and professional conflicts, illustrates how departmental policies and procedures and the lack of organizational support impede the process by which social workers investigate stepchildren and their caregivers and provide ongoing assessments. There are three subthemes developed under the theme of personal and professional conflicts: (a) organizational culture, (b) family interference, and (c) emotional cost of the job. Social workers face barriers such as victims withholding information or making untruthful statements. Additionally, participants recognized that job burnout, vicarious trauma, and work policies may be detrimental to stepchildren.

Research previously conducted on the barriers social workers face when assessing safety and risk corroborates the statements disclosed by the participants. Dagan et al. (2016) research revealed that secondary traumatization, organizational stress combined with a lack of personal mastery can hinder a social worker's ability to assess maltreatment. The participants' statements corroborate previous research on social workers' barriers to evaluate safety and risk.

According to Dagan et al. (2016), secondary traumatization, organizational stress, and a lack of personal mastery can hinder the ability of social workers to assess maltreatment. Bullinger et al. (2020) argued that social workers cannot connect emotionally with children due to the policies, prevention methods, and procedures in place, including insufficient training and unrealistic deadlines while dealing with hostile parents and chaotic home environments.

In Theme 4, social workers noted that work–life balance is one of the positive attributes that enable them to provide efficient, potentially lifesaving evaluations. As a result of these attributes, social workers demonstrate resilience and commitment to their jobs and the support they receive from colleagues, supervisors, and management. Among the subthemes developed under work–life balance are (a) personal fulfillment and (b) on-the-job practicum, which can serve as a model for keeping social workers' cups full when interacting with families.

Research conducted on how to support social workers in ensuring the welfare and safety of stepchildren is extensive. As stated in Johnson and James' (2016) study on the long-term impact of childhood abuse, social workers are more confident when they are

trained in sharpening child-focused assessment tools. It was observed that working in

child welfare plays a significant role in developing secondary trauma, according to Dagan

et al. (2016). Research has demonstrated that adequate training and work experience can

reduce the risk of PTSD due to chronic exposure to traumatic events. As Cook (2019a)

has established, social workers' emotional response is pivotal in their home visits

decision-making.

As outlined in Research Question 2, the themes and subthemes are aligned with

those found in the existing literature. As a means of improving the protective capacities

of social workers, the perceived barriers within the complex family structure, social work

organization, and the emotional instability of social workers have been studied. Even

though these barriers may be uncomfortable when exposed, they are a crucial step in

ensuring the welfare and safety of stepchildren.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The two NASW Code of Ethics principles related to social workers' viewpoints

on the safety and risk factors associated with stepparental filicide and their perceived

barriers are service and social injustice (NASW, 2022).

Service is one of the values and ethical principles that child welfare social

workers must adhere. According to the NASW (2022) code of ethics, social workers must

assist those in need by addressing social problems. It was the purpose of Research

Question 2 to identify barriers to identifying and assessing the risk and safety factors

associated with stepparental filicide. In terms of barriers, personal and professional

conflicts and work–life balance were identified. The participants agreed that improving

departmental policies and procedures and increasing support to social workers would enhance the ability of social workers to provide services to stepchildren. Providing social workers with strategies to address vicarious trauma and other emotional costs of their jobs, such as self-care education.

Per previous research conducted by Claasen and Spies (2017), social workers must be able to establish a connection with children to mitigate the risk of maltreatment. If social workers are vulnerable to secondary trauma; capacity is impaired (Dagan et al., 2016).

Social justice is another value and ethical principle that child welfare social workers must adhere to (NASW, 2022). It is the responsibility of social workers to assist in resolving social injustices. The themes and subthemes developed under research question 1 relate to social workers' ability to recognize risk and safety factors in homes and among stepchildren and caregivers. The themes focus on family-centered concerns and strengths to address social injustices directed toward stepchildren.

Participants in this study believe that it is crucial to focus on the traits of the child, which makes them vulnerable to abuse and neglect and how stepchildren respond to trauma. Among these characteristics are identification as LGBTQIA, behavioral, emotional, mental health challenges, and age. Further, participants believe that failure to recognize the characteristics of perpetrators with a history of criminality and maladaptive behaviors threatens the well-being and safety of children.

Previous research on stepparental filicide victims and perpetrators found that child victims were young, had periods of uncontrollable crying (Resnick, 2016), and had

chronic health problems and special needs (Sari Gokten et al., 2016). In the case of

perpetrators, social workers should be aware of behaviors that indicate mental illness,

violence, substance abuse, and a history of child abuse as a minor (Aho et al., 2017;

Karpetis, 2017).

It is a form of social injustice that children are exposed to documented risks when

a stepparent is in their home or has access to them. As a result of the findings of this

study, some critical recommendations can be made for identifying, addressing, and

preventing the injustice of stepparental filicide. There is a vital need to bring awareness

and education to the social work community to help mitigate the impact of child deaths

on local communities and society. The study aligns with the mission of the NASW,

which is to improve human well-being and empower the oppressed, vulnerable, and those

suffering from economic insecurity (NASW, 2022).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

I hope that these findings will provide a strategy for social work communities to

address this issue. In Theme 3, personal and professional conflicts, methods are presented

that may contribute to further the development of knowledge in this field by emphasizing

the need to educate and train social workers and their partners. To improve child abuse

investigations, ongoing protective services, and supervision of at-risk and abused

children, it may be necessary to bring awareness to this polarizing topic and update

current safety and risk assessment tools.

Professional Recommendations

To prevent stepparental filicide, participants recommended child-specific training, conducting clinical assessments, and interviewing collaterals. Participants recommended four training categories: (a) fatherhood engagement, (b) characteristics of young children in care, (c) victims recanting previously disclosed abuse, and (d) the signs that their abusers have coached children.

The participants believe that biological fathers are a deterrent to ill-willed stepparents. Research suggests that stepfathers impose violent punishment on children who are unrelated to them due to the lack of parental investment and an innate connection (Debowska et al., 2021). This tragedy may be preventable if biological fathers and paternal relatives are present in the lives of children.

Training on young children in care should also include teaching the developmental, emotional, and mental characteristics of children suffering from childhood trauma. Social workers must be able to identify signs indicating whether a child is thriving in the home environment. Training social workers on how and why children retract previous statements regarding abuse or neglect may prevent them from dropping the ball and becoming complacent during the assessment process. It is also possible to train social workers on how caregivers instruct children regarding what they should say to social workers and other professionals so that the child welfare community can use different methods to assess safety and risk, such as paying attention to nonverbal cues.

As part of the job-related recommendations, social workers should be trained to conduct congruent clinical assessments. This California metropolitan child welfare agency does not require social workers to be licensed. As a result, many social workers are not trained to perform clinical assessments. Participants indicated that social workers and supervisors with clinical assessment skills are better equipped to identify safety and risk factors for children. These clinical skills involve demonstrating compassion, empathy, and self-awareness when communicating and actively listening to families.

According to Claasen and Spies (2017), these clinical skills include assessing family capacity and analyzing treatment needs. As part of a practical clinical assessment, it is essential to use emotional intelligence when solving problems, thinking critically, and implementing advocacy, collaboration, documentation, and time management techniques (Ungar, 2019).

Another job-related recommendation the social work participants made is the importance of engaging collaterals. Collaterals are third parties who have firsthand knowledge of the circumstances of the household or client (Reamer, 2022). Stepparental filicide should be investigated and assessed in terms of safety and risk by interviewing collaterals, including the child's current and previous schools, daycare/after-school providers, family members, and neighbors, reviewing police reports, obtaining police calls from the home, and identifying any child abuse histories associated with the stepparent (Berkout & Kolko, 2016).

Stepparent-Focused Services

The findings and recommendations from the social work participants support the inclusion of stepparents in the case plan, court orders, or family meetings with the agency. The agency's primary objective is to determine whether the biological parents' actions or inactions contributed to the abuse and neglect of the child.

There is a mandate to investigate and provide services to all individuals who live in the home or have significant contact with the child (Zeanah & Humphreys, 2018). However, mandating services to stepparents is uncommon, especially if they choose to remain in the shadows. In ensuring the safety of stepchildren, participants believe that engaging stepparents in the investigation, explaining their role in safeguarding a child's well-being, and ensuring accountability during child and family team meetings are significant steps.

Child-Centered Services

Developing a trusting relationship with the child is critical to these recommendations. It is possible to build trust by allowing children to process the information they have disclosed by sitting with them in silence for some time. If a child has experienced abuse at home, the trauma of recalling that abuse may prevent them from disclosing it to their social worker. Therefore, it is crucial to interview the child at a location other than where the alleged abuse occurred. This strategy may involve interviewing the child at school, daycare, after-school program, or at the home of a trusted friend or family member.

Additionally, it is customary practice when investigating child abuse to conduct body checks on young, pre-verbal children (Berthold et al., 2018). As the participants noted, asking verbal children to disclose any marks or bruises on their bodies that are not visible can provide additional insight into the severity of the abuse.

Impact on Social Work Practice as an Advanced Practitioner

The study's findings will improve my role as an administrator in this partnering agency as an advanced practitioner. Facilitating social work roundtables is one of my duties as an administrator. During these roundtables, social workers present child abuse investigations and cases to community partners and social work advocates. The panelists were provided with information concerning the allegations and circumstances that brought the family to the attention of the social work agency. The social worker provides information regarding the family's strengths, weaknesses, and support. By utilizing the study's findings, we may improve our understanding of how to support the efficiency and effectiveness of this assessment practice designed to identify and prevent fatal cases of child maltreatment. Work–life balance, on-the-job practicum teaming strategies, supports the participants' recommendations under theme four.

Researchers from Brissett-Chapman (1999/2018) have examined how social workers collaborate with community representatives and external stakeholders on structured risk assessments to predict how children may become vulnerable to abuse and neglect. In light of the study's findings, social work professionals should collaborate with the community (Brissett-Chapman, 1999/2018).

Transferability of the Findings

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied beyond the project's scope (Nassaji, 2020). Research findings can be transferred to comprehensive child protection practice in various ways. The participants in this study were social workers who investigated and provided ongoing services and support to at-risk or abused children and their families.

The broader social work community, however, includes but is not limited to faith-based and religious partners (Williams et al., 2019), family preservation agencies that employ in-home outreach counselors (Patwardhan et al., 2017), law enforcement (Van Dijk & Crofts, 2017), mental health practitioners (Karpetis, 2017), hospital and medical staff (Woodman et al., 2018), and school personnel (Fiorvanti & Brassard, 2020).

Through education, social workers can improve their assessment strategies and create positive social change by reducing child maltreatment deaths and critical incidents that have historically led to crises, division, and trauma in the child protection system.

Limitations

Performing a reflexive thematic analysis required me to reflect on my assumptions regarding the research topic. Reflexive thematic analysis involves considering how values and life experiences shape the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As a result of conducting a reflexive thematic analysis, I could reflect on my biases toward stepparents. While performing child death reviews as a social worker, I developed biases. According to these reviews, stepfathers primarily caused child deaths.

An analysis of the literature, specifically case studies examining the perpetrators, indicated that men commit stepparental filicide disproportionately (Block & Kaplan, 2022). Nevertheless, I remained open to the possibility that the results could differ from my expectations.

Recommendations for Further Research

A recommendation for future research is based on the limitations identified in this study. This study attracted the interest of many social work managers. Within this social work department, the executive management team oversees specific bureaus. Bureaus consist of regional offices led by regional administrators. The executive management team and regional administrators represent social work at the mezzo level. They are responsible for analyzing social work data, developing, and measuring initiatives, programs, and policies, and establishing relationships with community partners.

To further understand the risk factors associated with stepparental filicide, further research should focus on the perspectives of social work managers. Using a mezzo lens to examine this phenomenon may allow child protection agencies to improve their policies and practices related to social work. Exploring the topic from a micro and mezzo perspective may reduce child maltreatment deaths and critical incidences on various social-ecological levels (McLeigh et al., 2018).

Researchers can disseminate their findings in a variety of ways. Since the partnering agency requires a summary of the results, it may decide to post the findings on its virtual billboard, accessible to all social workers. The information can be distributed to the executive management team and the 18 regional offices during general staff meetings.

It is also possible to present the findings to external stakeholders and local partnering agencies, including law enforcement, who share the same child welfare mission. The information can be provided to community partners interacting with children and families in various settings.

Implications for Social Change

It is essential to highlight the implications for social change that this research has on the micro, macro, and mezzo levels of social work. The micro level represents the immediate family within the community (Harrison et al., 2016). The mezzo level represents child protection professionals and other departmental agencies that protect this vulnerable population (Lombard & Viviers, 2020). In contrast, the macro level embodies systemic change by establishing policies and laws that address this issue (Forenza & Eckert, 2018).

On a micro level, social workers can use these findings to conduct investigative and preventative assessments regarding the safety of stepchildren on their caseloads. According to Helm and Roesch-Marsh (2017), these findings may improve policies and guide the development of a training protocol to prevent child deaths due to stepparental filicide. At the mezzo level, organizations that interact with children daily, such as educational institutions, faith-based clergy, law enforcement, and medical staff, can improve their practices when interacting with stepchildren. At a macro level, it is essential to analyze the existing data on the circumstances, victims, and perpetrators involved in the deaths and critical incidents of stepchildren to bring about systemic

change. According to the current data, government funds and resources may be allocated to training and other initiatives to ensure the safety and well-being of stepchildren.

Summary

Using the perspective of child protection social workers, I conducted this qualitative research study to examine the safety and risk factors associated with child maltreatment deaths at the hands of stepparents and the barriers preventing social workers from conducting accurate assessments. Using Bandura's social learning theory, I developed open-ended interview questions designed to elicit honest feedback about the varied experiences of social workers. These findings provide insight into victims, perpetrators, and environmental risk factors that could contribute to child abuse or, worse, child death. In addition, the results indicated that barriers within the child welfare organization, family dynamics, and personal obstacles prevent social workers from identifying these risk factors.

Based on the findings related to Theme 1, family-centered concerns about the child's risk factors, the social work participants identified the same child characteristic, which makes children vulnerable to abuse by stepparents. The perspectives of child welfare social workers are crucial to understanding the next steps required to bring awareness to this issue. The social workers are the front line of defense when it comes to protecting this vulnerable population.

The study's findings also provide essential insights into how to address this issue at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Collaboration between child welfare professionals, local agencies, and community members may be enhanced as

improvements are made in this area of child protection. To ensure stepchildren's ongoing

safety and well-being, the socioecological system surrounding them must advocate for

developing prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies (Tucci & Mitchell, 2022).

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Appendix: Research Interview Questions

Inclusion Question:

Q1: Do you currently hold the position of Emergency Response (ER) or Continuing

Services (CS) Child Welfare Social Worker (CSW) in Los Angeles County?

Exclusion Question:

Q1: Do you currently or have you previously worked in the Compton-Carson regional

office?

Demographic

Q1: What is your race/ethnicity?

Q2: What is your age?

Q3: What are your pronouns/gender?

Q4: How many years of experience do you have in the field of child welfare?

Q5: How long have you worked in ER or CS?

Q5: Are you a licensed clinical social worker? (LCSW)

Disclaimer: The researcher recognizes and that some questions may invoke memories
and emotions related to child abuse fatalities or critical incidences. The Employee
Assistance Program (EAP) is a resource available, if needed.

<u>Interview Questions:</u>

<u>Prompt Question:</u>

Q1: Describe your experience so far as a child welfare social worker.

<u>Background Question</u>

Q1 (a): If you currently work in Emergency Response (ER), Can you share an experience you had while investigating a child abuse complaint where a stepparent was either part of the investigation, lived in the home, or had significant contact with the child(ren) under investigation?

Q1 (b): If you currently work in Continuing Services (CS): Can you share an experience you had while supervising a family where a stepparent either lived in the home or had significant contact with the child (ren)?

Research Question 1:

Observation

Q2: As a current ER or CS social worker, what relationship dynamics have you observed between a child and stepparent that have helped you to determine if a child (ren) is safe or at-risk in their home?

Q3 (a): When a stepparent lives in the home or has access to the children, what learning opportunities (i.e., training, supervision, mentoring, coaching, experience) have had the most significant impact on how you assess risk?
Q3 (b): Which ones have not?

Reproduction
Q4: Are there particular approaches you use when assessing for risk, such as a risk assessment tool, observation of interactions between the child and the parent or family, or an interview with the child or parent? Describe your approach. Feel free to identify and describe as many of the assessment strategies you apply when assessing risk.
Q5: Considering your experience as an ER or CS social worker, what aspects of the job have assisted you in retaining information necessary for assessing the child's relationship with their stepparent? What aspects have been a barrier?

Self-efficacy

Q6: Give examples of what would help you make use of this knowledge and awareness

Q7: Please give examples of the barriers you face in applying this knowledge and awareness to your practice

Emotional coping/Self-regulation)

Q8 (a): Explain what type of home environment supports the assessment of filicidal risk

Q8 (b): Explain what type of home environment hinders the assessment of filicidal risk

Q9: What strategies have you used to navigate these two environments?

Reinforcement/Expectations

Q10: What has been the impact of high-profile child death cases on the way you investigate or assess the risk to a child (ren) when a stepparent is present in the home or has significant contact with the child (ren)?

Research Question 2:

Q11 (a): How have you encountered barriers in assessing for risk as an ER/CS social worker?

Q11 (b): To improve your ability to assess risk, what recommendations would you suggest?

Planned follow-up question:

Q12: Are there any other considerations you would like to share regarding the assessment of risk in stepchildren?