

“We Are Not Disorderly Kids”: Young Adult, Family, and Social Work Perspectives on
Disrupting System Failures that Funnel Child Welfare Involved Youth into the Juvenile Legal
System

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Abstract

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Foster care, youth detention, and youth incarceration are all associated with long-term harms including lifelong trauma, physical health and mental health concerns, and significant challenges transitioning into adulthood. Youth involved in child welfare face disproportionately high risk of juvenile legal system contact compared to their non-involved peers due to a structurally inequitable process that funnels youth from child welfare into the legal and carceral systems. To promote health and wellbeing in historically and persistently marginalized youth and families, there is a need to understand this process and develop tangible alternatives. This three-paper mixed-methods dissertation intends to interrogate this systems failure by examining the links between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington State and offer potential alternatives from the perspectives of caregivers and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who work within these systems. Guided by ecological systems theory and informed by community based participatory research (CBPR) principles, this community-engaged investigation utilized focus group and survey methodology to examine the ways in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect to create inequities for youth,

shed light on the specific mechanisms by which youth may become incarcerated through their involvement with child welfare, and develop supportive alternatives to system involvement in Washington State. Informed by priorities set by community partners, paper one is a systematic literature review that examines the extent and potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare cases. Paper two is a qualitative methods paper that applies Walsh's (2003) typology of reflexive practice to provide a framework and comprehensive illustration of reflexive practice within child welfare research designed to support collaborative research partnerships. Paper three presents the methods and main outcomes of this community-engaged dissertation investigation. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for urgent transformative change. This includes developing and supporting academic-community partnerships that center lived expertise and challenge hierarchical research structures to advance evidence-informed policy change, implementing immediate trauma-informed training for all individuals responding to child welfare calls as a harm reduction strategy, and establishing long-term formal initiatives to create a new emergency response system that reduces law enforcement presence and prioritizes community-led, culturally responsive support.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	i
List of Tables	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter One: Introduction to the Three Article Dissertation.....	1
Defining the Problem.....	1
Transformative Change Through Community Engagement.....	5
Guiding Theoretical Frameworks	8
Researcher Positionality.....	11
Dissertation Study: Structure of the Three Papers.....	12
References	17
Chapter Two: Police Involvement in Child Welfare Cases in the U.S.: A Systematic Literature Review	23
Abstract	23
Introduction.....	24
Methods.....	27
Results.....	29
Discussion.....	41
Conclusions.....	44
References	56
Chapter Three: Towards Transformative Change: An Illustration of Reflexivity in Child Welfare Research.....	62
Abstract	62
Introduction.....	63
Methods.....	66
Proposed Process with Illustrative Examples	70
Conclusion	86
References.....	88
Chapter Four: “We Are Not Disorderly Kids”: Young Adult, Family, & Social Work Perspectives on Disrupting the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline.....	93
Abstract	93
Introduction.....	95
Methods.....	102
Results.....	114

Discussion	131
Conclusion	136
References	145
Chapter Five: Conclusion	155
Social Justice Implications.....	160
Implications for Social Work Practitioners and Other First Responders.....	160
Policy Implications	162
Implications for Research	164
Conclusion	167
References.....	168
Appendices.....	171
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions	171
Appendix B: Recruitment Materials	173
Appendix C: Screening Call Questions	174
Appendix D: Follow-Up Survey	176
Appendix E: IRB Approval	179
Bibliography	180
Curriculum Vitae	198

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1.1 Visual depiction of foster care to prison pipeline</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Figure 1.2 Working conceptual model.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Figure 2.1 Flowchart summarizing article search and selection process</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Figure 3.1 Illustrative steps for reflexive child welfare research</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Figure 4.1 Research process.....</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Figure 4.2 Recommendations for systems change, before and after meaning-making and member-checking sessions</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>Figure 4.3 Final ranked priorities for systems change</i>	<i>130</i>

List of Tables

<i>Table 2.1 Study design characteristics of peer reviewed articles</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Table 2.2 Design and characteristics of grey literature</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Table 2.3 Study aims and main findings.....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Table 4.1 Focus group participant characteristics.....</i>	<i>138</i>
<i>Table 4.2 Themes, subthemes, and representative quotes</i>	<i>139</i>
<i>Table 5.1. Summary of the three-paper dissertation</i>	<i>156</i>

Dedication

For Clementine and her soon to be little sister,

May you always have the space to be exactly who you are, and the courage and wisdom to lift up those who don't. I pursue this work from a place of love and a deep desire to contribute to a better future for you both. My hope is that the world you grow into is one where you feel safe and joyful, and where every child and family has an opportunity to thrive in their own definitions of wellness and belonging.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation exists because of the incredible generosity, wisdom, time, and expertise of the young adults, families, and community members who graciously participated. All of these folks brought this project to life, gave it depth and meaning, and continued to inspire and teach me at every step of the process. Inspired by bell hooks who describes the classroom as transformational space, I have come to view this dissertation process as one that has been personally transformative, thanks in large part to the community who engaged with and contributed to this work. I am profoundly grateful to everyone who shared and trusted me to hold their personal stories. I recognize the responsibility that comes with that trust, and I embrace the ongoing obligation to honor those stories by carrying them forward in pursuit of tangible, meaningful, transformative change.

I am incredibly humbled by and appreciative of the support from my committee members who have gifted me with their insights, expertise, patience, and time. My chair, Dr. Emiko Tajima, took me on as a mentee late in the PhD process when I was struggling to pivot to a topic that felt inspiring and relevant. She graciously offered me her support and wisdom, extended her trust in me, and her gentle yet brilliant guidance led me to a place where I now believe in myself as a scholar. I am beyond fortunate to have learned from her as my chair and my hope is that I may collaborate with her ongoing. Thank you to Dr. Margaret Kuklinski who has walked with me throughout my entire doctoral journey. Margaret has inspired my intellectual curiosity, grounded me in scientific rigor, and invested an inordinate amount of her time and energy to support my personal and academic development. She has an unmatched ability to balance scientific integrity and precision with genuine compassion. Margaret's support extends well beyond the bounds of academia, and she has been a primary source of support as I became a

mother, navigated personal challenges, and considered future career trajectories. Her guidance has left a lasting impact, and I will always admire her as both a professional mentor and a personal role-model. Thank you to Dr. Vivian Lyons who single handedly re-ignited my passion for research. When I felt most defeated, she sat patiently with me as I floundered, made me feel seen and heard, and opened the door for me to pursue community-engaged work that felt meaningful, tangible, and impactful. She has shown me that it is possible to pursue academic excellence AND question the status quo, pursue research that changes systems, and fight for equity. It's truly remarkable the time she has dedicated to being my fierce advocate, academic mentor, and friend. I dream of becoming a mentor just like Vivian. Thank you to Dr. Kristian Jones for always grounding me, humanizing the work, and sharing his deep wealth of knowledge. Throughout this journey, Kristian has always met me exactly where I am, without judgment. He brings a rare blend of compassion, humility, curiosity, and integrity to every interaction, modeling the kind of scholar, educator, and human being I aspire to be. His mentorship has not only shaped the way I approach research and teaching, but also how I show up in the world, with care, intention, and purpose. And finally, thank you to Dr. Ali Rowhani-Rahbar for your advocacy and support as my GSR. Ali's leadership style is truly remarkable and inspiring, making each person he works with feel valued. I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to have learned from him.

I also extend deep gratitude to my peer mentors. To my PhD student colleagues, thank you for your support, friendship, and patience with me as I grew into a scholar that really understood the value of community. To Dr. Erin Harrop who graciously extended their time and expertise to support me in learning qualitative methodology early in my doctoral journey. To Dr. Kelsey Conrick, my academic hero. Thank you for paving the path just ahead of me with

courage, brilliance, and authenticity. Your unwavering commitment to academic excellence while also embracing the journey of motherhood has shown me that it is possible to pursue both with grace and intentionality. Finally, to Sarah Porter, the most incredibly thoughtful and generous person that I have ever met. Thank you for guidance, your unwavering support, your deep and authentic friendship, your humor, and your presence. Your ability to show up fully and wholeheartedly for everyone in your life is extraordinary and rare, you are a gift to all of us. I am profoundly grateful to have had the privilege of learning alongside you and from you.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to all the community partners and co-authors on this dissertation. I extend specific heartfelt thanks to Malcom King and Arthur Longworth for inviting me in as a collaborator and sharing their incredible insights, stories, time and expertise. In addition to their intellectual contributions, I am particularly grateful for their trust, openness, and kindness. Thank you to Bree Martinez for your support as a double coder and your warmth and presence as such a thoughtful and collaborative human being. Finally, thank you to Dr. Ben Danielson and the entire AHSWAY team. You all believed in this work, gave it a home, and ensured that the project always listened deeply to young adults and families with the intention to build thriving communities. Thank you for your patience with me and for inspiring me to always lead with love.

Beyond my academic and professional circles, I want to acknowledge and deeply thank Alexis Apostol (Leki), my dearest friend, whose presence and guidance has meant the world to me over the past few years. I cannot imagine making it through this doctoral journey without her. Leki has taught me the meaning of reciprocal friendship, always showing up selflessly and providing the warm comfort of genuine support. Leki is my daughter's hero, a professional icon, my horseback riding idol, and the truest version of a friend I have ever known. I am so fortunate

to have had her in my life during this chapter, and I look forward to infinite years of friendship ahead.

I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family for their unwavering love and support throughout my life. Their influence extends far beyond the confines of this dissertation. I come from a family of strong and brilliant women. I am particularly inspired and supported by my mother and grandmother, who value intellectual and professional integrity and social justice above all else. I have had the profound honor of witnessing these two shatter glass ceilings with steadfast courage, grace, and resilience. Their impact is visible in policy change, individuals they have inspired, and communities they have supported. My mother and grandmother ignited a passion within me to pursue a career inspired by intellectual curiosity and a dedication to service. This achievement is as much a testament to their upbringing as it is to my personal efforts.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, I save my greatest appreciation and gratitude for my husband Jeremy. He is truly one of a kind, showing up and loving me in ways I never dreamed possible. Professionally, he has held me up when this process almost broke me, encouraged me to pursue the most challenging paths, and believed in my intellect and dedication with a conviction that offered me strength. In the darker moments, he has met me without judgement and guided me to find light through humor and compassion. Personally, he has loved me unconditionally, walked with me into parenthood in the most beautiful and inspiring way, and showed me what it means to feel ‘at home’. He is the human embodiment of hope, and the antidote to all my painful history. The completion of this dissertation, the trajectory of my career more broadly, and my growth as a human and a mother are in very large part thanks to him. I am immensely grateful to be his partner in life.

Chapter One: Introduction to the Three Article Dissertation

Defining the Problem

The Foster Care to Prison Pipeline

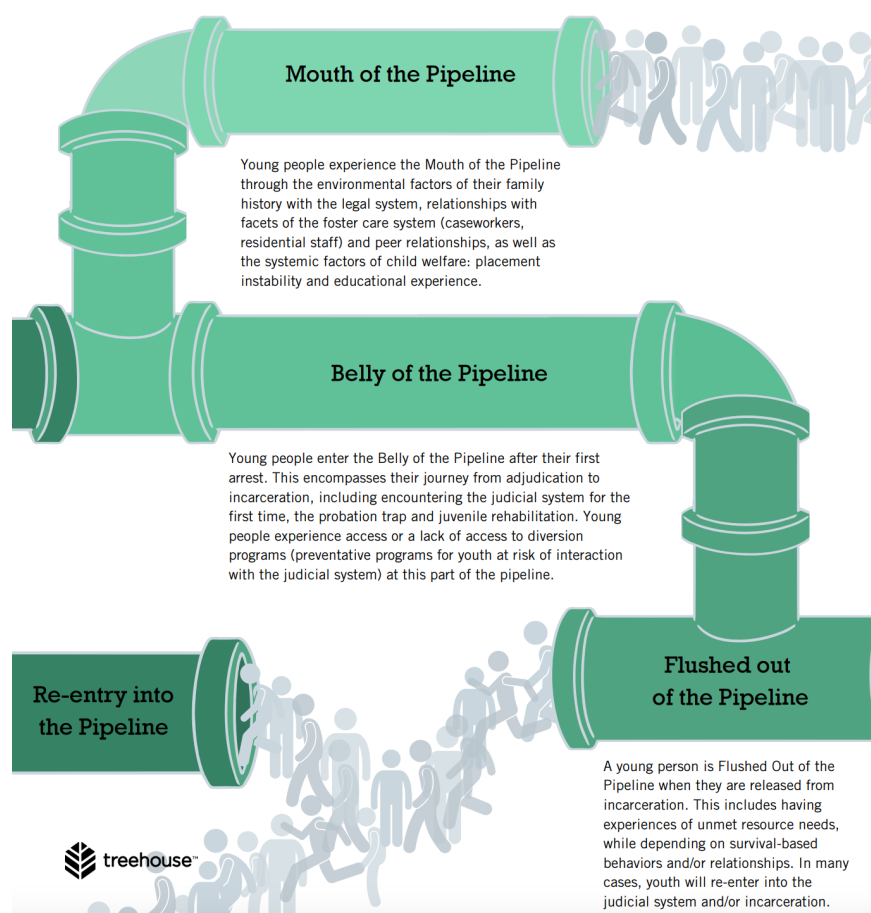
Both foster care and youth incarceration are associated with long-term harms including lifelong trauma, physical health concerns, and significant challenges transitioning into adulthood and obtaining economic stability (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2022; Trivedi, 2019). Children and youth with child welfare involvement face disproportionately high risk of subsequent juvenile legal system contact compared to their non-involved peers. Nationally, approximately 60% of youth in the juvenile legal system have a history of child welfare system involvement (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019) making them ‘dually involved’ in these two systems, and over 50% of youth who have experienced foster care involvement will encounter the juvenile legal system through either arrest, conviction, and/or detention by the age of 17 (Courtney et al., 2004; Perez, 2023; Shelden & Troshynski, 2020). In Washington state almost 50% of youth involved with the juvenile legal system have a history of involvement with the child welfare system (Washington State Center for Court Research, 2014), and almost 80% of youth in juvenile rehabilitation facilities have been the subject of child protective services investigations (Abramo, 2019). Moreover, for youth in child welfare, typical adolescent behavior including risk taking and boundary testing (e.g., skipping school) often results in police response and leads to unnecessary contact with the juvenile legal system (Byers et al., 2024; National Foster Youth Institute, 2021). Seventy percent of detained youth in the U.S. are held for non-violent offenses including “status offenses,” which include being tardy or refusing to obey their parents or guardians (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2022), all of which happen more frequently for youth involved with child welfare (Byers et al., 2024). Furthermore, a child welfare bias has been identified in the juvenile legal system, where youth with a history of child welfare involvement are more likely to be convicted

of an offense, are less likely to receive probation as a first time offender, and more likely to receive a correctional placement compared to non-child welfare involved youth (Goetz, 2020; Krinsky, 2010; Ryan et al., 2007).

Similar to the school to prison pipeline, where inequitable policies and practices in the U.S. push the most at-risk and vulnerable youth out of the classroom and into the juvenile legal system (ACLU, 2008; Hirschfield, 2018; Mallett, 2015, 2017), there is a comparable foster care to prison pipeline (Figure 1.1). The foster care to prison pipeline, in which foster care serves as a structurally inequitable conduit that funnels youth into juvenile legal systems, is created by the clear overlaps and intersections of the child welfare and legal systems. The harms associated with the foster care to prison pipeline and the experience of dual system involvement, are greater than those associated with foster care placement alone (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Modrowski et al., 2023). This pipeline also has enduring and intergenerational impacts. Evidence suggests that children of mothers who have a history of foster care involvement and juvenile incarceration are at greater risk of incarceration themselves (Zhao et al., 2020). Additionally, once child welfare involved youth have their first contact with law enforcement, they often find themselves navigating the juvenile legal system with no support and unjust biases placed upon them (Goetz, 2020; Krinsky, 2010; Yamat, 2020). Finally, once a youth has experienced contact with the juvenile legal system, they are significantly more likely to experience arrest and incarceration as an adult (Copeland et al., 2023; Rhoades et al., 2016). The foster care to prison pipeline highlights a systems failure at direct odds with the stated mission of the national Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau which states that it, "seeks to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children...." (Children's Bureau, 2025) and the mission of

Washington’s Department of Children Youth and Families (Washington State DCYF) to “protect children and strengthen families so they flourish” (Washington State DCYF, 2023).

Figure 1.1. Visual depiction of foster care to prison pipeline*



**Note. This figure was created by community partners at Treehouse and published in their 2023 report on the foster care to prison pipeline.*

While there are many ways to describe the relationship between foster care and juvenile legal system involvement, this dissertation utilizes the pipeline analogy. The primary reason we chose this is because it is used by our community partners and the lived experience council that we have been privileged enough to learn from and collaborate with. However, it must be noted that this investigation does not intend to imply inevitability or passivity with regards to the relationship between foster care and juvenile legal systems, but instead aims to point to the

structural and contextual factors that impact these relationships. As stated by policy specialist Arthur Longworth, “We hope no one envisages the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline too literally, though. Because, from the perspective of the lived-experience community, a structural inequity that funnels so many of our young people into incarceration is not really a pipeline at all. It is a Beast.” (King & Longworth, 2023, p. 7).

The Foster Care to Prison Pipeline as a Social Justice Problem

The child welfare and juvenile legal systems are both characterized by disproportionate representation of Black and Indigenous youth and families. In child welfare, Black youth represent 14% of the total youth population but account for 22% of those in foster care, and Indigenous youth make up 1% of the total population but account for 2% in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Black and Indigenous youth are also three to four times more likely to be detained than their white peers (Rovner, 2022). The current racial disparities seen in both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems are historically rooted and intentional. The child welfare system emerged through the formation of charity organizations that sought to rescue and save White children from poverty while purposefully excluding Black children who were deemed as inferior and unworthy (Bates, 2016; Dettlaff & Copeland, 2023). Racial disparities in juvenile and adult legal systems stem from a history of oppression and biased decision-making that have intentionally targeted people of color, driving a narrative that falsely associates them with criminality and particularly portrays Black youth as less innocent than White youth (Hinton et al., 2018; National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, 2022). Furthermore, these disparities likely represent the cyclical nature of oppression where historically and persistently marginalized communities experience systemic poverty, which often results in unstable housing, unemployment with loss of familial welfare benefits, and difficulty finding and acquiring

childcare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). Experiences of poverty driven by deliberate systemic oppression then leads to child welfare intervention due to poverty rather than harmful parenting practices (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023; Edwards, 2019), which then increases the likelihood of law enforcement contact and incarceration for both parents and their children (Yi & Wildeman, 2018).

Transformative Change Through Community Engagement

Disruption of the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline

The child welfare and juvenile legal systems work together in ways that perpetuate harm and disproportionately impact historically and persistently marginalized communities. There is an urgent need for transformative change that will disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline. Achieving this requires a deep understanding, informed by lived experience, of the various ways and points in families' lives in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and overlap to create the pipeline. It also calls for the creation of concrete and practical alternatives to the systemic failures that lead to youth incarceration.

Community Partnerships and Perspectives of Lived Experts

Engaging with and including the voices of individuals, families, and communities with lived experience is crucial to developing a deep understanding of the conditions that create the overlaps in the current systems, and is necessary to drive relevant change through program and policy initiatives, and improve outcomes for those who have been most impacted by the systems (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021). Centering the voices of lived experts also aims to ensure that the solutions proposed are most appropriate for those most impacted by these systems, and supports understanding of the specific mechanisms by which the current systems and prior reform efforts have either intentionally or unintentionally perpetuated harm (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021). An

overarching goal of this work is to ensure that recommendations for policy advocacy and transformative systems change are developed from the lived expertise of those most impacted by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems. It aims to center young adult, parent, and social work voices as the primary evidence needed to promote meaningful systems change. It is centered on the understanding that for this body of research to be meaningful, impactful, and reparative, youth and parents are not to be regarded and treated as research subjects, but instead as community partners, co-investigators, and beacons of strength, knowledge, and hope.

Process of Engaging Community Partners

This investigation was co-developed in partnership with community organizations in Washington State serving youth who have experienced child welfare and juvenile legal system involvement. I partnered with the AHSHAY center, a center that aims to promote evidence-based and community-informed paths to opportunity, including new programs and policy changes for youth and families. This dissertation was part of AHSHAY's larger advocacy and policy agenda aimed ultimately at ending youth incarceration in Washington State. Through connection building opportunities facilitated by AHSHAY, I also began to meet, collaborate with, and ultimately partnered with Treehouse, another Washington State community organization that serves foster youth. Treehouse team members then facilitated introductions and collaborations between myself and the lived experience council, a council of individuals who have lived experience in the foster care system. During the course of this project, the majority of Treehouse employees who were collaborating with the research team left their positions at Treehouse and transitioned to other local community organizations including Team Child, a legal services and policy advocacy center in Washington State. I then ended the formal collaboration with Treehouse yet continued to partner with AHSHAY, Team Child, all individuals who had

originally partnered on this work through their affiliation with Treehouse, and the lived experience council. This shift in relationships represents the inherently complex and unpredictable processes and dynamics that typically accompany community engaged research (D'Agostino, 2024; Kantamneni et al., 2019). Despite their complexity, such relationships are essential for advancing social justice oriented research agendas that actively challenge traditional academic hierarchies and promote more equitable methods of knowledge production and dissemination (Wallerstein, 2020).

The community partners described above met regularly with me and other members of the research team (dissertation committee) to develop research questions and objectives that supported the overarching missions of these organizations while also centering the perspectives and lived expertise of young adults and families who have experienced system involvement in Washington State. Emphasizing the importance of a participatory community engaged approach, during these initial research meetings I facilitated discussions that encouraged community partners to share their insights, concerns, and priorities. This iterative process involved refining initial research objectives and questions based on feedback, organizational priorities, and identifying pressing issues that required further investigation. This collaborative process also aimed to ensure that the research outcomes would be meaningful to the community, while also supporting advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and program development that could lead to tangible systems change and a reduction in harm to those most impacted by system involvement. These community organizations, community members, and the lived experience council were involved at each step of the research process including data analysis, follow-up survey development, and dissemination, all of which is described in detail in dissertation paper 3.

Importantly, the focus and content of each of the three papers included in this dissertation were meaningfully shaped by the voices, perspectives, and priorities of community partners. Early findings from the broader investigation and ongoing dialogue with community partners revealed a strong desire to reduce the presence of law enforcement within the child welfare. This input then directly informed the focus and topic of the systematic review (paper 1). Additional discussions with community members and lived experts, particularly regarding the perpetuation of harm within child welfare that often occurs by white social workers, underscored the critical importance of reflexive practice and acknowledgements of positionality within child welfare research. These insights from community members, coupled with CBPR principles that prioritize reflexivity as a crucial component of the research process (Andress et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2015), guided the development of paper 2 which focuses on reflexivity and positionality within child welfare research. Finally, paper 3 describes the process and outcomes of these collaborative community partnerships and focus groups with lived experts.

Guiding Theoretical Frameworks

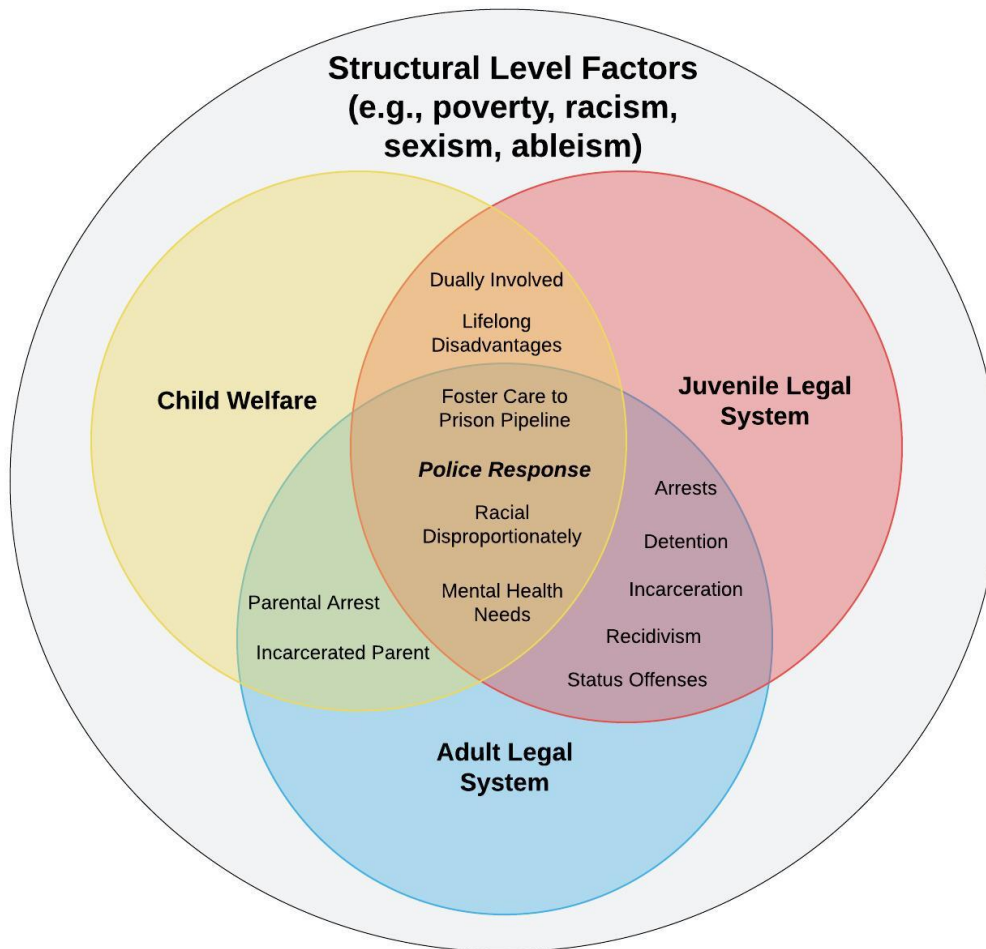
Each paper aims to adopt a multilevel perspective that attends to complex broader contexts, including systemic racism and socioeconomic oppression, that shape individual's involvement with the child welfare and juvenile legal systems. This dissertation consists of three papers, each aiming to move beyond deficit-based frameworks that place blame on individuals and families. This dissertation is guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and principles of community based participatory research (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory posits that individuals exist within multiple intersecting systems and places considerable emphasis on the connections and

interactions between these various systems. This project aims to examine the multiple interconnected systems that create inequities for youth and shed light on the specific mechanisms by which youth may become incarcerated through their family's involvement with child welfare. Figure 1.2 represents the working conceptual model for this dissertation, where the overlaps in the Venn diagram represent potential points for targeted intervention and systems transformation to reduce dual system involvement. For example, developing and implementing community-based alternatives to police response to foster youth experiencing mental health concerns may be a mechanism by which to reduce dual system involvement. The overarching circle of the model represents the structural level factors that contribute to involvement and disproportionality within these systems. Furthermore, the choice to include parent, youth, and social workers as focus group participants reflects the multiple levels of an ecological systems model.

This work aims to develop system alternatives that acknowledge and address the ways in which racism and socioeconomic oppression impact involvement in child welfare, juvenile legal, and adult legal systems by recognizing and addressing the structural level factors (e.g., poverty) which lead to child welfare intervention, instead of focusing the response solely on individuals and families by problematizing or criminalizing their actions. This may be a crucial step in addressing the well documented racial and socioeconomic disparities in the child welfare and juvenile legal systems (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020; Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, 2022; Palcheck, 2021; Rovner, 2022). Utilizing an ecological perspective and voices of individuals who have been impacted by the system and those who work within it, the investigation ultimately aims to illuminate promising points for system transformation.

Figure 1.2. Working conceptual model



Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative approach to research that is centered upon equitable engagement of community members throughout all aspects of the research process (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR prioritizes partnerships among community members, community organizations, academic researchers, and other stakeholders to promote community health and wellbeing while working to eliminate disparities (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Importantly, CBPR views community members as co-investigators in research and highlights community voices and lived experience as the primary evidence needed to promote change (Israel et al., 1998; Ruff & Harrison, 2020).

Furthermore, because successful CBPR hinges upon authentic collaborative partnerships between academic researchers and communities, reflexive practices from academic partners that acknowledge and examine the unequal power dynamics and positionality of researchers are a necessary component of the research process (Andress et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2015). In line with recent investigations utilizing CBPR to amplify voices of those with lived experience and improve practices within child welfare (Ruff & Harrison, 2020; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Waechter et al., 2009), this work is informed by CBPR.

Researcher Positionality

As a doctoral student and clinical social worker, I approach this work with a critical awareness of the immense power and privilege that my identities hold. I am a white, cisgender, able-bodied individual, identities that offer me countless systemic advantages within academic, clinical, and broader societal spaces. I also carry the professional identity of a white social worker, a role that has historically, and continues to, contribute to the perpetuation of harm within the child welfare system. I am continuing to unlearn the white saviorism that upholds the social work profession and acknowledge that I still have much to work to do in this process. I also recognize that, because of my positionality and intersectional identities, some individuals may not feel safe or comfortable sharing certain experiences with me. I hold this awareness with humility and a commitment to personal accountability and relationship-building grounded in respect and trust.

In addition to my professional identity, I am a survivor of early childhood trauma. Yet, despite the violence in my home, I was never involved with the child welfare system. I believe my lack of involvement with the system was likely due to my protected identities as a white, middle-class child. This recognition informs my understanding of how structural and systemic

protections and privileges shield some families while exposing others, particularly Black, Indigenous, and other families of color, to heightened surveillance and intervention by both the child welfare and the legal systems. I come to this work with the understanding that meaningful change necessitates learning from and centering the voices and experiences of those most impacted by harmful systems.

This project emerged from my clinical practice experience as a social worker in a pediatric emergency department. In my work there, I witnessed firsthand the harmful, disproportionate, and racialized practices that led to child welfare and law enforcement involvement for families of color at much higher rates than White families. These experiences not only informed my research agenda but also solidified my stance as an abolitionist. I do not believe that the child welfare or juvenile legal systems effectively protect or support children and families. Rather, I see an urgent need to reimagine family support in the United States, centering community-led and community-held strategies that humanize and affirm the dignity and autonomy of families and historically marginalized communities.

Dissertation Study: Structure of the Three Papers

The child welfare and juvenile legal systems are two systems that perpetuate harm and disproportionately impact historically and persistently marginalized communities, particularly Black and Indigenous youth and families. This dissertation set out to utilize qualitative and quantitative evidence to generate actionable community-informed programmatic and policy recommendations aimed at transforming the child welfare system and promoting decarceration by disrupting the foster care to prison pipeline. Central to this investigation was a commitment to a community-engaged approach that prioritized collaboration at every stage of the research process and centered the lived expertise of youth and families impacted by these systems as well

as social workers working within them. By elevating the voices and experiences of those most impacted by these systems as the primary evidence needed for systems change, this work intends to challenge dominant narratives, humanize and decriminalize system involved youth and families, and advocate for compassionate equity driven transformation of current policies and practices. The overarching goal of this dissertation was to examine the points of overlap and intersection between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives from the perspective of parents and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who are currently engaged with these systems through their practice.

In Paper One (Chapter Two), guided by early findings from focus groups and priorities set by community partners, I explore the potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare cases in the United States. Utilizing a systematic literature review approach that followed the guidelines proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009), I summarize the current research evidence (past 20 years) concerning the extent and potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare. The specific research questions include:

1. How does police involvement in child welfare cases impact child welfare outcomes (e.g., unsubstantiated vs. substantiated cases; out of home placements, outcomes specifically associated with allegations of neglect)?
2. How does police involvement in child welfare cases impact racial and sociodemographic disparities and disproportionality within child welfare?
3. To what extent does the current (past 20 years) literature offer potential alternatives to police involvement within child welfare cases?

Findings from the systematic review reveal that police involvement in child welfare cases is regularly characterized by more punitive outcomes for children and families, and that policing may be a significant contributing factor to the socioeconomic and racial disparities within child welfare. Implications and potential actionable alternatives to police involvement in child welfare are discussed in detail.

Paper Two (Chapter Three), again guided by conversations with community partners, provides a comprehensive illustration of reflexive practice in child welfare research. Informed by Walsh's typology of reflexive practice (Walsh, 2003), this paper aims to offer theoretical and practical guidance, specific strategies for engaging in reflexive practices, and illustrates the steps taken in applying this Walsh's (2003) typology to child welfare research. Specific research questions include:

1. In what ways might researcher positionality, implicit biases, and power dynamics impact the research process and outcomes particularly within child welfare research?
2. How might social work scholars, particularly those who hold identities that have historically perpetuated harm within child welfare (e.g., white social worker), engage in reflexive practices to facilitate collaborative partnerships among child welfare researchers, families, and communities as a means to drive systemic change?

I propose a guiding framework to facilitate engagement in reflexive practices within child welfare research utilizing illustrative examples from the reflexive data gathered throughout this dissertation. The framework includes five steps, provides illustrative examples for each step utilizing reflexive data (i.e., examples from my own reflexive journaling) from this dissertation, and maps each step onto Walsh's (2003) typology of reflexivity. I also include a discussion on

how engagement in these practices may ultimately lead to more collaborative and nuanced child welfare research that has the potential to drive transformative change.

Paper Three (Chapter Four) is the main outcomes paper, describing the processes and results of this community engaged dissertation that utilized focus groups and ongoing meetings with community partners to examine the ways in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and overlap to create inequities for youth, sheds light on the specific mechanisms by which youth may become incarcerated through their families' involvement with child welfare, and develops potential supportive alternatives to system involvement in Washington state.

Specific research objectives include:

1. Conduct focus groups to understand (a) the ways, patterns, and points in families' lives in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and (b) identify alternatives to better support children, youth and families to prevent involvement in these systems.
2. Refine and prioritize recommendations for alternatives to these systems identified in focus groups using quantitative and qualitative survey methodology that allows participants to give input on recommendations generated in other focus groups and help prioritize recommendations for policy advocacy and systems change.

This multi-phased investigation began with the collaborative development of research objectives with partnered community organizations. Participants were then recruited through purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Focus groups (n = 5) were then conducted with young adults and caregivers who had experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who work with child welfare and juvenile legal systems in their practice. Initial focus group findings were shared back to focus group participants and community partners in meaning-making and

member-checking sessions where participants were invited to interpret and refine results in collaboration with the research team. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was then utilized to code all focus group data and a follow-up survey was developed and disseminated to validate and expand upon all focus group findings. Major themes and subthemes related to the intersections and overlaps between child welfare and juvenile legal systems are identified and discussed in detail. Recommendations and priorities for systems change are also identified and discussed, with a specific discussion around next steps to move towards implementation of policy advocacy and program initiatives to disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline in Washington State.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I synthesize findings from all three papers to provide recommendations for future policy and program initiatives aimed at supporting transformative systems change. I also identify social justice implications, implications for social work practitioners and other first responders, and directions for future research.

This dissertation research aims to contribute results that are foundational for informing systems change through policy advocacy and the development of program initiatives to disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline in Washington State. As a community engaged project that is continuing to collaborate with a network eager for guidance from those with lived expertise and ready to advance policy and practice within the field, the impact of this work has the potential to be widespread and particularly consequential for youth who are disproportionately impacted by child welfare. In addition to informing the development of program initiatives and policy advocacy efforts, the findings from this dissertation offer an important foundation for ongoing research.

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Chapter Two: Police Involvement in Child Welfare Cases in the U.S.: A Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

Police contact is a common pathway through which families become involved with child welfare, and police involvement in child welfare cases may contribute to the well documented racial disproportionality within the child welfare system. In order to prevent instances of unnecessary system involvement and reduce disparities within the child welfare system, the potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare must be understood. The present systematic literature review aims to summarize the current existing research within the United States concerning the extent and potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare investigations. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, this systematic review identified seventeen relevant articles, eleven of which were peer reviewed studies and six were grey literature articles. Results demonstrate that compared with cases not involving police, police involvement in child welfare cases is often characterized by more substantial and punitive outcomes. This includes higher rates of substantiated investigations, more out-of-home placements, and increased odds of child removal particularly in cases of neglect. Furthermore, results suggest that police presence serves as a major contributing factor to racial and socioeconomic disparities within the child welfare system. Results found in the current systematic literature review offer an evidence-base supporting the elimination of police presence within child welfare, specifically in cases of neglect. Alternatives to police involvement may include the provision of concrete resources to support families' social and economic needs as well as supportive interventions including accessible health care and parenting skills trainings.

Introduction

Contact with police is a common trajectory through which children and families become involved with the child welfare system (Edwards, 2019). The term “child welfare system” refers to a network of systems including child protective services and all aspects of child welfare that focus on investigations, decision making, and child placement. Police are responsible for approximately 20% of the roughly three million child maltreatment reports filed with child protective services (CPS) each year (Edwards, 2019; Nadon et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). Interactions with police including investigations of intimate partner violence (IPV), parental arrests, or unexpected police stops often result in child welfare involvement (Edwards, 2019; Kajeepeta et al., 2024). Additionally, although police officers often lack specific training in child maltreatment, police frequently collaborate with CPS workers in child welfare investigations (Cross et al., 2005; Dettlaff et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021). Police may become involved at the request of CPS workers to serve as additional protection when they encounter resistance from families or a potentially volatile situation (Cross et al., 2005; Wise et al., 2024), and forceable child removal is often physically carried out by both police and social workers (Dettlaff et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021).

Police also regularly initiate reports and collaborate with social workers on investigations specific to allegations of neglect (Cross et al., 2005; Edwards, 2019; Wise et al., 2024). A considerable majority (approximately 70%) of child welfare reports and subsequent investigations involve allegations of neglect, which is associated strongly with family poverty (Palmer et al., 2023; Roberts, 2020; Ruth, 2024; Slack et al., 2004; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Despite the potential for early intervention and preventive measures to address the social and economic needs of families living in poverty, the response from CPS often fails to address these

needs (Jacobs et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020). Instead, approximately 42% of CPS responses to allegations of neglect include some form of investigation, and children are removed from their homes in anywhere from 5% to 30% of those investigations (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). These forceable family separations often involving both police and social workers are a traumatic experience that precipitates many long-term negative consequences and poor outcomes in adulthood including mental health concerns, poverty and homelessness, physical health concerns, and incarceration (Doyle, 2007; Holman & Ziedenberg, 2022; Trivedi, 2019; Warburton et al., 2014).

Furthermore, “short stays,” in which children are separated from their primary caregivers and placed in out of home care for less than 30 days, most often result from allegations of neglect (Greenfield et al., 2023; Hager, 2020). Short stays have elicited cause for concern both within and beyond child welfare research, raising questions about the underlying causes and necessity of traumatic brief removal (Garcia et al., 2014; Getz et al., 2022; Greenfield et al., 2023). In some states, short stays have also been shown to be strongly correlated with police involvement in the removal process (Getz et al., 2022). Children who experience short stays are also more likely to be children of color (Getz et al., 2022; Nelson-Dusek & Rothe, 2016), contributing to the evidence demonstrating disproportionate racial representation within child welfare (Gateway, 2021).

There are reasons to believe that police involvement in child welfare cases contributes to the disproportionate representation of Black and Indigenous youth and families in the child welfare system, who collectively represent 15% of the US population but 24% of those in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). After initial investigation by child protective services, Black children are removed from their homes at nearly double the rate of their White peers

(Dettlaff et al., 2023; Yi et al., 2023). These disparities are one manifestation of the enduring and intergenerational impact of systemic oppression on historically and persistently marginalized communities, which often results in systemic poverty, including unstable housing, unemployment with loss of familial welfare benefits, and difficulty finding and acquiring childcare (Gateway, 2023). This systematic poverty and oppression is associated with increased family surveillance by law enforcement which in turn increases the likelihood of child welfare intervention (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Edwards, 2019; Gateway, 2023). Given the clear overlap and intersections between police and child welfare, it is possible that police activity in the form of family surveillance may be contributing to the high rates of CPS investigations and child removal in the US, particularly for minoritized racial groups (Edwards, 2019; Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, the pervasive and enduring presence of systemic racism in policing within the United States (DeAngelis, 2024) may also be associated with and ultimately contributing to persistent racial disparities within the child welfare system. Finally, for Black youth, any encounter with the police in childhood has been shown to increase the risk of arrest in young adulthood (McGlynn-Wright et al., 2020). Therefore, police presence in child welfare cases may serve as a crucial and harmful entry point into the juvenile legal system for historically and persistently marginalized youth.

The evidence concerning the consequences of police involvement in child welfare cases in the United States has not recently been comprehensively reviewed and synthesized. In 2005, Cross et al. conducted a literature review and secondary analysis of a national CPS dataset examining the impact of police and CPS co-involvement on the outcomes of child maltreatment investigations. Findings from the Cross et al. (2005) literature review and secondary analysis demonstrate that: 1) law enforcement and CPS co-involvement tends to be related to more

substantial child protective and criminal justice intervention including out of home placement, 2) law enforcement involvement increases the likelihood that allegations of abuse and neglect will be substantiated, and 3) law enforcement and CPS co-involvement results in higher rates of child removal in neglect cases compared to neglect cases where law enforcement is not involved. In this article, punitive child welfare intervention refers to an approach that places blame and responsibility of failure on families without acknowledging or addressing the economic, political, and social barriers that families may be facing or providing supportive interventions and resources. Taken together, Cross et al. (2005) results suggest that when law enforcement and CPS collaborate, children and families experience more substantial and punitive child welfare intervention including greater rates of out of home placement, particularly in cases of neglect.

The objective of the present review is to summarize the current (past 20 years) existing US research concerning the extent and potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare investigations. We were specifically interested in examining investigation outcomes (e.g., unsubstantiated vs. substantiated cases), out of home placements, general outcomes associated with police and CPS co-involvement in child welfare cases, outcomes specifically associated with allegations of neglect, and racial and sociodemographic disparities and disproportionality when police are involved in child welfare cases. We also aimed to understand the extent to which the current research discusses alternatives to police involvement within the child welfare system.

Methods

Review Design

We conducted a literature review utilizing a systematic approach that followed the guidelines proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-

Analyses (Moher et al., 2009). We engaged a health sciences librarian to assist in the development of the search strategy. The resulting strategy was complemented with a search of the ‘grey’ literature (e.g., publications not published in peer reviewed journals). This investigation did not require institutional review board approval.

Search Strategy

We conducted a two-step search to examine both peer reviewed research and grey literature. The first step utilized Web of Science, Social Work Abstracts, PubMed, and CINAHL. The last data pull for the first step of this search was conducted on October 14, 2024. The second step was completed on November 8, 2024 and utilized Grey Literature Report and GreyNet International databases, as well as a hand search of the top 200 Google hits utilizing advanced search terms.

The following search terms were utilized for both Web of Science and Social Work Abstracts: (“child welfare” OR “child protective services”) AND (“law enforcement” OR police). These search terms were utilized for PubMed: ("Child Welfare"[Mesh] OR "Child Protective Services"[Mesh] OR "Child welfare" OR "child protective services") AND ("Police"[Mesh] OR "Law Enforcement"[Mesh] OR "Law enforcement" OR police). Finally, these search terms were utilized for CINAHL, and Medline records were excluded from the CINAHL search: (MH "Child Welfare+" OR “child welfare” OR “child protective services”) AND (MH "Police" OR “law enforcement” OR police). We utilized the following terms for grey literature searches: “Child Welfare” OR “Child Protective Services” AND Police OR “Law Enforcement.”

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible articles included empirical and conceptual literature that assessed the intersection of police involvement and child welfare cases and/or assessed the consequences associated with police involvement in child welfare cases in US populations. The specific exposure of interest was police involvement in child welfare cases (e.g., police as child welfare referral sources). The outcomes of interest were any child-welfare based outcome including substantiated investigations, child removal or out-of-home placements, and police involvement contributing to disparities within the child welfare system. In order to summarize the most recent and relevant practices within child welfare, articles published prior to 2005 were excluded. Although IPV investigations often result in involvement with child welfare, studies that specifically focused on IPV were excluded due to the distinctly unique police-centric response to IPV that requires police intervention and investigation (Kajeepeta et al., 2024).

Screening and Abstraction

The systematic review management software Covidence was utilized to conduct the screening and abstraction process. After all duplicates were removed, the first author (Hsieh & Shannon) conducted all the review steps independently, including the initial title and abstract screen as well as the full-text screen and data abstraction process. The first author also reviewed the reference lists of all included articles. All grey literature was hand searched, screened, and abstracted by the first author. Data extracted included year published, study aims, study setting, study design, main findings, whether study included an analysis of racial disparities / disproportionality, and whether study offered alternatives to police involvement.

Results

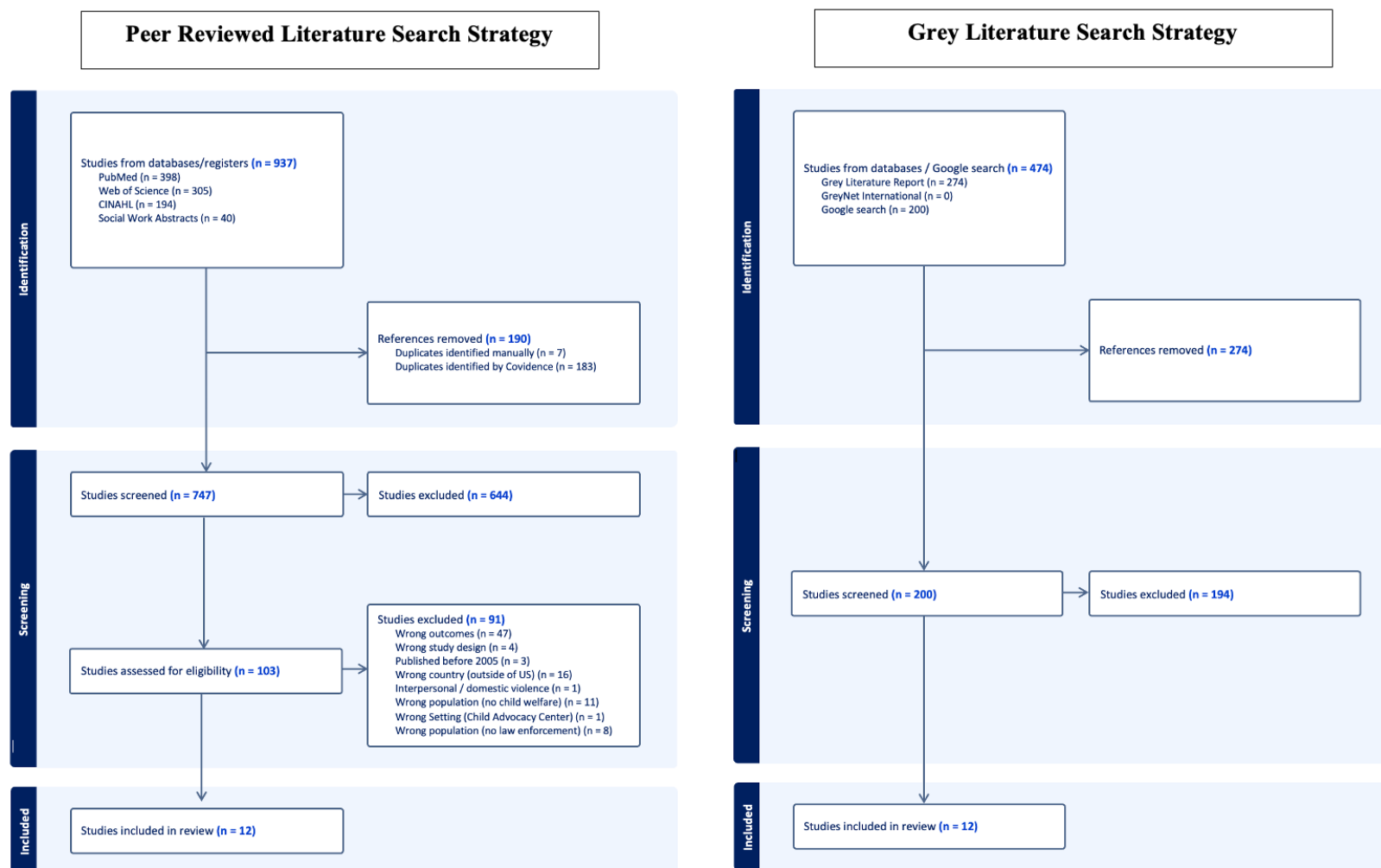
Peer Reviewed Search Results

The literature search yielded 747 articles after duplicates were removed. Of those 747, 664 were excluded during the initial title and abstract screen, resulting in 103 for full text review. The most common reasons for exclusion were: studies did not discuss child welfare outcomes related to or associated with police involvement, were based outside of the United States, or were published prior to 2005. An additional 91 articles were excluded during the full text screen, resulting in 11 eligible articles to be included in the review (Figure 2.1).

Grey Literature Search Results

Grey literature database searches yielded an additional 274 articles. After review and screening, none ($n = 0$) of the 274 articles identified in the grey literature database searches met eligibility criteria. After completing a hand search of the top 200 Google hits utilizing advanced search terms that matched the peer reviewed literature search terms, an additional six articles ($n = 6$) were deemed eligible and included in the review (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Flowchart summarizing article search and selection process.



Characteristics of Included Studies

Included peer reviewed articles were all published between 2007 and 2024. The majority of the articles (73%, $n = 8$) were published in interdisciplinary journals. Other journal disciplines were social work ($n = 2$) and law review ($n = 1$). Most of the included peer reviewed articles were empirical studies (82%, $n = 9$), and the additional two articles (18%, $n = 2$) were conceptual papers. With regards to study design, four ($n = 4$) of the empirical studies were longitudinal analyses, three of which utilized nationally representative data ($n = 3$; (Edwards, 2019; Gandarilla Ocampo et al., 2024; Nadon et al., 2023) and one utilized state survey data ($n = 1$; McDaniel, 2006). One cross-sectional study ($n = 1$; (Greenfield et al., 2023) also utilized a nationally representative database to identify systemic factors associated with specific types of child welfare involvement (“short-stays”). Two studies ($n = 2$; (King et al., 2013; Woodmass et al., 2017) conducted quantitative analyses of state administrative and official data, one of which linked administrative data and birth records in California to follow children reported and investigated for maltreatment (King et al., 2013), and the other completed a secondary analysis utilizing a report from the Minnesota Department of Human Services to identify substantiated child neglect cases in four specific counties (Woodmass et al., 2017). One study ($n = 1$; (Pelton, 2007) conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses of court records from child protection cases in Clark County, Nevada. Another study ($n = 1$; (Jordan et al., 2011) was a quasi-experimental effectiveness study comparing two types of child protection investigation structures in the state of Florida: law enforcement agencies vs. public child welfare agencies. The final two peer reviewed articles included in this review were conceptual papers ($n = 2$; (Garcia et al., 2014; McEvoy, 2020). One of which was a literature review that discussed lessons learned from state specific models of child welfare practice and provided recommendations to improve child

welfare investigations nationally (Garcia et al., 2014), and the other was a legal commentary that utilized New York law and procedure as illustration (McEvoy, 2020). Additional details including sample characteristics and study timeframes are included in Table 2.1.

Approximately half of the peer reviewed studies ($n = 5$) used a national sample and another 45% ($n = 5$) focused on statewide analyses of the following states: California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, and New York. The remaining study ($n = 1$) conducted county specific analyses within the state of Nevada. Although all studies acknowledged the racial disparities and disproportionality present within the child welfare system, only 54% of the studies ($n = 6$) included a specific quantitative or qualitative analyses to examine racial and sociodemographic factors. Finally, although many studies offered suggestions for improvements within the child welfare system, only one offered a concrete recommendation to reduce law enforcement presence in child welfare cases (Table 2.3).

Grey literature articles included four (67%, $n = 4$) empirical studies and two (33%, $n = 2$) conceptual papers, all of which were published between 2020 and 2024. Two of the empirical articles were news reports ($n = 2$; Hager, 2022; (Roberts, 2022) utilizing qualitative data from case studies and interviews, and one was a nonprofit report ($n = 1$; (Hager, 2020) utilizing qualitative interviews and quantitative data from a nationally representative database. The final empirical article ($n = 1$; (Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024) was a law report that included a review of existing research, qualitative analysis of family narratives, and quantitative analysis of data from publicly available documents and reporting systems. The two conceptual papers ($n = 2$; (Richardson, 2024; Ruth, 2024) included a law review report that discussed civil case examples (Richardson, 2024), and a conceptual policy brief that reviewed the recent literature and provided recommendations for future policy advocacy efforts (Ruth, 2024). Over half of the grey literature

studies utilized a multistate or national sample (66.7%, n = 4), while two studies included analyses and discussions specific to the following states: California and New York. All of the articles (n = 6) included some discussion around racial and socioeconomic equity and two of them (n = 2) provided recommendations around reducing law enforcement presence within child welfare. Additional details on grey literature are included in Table 2.2.

Summary of Findings

Substantiation of Maltreatment Reports

Four (24%) of the seventeen articles examined child maltreatment report substantiation by referral type. All four of these investigations found that referrals reported by law enforcement were more likely to result in substantiated findings compared to referrals from educational, social service, and medical personnel as well as non-mandated reporters (e.g., community members) (Gandarilla Ocampo et al., 2024; King et al., 2013; Nadon et al., 2023; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). Nadon et al. (2023) found that referrals from law enforcement were associated with the highest odds of substantiation when compared to all other mandated reporters (medical personnel and social service providers). Similarly, Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) found that 32% of reports made by law enforcement in Los Angeles County were substantiated, which was the highest rate of substantiation across all categories of professionals who made mandated reports. Gandarilla Ocampo et al. (2024) found that law enforcement had a substantiation percentage of 39.4%, which was the second highest substantiation rate examined, second only to the exceedingly rare cases in which the alleged perpetrator made a referral. Finally, King et al. (2013) examined substantiation rates associated with types of abuse and referral sources and found that children with reports of physical abuse initiated by law enforcement were more than 6 times as likely to be substantiated as compared to reports of physical abuse from other referral sources.

Out-of-Home Placement

Six studies (35%) investigated factors associated with children being placed out of their homes following child maltreatment investigations (Gandarilla Ocampo et al., 2024; Greenfield et al., 2023; Hager, 2020; Nadon et al., 2023; Pelton, 2007; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). Nadon et al. (2023) found that referrals from law enforcement, social services, and medical personnel were more likely than those from mental health personnel to result in out-of-home placement, and referrals from social services personnel were associated with the highest odds of out-of-home placement. Further supporting this trend, Gandarilla Ocampo et al. (2024) demonstrated that 7.8% of child maltreatment reports made by legal personnel and law enforcement resulted in out-of-home foster care placement. Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) found that when law enforcement works with child protective services, it often results in higher rates of out-of-home placements, particularly for low-income Black and Indigenous families. In a study of child removal in Clark County Nevada, Pelton (2007) found that children were placed in foster care facilities (as opposed to no-removal or placed with family/kin) in a substantially greater proportion of cases in which police were involved compared to cases with no police involvement (85% vs. 55%). Greenfield et al. (2023) focused specifically on short-stays of less than 30 days, and found that living in a state with higher police presence (more police per capita), was associated with greater odds of experiencing a short stay compared to a long stay. Similarly, Hager (2020) demonstrated that short-stays tend to occur most frequently in high poverty communities where law enforcement are the only professional group authorized to remove children without a court order.

Law Enforcement and CPS

With respect to collaboration and co-involvement between law enforcement and CPS, four studies (18%, $n = 3$) examined and discussed models of collaboration between the two

systems (Garcia et al., 2014; McEvoy, 2020; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). In a legal commentary, McEvoy (2021) explores the interactions between law enforcement and CPS and notes that due to different philosophical approaches and agency objectives, there is often significant conflict when the two systems work together. Furthermore, McEvoy (2021) demonstrates that families are often over criminalized, particularly in cases of neglect, due to law enforcement involvement in child welfare investigations. In their literature review and subsequent recommendations for future policies and practices, Garcia et al. (2014) cautiously recommend implementing joint investigations, where CPS and law enforcement work collaboratively as a means to reduce unwarranted short-term placements. Of note, Garcia et al. (2014) only advocate for this collaborative model in cases of sexual abuse and more severe physical abuse as a means to ensure that substantiated cases are allocated enough resources to ensure appropriate placements for children, and do not make any suggestions about law enforcement involvement for cases of neglect. Finally, Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) findings suggest that collaboration between child welfare and law enforcement agencies via data sharing, formal partnerships, and/or co-investigations, is associated with higher rates of family separation and termination of parental rights.

A phenomenon not seen in the peer reviewed literature but found in four of the grey literature articles (22%, n = 4) illustrates how law enforcement is often used to coerce families into complying with CPS investigations (Hager, 2022; Richardson, 2024; Roberts, 2022; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). Through the use of case studies, Roberts (2022) illustrates how CPS relies on law enforcement officers to use force and intimidation to enter homes and remove children, typically without warrants. Hager (2022) and Richardson (2024) further support this notion, demonstrating that CPS uses coercive tactics including lying to parents about their rights and calling the police to assist them in forcibly entering families' homes. Both Hager (2022) and Richardson (2024)

note that threatening to call police and/or enlisting police as backup support often works as an intimidation tactic because families are typically unaware of their rights yet understand that police and CPS workers have the power to remove children without a court order. Furthermore, Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) discusses how law enforcement presence in home investigations is not only used as a coercive tactic by CPS, but also has the potential to subject families to criminal investigation if law enforcement officers observe anything in the home that may establish suspicion of a crime.

Four studies (22%, $n = 4$) explicitly discuss the ways in which families become involved with the child welfare system. All of them conclude that policing and law enforcement presence are major contributing factors (Edwards, 2019; Pelton, 2007; Ruth, 2024; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). Edwards (2019), for example, notes, “exposure to policing plays an important role in determining which children do, and which children do not, come to the attention of child protection agencies” (p. 65). The study demonstrates empirically that greater police presence in communities is associated with higher rates of child welfare engagement. Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) provides evidence suggesting that any contact with law enforcement is a significant entry point for families into the child welfare system. Furthermore, Pelton (2007) demonstrates that often, arrest and incarceration of parents unrelated to the immediate safety of the children creates a child protection problem and ultimately requires engagement from child welfare agencies. Importantly, Ruth (2024) demonstrates the harmful cyclical nature of the two systems, noting that involvement with one system often makes families more vulnerable to involvement in the other: “incarcerated people are more likely to have been in foster care previously than others, and youth in foster care are more likely to become incarcerated as adults” (para. 8).

Finally, one study (6%, $n = 1$) utilized the child welfare information system of Florida to examine the outcomes of Florida's decision to transfer all child protective investigative (CPI) work in specific jurisdictions to the sole responsibility law enforcement agencies (Jordan et al., 2011). Jordan et al. (2011) compared child welfare related outcomes in jurisdictions that had transferred CPI to law enforcement agencies to those that remained in child welfare. Results revealed that in the areas served by law enforcement, the proportion of alleged victims with substantiated findings was nearly three percentage points higher than in the areas served by public child welfare agencies, yet the proportion of children with unsubstantiated findings who were victims in a subsequent report within six months and the proportion of children with recurrence of maltreatment within six months was higher in areas served by law enforcement (Jordan et al., 2011). This suggests that law enforcement agencies may be penalizing and criminalizing families without providing supportive resources and services. Results from this investigation also revealed that child welfare agencies conducted investigations in a significantly more cost-effective manner compared to law enforcement agencies (Jordan et al., 2011).

Neglect

Two of the articles (12%, $n = 2$) examined child welfare outcomes for alleged cases of neglect specifically, as compared to other forms of maltreatment including physical and sexual abuse (McEvoy, 2020; Nadon et al., 2023). Nadon et al. (2023) demonstrated that neglect was linked with the highest odds of both substantiation and out-of-home placement compared to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. McEvoy (2021) found that families in New York state were often over-criminalized for cases of neglect and recommended that all poverty related cases of neglect should move out of the criminal system and back to child welfare domain so that child

welfare agencies can help keep families “intact” by providing preventive services including parenting skills classes, mental health services, and concrete resources including cash assistance.

Racial and Sociodemographic Factors

Two thirds of the articles (67%, n = 12) included an analysis of sociodemographic and racial factors that may intersect with and/or precipitate child welfare investigations (Edwards, 2019; Greenfield et al., 2023; Hager, 2020, 2022; King et al., 2013; McDaniel, 2006; Nadon et al., 2023; Richardson, 2024; Roberts, 2022; Ruth, 2024; Woodmass et al., 2017; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). Zeidler-Ordaz (2024) discusses the ways in which both child welfare and law enforcement systems are fraught with racial and socioeconomic disparities, noting that when the systems work together the disparities become compounded and create a greater likelihood of inequitable outcomes for low-income families of color. Hager (2022) details the ways in which CPS uses law enforcement officers to coerce families and ultimately remove children, demonstrating that this coercion typically only occurs for low-income families because affluent families seek legal counsel immediately. McDaniel (2006) demonstrated that law enforcement and social service providers are more likely to report families who experience homelessness or domestic violence and caregivers who have a learning disability for child welfare concerns. King et al. (2013) found that there was a slightly greater rate of substantiation among children with Native mothers as compared to children with White mothers, and Edwards’ (2019) analysis revealed that police have been responsible for handling the growing number of cases specifically involving Native families. Woodmass et al. (2017) found that compared to Black children, White children were more likely to have an informal placement arranged by police, however details on these placements were not provided. Nadon et al. (2023) demonstrated that compared to referrals involving White children, referrals involving Black, Native, Multiracial, Hawaiian/Pacific

Islander, and Hispanic children were associated with 10–23% higher odds of substantiation. Furthermore, this same investigation revealed that referrals involving Native, Multiracial, and Black children had 12–39 % higher odds of experiencing out-of-home placement compared to child maltreatment referrals involving White children (Nadon et al., 2023). Finally, Greenfield et al. (2023) demonstrated that higher rates of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment was associated with greater odds of being placed in child welfare settings for short stays (<30 days) compared to long stays (>30 days), and all racial and ethnic child populations other than White non-Hispanic children had greater odds of experiencing short stays.

Alternatives to Police Involvement & Recommendations for Change

Although recommendations for child welfare policy and practice change were limited in the studies included in this review, the articles that did provide recommendations were typically aligned in their suggestions. Pelton (2007) noted that child welfare should reallocate resources away from services and facilities that support out-of-home placement and instead focus on providing supportive concrete resources to alleviate concerns related to poverty. Further supporting this notion, Ruth (2024) advocated for resources to address poverty and preventative health and mental health care as opposed to relying on child welfare and law enforcement to address all social issues. McEvoy (2021) recommended that all poverty-related cases of neglect should be returned to the sole domain of child welfare, with no law enforcement involvement, so that families may access preventive services and resources as opposed to criminalization for poverty. Similarly, Hager (2020) noted that many child welfare officials believe that law enforcement officers should focus their time on criminal matters and should not be responding to concerns of poverty and ‘neglect.’ Garcia et al. (2014) tentatively advocated for joint investigation between law enforcement and CPS as a means to reduce unnecessary short stays,

but only in cases of severe abuse where placement is clearly warranted. Garcia et al. (2014) did not provide recommendations or suggestions regarding law enforcement involvement in cases of neglect.

Discussion

In this systematic literature review, we summarized the recent evidence base concerning the potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare cases within the US. Although there is a dearth of research examining this issue (n = 17 studies), results from this review reveal that police involvement in child welfare cases is regularly characterized by more punitive outcomes for children and families, including higher rates of substantiated investigations and more out-of-home placements particularly in cases of neglect. Results also suggest that policing contributes to racial and socioeconomic disparities within the child welfare system. Many of the investigations in this review also discuss the ways in which law enforcement and child welfare priorities conflict. These conflicting priorities often result in a response from law enforcement that relies on punishment and criminalization without the provision of preventive resources that may mitigate future maltreatment reports and investigations.

This review is an important expansion and update for current relevance, synthesizing evidence on consequences associated with police involvement in child welfare cases since the comprehensive literature review completed by Cross et al. in 2005. Broadly, Cross et al. (2005) found that when law enforcement and CPS collaborate on child welfare cases, there tends to be more substantial criminal and child protective intervention including higher rates of substantiation and out-of-home placements. Findings from the present review suggest that there have been no significant changes in general findings since the review conducted by Cross et al. in 2005. However, since 2005, there has been additional evidence highlighting that law

enforcement presence in child welfare may be supporting an expanding number of traumatic family separations and out-of-home placements, particularly for low-income Black and Indigenous families (Edwards, 2019; Gandarilla Ocampo et al., 2024; Greenfield et al., 2023; Hager, 2020; Nadon et al., 2023; Pelton, 2007; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024).

The most substantial difference between the previous review (Cross et al., 2005) and this review is the way in which results are interpreted. Cross et al. (2005) advocate for more collaboration between CPS and law enforcement, as the authors view more substantial intervention as a mechanism to promote positive outcome for youth and families. However, in the past 20 years, a considerable amount of evidence has documented the negative consequences of out-of-home placement and substantial CPS involvement (Engler et al., 2022; Orri et al., 2021; Sankaran et al., 2019; Trivedi, 2019; Warburton et al., 2014). Some long-term outcomes of child removal and out-of-home placement include mental and behavioral health concerns in childhood and adulthood, poverty and houselessness, incarceration, poor academic performance, and physical health concerns (Engler et al., 2022; Orri et al., 2021; Sankaran et al., 2019; Trivedi, 2019; Warburton et al., 2014). Given the expansive evidence in the past twenty years demonstrating that forceable family separation is in most cases detrimental to children and parents, and often much more traumatizing than living in poverty (Hager, 2020), the current review advocates for a reduction in police presence as a means to reduce instances of traumatic child removal, particularly in cases of neglect.

The clearest and most actionable findings from this review are related to those of short stays and out-of-home placements in cases of neglect. Recent evidence suggests that short stays are often unwarranted (Hager, 2020) and reducing the occurrence of short stays has been identified as a priority for child welfare (Garcia et al., 2014). Results from this review reveal that

short stays are more likely to occur in areas with greater police presence and when police are involved in child welfare investigations (Edwards, 2019; Greenfield et al., 2023; Pelton, 2007). Furthermore, this review demonstrates that neglect, often related to poverty concerns, is linked to high levels of out-of-home placement, which is more likely to occur when police are involved (Cross et al., 2005; McEvoy, 2020; Nadon et al., 2023). Since short stays typically stem from poverty-related neglect concerns (Hager, 2020), eliminating police presence specifically in cases of neglect may be an effective way to reduce short stays, out-of-home placements more generally, and carceral practices that criminalize families living in poverty and potentially act as an entry point into criminal and juvenile legal systems. Moreover, since this review points to police involvement, short stays, and out-of-home placements in cases of neglect as drivers of racial and socioeconomic disparities within child welfare (Edwards, 2019; Greenfield et al., 2023; McEvoy, 2020; Nadon et al., 2023), eliminating police presence in neglect cases may be a crucial step towards achieving equity.

Many of the studies included in this review acknowledged that child welfare engages in a unique form of surveillance that often functions as an extension of policing (Edwards, 2019; Greenfield et al., 2023; Hager, 2022; McDaniel, 2006; McEvoy, 2020; Roberts, 2022; Ruth, 2024; Zeidler-Ordaz, 2024). However, only one of the included articles discussed the possibility or feasibility of dismantling the current child welfare system (Roberts, 2022). Recommendations for policy and practice change within the current child welfare system included reallocating time and resources away from services and practices that support child removal and towards provision of concrete resources and supportive interventions, as well as eliminating and/or reducing police involvement from all cases that involve allegations of neglect. Since the child welfare system can serve as a distinct system of punishment, criminalization, and surveillance both with and without

police presence (Edwards, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020), future research should highlight the evidence regarding the consequences of eliminating both police presence and substantially reshaping the current child welfare system that often serves as a form of policing. Transforming the current child welfare system would allow for a new system of community-based responses and supportive prevention resources and programs that serve to truly protect children by providing support and resources to ensure communities and families are safe and healthy (Jacobs et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020).

Limitations

This systematic literature review has some limitations. First, it is based on 17 articles, 11 of which are empirical studies. This indicates a gap in the evidence base with a specific need for more empirical research utilizing both nationally representative and state-based data. Second, the first author completed all screening and abstraction steps in the review; including a second researcher could increase reliability and reduce the potential for bias. Third, there is considerable variation across US states regarding child welfare policies and practices (Edwards, 2016; Greenfield et al., 2023; Ocasio et al., 2013). Because this review does not explicitly address these state differences, findings may not represent patterns in all states. Finally, this review excluded articles focused specifically on IPV; future research is needed to synthesize the evidence on the intersections and overlaps between police and child welfare specifically in cases of IPV.

Conclusions

This literature review revealed that compared with child welfare cases not involving law enforcement, police involvement in child welfare cases is often characterized by more punitive outcomes, including higher rates of substantiated investigations, more out-of-home placements, and increased odds of child removal particularly in cases of neglect. Furthermore, results suggest

that police presence serves as a contributing factor to well documented racial and socioeconomic disparities within the child welfare system. Taken together, recommendations provided in this review would likely support the elimination of police presence within child welfare, specifically in cases of neglect. Alternatives to police involvement may include provision of concrete resources to alleviate concerns of poverty including cash and housing assistance, as well as supportive interventions including accessible health, mental health, and substance use treatment, as well as parenting skills trainings. Further research is needed to determine the feasibility of reducing and/or eliminating police presence within child welfare and the consequences of implementing supportive alternatives for more positive outcomes for children and families.

Table 2.1. Study design characteristics of peer reviewed articles

Authors	Year	Empirical	Study Design	Region	Timeframe	Data Source	Sample
Edwards, F.	2019	Yes	Longitudinal analysis of nationally representative data	National	2009 – 2015	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System Measures of child poverty from the American Community Survey	All investigated reports of child maltreatment annually (from 2009 to 2015)
Garcia, A., Puckett, A., Ezell, M., Pecora, P.J., Tanoury, T., Rodriguez, W.	2014	No	Literature review, examples of best practices & recommendations	National	1981 – 2012	Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System	State specific examples of promising practices: Florida, New Mexico, New York
Gandarilla Ocampo, M., Drake, B., Simon, J., Jonson-Reid, M.	2024	Yes	Longitudinal, statistical analysis of nationally representative data	National, 32 states	2012 – 2017	Annual National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) hotline report and placement data	2,101,397 children with a first ever hotline report in 2012–2014 were followed for three years
Greenfield, B., Zhang, L., & Simmel, C.	2023	Yes	Statistical analysis of nationally representative data	National	Fiscal year 2018	Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Multiple supplemental datasets to assess macro-level factors associated with child welfare experiences	Children who exited foster care during 2018 (n ~ 252,628) and children still in foster care at the end of 2018 but with a record on the length of the previous episode of foster care placement (n = 65,937). Combined groups yielded an analytic

							sample of 318,565 children
Jordan, N., Yampolskaya, S., Gustafson, M., Armstrong, M., McNeish, R., Vargo, A.	2011	Yes	Quasi-experimental effectiveness study	Florida	Fiscal year 2007 - 6 months from initial report date in fiscal year 2007	HomeSafenet: the child welfare information system of Florida	All children defined as being maltreated during state fiscal year 2007
King, B., Lawson, H., & Putnam-Hornstein, E.	2013	Yes	Prospective cohort quantitative study of administrative and State official data	California	2002 - 2007	Linked administrative data from Child Welfare Services/Case Management System and birth records in California	59,413 children born in 2002, who were successfully matched to a birth record, and whose first report for maltreatment was received and investigated by CPS prior to 5 years of age
McDaniel, M.	2006	Yes	Longitudinal, statistical analysis of State survey data	Illinois	1998 - 2003	Longitudinal survey data from the Illinois Families Study (IFS)	1260 families, representative of the 1998 TANF population from nine counties in Illinois
McEvoy, R.C.	2021	No	Conceptual legal commentary	New York	N/A	New York law and procedure as illustration	New York Families, CPS, & Law Enforcement

Nadon, M., Park, K., Lee, J.Y., Wright, M.	2023	Yes	Longitudinal, statistical analysis of nationally representative data	National, 50 states and D.C.	2008 – 2018	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System American Community Survey	24,349,293 cases with children under age 18
Pelton, L.H.	2007	Yes	Quantitative and qualitative review of court records	Clark County Nevada	July 1, 2005 – June 30, 2006	Court records from filed child protection cases in Clark County family court	150 random sample of cases
Woodmass, K., Weisber, S., Shlomi, H., Rockymore, M., Wells, S.J.	2017	Yes	Quantitative secondary analysis of State administrative data	Minnesota	2001	Administrative data from Minnesota Department of Human Services report	Substantiated child neglect cases: 81 pairs of African American and White children matched by type of neglect, gender, age group, and county

Table 2.2. Design and characteristics of grey literature

Authors	Year	Empirical Study	Study Design	Study Description	Region	Data Source
Hager, E	2020	Yes	Mixed-methods: Qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis of federal child-welfare records	Nonprofit Report	National	Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Interviews with children and families who have been involved with child welfare and professionals who work within or alongside the child welfare system
Hager, E	2022	Yes	Qualitative interviews	News Report	New York	Interviews with parents who have been involved with child welfare and professionals who work within or alongside the child welfare system
Richardson, A	2024	No	Conceptual	Law Review Blog Post	National	Literature review and civil case examples
Roberts, D	2022	Yes	Qualitative interviews and video footage analysis	News Report	National	Interviews with families who have been involved with child welfare and professionals who work within or alongside the child welfare system.
Ruth, E	2024	No	Conceptual	Policy Briefing	National	Police body camera footage. Literature review
Zeidler-Ordaz, L	2024	Yes	Mixed-methods: Qualitative narrative analysis and quantitative analysis of publicly available documents and reporting systems	Law Report	California	Narratives of children and parents who have been involved the child welfare system Los Angeles County's Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Reporting System, and public records requests from Los Angeles County's DCFS and District Attorney's Office

Table 2.3. Study aims and main findings

Authors	Year	Study Aims	Racial / Equity Analysis	Alternatives to Police Involvement	Summary of Main Findings
Peer Reviewed Literature					
Edwards, F.	2019	To explore whether exposure to policing helps explain how and why certain children enter the child welfare system, evaluates whether variation in police activities is predictive of intensity of maltreatment reporting, and evaluates whether racial inequalities in exposure to policing contribute to racial inequalities in child welfare.	Yes	None offered	- Police are most frequent sources of reports of maltreatment - Police have been responsible for initiating a growing proportion of cases involving Native families - Involvement with the child welfare system is a spillover consequence of arrest, particularly for American Indian-Alaska Native children - Elevated police presence in communities is associated with greater child welfare engagement
Garcia, A., Puckett, A., Ezell, M., Pecora, P.J., Tanoury, T., Rodriguez, W.	2014	To determine whether relying upon CPS workers, law enforcement (LE) officers, or both will prevent unnecessary, short-term placements.	No	None offered	- Based on prior research, authors strongly advise implementing policies and practices that incorporate joint investigations (CPS and law enforcement) - Joint models may decrease unwarranted short stays and ensure that substantiated cases are allocated the time and resources to secure appropriate placements - Joint models also help ensure prosecution of perpetrators when warranted
Gandarilla Ocampo, M., Drake, B., Simon, J., Jonson-Reid, M.	2024	To determine if initial maltreatment report source predicts immediate and long-term risk of re-referral, substantiation, and placement.	No	None offered	- Across all reporter subtypes, law enforcement made the largest percentage of total reports (19.11 %) - Across all reporter subtypes, those very few reports from alleged perpetrators had the highest substantiation percentage (43.2 %), followed by law enforcement (39.4 %) - Across all reporter types, medical personnel had the largest percentage of their reports proceeding to foster care at 12.4 %, followed by social services personnel (9.4 %) and then law enforcement (7.8 %)

Greenfield, B., Zhang, L., & Simmel, C.	2023	To better understand how macro level factors at the state level, in addition to child and case characteristics, may be relevant for short-stayers.	Yes	None offered	- Living in a state with greater police per capita is associated with greater odds of experiencing a short-stay - Both higher rates of SNAP enrollment and higher percentage of police presence in certain states is associated with greater odds of short-stays - All racial and ethnic child populations other than White non-Hispanic had greater odds of being placed in short-stays
Jordan, N., Yampolskaya, S., Gustafson, M., Armstrong, M., McNeish, R., Vargo, A.	2011	To examine the impact of Florida's decision to transfer Child Protective Investigation (CPI) responsibility from the public child welfare agency to law enforcement agencies in certain jurisdictions.	No	None offered	- In the areas served by law enforcement, proportion of alleged victims with substantiated findings was nearly three percentage points higher than in the areas served by public child welfare agencies - Proportion of children with unsubstantiated findings who were victims in a subsequent report within six months was higher with law enforcement - Proportion of children with recurrence of maltreatment within six months was higher with law enforcement. - Child welfare conducting CPI in more cost-efficient manner than law enforcement
King, B., Lawson, H., & Putnam- Hornstein, E.	2013	To examine whether the status and identity of maltreatment reporter are independent predictors of substantiation across maltreatment types, in the presence of multiple sociodemographic characteristics and risk factors.	Yes	None offered	- A greater rate of substantiation observed among children with Native American mothers relative to those of White mothers - Children reported by law enforcement and legal sources, medical professionals, public agencies, and other professionals were considerably more likely to be substantiated than children reported by non-mandated reporters - Children with reports of physical abuse initiated by law enforcement were more than 6 times as likely to be substantiated
McDaniel, M.	2006	To understand which families, in a sample at high risk for child protection involvement, are reported by whom and examine whose reports are more likely to be substantiated after an investigation.	Yes	None offered	- Among the mandated sources, law enforcement officials and social service providers made most reports - Law enforcement and social service providers were more likely to report families experiencing domestic violence, homelessness, and caregivers with a learning disability - It is likely that homeless families and families experiencing domestic violence are more likely to come in contact with law enforcement and social service providers

McEvoy, R.C.	2021	Legal commentary exploring the interaction between CPS and law enforcement.	No	Shift cases of poverty-related neglect out of the criminal system and return them to CPS domain.	- Operating under a parallel enforcement framework (CPS and law enforcement working together) rarely results in seamless cooperation between the two agencies due to different philosophical approaches and operational objectives - Things become more coercive in the child welfare setting when police and CPS rely on one another - The risk to children may be greater when CPS and police work closely together, particularly in poverty-related neglect cases
Nadon, M., Park, K., Lee, J.Y., Wright, M.	2023	To examine the influence of different referral sources on child welfare case outcomes.	Yes	None offered	- Referrals from law enforcement associated with highest odds of substantiation - Referrals from social services personnel associated with highest odds of out-of-home placement - Compared to referrals involving White children, those involving Black, Native, Multiracial, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic children were significantly associated with 10–23 % higher odds of substantiation - Referrals involving Native, Multiracial, and Black children had 12–39 % higher odds of out-of-home placement - Poverty rates positively associated with the odds of substantiation - Neglect linked with the highest odds of both substantiation and out-of-home placement
Pelton, L.H.	2007	To examine the precipitating reasons for child removal in Clark County, for the purpose of recommending measures that can be taken to reduce the need for child placement.	No	None offered	- Children were placed in Child Haven or other foster care facilities in a greater proportion of the cases in which police were involved than of the cases in which they were not involved (85% vs. 55%) - In many cases, the arrest and incarceration of parents on outstanding warrants unrelated to the immediate safety of the children precipitated the need for placement - Reallocation of resources from placement facilities to the provision of direct assistance with concrete services is recommended

Woodmass, K., Weisber, S., Shlomi, H., Rockymore, M., Wells, S.J.	2017	To identify and explore potential interactions between race and other variables of interest as they relate to decision making following substantiation for neglect.	Yes	None offered	- White children were more likely than Black children to have an informal placement arranged by police - Race was not a significant predictor of ongoing placement nor were there any significant interactions with race - Disproportionalities may have resulted from risk factors present prior to contact with CPS
Grey Literature					
Hager, E	2020	Examining Causes and Consequences of “Short Stays” in Foster Care	Yes	None offered	- Short stays happen most often in high-poverty areas where law enforcement is the only group authorized by state law to remove children without a court order - New Mexico has the highest national rate of short stays, in part due to a state specific law allowing police to remove children for 48 hours while parents are investigated by CPS - Law enforcement may not be aware of the research showing that family separation can be more traumatizing than living in poverty - Child welfare officials interviewed believe that police should focus on “criminal matters” and need not be involved in cases of neglect
Hager, E	2022	Examining potential rights violations in child welfare investigations	Yes	None offered	- In New York, state law mandates that CPS attempt to inspect a child’s home every time they’re forwarded a tip about possible child maltreatment, regardless of the seriousness of the allegation - Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately impacted by this, accounting for at least 83 % of cases in 2021 - When CPS is denied entry, they call for law enforcement support to intimidate families into allowing home entry - Intimidation, especially when backed by police presence, works because families understand that CPS can remove children without a court order - These potential rights violations are significantly more common for low-income families because affluent families immediately seek legal counsel and support

Richardson, A	2024	Explores some of the civil cases that have been brought by parents against child welfare agencies and considers the challenges and potential of such suits	Yes	None offered	- Child welfare targets Black and Brown families via the use of “structurally racialized approaches and discriminatory outcomes” - CPS uses coercive tactics including lying to parents about their rights, threatening to take children away, calling or threatening to call police, as a means to force entry families’ homes
Roberts, D	2022	Utilizing qualitative case studies quantitative data to demonstrate why the child welfare system should be abolished	Yes	Advocates for abolition of child welfare system	- When police are called to assist CPS, they use additional force and intimidation to remove children – often without warrants - After these forcible removals, parents may be charged with child abuse and often plead guilty to avoid prison and termination of parental rights
Ruth, E	2024	Discussion of how the criminal legal and child welfare systems are deeply interwoven	Yes	Advocates for better resources for families as well as reduced child welfare and law enforcement presence in schools	- Child welfare investigations bring families in contact with the criminal legal system, increasing the likelihood of dual-system involvement - Child welfare and criminal legal systems target the same communities and individuals - Black and Indigenous parents are over-reported and over-investigated, and ultimately more likely to have their children removed and their parental rights terminated - Both criminal legal and child welfare systems have become catch-all nets to address social concerns that they’re not equipped to handle - Child maltreatment is a structural issue rooted in poverty, and therefore structural solutions including preventive and transformative resources are needed
Zeidler-Ordaz, L	2024	A report utilizing qualitative case studies and quantitative data to shed light on the federal, state, and local laws and regulations that encourage collaboration between child welfare and law enforcement agencies	Yes	None offered	- Law enforcement contact is a significant entry point for families, particularly families of color and low-income families, into the child welfare system - Law enforcement involvement in CPS investigations leads to higher substantiation rates and contributes to racial disparities within child welfare - In 2019 in LA county, 32% of law enforcement reports were substantiated, the highest substantiation rate of all categories of professionals

					- Law enforcement presence in child welfare investigations has the potential to subject families to criminal investigations because law enforcement can establish suspicion of a crime without a warrant - Evidence suggests that collaborations between agencies, via mandated reporting, data sharing, formalized partnerships, or co-investigations, is associated with higher rates of family separation and termination of parental rights
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Chapter Three: Towards Transformative Change: An Illustration of Reflexivity in Child Welfare Research

Abstract

The child welfare system in the United States is rooted in a history of white supremacy and social control. Today, it continues to perpetuate inequities as demonstrated by the well documented racial disparities within the modern child welfare system. Addressing these injustices requires urgent transformative change and a complete reimagining of the current system. Such transformation will require true collaboration between social workers, communities, and lived experts who have been most impacted by the child welfare system. Engagement in reflexive practices and critical examinations of positionality can help to facilitate genuine collaborative partnerships by providing the foundation for deep, transparent, and vulnerable engagement between social workers and community members. The purpose of this paper is to provide an illustration of reflexivity in child welfare research, with the goal of providing practical and theoretical guidance to support collaborative research partnerships. This work is informed by Walsh's typology of reflexive practice (Walsh, 2003) and illustrates the steps taken in applying this typology to child welfare research. The five steps for conducting reflexive child welfare research proposed in this paper offer a guiding framework for engagement in reflexive practice that may strengthen collaborative research partnerships and ultimately support in developing and disseminating the evidence for ethical, equitable, and meaningful child welfare systems transformation.

Introduction

Challenging injustice, inequities, oppression, and racism is central to social workers' professional code of ethics, and serves as a defining characteristic that sets social work apart from other helping professions (Dettlaff et al., 2023; NASW, 2021). Yet the history of the social work profession as a whole, and child welfare in particular, is rooted in white supremacy, social control, and white saviorism (Dettlaff et al., 2023; Dettlaff & Copeland, 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021). The modern child welfare system came to fruition through the establishment of charity organizations that aimed to save White children from poverty while intentionally excluding Black children who were deemed as inferior to White children (Bates, 2016; Dettlaff et al., 2023). Today, the child welfare system continues to perpetuate harm and inequities, with disproportionate representation of Black and Indigenous youth and families in the system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020) and removal rates for Black children at nearly double the rate of their White peers (Yi et al., 2023). These disparities in the child welfare system are often unintentionally reinforced by well-meaning but often under-resourced social work clinicians and researchers who work within a system that enables and perpetuates unjust and racialized family separations (Jacobs et al., 2021).

There is an urgent need for transformation of the child welfare system and elimination of racialized injustices and inequities. This will require a complete reimagining of the current system and true collaboration between social workers, communities, and lived experts who have been most impacted by the child welfare system. This type of collaboration requires transparency and vulnerability, with social workers prioritizing acknowledgement of complicity, historical perpetuation of harm, and unequal power structures. Engagement in reflexive practices and critical examinations of positionality can help to facilitate genuine collaborative partnerships by

providing the foundation for deep, transparent, and vulnerable engagement between social workers and community members.

Research, in particular, necessitates a strong commitment to reflexive practice. Reflexivity in research is broadly understood as an awareness of the influence of the researcher's values and beliefs on the research process and outcomes (Ide & Beddoe, 2024; Probst & Berenson, 2014). Another core component of reflexivity is positionality. Positionality refers to the way in which we understand ourselves and how our intersectional identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion) shape our self-concept, lived experience, and relationship to our research (Piedra, 2023; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). Reflexive practices urge researchers to critically examine the ways in which their social identity, positionality, beliefs, and biases shape their research (Berger, 2015; Gill, 2022; Tajima, 2021). These practices also center the cultural and political contexts of both the researcher and the participants (Gill, 2022; Hesse-Biber et al., 2012), including historical and present contexts that may promote and sustain injustice and oppression. The intentional inclusion, integration, and reporting of reflexive practices supports transparency, collaboration, and integrity in research (Gill, 2022; Probst & Berenson, 2014), all of which are crucial for a social work research agenda that aims to address injustices and promote systems change (Coburn & Gormally, 2017; Wahab et al., 2012). Reflexive practices, including the introspection around researcher positionality, also allow for a critical examination of unequal power dynamics (Andress et al., 2020) and confrontation of beliefs and biases that may prevent building trustworthy and accountable partnerships between researchers and community members (Cadman et al., 2024).

Although traditionally regarded as a hallmark of qualitative research, reflexivity has recently begun to also be utilized in quantitative research as a means to engender more ethical,

transparent, and collaborative research (Jamieson et al., 2023; Luoma & Hietanen, 2024). This includes the recognition and acknowledgement of quantitative researchers' positionality and their relationship to the research questions, as well as critical thinking about reflexivity throughout all phases of the quantitative research process (e.g., How can the research team collect and disseminate data in a way that is accessible to the population being studied?, In what ways might a particular analytic approach reproduce existing biases or inequities?) (Jamieson et al., 2023). Additionally, child welfare researchers have begun to use participatory research methods and reflexive practices to amplify voices of those with lived experience in the child welfare system and improve child welfare practices (Rosen & Proctor, 2003; Seekamp et al., 2023; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014). Despite the recent uptick in the use of reflexivity across various research methodologies, there are few existing procedures and approaches for applying reflexive practices and engaging in reflexivity within child welfare research.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an illustration of reflexivity in qualitative child welfare research. Through a comprehensive illustration of reflexive practices utilized in a larger study conducted by the first author, this paper offers theoretical and practical guidance as well as specific strategies for engaging in reflexive practices. Furthermore, this work is informed by Walsh's typology of reflexive practice (Walsh, 2003) and illustrates the steps taken in applying this typology to child welfare research. A crucial goal of this paper is to encourage child welfare researchers to intentionally incorporate these practices into their work as a means to enable greater collaboration, trust, and authentic partnerships. Since transformative change necessitates partnering with and centering the voices of families and communities that are most impacted by the system, engagement in these practices may be an essential precondition to achieving a more just and equitable child welfare system. This qualitative methods paper utilizes examples from a

larger empirical study as an illustration of application and ultimately aims to build the scaffolding for incorporating reflexive practices that will cultivate collaborative partnerships among child welfare researchers, families, and communities as a means to drive systemic change.

Methods

Parent Study

The overarching goal of the larger empirical study was to examine the points of overlap and intersection between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives to these systems from the perspective of parents and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who are currently engaged with these systems through their practice. The study was guided by Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) principles (Israel et al., 1998; Ruff & Harrison, 2020) and aimed to prioritize partnerships among community members, community organizations, academic researchers, and other community partners at every phase of the research process (Wallerstein et al., 2017). Overall, the investigation set out to utilize qualitative and quantitative evidence to generate actionable community-informed programmatic and policy recommendations aimed at transforming the child welfare system. To achieve this goal, the investigation prioritized a collaborative community-engaged approach that centered the lived expertise of youth and families impacted by these systems as well as social workers working within them as the primary evidence needed for systems change.

Utilizing focus group methodology, the parent study included a total of 24 individuals (n = 24) in the following distinct participant groups: 1) parents and caregivers who had experienced child welfare involvement with their children and were involved with child welfare when they

were a child (n = 6), 2) parents or primary caregivers whose child or relative was involved with child welfare (n = 7), 3) young adults who had experienced child welfare involvement themselves (n = 7), and 4) social workers who were currently engaged with the child welfare and/or juvenile legal systems through their practice (n = 4). In line with core principles of a collaborative approach to research, the study team invited all community members who participated in this research to engage in meaning making and member checking sessions where initial findings from the focus groups were presented and collectively interpreted (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017). The purpose of these sessions was to support inclusion of all community members in every step of the research process, as well as to ensure that initial findings resonated with participants' experiences and perspectives and that recommendations for systems change were grounded in the lived experiences of community members (Allen et al., 2019). Following meaning making and member checking sessions as well as formal thematic analysis of focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a survey with compiled recommendations for systems change was developed and disseminated back to focus group participants and community partners. The purpose of this survey was to allow all participants the opportunity to give input on recommendations generated in other focus groups to prioritize recommendations for policy advocacy and systems change.

Current Study

The illustration in this paper is put forth following careful engagement in critical positionality examinations and reflexive practices by the first author throughout the parent study. These reflexive practices are central to supporting strong and authentic collaborations with community partners (Gill, 2022; Ide & Beddoe, 2024; Probst & Berenson, 2014). Such practices have the potential to challenge hierarchical research structures and enable research agendas that

are truly representative of the perspectives of those most impacted by the systems being studied. The five steps proposed in this paper offer a guiding framework, informed by successes and missteps of the first author, for engagement in reflexive practice that may strengthen collaborative research partnerships and ultimately support in developing and disseminating the evidence for ethical, equitable, and meaningful child welfare systems change.

Applying Walsh's Typology of Reflexive Practice to Child Welfare Research

To support inclusive and thorough reflexive practice applied throughout all phases of the research process, the first author utilized Walsh's (Walsh, 2003) comprehensive approach to reflexivity. Walsh's typology of reflexive practice incorporates four overlapping and intersecting facets of reflexivity: 1) personal, 2) interpersonal, 3) methodological, 4) contextual (Walsh, 2003). Personal reflexivity necessitates a reflection on researchers' own assumptions, expectations, reactions, and biases (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Walsh, 2003). Personal reflexivity incorporates a critical examination of researcher positionality and the ways in which researcher intersectional identities, biases, and lived experience may shape the research process and outcomes (Walsh, 2003). Interpersonal reflexivity involves an acknowledgement and appreciation for participants' unique perspectives and the ways in which their interpretations may impact the research process, as well as a reflection on the ways in which the relationships of the research team may impact the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Walsh, 2003). Methodological reflexivity refers to the considerations around methodological decisions and the ways in which these decisions may impact the process and outcomes of research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Walsh, 2003). Finally, contextual reflexivity refers to situating the research project within its cultural and historical context while also aiming to positively impact the context in which the project is located (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Walsh, 2003). While Walsh's (2003)

typology allows for incredible flexibility and tailoring, it does not provide concrete steps to support the implementation of reflexive practices within research.

The first author utilized concrete and specific practices spanning all four of Walsh's (2003) reflexive dimensions to develop a guiding framework that addresses each of the facets of reflexivity outlined in Walsh's (2003) typology. **Reflexive writing** in various forms was utilized throughout the lifespan of the project. First, journaling was used at the inception of the project to examine researcher assumptions and biases that may have shaped the research questions, and expectations of the research process and intended outcomes (Ortlipp, 2008; Wyatt, 2007). Next, written and/or recorded memos were completed prior to and immediately after every focus group and meeting with community partners. These memos provided details on interpersonal dynamics and relationships, examined assumptions and biases of the researcher and participants (from the perspective of the first author), emphasized crucial moments of insight from both participants and the lead researcher, reflected on the context impacting the process and outcomes, and highlighted gaps in the researchers thinking (Lempert, 2007; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). To promote **collaboration** and engage in interpersonal reflexivity, the first author shared these memos with a member of the research team and asked this team member to provide authentic feedback around assumptions, biases, and methodological decisions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Finally, in line with participatory research designs, the first author engaged in multiple **member reflection** meetings with research participants and community partners throughout the course of the research project (Finlay, 2002b). Prior to initiation of the focus groups, the first author met with community partners and research team members to build a collaborative research agenda and ensure that focus group questions were clear and representative of the research agenda. At the culmination of data collection, the first author presented initial findings to research

participants and community members and allowed them the space to provide their own interpretation of the initial results and propose methods of dissemination that would support tangible impact. These member reflection practices and the reflexive writing that accompanied them incorporated all four dimensions of reflexivity (Walsh, 2003) and supported a truly collaborative research process.

Proposed Process with Illustrative Examples

The five steps outlined below offer a proposed guiding framework to facilitate engagement in reflexive practice within child welfare research, informed by the first author's experiential insights. This framework aims to deepen researcher self-awareness, cultivate more authentic and equitable research partnerships, and support the co-creation of evidence between researchers, practitioners, lived experts, and community organizations and draws on applications from Walsh's (2003) model. The steps in this framework focus on concrete examples of how to apply reflexive practices to each dimension of Walsh's (2003) reflexive typology, where step 1 in this model includes personal and interpersonal reflexivity, steps 2-3 include personal, interpersonal, and contextual reflexivity, and steps 4-5 include personal, interpersonal, contextual, and methodological reflexivity. These examples are intended to facilitate clear and practical implementation of reflexive practices within child welfare research. Ultimately, this framework seeks to enhance the quality of collaborative research partnerships and meaningfully contribute to transformative systems change. The five steps are visually represented in Figure 3.1.



Figure 3.1. Illustrative steps for reflexive child welfare research

Step 1. Examining Positionality, Biases, and Assumptions

Before solidifying the research agenda and engaging in the formal research process, it is essential for child welfare researchers to take an introspective approach that critically examines researchers' positionality, assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions. Since child welfare research typically involves working with historically and persistently marginalized communities, this critical examination can facilitate authentic research partnerships by acknowledging power dynamics and the ways in which social work scholars and practitioners have been complicit in harm, challenge preconceived assumptions and biases that may sustain the status quo within child welfare, and create space for research agendas that are more relevant and grounded in the realities of those who experience involvement with the child welfare system. Without this introspective approach, child welfare researchers run the risk of reinforcing biases and

stereotypes, exacerbating power imbalances, and ultimately limiting relevance and impact of the research. Engagement in this introspective approach may involve the following:

- *Identifying pre-existing beliefs and assumptions:* Consider what you assume to be true about the child welfare system (e.g., reformist belief that child welfare must be maintained yet improved upon vs. abolitionist belief that the current child welfare system must be eliminated and replaced with practices and resources that better support the safety and wellbeing children and families).
- *Critical examination of positionality:* How has your positionality and lived experience shaped your understanding of the child welfare system? Are your assumptions and biases influenced by your identities, privilege, professional training, and/or secondhand narratives?
- *Reflexive practices to examine biases and assumptions:* Consider maintaining a reflexivity journal or engaging in a narrative autobiography (Ellis, 2004) to document how researcher positionality, biases, assumptions, and expectations may influence the research questions, process, and outcomes. These reflexive practices are crucial prior to the inception of the research project, however, should also be thoughtfully maintained throughout the life course of the project.

Application: for Step 1, reflexive writing was utilized to examine and reflect upon personal and interpersonal reflexivity.

Example: First author's reflexive journal entry prior to initiation of the research project.

I'm a doctoral student and clinical social worker. I'm a white, cisgender, able-bodied individual. My identities hold immense power and privilege. As a white social worker, I also hold an identity that has historically and continues to perpetuate harm within child welfare. I am

continuing to unlearn the white saviorism that upholds social work, and I still have lots of work to do. I recognize that many folks may not feel safe sharing certain things with me.

I am also a survivor of early childhood trauma, but despite the violence in my own home, I was never involved with child welfare. I think this was likely due to my protected identity as a white middle class child. I am coming to this work with the understanding that in order to make real change, we have to center the voices and experiences of those who are most impacted by harmful systems.

This project came into being from my clinical work experience as an emergency department social worker at a children's hospital. In my work there, I witnessed countless harmful and racist practices that led to child welfare and law enforcement intervention for BIPOC families at much higher rates than white families. I am coming to this work as an abolitionist. I don't believe the child welfare system or the juvenile legal system protects children and families. I feel we need to reimagine family support in this country and develop community held and led strategies to support families.

Benefits of this approach: This reflexive writing process supported the lead researcher in deeper self-discovery and allowed her to recognize her biases, privileges, and assumptions more clearly. The clarity offered through the reflexive writing process facilitated more honest and intentional communication with participants and community partners which ultimately supported the development of a more collaborative research agenda.

Step 2. Naming Positionality and Identity

Transparency about researcher identity and positionality is an act of accountability that can promote trusting and authentic partnerships between researchers and community members.

Simply examining one's positionality is not sufficient for building collaborative relationships.

Researchers should also consider explicitly sharing insights about their identity and positionality with participants as an active commitment to more accountable, honest, and ethical research practices. This transparency is particularly important when the researcher holds an identity that has historically contributed to harm (i.e., white social worker). Acknowledging this history is a crucial step towards accountability as well as interrupting cycles of harm and/or potentially exploitative research practices. Naming researcher positionality and identity may incorporate the following:

- *Explicit acknowledgement:* In meetings with research participants and community partners, publications, and presentations, openly share about researcher positionality and intersectional identities and how these may impact the research process and outcomes.
- *Going beyond the superficial:* Explicit acknowledgement is not just about listing demographic characteristics. Acknowledgement requires vulnerability, transparency, and explicit recognition of power dynamics present and researcher complicity in systems that may have perpetuated harm.
- *Reflexive practices to support explicit acknowledgement of identity and positionality:* Consider writing draft positionality statements that will be shared with academic colleagues in meetings, publications, and in presentations. When engaging with participants and community partners, consider hosting introductory meetings where you transparently share about your identity, experiences, and your relationship to the research. Vulnerably sharing about identity is challenging, and engaging in reflexive memos to document researcher feelings around sharing identity and the potential impact of this explicit identity acknowledgement may support a deep and honest reflexive process.

Application: for Step 2, reflexive writing and audio recordings were utilized to examine and reflect upon personal, interpersonal, and contextual reflexivity. Crucial insights from this reflexive writing and recording process were also shared with research participants and a research team member to support collaboration and accountability.

Example: First author's reflexive memo prior to the first focus group with parents and caregivers.

It's the start of my first focus group with parents who were also involved in the system as children and I'm feeling VERY nervous, way more nervous than I thought I was going to be. I am worried about my introduction and sharing my own positionality as a social worker who holds an identity that has historically perpetuated harm. I am worried I am going to come off as disingenuous. I'm also wanting to make sure that just logistically it goes smoothly and that people don't feel uncomfortable and that I'm able to appropriately manage group dynamics for a population that I haven't had much experience partnering with. I'm just way more surprisingly nervous than I thought I was going to be. I really want this work to have impact and I am worried that this might not go anywhere. Or worse, it might actually make people feel bad and perpetuate harm.

Benefits of this approach: This reflexive writing process supported the lead researcher in processing some of her emotions around vulnerably sharing her positionality and intersectional identities with research participants and community partners. The act of developing positionality statements and processing vulnerability around sharing them allowed her the space to more clearly, honestly, and openly share details about her identity with research participants. She believes this ultimately allowed participants to feel more seen and respected which then led to more open and authentic interactions.

Step 3. Reflecting on the Specific Ways in Which Positionality and Identity Impact the Research Process and Outcomes

Researcher positionality and intersectional identities will inevitably shape the formation of research questions, interactions with participants and community partners, and data interpretation. Without careful and intentional reflection, researchers may unintentionally validate biased assumptions or overlook critical perspectives. Considering the specific ways positionality and identity impact the research process and outcomes may include reflections on the following topics:

- *Power dynamics:* Acknowledge and reflect on the unequal power dynamics and the ways in which the researcher holds power and privilege relative to research participants and community partners. Consider how the researcher might begin to shift these power dynamics.
- *Impact on data collection:* Acknowledge and accept that researcher identity will likely influence participants' willingness to share their experiences openly.
- *Risk of overshadowing voices:* While reflexive practices are crucial to qualitative research, researchers must ensure that their voices and identities are not centered over the narratives of research participants and community partners. In quantitative or mixed methods research, this might include asking research participants and community members to help develop the research questions. For example, when working with specific data sets, what questions might participants want to know, or what might they add/change about the questions the researcher has already developed?
- *Reflexive practices to support reflection on the ways in which identity impacts the research process and outcomes:* Consider writing reflexive memos and engaging in

collaborative reflexivity with research team members to critically examine how the research process and outcomes have been impacted by researcher identity.

Application: for Step 3, reflexive writing and audio recordings were utilized to examine and reflect upon personal, interpersonal, and contextual reflexivity. Insights from these reflexive writing and recording process were shared with a research team member to support collaboration and to deepen the reflexive process by allowing the lead researcher to receive feedback around the assumptions and biases that emerged in writings and recordings.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the second focus group with parents and caregivers.

Once again, I am floored by the amazing people whom I had the privilege of sharing space with in the focus group today. They were all so incredible and I am honored that they were willing to share their stories with me and others. Today's session was definitely more challenging than the first one. There were some conflicting opinions that started a bit of an argument between group members. I was doing my best to let it play out and let them all work it out, but when one of the white focus group members made what felt like a microaggression towards a parent of color, I felt I had to step in. When the parent of color was saying "well in my experience, when they took my child away because of my addiction...", the white kinship caregiver interrupted her and said "yeah, I've seen your story one thousand times and I'm trying to explain to you that...". I am not sure if I did the right thing – but I stepped in and said – "while all of you have experience with child welfare, it's very important that we honor everyone's unique experience and be respectful of each other's stories." It felt vulnerable and stressful to interrupt the focus group members and I'm worried I maybe came off as a white savior in that moment, but I felt that comment had to be addressed. I'm also worried that my

interruption may have drastically shifted the content of the focus group and therefore significantly impacted the outcome. That said, after a few awkward moments of silence, the tension ended up being diffused and the parents continued on to have a beautiful conversation around the racial disparities they notice within child welfare. I definitely feel like I have a lot to learn as a facilitator in a group where I am an outsider – I have no lived experience with child welfare. My prior work with trauma survivors, I felt like an insider because I am also a survivor of childhood trauma, and I think this positionality helped me feel more confident in my facilitation. With these groups, I don't have that confidence and it's definitely a steep learning curve.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the first focus group with social workers.

I had a really clear and powerful personal experience of feeling overwhelmed during this focus group. Each social worker had so much to say about all the ways in which law enforcement becomes involved in their work and all of the unique systemic injustices they see in their practice. Since each of them represented a different practice setting, it started to feel like there is SO MUCH wrong with the ways in which American society treats families, and that our work as social workers will never have real meaningful impact because everything is just so broken and harmful. I felt overcome with frustration and sadness by this harsh reality. The participants also named this dynamic and talked about how working as a social worker will burn you out so quickly – that we all start this work with hope for change and then get so burnt out and realize that we can't do anything and often have to tell the people we work with that there is nothing we can do because the resources and systemic support that families need just don't exist. This was really heavy to sit with, I think for all of us. Curious if this heaviness will continue to sit with me and possibly impact dissemination of these findings – will this work really have impact?

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the second focus group with young adults.

These folks are so beyond inspiring and every time I hear their stories I feel so privileged to share space with them and then I fully re-committed to working on systems change. They remind me that I HAVE to use my power and privilege to make some changes... They talked about the compounding trauma of feeling like their racial and cultural identities were being erased while they were also ripped from their families – one youth told a tearful story of how her hair was ruined because her white foster family didn't understand Black hair and how this continues to be a point of shame for her and a constant reminder of the pain she endured. I just feel so grateful to have been able to hear these stories and I know I can't just let these stories and experience sit as “dissertation data” – that would be such a selfish act and a true disservice to these youth.

Benefits of this approach: This reflexive writing process supported the lead researcher in naming and processing her emotions that came up throughout the data collection and analysis process. The act of naming and processing these feelings through writing and audio recordings allowed her the opportunity to recognize how her own identities and emotions were impacting the research process and ultimately provided a space to personally reflect on this without centering her own experience when sharing space with research participants. Additionally, by sharing these reflections with another member of the research team, she received valuable feedback around her unseen biases, assumptions, and missing analytical insights. This exchange supported ongoing self-reflection and greater openness to alternative perspectives and interpretations. For example, after sharing a reflexive memo written at the end of a focus group with young adults, the research team member asked the lead researcher to think more critically about intersectionality: *“Think about intersectional factors that could be impacting how youth of*

color are experiencing racism in these systems. For example, do queer youth have distinct experiences compared to straight youth?" The lead researcher believes that these reflexive practices provided the opportunity to continuously refocus the research on the experiences, needs, and wants of research participants and community partners, thereby further supporting a collaborative, community-engaged research project.

Step 4. Challenging Assumptions

It is crucial for researchers to recognize and respect that community members and research participants may have expertise, values, and beliefs that contradict what researchers believe to be true. One of the complexities of working with historically and persistently marginalized communities is recognizing that communities that are not well-served by a system may still support that system, resist calls for its complete abolition, or have a challenging time imagining system alternatives. Community members and individuals outside of academia or broader intellectual spaces may not want sweeping system change, and this must be acknowledged and honored by researchers. Challenging researcher assumptions may incorporate the following:

- *Avoid projection of researcher views:* The existence of systemic oppression does not imply that all individuals who have experienced system involvement will align with researcher expectations of reform, resistance, or abolition.
- *Seek to understand and learn from lived experts:* Some individuals and communities may have had neutral or even positive experiences with the system, while others may feel trapped within and struggle to envision alternatives. Researchers should prioritize listening to and learning from community members with lived experience of these systems without imposing researcher biases about reform, transformation, or abolition.

- *Reflexive practices to support challenging assumptions about reform and abolition:*

Consider engaging in reflexive memos and collaborative reflexivity with research team members to explore the tensions between harm caused by the system and the reality that no clear alternatives exist for many individuals within that system. Additionally, reflexive memos may be useful in challenging researcher biases and assumptions around the need for reform, transformation, or abolition.

Application: for Step 4, reflexive writing and audio recordings were utilized to examine and reflect upon personal, interpersonal, and contextual reflexivity. Furthermore, member reflection meetings were utilized to support methodological reflexivity and challenge the lead researchers' assumptions around methodological choices. Insights from reflexive writing, recording, and member reflection meetings were shared with research participants, community partners, and a research team member to support collaboration, trust, and accountability.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the first focus group with parents and caregivers.

Absolutely humbled after the first focus group. These parents who were also in the system as children are so incredibly strong and powerful. I was surprised by how many of them actually noted some good in the system and felt that some CPS contact was necessary. One of them was even making comments that family reunification is not always good. My surprise around this definitely showed my bias because I was so sure all of them would want to just abolish the system. I also found it fascinating that when asked to dream up a new system they all just talked about minor but meaningful ways to fix the current system – no one really offered creative solutions around a new system entirely. It felt to me like they have been so oppressed by the system, as both children and parents, that they couldn't really even dream up an alternative that

isn't just fixing what is already there. But I think that could also be a privileged way to look at it because I've never had system contact, it's so easy for me to think that we should build something new and different.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the first focus group with young adults.

One theme that has come up across all groups is that it seems really challenging for folks to reimagine the system... I think this is a meaningful finding in and of itself – but it also will definitely take my results and recommendations for policy advocacy in a new direction. The recommendations coming from focus group participants are much more geared toward small changes within the system that currently exists (e.g., today all the youth recommended trauma informed training for both law enforcement AND CPS social workers). I really thought that the groups were going to talk more about abolition and/or about entirely new systems, not fixing what already exists. But I think my abolitionist perspective really skewed my idea of what data I was going to find – and speaks to the fact that I don't have lived experience in the system and can be extra critical because I've never been oppressed by child welfare or law enforcement.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of the second focus group with young adults.

Interestingly, this was the first group that talked about abolition unprompted. When I asked them to reimagine the system one of them said "there shouldn't be a system" and then they all kind of rolled with that. I haven't had an experience yet where youth or parents who have been in the systems so clearly state that the systems need to be abolished. I am not sure why this came out in this group particularly, but it was very refreshing. What was particularly wonderful was that these youth were able to talk about abolition while also talking about what they would like to see in terms of systems change because they know abolition isn't necessarily realistic at this moment in time. Their priorities for change were: have folks with lived experience support

youth in foster care, make sure they are trauma informed and culturally matched, and reduce police presence.

Benefits of this approach: These reflexive processes supported the lead researcher in challenging her biases and assumptions, particularly around abolition. She came to the work as a self-described “abolitionist” and was truly surprised when this perspective was not often shared by research participants. The reflexive processes provided the opportunity to reflect upon what she was hearing from participants and learn from them without consistently projecting her own biases around abolition of the child welfare system. Furthermore, the reflexive memos/ journal entries served as a record of her evolving and at times cyclical thoughts (as evident in one example above, she continues suggest that abolition is the “right” answer) and supported her in staying accountable to the research participants, community partners, and the goals of this collaborative research agenda that aimed to center the voices of those impacted by the system.

Step 5. Accepting That Engagement in Critical Examination of Positionality, Naming Identity, and Engaging in Reflexive Practices Does Not Guarantee Acceptance or Allyship

A common pitfall in reflexive research is the assumption that acknowledging researcher identity and positionality while engaging in ongoing reflexive practices will lead to trust, solidarity, or exemption from critique. The process of accepting that researchers may not achieve allyship might include the following:

- *Understand that allyship as not self-determined:* Even if a researcher positions themselves as an ally, individuals and communities may still view their presence with skepticism and be unwilling to share openly. Acknowledge that this skepticism and guardedness is warranted, particularly given the unequal power dynamics and the fact

that both researchers and social workers have historically perpetuated harm within child welfare.

- *Be prepared for rejection or discomfort:* Some individuals and communities may distrust research motives, question researcher ability to understand their experiences, and/or reject the research framework altogether. Accept this rejection and recognize that engagement in critical identity exploration and reflexive practice does not absolve historical and contextual wrongdoing.
- *Avoid defensive reactions:* Reflexivity is not about seeking validation as a researcher. Engagement in reflexive practices is about being accountable for how researcher presence, positionality, and intersectional identity influences the research process.
- *Ethical follow-up and dissemination:* Informing research participants about the impact of their contributions is essential for transparency, respect, and accountability. Consider direct and personalized outreach to participants and community partners throughout the research process summarizing research impact and allowing space for follow-up questions and critical feedback. Furthermore, ensure that participant and community partner contributions are specifically acknowledged, and respect participant wishes regarding ongoing engagement and dissemination.

Application: for Step 5, reflexive writing and audio recordings were utilized to examine and reflect upon personal and interpersonal reflexivity. Additionally, member reflection meetings were utilized to support methodological reflexivity specifically around ethical follow-up and dissemination of research findings. Insights from these reflexive processes were shared with research participants, community partners, and research team member to support collaboration and accountability.

Example: First author's reflexive memo at the end of a meaning making sessions with parents and caregivers.

After we had come to an agreement on how these parents wanted the results of the focus group to be interpreted and what they wanted prioritized for systems change, one mother looked at me and said "So what are you going to do about this? Are you going to use all the power of the big university and actually do something to help us? Or are you going to just use this information for your research and move on?" I was taken aback and DEFINITELY didn't respond as thoughtfully as I should have. But I made a commitment to her that I would use my privilege to support them in making some tangible systems change. I said it could take a long time, but I am committed to this work. Reflecting back on this, despite how uncomfortable I felt in the moment, I'm so glad she pushed me. That was so important. I needed the reminder that I am not a member of their community and I can't just exploit their time and voices for the sake of MY research agenda. I better figure out a tangible and meaningful way to use this data to support systems change.

Benefits of this approach: These reflexive processes provided the opportunity for the lead researcher to process the feedback received from research participants and community partners. This dedicated space for reflection allowed her to respond in the moment with less defensiveness and supported her in coming to a place of acceptance around the rejection she at times experienced. Furthermore, having a space to record and process these moments ultimately kept her accountable to the feedback received from participants and community partners and she believes this accountability facilitated deeper trust and collaboration.

Conclusion

The current paper utilizes concrete examples from the reflexive practices described above to provide a comprehensive illustration of engaging in reflexivity within child welfare research. This illustration is not intended to be prescriptive or linear, nor is it meant to be a one-size-fits-all approach to reflexive practice. Instead, this paper aims to remove some of the opacity that often accompanies the notion of reflexivity in research and provide a scaffolding to support intentional reflexive practices that may ultimately promote child welfare system transformation. More specifically, the illustration put forth in this paper aims to establish a framework for incorporating reflexive practices that will ultimately support collaborative partnerships and drive transformative systemic change within child welfare. By utilizing this framework, both qualitative and quantitative child welfare researchers may be able to work toward more collaborative, accountable, and nuanced research contributions that acknowledge structural and systemic issues as well as researcher's role in shaping how those issues are understood and addressed. It is the author's hope that the illustration put forth in this manuscript is not viewed as finite, prescriptive, or without flaws, but instead a tool that can be built upon, adapted, and utilized as a mechanism to promote collaboration as a means to achieve transformative change.

This paper is not without limitations or missteps. Future work may consider incorporating additional reflexive practices that may be appropriate for other child welfare research including: narrative autobiography and self- interview (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Furthermore, the current project operated under a limited timeline as it was a component of the first author's dissertation study. Additional time would have likely contributed to more robust opportunities to engage in reflexive practices. For example, reflexivity discussions with research participants and community partners and receiving ongoing feedback around positionality and reflexivity from

the entire research team may have supported deeper connections and collaborations between researchers, participants, and community partners which in turn may have contributed to greater impact. Future work would benefit from thoughtfully and intentionally integrating these practices into the research design, ensuring sufficient time for meaningful engagement with and reflection on reflexive practices. This type of intentional approach may support truly collaborative research that challenges traditional hierarchical research structures and centers the voices of lived experts and community partners.

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Chapter Four: “We Are Not Disorderly Kids”: Young Adult, Family, & Social Work Perspectives on Disrupting the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline

Abstract

Children and youth involved in child welfare face disproportionately high risk of juvenile legal system contact compared to their non-involved peers. This is largely due to a structurally inequitable process that funnels youth from child welfare into the legal and carceral systems. Disruption of this process requires an in-depth understanding, informed by those with lived experience, of the various ways, patterns, and points in families’ lives in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and overlap. It also necessitates the development of concrete alternatives to the failures of the child welfare and juvenile legal systems that lead to youth incarceration. As a first step towards disruption, the goal of this study is to examine the points of overlap and intersection between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives from the perspective of parents and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who are currently engaged with these systems through their practice. Informed by ecological systems theory and community based participatory research principles, this investigation utilized a multi-phase, community-engaged, participatory approach. Methods included focus groups, meaning-making and member-checking sessions, and survey methodology. Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. Results demonstrate strong support for urgent transformative change of the child welfare system as participants collectively describe the current system as one that perpetuates trauma, disproportionately harms marginalized communities, and lacks adequate preventative support. Lived experts and community partners recommend both short and long-term recommendations for transformative change including an immediate rollout of trauma-informed training for all individuals who respond to child welfare concerns and formal policy

and program initiatives to build a new emergency response system rooted in community leadership, lived experience, and culturally responsive support. Future efforts to realize these goals should involve collaboration with policy experts to develop actionable policy agendas that advance transformative change.

Introduction

In the United States, approximately 600,000 children are served by the foster care system annually (United States Children's Bureau, 2022). Of those, only 13% enter foster care for concerns of physical abuse and 4% for concerns of sexual abuse (United States Children's Bureau, 2022). The majority 62%, approximately 370,000 children, enter foster care due to concerns of neglect (United States Children's Bureau, 2022). Although neglect is the primary contributing factor for children entering foster care (United States Children's Bureau, 2022), neglect often serves as a proxy for family poverty and the lack of resources associated with living in poverty (e.g., stable housing, adequate food, access to medical and mental health care) (Palmer et al., 2023; Roberts, 2020; Ruth, 2024; Slack et al., 2004; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Despite the potential to reduce the risk for neglect by providing preventive measures that address the economic needs of many families, the response from child welfare often fails to address these needs and is typically centered around blaming and punishing families for circumstances related to poverty (Jacobs et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020). Foster care placement is often a traumatic experience of family separation that is associated with many long-term negative consequences and poor outcomes in adulthood including mental health concerns, poverty and homelessness, physical health concerns, and incarceration (Doyle, 2007; Engler et al., 2022; Holman & Ziedenberg, 2022; Trivedi, 2019; Warburton et al., 2014). Given the relatively preventable nature of neglect through the provision of economic resources and social support for families (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2025) and the poor outcomes associated with foster care, there is a clear need for transformative change of the child welfare system that shifts the blame and burden away from families and provides long-lasting social and economic support.

In addition to the harms related to foster care, children and youth who experience child welfare involvement and/or foster care placement face an increased risk of contact with the juvenile legal system and being sucked into the ‘foster care to prison pipeline.’ Similar to the school to prison pipeline, where inequitable policies and practices in the U.S. push the most at-risk and vulnerable youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, youth from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, youth living in poverty) out of the classroom and into the juvenile legal system (ACLU, 2008; Elias, 2013; Hirschfield, 2018; Mallett, 2015, 2017), there is a comparable foster care to prison pipeline. While the term *pipeline* was chosen by community partners and individuals with lived experience, the research team emphasizes that we do not endorse the implication of passivity or neutrality that the word might suggest. Using *pipeline* should not obscure the fact that the process of funneling youth from one system to another and compounding their trauma is, in fact, deliberate, harmful, and rooted in intentional systemic inequity. The foster care to prison pipeline, in which foster care serves as a structurally inequitable conduit that funnels youth into juvenile and ultimately adult legal systems, highlights a systems failure at direct odds with the stated mission of the national Administration for Children and Families Children’s Bureau, which “seeks to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children....” (Children’s Bureau, 2025). The harms associated with the foster care to prison pipeline and the experience of dual system (child welfare and juvenile legal system) involvement, are greater than those associated with foster care placement alone (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019; Modrowski et al., 2023).

The foster care to prison pipeline can be observed in the unique links between the child welfare and juvenile legal systems in the U.S. Children and youth who have experienced child welfare involvement and/or foster care placement face a disproportionately high risk of subsequent juvenile legal system contact compared to their non-involved peers (Vidal et al.,

2017; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Approximately 60% of youth in the juvenile legal system have a history of child welfare system involvement (Herz & Dierkhising, 2019). Evidence also suggests that over 50% of youth who have experienced foster care involvement will encounter the juvenile legal system through either arrest, conviction, and/or detention by the age of 17 (Courtney et al., 2004; Perez, 2023; Shelden & Troshynski, 2020). Moreover, for youth involved in child welfare, typical risk taking and boundary testing adolescent behavior such as skipping school often results in police response and leads to unnecessary contact with the juvenile legal system (Byers et al., 2024; National Foster Youth Institute, 2021). Many child welfare involved youth enter the juvenile legal system as a result of “placement crimes” that occur in residential placements like group homes where adolescent misbehavior is treated more severely and often results in engagement with law enforcement (Herz et al., 2006; Krinsky, 2010; McClendon et al., 2024; Palcheck, 2021). Additionally, seventy percent of detained youth in the U.S. are held for non-violent offenses including “status offenses” like being tardy or refusing to obey their parents or guardians (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2022), all of which happen more frequently for youth involved with child welfare (Byers et al., 2023). Furthermore, a child welfare bias has been identified in the juvenile legal system, where youth with a history of child welfare involvement are more likely to be convicted of an offense, are less likely to receive probation as a first time offender, and more likely to receive a correctional placement compared to non-child welfare involved youth (Goetz, 2020; Krinsky, 2010; Ryan et al., 2007). Finally, legal system involvement in adolescence is associated with increased risk of arrest and incarceration as an adult (Copeland et al., 2023; Mendel, 2023). These clear overlaps and intersections between the child welfare and juvenile legal system produce the foster care to prison pipeline.

Both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems are also characterized by disproportionate representation of Black and Indigenous youth and families. In child welfare, Black youth represent 14% of the total youth population but account for 22% of those in foster care, and Indigenous youth make up 1% of the total population but account for 2% in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Black and Indigenous youth are also three to four times more likely to be detained than their White peers (Rovner, 2022). The racial disparities in both systems are rooted in deliberate racial oppression. The child welfare system emerged through the formation of charity organizations that sought to rescue and save White children from poverty while purposefully excluding Black children who were deemed as inferior and unworthy (Bates, 2016; Dettlaff & Copeland, 2023). Racial disparities in juvenile and adult legal systems stem from a history of oppression and biased decision-making that have intentionally targeted people of color, fostering a misleading narrative that falsely associates them with criminality and particularly portrays Black youth as less innocent than White youth (Hinton et al., 2018; National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, 2022). The current disparities seen in both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems are historically rooted and intentional. Furthermore, they likely represent the intergenerational nature of systemic oppression, where historically and persistently marginalized families experience systemic poverty, which often results in unstable housing, unemployment with loss of familial welfare benefits, barriers in accessing health and mental health care, and difficulty finding and acquiring childcare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023), all of which are circumstances and conditions that may constitute neglect. This intergenerational cycle of poverty and oppression leads to child welfare intervention largely due to circumstances related to poverty rather than harmful parenting practices (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023; Edwards, 2019), which then increases the

likelihood of law enforcement contact and legal system involvement for both parents and their children (Yi & Wildeman, 2018).

This pipeline also has enduring and intergenerational impacts. Evidence suggests that children of mothers who have a history of foster care involvement and juvenile incarceration are at greater risk of incarceration themselves (Zhao et al., 2020). Additionally, once child welfare involved youth have their first contact with law enforcement, they often find themselves navigating the juvenile legal system with little support and additional unjust biases placed upon them (e.g., the child welfare bias described above, structural and implicit biases faced by youth of color) (Goetz, 2020; Krinsky, 2010; Yamat, 2020). Finally, once a youth has experienced contact with the juvenile legal system, they are significantly more likely to experience arrest and incarceration as an adult (Copeland et al., 2023; Rhoades et al., 2016). All of these factors combine to create an unjust pipeline that is cyclical, multigenerational, and nearly impossible to escape once entered.

The child welfare and juvenile legal systems clearly coordinate and collaborate to perpetuate harm and disproportionately impact historically and persistently marginalized communities, particularly Black and Indigenous youth and families. There is a distinct need for transformative change that will ultimately disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline. Disruption of the pipeline requires an in-depth understanding, informed by those with lived experience, of the various ways, patterns, and points in families' lives in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and overlap to create the pipeline. It also necessitates the development of concrete alternatives to the failures of the child welfare and juvenile legal systems that lead to youth incarceration. Engaging with and including the voices of individuals, families, and communities with lived experience is crucial to developing a deep understanding of the

conditions that create overlaps in the current systems, ensuring that the solutions proposed are most appropriate for those most impacted by these systems, and understanding the specific mechanisms by which the current systems and prior reform efforts have either intentionally or unintentionally perpetuated harm (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021).

As a first step towards disrupting the foster care to prison pipeline, the goal of this study is to examine the points of overlap and intersection between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives from the perspective of parents and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who are currently engaged with these systems through their practice. The study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that individuals exist within multiple layers of intersecting systems and places considerable emphasis on the connections and interactions between these various systems. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) anchors this work in a perspective that moves away from an exclusive focus on individuals and families to one which recognizes the complex multilevel factors and contexts, including systemic racism and socioeconomic oppression, that shape individuals' involvement with child welfare and juvenile legal systems. As stated by Teresa Rafeal of the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, "There is a fine line between parental neglect of children and societal neglect of families" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023, p.3). This work aims to outline system alternatives that acknowledge and address the ways in which racism and socioeconomic oppression impact involvement in child welfare and juvenile legal systems. To achieve this, instead of focusing the response solely on individuals and families by problematizing or criminalizing their actions, structural level factors (e.g., poverty) which lead to child welfare intervention will be recognized and addressed. Utilizing an ecological perspective

and voices of individuals who have been impacted by the systems and those who work within them, this investigation ultimately aims to illuminate promising points for system transformation.

Involving individuals and communities with lived experience is an important approach to collect meaningful insights, shape policies and program initiatives, and improve outcomes for those who have been most impacted by the systems (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative approach to research that is centered upon equitable engagement of community members throughout all aspects of the research process (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR prioritizes partnerships among community members, community organizations, academic researchers, and other stakeholders to promote community health and wellbeing while working to eliminate disparities (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Importantly, CBPR views community members as co-investigators in research and highlights community voices and lived experience as the primary evidence needed to promote change (Israel et al., 1998; Ruff & Harrison, 2020). This work is informed by CPBR and in line with recent investigations utilizing CBPR to amplify voices of those with lived experience and improve practices within child welfare (Ruff & Harrison, 2020; Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014; Waechter et al., 2009).

Guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and informed by CBPR principles (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014; Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017), this community engaged investigation aims to examine the ways in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and overlap to create inequities for youth, shed light on the specific mechanisms by which youth may become incarcerated through their involvement with child welfare, and develop supportive alternatives to system involvement in Washington state. Specific objectives were to (1) conduct focus groups to understand (a) the ways, patterns, and points in

families' lives in which child welfare and juvenile legal systems intersect and (b) identify alternatives to better support children, youth and families to prevent involvement in these systems, and (2) refine and prioritize recommendations for alternatives to these systems identified in focus groups using quantitative and qualitative survey methodology that allows participants to give input on recommendations generated in other focus groups and help prioritize recommendations for policy advocacy and systems change. Results are expected to be foundational for informing systems change through policy advocacy and the development of program initiatives to disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline in Washington state.

Methods

This investigation was co-developed in partnership with community organizations in Washington State serving youth who have experienced child welfare and juvenile legal system involvement. The principal investigator (PI; who also serves as the first author and focus group facilitator) partnered with a university and community-based center (dually funded) that aims to promote evidence-based and community-informed paths to opportunity, including new programs and policy changes for youth and families. The current investigation was part of this center's larger advocacy and policy agenda aimed ultimately at ending youth incarceration in Washington State. Through a series of meetings and connection building opportunities facilitated by this center, the PI also began partnering with a community organization that serves foster youth and a council of individuals who have lived experience in the foster care system (the lived experience council). These community organizations and the lived experience council were involved at each step of the research process, which will be described in detail throughout the methods section.

The PI began meeting with community partners to develop research objectives that supported the overarching missions of these organizations while also centering the perspectives

and lived expertise of young adults and families who have experienced system involvement in Washington State. Emphasizing the importance of a participatory approach, during these initial research meetings the PI facilitated discussions that encouraged community partners to share their insights, concerns, and priorities. This iterative process involved refining initial research objectives based on feedback, organizational priorities, and identifying pressing issues that required further investigation. It also aimed to ensure that the research outcomes would be meaningful to the community, while also supporting advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and program development that could lead to tangible systems change and a reduction in harm to those most impacted by system involvement.

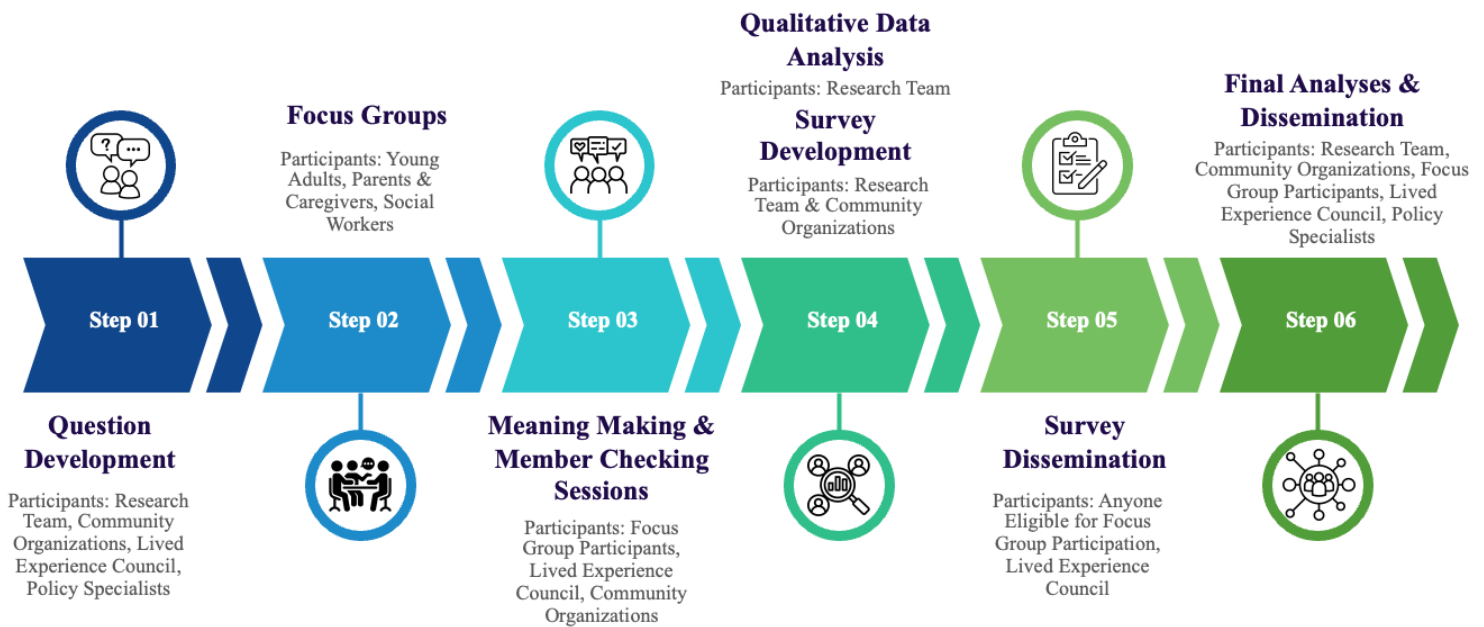
Recognizing the inherent power dynamics in academic-community partnerships, the PI aimed to cultivate an equitable research environment where the knowledge and lived experiences of community partners and lived experts were centered as the primary evidence needed to support transformative change. Furthermore, CBPR principles emphasize and necessitate an examination of positionality and power dynamics that exist within research (Andress et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2015). To support a collaborative approach that aligned with CBPR values, the PI actively engaged in reflexive practices throughout the research process (Walsh, 2003). This approach required a continuous and critical examination of positionality, including how personal background, privileges, and institutional affiliations shaped the research process and outcomes and influenced interactions with community partners and lived experts. By integrating these reflexive practices, including reflexive writing and engagement in member reflection meetings, the PI aimed to acknowledge and mitigate biases, challenge hierarchical research structures, and ensure that the investigation remained ethically sound and truly representative of the voices and priorities of those directly impacted by child welfare and juvenile legal systems.

Details on reflexivity data process and analysis are provided in a separate paper (Scheuer & Jones).

Research Process

This investigation utilized a multi-phase, community-engaged, participatory approach (Figure 4.1). The study began with the development of guiding research objectives and questions in collaboration with community partners which is described above. Following objective and question development, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Focus groups were then conducted with eligible participants to gather in-depth qualitative insights, and focus group data was initially analyzed using rapid qualitative analysis (Neal et al., 2015). Initial focus group findings were shared back with focus group participants and community partners in meaning-making and member-checking sessions, where participants were invited to interpret and refine results in partnership with the research team. Upon completion of meaning-making / member-checking sessions, traditional thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code, categorize, and analyze the focus group data. Insights from meaning-making sessions and qualitative analysis informed the development of a follow-up survey designed to validate and expand upon the qualitative focus group findings. The survey was then disseminated back to focus group participants and the lived experience council, and responses were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and qualitative coding of open-ended items.

Figure 4.1. Research process



Recruitment and Eligibility

Following development of the research objectives and approval by the University Institutional Review Board, the research team collaborated with community partners to develop recruitment fliers and a brief recruitment survey. Three separate fliers with linked surveys were developed (Appendix B) to recruit for three distinct participant groups: 1) parents and caregivers who had experienced child welfare involvement with their children, 2) young adults who had experienced child welfare involvement themselves, and 3) social workers who were currently engaged with the child welfare and/or juvenile legal systems through their practice. Fliers included a QR code that routed all interested individuals to complete the recruitment survey. The PI's contact information was also included as a means to provide the survey link to individuals who were not able to access the QR code. Recruitment surveys asked interested individuals to

identify which group best described them (e.g., young adult, parent or primary caregiver, or social worker). The survey also included basic demographic questions (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity), questions about availability for focus groups (e.g., evenings, weekends), and a request for contact information (e.g., phone number). Interested social workers were also asked to identify which setting they currently practice in.

Parent and young adult recruitment fliers were distributed via email to Washington State community organizations serving youth and families who may have been involved with the child welfare system, local child welfare parent advocacy and advisory groups, and posted on local Facebook affinity groups for individuals and families who may have been involved with child welfare. Social work recruitment fliers were distributed via email to the PI's personal network of social work colleagues, as well as a social work listserv at a local children's hospital, and posted on the *National Association of Social Workers – Washington State Chapter* Facebook page. The research team contacted all interested individuals who completed the recruitment survey via phone to conduct a brief screening call providing more detail about the investigation and assessing for interest and eligibility (Appendix C).

Young adults, parents, and caregivers were eligible if they spoke English, were ≥ 18 years old, had lived experience with child welfare and/or CPS that occurred within Washington State, were comfortable sharing about their experiences with child welfare and/or CPS openly and honestly in a focus group setting, and had capacity to participate in a virtual 90-minute focus group with their cameras on. Additionally, only individuals with historical / closed child welfare cases were included in this investigation to ensure a significantly reduced likelihood of encountering any information that could require a mandated report and potentially perpetuate more harm. Juvenile legal system involvement was not a criterion for eligibility for various

reasons. First, the research team aimed to capture the various points in families lives where child welfare and juvenile legal systems might intersect, even in broad or indirect ways, recognizing that such intersections do not always lead to formal legal system involvement. Second, many young adults and families who have had brief or limited contact with the juvenile legal system do not identify as having a history of juvenile legal system involvement. The research team therefore did not want to exclude individuals who may have had contact with the juvenile legal system but would not identify as such. Social workers were eligible to participate if they were currently practicing in Washington State in a setting that had overlap with child welfare, CPS, law enforcement, and/or the juvenile legal system more broadly, and had capacity to participate in a 90-minute virtual focus group with their cameras on.

Demographics Data Analysis

Participant self-reported race, ethnicity, gender, group that best described them (e.g., young adult, parent, social worker), and social work practice setting (for social workers only) were all obtained from the recruitment survey. Descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies) were utilized to analyze demographic data.

Focus Groups

Focus group questions were carefully designed in collaboration with community partners. This collaborative process aimed to ensure relevance to partnered community organizations' priorities as well as focus group participants, foster engagement within the focus groups, and ensure that topics addressed were both meaningful and culturally appropriate. Focus group questions were centered around 3 domains related to the overarching research objectives: 1) lived experience with the child welfare system; 2) intersections and overlaps between child welfare and juvenile legal systems; and 3) recommendations for systems change / suggestions for

alternatives to child welfare and juvenile legal system involvement. Focus group questions are included in Appendix A.

After completion of screening calls, 31 individuals ($n = 31$) were interested and eligible to participate, and 24 ($n = 24$, 77.5%) ultimately participated in the focus groups. Based on demographic characteristics of interested and eligible individuals, four distinct focus groups were created: 1) parents or primary caregivers who experienced child welfare involvement with their own child/children and were also involved with child welfare when they were a child, 2) parents or primary caregivers who have experienced child welfare involvement with their own child or provided kinship care to a relative, 3) young adults (age 18 – 26) who experienced any prior involvement with child welfare (two separate focus groups), and 4) social workers currently practicing in Washington state. Although many of the participating young adults and caregivers had experienced juvenile legal system contact, for reasons described above, this was only identified during the focus groups.

The five focus group sessions were scheduled and completed via Zoom, a HIPAA compliant virtual platform. All focus groups lasted between 77 – 102 minutes. Virtual recording of the focus groups began once verbal consent was received from each individual participant (Appendix A). To facilitate community engagement through transparent and accountable practices that acknowledge biases and power dynamics present within the research space, the focus group facilitator (the PI) opened each focus group session by naming her positionality and the identities she holds that may have perpetuated harm amongst those impacted by the child welfare system (e.g., white social worker). After this opening statement, the facilitator initiated the focus group questions (Appendix A). At the culmination of each focus group, the facilitator asked each participant if they were interested in ongoing participation via survey completion and

member-checking sessions. The facilitator recorded all responses to the request for ongoing participation.

To support community engagement and ethical research practice, the research team prioritized compensation rates that demonstrated respect for community members' time and expertise (Langness et al., 2023). Young adult and parent participants were compensated \$70 for their 90-minute focus group participation. Focus group one (parents and caregivers who experienced child welfare involvement with their children and were also involved when they were a child) ran approximately ten minutes over time and participants were compensated an additional \$5 for a total of \$75. Social work participants were compensated at a rate of \$50 for their 90-minute focus group participation. The difference in compensation rates between groups reflects an acknowledgement that all social work participants were gainfully employed and that the voices of lived experts are often undervalued and undercompensated.

Meaning-Making and Member-Checking Sessions

In line with core principles of a collaborative approach to research, this investigation aimed to ensure equitable engagement of community members throughout all aspects of the research process (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2017). It was therefore crucial that all community partners and community members who participated in this research were given the opportunity to engage in meaning-making and member-checking sessions where initial findings from the focus groups were presented and collectively interpreted. The purpose of these sessions was to ensure that initial findings resonated with participants' experiences and perspectives, that recommendations for systems change were grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of community members and community partners, and to ultimately move beyond individual

interpretation of the data and support a collective approach that centered community members voices (Allen et al., 2019).

Prior to the meaning-making and member-checking sessions, the first author completed rapid qualitative analysis (Neal et al., 2015) of the focus group data to pull out initial themes and all recommendations for systems change generated in each of the focus groups; this process is described in the analysis section below. These initial themes and compiled recommendations for systems change identified through rapid analysis were then shared back to focus group participants, community organizations, and the lived experience council in meaning-making and member-checking sessions.

The PI scheduled four meaning-making / member-checking sessions: two with any interested focus group participants and two with partnered community organizations and the lived experience council. During the meaning-making / member-checking sessions, the PI shared the initial themes that emerged from the focus groups and asked the following questions: *Does this resonate?; What does not resonate?; What is missing?; Please provide specific examples of what you would like to see as prevention resources and support.* The PI then shared the initial recommendations for systems change efforts and asked the following questions: *Does this resonate?; What does not resonate?; What is missing?; What is the one area you would prioritize for systems change?* Upon completion of meaning-making / member-checking sessions formal thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on focus group data.

Thematic Data Analysis

An analytic process that prioritizes parent, young adult, and social work voices was essential to this project, and the inductive approach of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allows for participant insight to guide the development of themes and recommendations for

systems change. Therefore, thematic analysis of focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilized at various stages throughout the project.

Rapid Analysis

Traditional qualitative thematic analysis is a slow and labor-intensive process that does not lend itself well to the need for timely results (Gale et al., 2019; Neal et al., 2015; Nevedal et al., 2021). Rapid qualitative analysis is a streamlined approach that allows for accurate yet efficient analysis, and is particularly useful when rapid results are needed to inform subsequent waves of data collection or analysis (Nevedal et al., 2021). A rapid analysis approach was needed in this investigation in order to disseminate the findings back to community partners and focus group participants in a timely manner. Therefore, upon completion of focus groups and prior to meaning-making and member-checking sessions, rapid qualitative analysis was utilized to identify initial themes and participant recommendations for systems change. In line with Neal et al.'s (2015) approach to rapid qualitative analysis in which identification of themes occurs concurrently with review of audio recordings of the qualitative data, the PI listened to all focus group recordings and identified initial themes and participant recommendations for systems change based on the overarching research objectives and crucial information that arose during the focus groups. These initial themes and recommendations were then shared back to focus group participants and community partners in meaning-making and member-checking sessions.

Refinement

While rapid qualitative analysis offers valuable strengths, particularly in guiding future phases of data collection and analysis, it is not recommended as a substitute for traditional qualitative methods that offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data and participant experiences (Neal et al., 2015; Nevedal et al., 2021). Therefore, upon completion of

meaning-making / member-checking sessions, traditional thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code the focus group transcripts and categorize codes by themes relevant to the study aims. This process of refining the initial themes through traditional qualitative analysis aimed to ensure that the final themes and recommendations for systems change were more specific, actionable, and truly representative of participants experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, this refinement phase included an additional coder to support validity and reliability of the data.

First, all focus group audio recordings were transcribed and de-identified utilizing Rev.com, a platform that offers prompt transcription services. A modified verbatim transcription format was utilized to omit false starts and filler words. Then, to gain a deep understanding of the data, each transcript was read multiple times prior to beginning the coding process. From these readings, codes - concise labels capturing key content from the focus group transcripts (e.g., “problem child”, “police interactions”) - were developed. These codes were then reviewed repeatedly to detect patterns and organized into broader themes that aligned with the study’s objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Irrelevant codes were discarded, while those that remained were grouped into subthemes under larger thematic categories. The primary coding of all focus groups, development of initial themes and subthemes, initial identification of system change priorities, and selection of illustrative quotes was carried out by the first author. Another member of the research team independently performed secondary coding based on the initial framework created by the PI and identified representative quotes. The two authors then collaborated to review, refine, and confirm the themes and subthemes, resolving any coding discrepancies through discussion until consensus was achieved. Differences in

findings between rapid qualitative analysis and traditional thematic analysis are discussed in the results section.

Survey

Following the member-checking process and completion of thematic analysis, the PI shared the finalized recommendations for systems change with partnered community organizations. A survey with compiled recommendations from all focus groups was then developed in collaboration with partnered community organizations. The purpose of this survey was to allow all focus group participants and members of the lived experience council the opportunity to give input on recommendations generated in other focus groups as a means to prioritize recommendations for policy advocacy and systems change.

The survey was disseminated via secure Google Forms to all focus group participants and the lived experience council. Additionally, individuals who were eligible for focus group participation and had expressed interest in participating but ultimately could not attend the focus group sessions were also given the opportunity to complete the survey. The survey first asked participants to identify which group best described them (e.g., young adult, parent or primary caregiver, or social worker). The survey then included five recommendations and priorities for systems change that had been identified in focus groups and refined in member-checking sessions and asked each survey participant to rank their priorities for systems change from 1 – 5 (1 = most important, 5 = least important). Participants were also asked to provide open-ended responses noting what they believed was missing from the stated priorities and to provide any additional comments. Survey questions are included in Appendix D. All participants who completed the brief survey were compensated \$10.

Survey Data Analysis

The survey data was analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics to prioritize recommendations for systems change. The frequency with which each item was ranked as the top priority (i.e., ranked #1), second priority, third priority, fourth priority, and fifth priority was calculated to highlight items most frequently identified as top priorities by all participants. These quantitative findings were further contextualized through qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended responses, which provided additional insights into priorities and recommendations for systems change.

Results

Demographics

Five focus group sessions were completed with a total of 24 participants: 1) parents and caregivers who experienced child welfare involvement with their own child/children and were also involved with child welfare when they were a child. (n = 6), 2) parents or primary caregivers (n = 7), 3) young adults (n = 4), 4) social workers (n = 4), 5) young adults (n = 3). Demographics are presented in Table 4.1. Overall, focus group participants self-identified as majority female (88%) and represented a diverse range of self-reported racial and ethnic backgrounds (Table 4.1).

Thematic Analysis

Initial Themes and Recommendations

Rapid qualitative analysis (Neal et al., 2015) revealed six initial themes and six recommendations and priorities for systems change: (a) disparities: disparities based on racism and classism, (b) conflicting systems: child welfare and law enforcement work together yet provide conflicting information, (c) communication gaps: no communication across settings leading to unnecessary CPS and law enforcement involvement, (d) policing families through power and control: abuse of power and coercion leading to increased surveillance and

criminalization of youth and families, (e) punitive and traumatizing systems: child welfare and legal systems label, threaten, punish, and traumatize, and (f) prevention: effective prevention means advocacy, resources, and support prior to CPS involvement. Initial recommendations for systems change were: (1) trauma informed training and care, (2) transparency and communication, (3) prevention, support, and resources, (4) major reduction in law enforcement presence, (5) parent, child, and family advocates with lived experience, and (6) culturally responsive support for families.

Meaning-Making and Member-Checking

All individuals who participated in the meaning-making and member-checking sessions generally agreed with the initial themes pulled from the focus groups, although offered some suggestions for refinement that are reflected in the final themes discussed below.

Recommendations for systems change were significantly developed and refined in the meaning-making and member-checking sessions. Development and refinement of the recommendations for systems change is illustrated in Figure 4.2. Many of the initial recommendations were intertwined with the final recommendations, where each final recommendation reflects a synthesis of multiple early insights. The final recommendations for systems change were (1) trauma informed training for all individuals who may respond to child welfare calls, (2) a community-based organization of family advocates with lived experience who respond to child welfare calls alongside other responders (e.g., social workers), (3) prevention resources: creation of a system where youth and parents can anonymously ask for and receive services and support without necessitating a call to child welfare, (4) mentorship and concrete supports for youth and parents who are involved with CPS and/or foster care, and (5) formal initiative that builds an alternative emergency response system to all child welfare calls that sets youth and families up

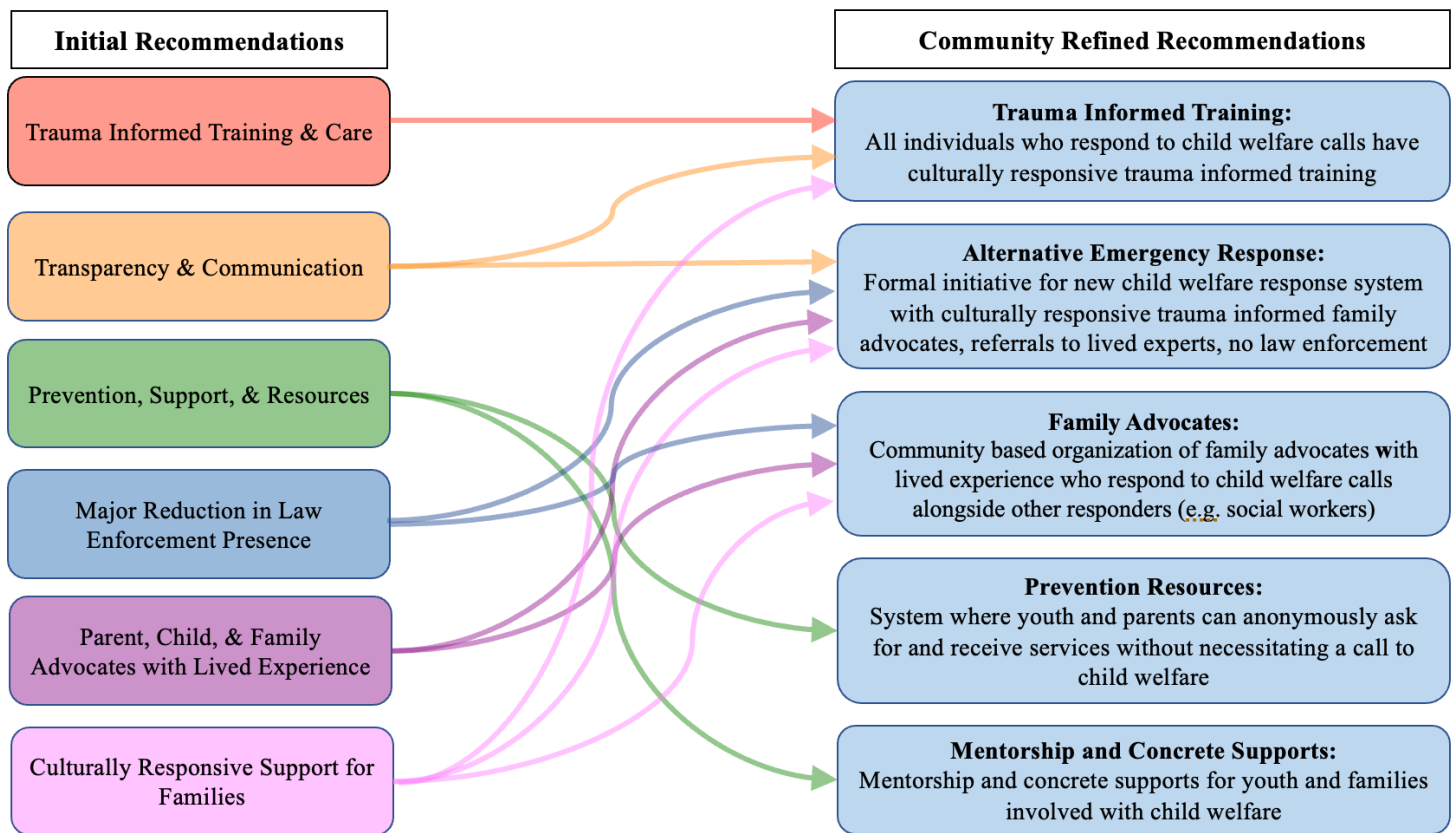
for long term success (e.g., no law enforcement presence, culturally responsive and trauma informed family advocates, referrals to lived experts) (Figure 4.2).

Although there were five distinct final recommendations, meaning-making and member-checking session participants advocated for a two-tiered approach to systems change. The first step would be trauma informed training for all individuals who may respond to child welfare calls to be rolled out across Washington State as soon as possible. The second step would be the development and implementation of a formal initiative that would build an alternative emergency response system to all child welfare calls that includes culturally responsive and trauma informed family advocates, referrals to lived experts, and no law enforcement presence. This two-tiered approach was developed out of an acknowledgement that policy change takes time and resources, and that immediate trauma training would reduce harm in the interim while waiting for the more substantial and impactful change of a new emergency response system.

Refinement: Final Thematic Analysis

Refinement of the focus group qualitative data yielded several final themes summarized in Table 4.2 and illustrated with participants' own words: (a) mechanisms of entry into child welfare, (b) systemic barriers precipitating system involvement, (c) intergenerational cycle of child welfare, (d) disparities and disproportionality, (e) legal system and child welfare intersections, (f) coercion and abuse of power, (g) foster care to prison pipeline, and (h) recommendations for systems change.

Figure 4.2. Recommendations for systems change, before and after meaning-making and member-checking sessions



Note. Additional details provided in the community-refined recommendations reflect insights offered during the meaning-making and member checking-sessions.

Theme 1: Mechanisms of Entry into Child Welfare

In alignment with the overarching objectives guiding the investigation, the focus group facilitator engaged both young adults and parents/caregivers in discussions about their lived experiences with the child welfare system, including the specific circumstances that led to their involvement. Focus group data revealed a wide range of pathways into the system. Participants described entry points including parental substance use, “*when my daughter was born... she tested supposedly for methamphetamines, barbiturates, tricyclics, and THC... And yeah, it started a whole big issue with CPS*”, and parental death, “*she ended up passing away when I was*

12 years old. She was the only mother I really knew because I was only three months old when I was adopted by her.” Others entered the system voluntarily through mechanisms like kinship caregiving, *“I started as a kinship caregiver for a little girl. [Now] I’ve become a foster parent for her and we’re just starting the process of adoption.”* The diverse points of entry into the child welfare system reflected in the focus group data highlight the importance of providing holistic support that may meet family’s needs (e.g., effective substance use treatment, provision of concrete resources) and prevent unnecessary system involvement.

Theme 2: Systemic Barriers Precipitating System Involvement

Consistent with evidence-base demonstrating the interconnectedness of systemic oppression and child welfare intervention (Blumenthal, 2021; Roberts, 2022; Slack et al., 2004), many focus group participants described the systemic barriers that contributed to or prolonged their involvement with the child welfare system. Several participants reflected on how poverty and systemic inequities, rather than maltreatment, were the primary drivers of family separation. As one parent shared, *“two of my kids had to go almost a year without me, just simply because I couldn’t work and get a place for them.”* Another parent described the compounding impacts of unmet needs, highlighting how her request for assistance was denied and this systems failure ultimately resulted in child welfare involvement,

When I think about my case, two years prior to my case, I asked for help. I tried to get housing and the response was, well, if you’re not a drug addict, if you’re not this, then there’s no services for you... And so, you can trace back people’s stories to these points of intervention.

Other participants spoke more broadly about the ways in which child welfare criminalizes families for living in poverty, particularly families from historically and persistently marginalized backgrounds. For example,

That's just the reality of the system that people live in, especially black and brown communities. That is the reality. These are systemic issues that push communities into poverty and into not being able to access treatment, food, all these things that then now you're neglecting your child.

Social workers echoed these concerns, describing how the lack of accessible services often leaves families in hopeless and unsafe situations which then leads to child welfare involvement,

I see a lot of times where families are at the point where they don't feel like they can manage the care of their child at home... they are like, 'I can't pick up my kid from the hospital because I don't feel safe and I don't feel like I can keep my other kids safe because my child needs mental health services that they don't have access to. And I've been screaming at my top of my lungs for help and I can't get it.' And it's very real and it happens all the time.

Together, these narratives highlight the urgent need to shift the focus of child welfare intervention from individual pathology to systemic accountability, demonstrating how structural inequities are often the root causes of family separation and continued system involvement.

Theme 3: Intergenerational Cycle of Child Welfare

Insights and testimonies from focus group participants strongly supported and substantiated the well-researched intergenerational cycle of child welfare involvement and specifically the destructive cycle where individuals who experience system involvement as children are significantly more likely to become involved with child welfare as parents,

compared to those not involve with the system as children (Langevin et al., 2025; Schachter & Kroll, 2021). Focus group participants clearly articulated this intergenerational cycle. One participant reflected,

Even looking back at my mom, my mom was dealing with a lot of depression, mental health issues, and you go back and back and back and back. You see just generation after generation and no one helps, but then they take the kids and cause more trauma and that's passed down. It's passed down.

Another participant described being involved with child welfare since infancy, a pattern that continued with her own child before she even reached adulthood,

I was in CPS myself probably since I was a baby... I went to live with my uncle and aunt when I was 16, became pregnant about three months later... Now I don't know where [my son is] because he's in the system.

One participant recalled aging out of the child welfare system without support, which contributed to the cycle repeating with her own children,

I gave birth to my daughter at 19... and I remember right before I was 18, I remember reaching out to state for help and they closed my case. They were just like, you're old enough now, we're not dealing with it. They closed it... And so then it switched to where I had CPS involved as in me being the parent.

Participants also emphasized how growing up in traumatic foster care environments left them unequipped with the tools or knowledge needed for parenting, further increasing their vulnerability to system involvement,

I came in for what they call it is abuse and neglect... At the time, I was a mother of three boys and I just couldn't understand it. I'm like, wait a minute. All the whoopings I got as a kid, when was it against the law to hit your kid with a belt? I guess I missed a memo.

These personal narratives not only illustrate the enduring consequences of child welfare involvement, but also underscore the urgent need for systemic reform that acknowledges and interrupts these cycles rather than perpetuating them. Without targeted, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive transformative change, the child welfare system could continue to reinforce generational patterns of surveillance and separation.

Theme 4: Disparities and Disproportionality

Focus group data further illuminated the pervasive disparities and racial disproportionality present within the child welfare system (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2006). Across all groups, focus group participants discussed harmful and biased practices that contribute to racial disparities within child welfare. One caregiver shared,

My sister should have been given more of an opportunity to heal because drug addiction, that's a sickness. It was bad. When Black folks do it, I am just going to be real with you. It's bad, it's demonized. But when White people started being on drugs all of a sudden, oh, it's an illness, we need to treat it. And so my sister wasn't treated with that same dignity and so her child, he was removed, taken away from her at birth.

Another parent noted,

[The caseworker] wrote a really nasty report about me. And I really think that was culturally related when she realized that the poverty, how this family functions in their culture isn't what I'm used to. So it's easy for somebody without that lived experience to walk into a home and make a bunch of judgments off of people.

Young adults also reflected broadly on their experiences of bias and racism within child welfare, *“I do want to say that I have dealt with a lot of racial bias in the system.”* They discussed having their racial and ethnic identities stripped from them upon entry into the system. One young adult shared,

When I was adopted by a White family as a Black kid... I used to get so many questions, why is your parents White? Why is your skin dark? Your sisters are White and you're Black. Really ignorant questions from people like that... I also, I never learned to braid my hair. My adopted mother ruined my hair. She cut my hair at a really young age. When I would get knots in my hair, she would cut off the braids instead of having someone help her undo the braids, she would torture my hair is what I say. She tortured it. And I still, to this day, I am working on repairing my hair.

Another noted,

I was adopted by an Irish woman when I was three months old, and I have no culture of my own. All I know is her culture. I know nothing about my family. I'm mixed... And to me, I don't think I'm White presenting at all. I'm obviously very Latina. And it also made an impact on me as a kid because in school I was kind of considered the weird kid.

Despite the diversity of their experiences and routes into the child welfare system, participants consistently reported significant distress related to their interactions with the system. Across narratives, individuals shared experiences of harm that they and/or their children suffered as a result of involvement with the child welfare system.

Social workers engaged with the child welfare system through their practice also reflected on the biases and disparities they've witnessed, for example,

I think people are quick to jump to conclusions to a degree, especially when it comes from a different culture that they don't understand. So I think just that relationship piece is so important. If you just really don't understand the kid and the culture and you don't get it and you have these biases of like, oh, I know in Black and Brown culture hitting is a thing. And it's like there's so much to that as an assumption and a bias and you were carrying that and that's why you're going to go report this thing.

From removal decisions influenced by cultural misunderstandings to the erasure of racial and ethnic identity through transracial foster placements, these collective narratives paint a powerful and troubling picture of how systemic racism operates within child welfare.

Theme 5: Legal System and Child Welfare Intersections

Specific intersections and overlaps between the child welfare and legal systems were also described by many focus group participants. One social worker discussed the various ways in which child welfare workers are required per organizational policy to partner with law enforcement,

If there is any mention of physical abuse or sexual abuse, we are made per policy to send those always out to law enforcement. Another is if we feel unsafe for whatever reason, going to a house we call law enforcement and we ask them just to tag along with us. We also have to assess for safety as well because [law enforcement] are the ones that can put a child into protective custody... And then, let's say it's a sexual abuse case and a child has disclosed something, then we also work with them when it comes to completing a child forensic interview as well.

Another social worker described how children's disclosures in the emergency room often lead to involvement with both child welfare and law enforcement, "Depending on what a child discloses

when they get to the emergency room, can result in a report to CPS and law enforcement.

Depending on the nature of the disclosure. That happens, I would say pretty frequently.” One parent described reaching out to law enforcement for help, which ultimately led to her children being removed by child welfare,

He was using drugs and then he had attacked me and then he took off with our kids in the snow on a meth psychosis. And I called the cops and then CPS came and took my kids the next day because they said that they didn't trust that I wouldn't bring the kids around him... How can they just take my kids when I'm being abused?

Young adults noted that their involvement with child welfare at times resulted from police reports and interactions, for example, *“a lot of [our involvement] was just our neighbors calling the cops.”* Many focus group participants also reflected on the ways in which child welfare and legal systems work together but provide conflicting information, making it nearly impossible for families to successfully navigate both systems. One parent noted,

The police actually argued with me on what state protocol was with CPS. So there's a complete lack of communication, training, cross training, whatever between the two.

They don't even know all the laws, they don't even know all the restrictions.

Together, these reflections underscore the deeply entangled nature of the child welfare and legal systems, and the consequences of their collaboration for children and families. While specific organizational policies may dictate partnerships between agencies, participants’ experiences reveal how these intersections often blur lines of protection and punishment, and frequently result in increased surveillance, family separation, and re-traumatization.

Theme 6: Coercion and Abuse of Power

Focus group participants shared details about how both child welfare and legal systems abused their power and often coerced families. One parent clearly described the unequal power dynamics between child welfare workers and families,

CPS workers and DCYF workers that are in there dealing with people and families, they have God level power over parents. If you're any parent that values and cares for their child, a CPS agent, having the ability to take that child from you, they can force you to do anything. And there's no oversight. There's no immediate oversight, there's no review."

Similar sentiments were shared about the legal system and the specific overlaps between child welfare and legal systems,

The police department, they just want to charge you. 85% is all they need for a trial. It's either plead to the case or lose your kids. Well, I'm going to plead to the case because I want my kids back. Of course, any real parent would fight for that.

Furthermore, young adults felt that the lack of resources and support provided by child welfare was a systems failure and overall abuse of power,

I wish I would've known that not every foster kid gets the help that they need. I feel like I would've been more prepared going in at age 15. You know what I'm saying? Most 15-year-olds don't end up on the streets at 15. It's just crazy.

Importantly, many participants discussed the ways in which the child welfare and legal systems label and criminalize families, further perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of child welfare involvement,

I feel like the state comes in and it ridicules and attacks parents and a lot of them are, we're foster kids, so they came from broken homes. They don't know how to have the

normal family. And instead of giving them the resources and helping them build up to repair and then break the chain, I feel like it's ridicule put them down.

Collectively, these reflections reveal how the immense and unchecked power held by child welfare and legal systems not only undermines family autonomy but also perpetuates cycles of harm through coercion and criminalization.

Theme 7: Foster Care to Prison Pipeline

Across all focus groups, participants described the various intersecting systems, mechanisms, and experiences that they believe collectively contribute to the foster care to prison pipeline. Young adults recounted experiences in which running away from their foster care placements functioned as a distinct pathway into the juvenile legal system, “*at one point I started running away because I felt safer on the streets than I did in my adopted home. And so, I started getting arrested by the cops*”. Similarly, young adults described utilizing emergency response services in attempt to seek support, which also ended up functioning as a pathway through which they were funneled from the child welfare system into the juvenile legal system,

I was 18 for not even a month and my brother had quite literally beat the crap out of me. So I called 9 1 1 and I as the victim was the one to get arrested because I was the one over 18.

Social workers highlighted how schools often overreport to child welfare agencies in situations that could be resolved through direct communication with families, practices that they believe may inadvertently contribute to the foster care-to-prison pipeline. As one social worker explained,

Schools call [child welfare] all the time when they could have easily discussed the situation with the parents... schools call when they just don't want to deal with the

situation... I think there needs to be so many changes on that because I [child welfare worker] involve myself with so many families that do not need to have CPS involvement at all.

Parents, caregivers, and young adults also described the ways in which they were labeled as a problem child and how this contributed to their experiences of dual system involvement.

One parent shared,

The discrepancies in the police department and foster care, there is a major disconnect. Just growing up in it, having a microscope over you. Foster kids automatically get this black bag over your head. You're a foster kid, we know you. You're in a system.

Another young adult reflected on her experience of being labeled as a problem child,

They needed to understand we are not disorderly bad kids. When the police come out three or four times a week that's not normal. So they need to just literally not jump to you are a disorderly child... That was the biggest thing for me as a kid was I didn't know how to communicate what I needed. I didn't know how to communicate what was going on. So if someone had just pulled me aside and been like, what is going on? What do you need... that probably would've gotten a lot further.

Another kinship caregiver clearly articulated the way in which labeling and dismissing children involved with child welfare ultimately creates the foster care to prison pipeline,

People were calling the police on her all the time because they didn't like the drama... The local police that contracts with the tribe, their reaction tended to be, oh, we've got a whole case file on her. Oh, we know all about her. So, she was really demonized and just considered a problem child instead of there being something in place to acknowledge that this child has been in the system their whole life and is experiencing the kinds of

things that can often happen to our children who have experienced trauma in the system. And instead of trying to have services for her to intervene and give her supports, they were already doing that pipeline for her.

Rather than offering care, support, or healing, the overlapping systems often label, dismiss, and surveil system-impacted youth, effectively funneling them from one harmful system to another. These personal narratives reveal how the foster care to prison pipeline is not the result of individual failings, but rather the consequence of systemic patterns that criminalize trauma, silence children and families' needs, and default to punitive responses.

Theme 8: Recommendations for Systems Change

In line with the primary objectives of the investigation, the focus group facilitator engaged all focus group participants in discussions about their recommendations for systems change and what alternatives might better support children, youth, and families to prevent involvement in child welfare and juvenile legal systems. Young adults, parents and caregivers, and social workers all offered detailed insights and meaningful recommendations. Representative subthemes and illustrative quotes are presented in Table 4.2. The development and refinement of the recommendations is depicted in Figure 4.2, with the finalized recommendations outlined below.

Survey

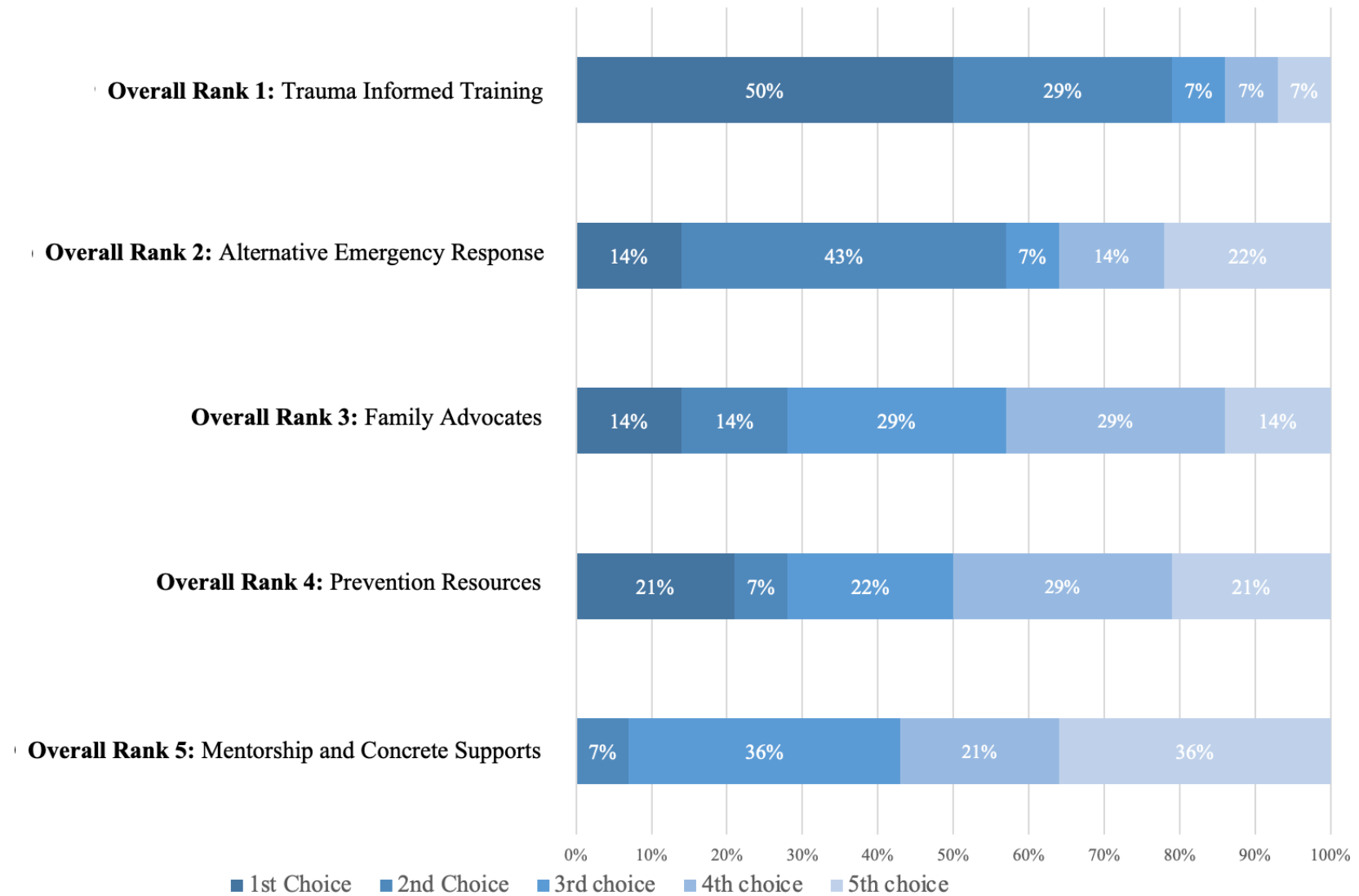
Fourteen individuals completed the survey, which asked focus group participants and members of the lived experience council to prioritize the compiled recommendations for systems change (Appendix D). The fourteen individuals included four young adults, seven parents and caregivers, and three social workers. Survey results indicated the following ranking of priorities for systems change, as shown in Figure 4.3:

- 1) Trauma informed training for all individuals who may respond to child welfare calls.
- 2) Formal initiative that builds an alternative emergency response system to all child welfare calls that sets youth and families up for long term success (e.g., no law enforcement presence, culturally responsive and trauma informed family advocates, referrals to lived experts).
- 3) A community-based organization of family advocates with lived experience who respond to child welfare calls alongside other responders (e.g., social workers).
- 4) Prevention resources: creation of a system where youth and parents can anonymously ask for and receive services and support without necessitating a call to child welfare.
- 5) Mentorship and concrete supports for youth and parents who are involved with CPS and/or foster care.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses revealed some additional insights and priorities. Participants emphasized the importance of child removal being a last resort and strictly reserved for the most severe cases, and consistently called for provision of concrete resources including housing and financial assistance. Participants also expressed the belief that protective custody decisions should not fall under the jurisdiction of law enforcement.

Importantly, echoing the sentiments from meaning-making and member-checking sessions, survey results demonstrated that participants' highest priority for change was a two-tiered approach that includes: 1) immediate implementation of trauma informed training across Washington state, 2) development of a formal initiative to build an alternative emergency response system that is ultimately implemented through policy change and program development.

Figure 4.3. Final ranked priorities for systems change



Discussion

This investigation set out to utilize qualitative and quantitative evidence to generate actionable community-informed programmatic and policy recommendations aimed at transforming the child welfare system and promoting decarceration by disrupting the foster care to prison pipeline. Guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this work aimed to move beyond deficit-based frameworks that place blame for system involvement on individuals and families. Instead, it adopted a multilevel lens that attends to complex broader contexts, including systemic racism and socioeconomic oppression, that shape individuals' involvement with child welfare and juvenile legal systems. By elevating the voices and experiences of those most impacted by these systems, this work intends to challenge dominant narratives, humanize and decriminalize system involved youth and families, and advocate for compassionate equity driven transformation of current policies and practices.

Across all focus groups, participants shared narratives of a child welfare system that perpetuates trauma, disproportionately harms marginalized communities, and lacks adequate preventative support. Participants consistently described experiences of harm, surveillance, and trauma, which were often initiated when families sought support for unmet basic needs or personal safety concerns. Youth and parents with prior system involvement also emphasized how insufficient support and compounded systemic oppression sustained cycles of intergenerational system involvement. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of shifting from a punitive, surveillance-based model of child welfare to one grounded in healing, dignity, and equitable support. A key component of this shift is ensuring that all families have access to preventive measures to address their economic and social needs (Jacobs et al., 2021) and prevent

unnecessary system involvement. Results from this investigation call for urgent, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive transformative change led by those with lived experience.

Furthermore, findings revealed multiple intersecting pathways through which youth are funneled from the child welfare system into the juvenile legal system. Across all focus groups, participants described how trauma was often met with punitive responses from the legal system, such as arrest for calling emergency services for personal safety concerns or running away from an unsafe foster placement. Youth and caregivers emphasized how labeling children as “problematic” led to increased surveillance and criminalization, rather than support, and ultimately opened the mouth of the foster care to prison pipeline. Social workers also noted how institutions like schools overreport to child welfare agencies, escalating situations that could be resolved through direct and supportive communication with families. Together, these insights highlight how systemic failures, stigma, and lack of trauma-informed training can perpetuate the foster care to prison pipeline.

Community partners and focus group participants generated thoughtful and actionable recommendations for transformative change. Overall, findings from the focus groups, meaning-making and member-checking sessions, and the survey demonstrate strong support for an immediate rollout of trauma-informed training as a harm reduction strategy, paired with long-term formal policy and program initiatives to build a new emergency response model rooted in community leadership, lived experience, and culturally responsive support. Prior research demonstrates widespread support of trauma informed training amongst both law enforcement and child welfare professionals (Donisch et al., 2016; Ezell et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021). Furthermore, trauma informed trainings have successfully been implemented with both law enforcement and child welfare professionals (Birch, 2024; Conners-Burrow et al., 2013). Results

from these successful implementations suggest that trauma informed training is highly successful at improving knowledge of trauma informed care and promoting use of trauma informed practice amongst child welfare professionals (Conners-Burrow et al., 2013), and can lead to increased trust between law enforcement agents and community members as well as reduced re-traumatization of victims when interacting with law enforcement (Birch, 2024). This evidence suggests that proven trauma-informed training models exist and may be readily adapted for immediate implementation in Washington state.

This investigation intentionally engaged individuals from various groups including those who have been impacted by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems (young adults and caregivers) and those who work within these systems (social workers). In line with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the choice to include caregiver, young adult, and social workers as focus group participants reflects the multiple levels of an ecological systems model. It is also known as data source triangulation, an indicator of rigor within qualitative research, where data is collected from different groups to ensure representation of various perspectives and further validate the data (Carter et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2020). Importantly, this investigation found that there was clear agreement across all groups with regards to the harms perpetuated by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems, biases within the systems, and recommendations for transformative systems change. Even social workers who work within the system expressed strong desire for transformative change, highlighting the ways in which they often navigate around formal policies as a means to mitigate harm. As one social worker noted,

I know there are times where my supervisor tells me to take law enforcement with me because he's worried for my safety, but I don't want to take them because I know I already come in with such power in the role I have. So, knowing that if I bring law

enforcement, I'm going to ruin our relationship. And so sometimes I kind of just say screw it, and I go by myself or with a coworker if I think it's really going to be that bad.

The strong alignment of perspectives and consistency across all participant groups highlights a critical insight: the primary barrier to progress is not a lack of consensus regarding the need for transformative change, but rather the absence of policy action to operationalize and sustain such change. This convergence of viewpoints signals that individuals across varying lived experiences and professional roles are already aligned in vision, and what is urgently needed is the commitment and policy leadership to translate this shared vision into concrete and transformative systems change. The lack of policy leadership and action towards transformative change may be in part due to the fact that such efforts would require direct confrontation of the racist history and policies within the child welfare and an honest reckoning with the failures of the current child welfare system (Dettlaff, 2023; Thurston et al., 2025).

Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to inform policy and drive meaningful change, particularly when it centers the voices of individuals and communities most impacted by systems. Such research can help to define and clarify complex problems by illuminating how current policies and programs may fall short, while also offering innovative and impactful recommendations for reform (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Ford & Goger, 2021; Nutley et al., 2007). This not only enriches collective understanding of complex systemic issues, but can also reshape how policymakers conceptualize both the issues and the solutions required to address them (Ford & Goger, 2021; Nutley et al., 2007). Furthermore, prior research suggests that policymakers are particularly responsive to evidence that incorporates personal stories, and that this type of evidence is most effective at generating new policies and/or policy alternatives that are relevant to constituents and communities (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Steiner, 2005).

Therefore, community-engaged qualitative research not only bridges the gap between research and practice, but also serves as a powerful mechanism for advancing evidence-informed policy that supports transformative systems change.

In alignment with some of the central aims of CBPR, a crucial component of this investigation is a commitment to tangible impact that will improve the lives of marginalized youth and families in Washington state (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). This work is designed to serve as a catalyst for change by utilizing empirical evidence and community expertise to inform and influence state-level policy. To advance this goal, the next phase of this investigation involves collaboration with policy specialists to develop actionable advocacy plans to ensure that recommendations for systems change generated in this study are considered by Washington state legislators. Importantly, focus group participants and members of the lived experience council will be invited to co-lead and participate in these advocacy efforts, ensuring that those most impacted by the systems remain at the forefront of the change making process. This approach is not only aligned with CBPR principles, but also enhances the potential effectiveness of advocacy efforts by grounding it in lived expertise and a shared vision for transformative systems change.

Limitations

This investigation is not without limitations. First, the study is limited in generalizability. The sample was relatively small, particularly in regard to survey respondents, and relied on convenience sampling primarily through community partners and the professional networks of the research team. As a result, the experiences and perspectives represented in this investigation may not represent those of a broader population, even within Washington State. Additionally, relationships between child welfare and legal systems are complex and localized. This investigation focuses solely on Washington State, limiting its applicability to other regions.

Further comprehensive analyses of federal law, policy, and practice initiatives are needed to better understand how these systems overlap and intersect on a national scale. Second, although policy specialists were consulted at the inception of this project during the development of research objectives and questions, they were not consulted when developing and refining priorities for systems change. The absence of policy specialist insight during this phase of the research process may limit feasibility of advocacy and policy reform efforts. Finally, law enforcement officers were not engaged as stakeholders in this investigation. Therefore, the study team is not able to assess their willingness to engage and participate in trauma informed training, which may ultimately create barriers to implementation of the statewide training proposed by study participants.

Conclusion

Children and youth who have experienced child welfare involvement face inordinate risk of juvenile legal system contact. Both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems also disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous youth and families, reflecting persistent systemic racism and oppression. To promote the health and well-being of historically and persistently marginalized communities in Washington State, there is a need to understand and dismantle the process by which youth become funneled from child welfare into the juvenile legal systems (the foster care to prison pipeline). Findings from this investigation highlight strong support among young adults and families impacted by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems and social workers working within these systems for urgent trauma informed and culturally responsive systems change. Ultimately, lived experts would like to see an immediate rollout of trauma-informed training as a harm reduction strategy, paired with long-term formal policy and program initiatives to build a new emergency response system rooted in community

leadership, lived experience, and culturally responsive support. Future efforts to realize these goals will involve collaboration with policy experts to develop actionable policy agendas that advance transformative change across Washington State.

Table 4.1 Focus group participant characteristics

	Total, N = 24
Group, N (%)	
Parents or Caregivers who Experienced Child Welfare Involvement Themselves <u>AND</u> With Their Child	6 (25)
Parent or Caregiver	7 (29)
Young Adult (age 18 – 26)	7 (29)
Social Worker	4 (17)
Self-reported Race, N (%)	
African	1 (4)
African American	1 (4)
Black	3 (12.5)
Hispanic	1 (4)
Human	1 (4)
Latinx	2 (8)
Mixed or More Than One Race	5 (21)
Native American	1 (4)
White	9 (37.5)
Self-reported Ethnicity, N (%)	
African American	1 (4)
Black	3 (13)
Bulgarian	1 (4)
Ethiopian	1 (4)
European American	1 (4)
Hispanic	2 (8)
German	1 (4)
Latina	2 (8)
Mexican	1 (4)
Mixed	2 (8)
Native American	2 (8)
Pacific Islander	1 (4)
Swedish	1 (4)
White	4 (17)
Self-reported Gender, N (%)	
Female	21 (88)
Male	1 (4)
Non-binary	2 (8)
Social Work Practice Setting, N (%)	
Child Welfare	1 (25)
Hospital	1 (25)
Outpatient Clinic	1 (25)
School	1 (25)

Table 4.2 Themes, subthemes, and representative quotes

Theme	Subtheme	References	Representative Quotes
Mechanisms of Entry into Child Welfare	Adoption	2	<i>"I was adopted by a white family when I was two and a half and then later placed back in the system."</i>
	Bio Children Removed	2	<i>"I had two of my children removed from my care 10 years ago. They were eight at the time and then eight months."</i>
	Bio Parent Abuse	3	<i>"It was chaos, a lot of physical violence, sexual violence, you name it, it happened. And I was always told to lie. And it wasn't until I was about 12 years old when a detective found a journal of mine and it was then reported."</i>
	Bio Parent Loss of Custody	1	<i>"My parents got divorced and then my mom had custody of me and then she lost custody of me. And so, CPS came to our house and took me and my brother and my sister away..."</i>
	Foster Care Provider	1	<i>"I'm currently a foster significant other for a 17-year-old. I just retired this past December from being a guardian ad litem for over 10 years. So, I've dealt with the foster care system from multiple sides."</i>
	Kinship Caregiver	5	<i>"My nephew, I found out that he was in foster care and was going to be adopted out. My husband and I immediately jumped into action and wanted to have him placed in our home because we had no idea of the situation."</i>
	Parent Death	3	<i>"I was 11 years old when my mother killed herself...So when she did that, it threw everything into a tailspin."</i>
	Substance Use	3	<i>"Been a foster kid since birth. Mom was addicted to crack cocaine... immediately removed..."</i>
Systemic Barriers Precipitating System Involvement	Houselessness	4	<i>"They took away all my parental rights because I homeless for four years."</i>

	Lack of Health or Mental Health Services	2	<i>"I think that depending on your insurance and stuff, you can wait for a medication provider for several months and these kids need help and these families need help and they're not getting it, which is leading them down more serious paths."</i>
	Poverty	4	<i>"I really think that just the stress of not having the resources was really the linchpin that sent my sister just spiraling out of control because she wasn't able to afford the housing and she didn't have a job where she could properly take care of her children in order to deal with stress and various things. Then you start abusing substances and you spiral out of control."</i>
Intergenerational Cycle of Child Welfare	Cycle of Trauma & System Involvement	6	<i>"The foster family, the father was a chief of police who proceeded to rape me... And so I ran away from that foster home and pretty much been on my own ever since about 12 years old-ish when that happened, 11, 12. And my life was just full of drugs and pretty much abusive relationships and everything like that. I ended up having three kids... my children were removed from my care three years it took me to get them back, but I was able to get them back."</i>
	Lack of Knowledge & Skills	2	<i>"If you're pregnant, your insurance, your doctor's office should be having you do some kind of parenting skill classes so that you get these skills that then later down the line, parents are penalized because they don't know how to parent. Because the only way they've been taught is again, right from parents that also were in the system."</i>
Disparities & Disproportionality	Forced Assimilation	1	<i>"I wanted to go back to my country because I didn't know how life really worked here. I didn't know any English. It was very tough for me."</i>
	Racism	17	<i>"Coming from a Black or a Hispanic or any other race other than Caucasian, what they do is they railroad you. They give you these Caucasian workers that don't understand that people that come from ethnic backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, they have a different parenting thing, and it's not always bad, it's just different. And since they don't understand it, they take it as, oh, you're abusing this child, or, oh, you're verbally hurting them, or you're putting them through this trauma."</i>

Legal System and Child Welfare Intersections	CPS Reports and Referrals	4	<i>"If there is any mention of physical abuse or sexual abuse, we [CPS workers] are made per policy, we have to send those always out to law enforcement."</i>
	Medical Systems	4	<i>"There's also coaching that the parents get upon discharge, it's part of the crisis prevention plan. If there's an emergency or they've eloped or a suicide attempt or self-harming to a point where it needs medical attention or if they're making threats and you feel unsafe in the home, then call 9 1 1 is part of the instruction. So oftentimes law enforcement gets involved in those ways."</i>
	Police Reports & Interactions	7	<i>"One of the questions is have the police ever been called to your home? So praise God, the police have never been called here. And what if somewhere if the police have ever been called to your home? Well, that exnays a bunch of people. Young people do things, so it's like that small child is paying for the sins of your past. You're a different person now. So I mean, you're eliminated [from caregiving] for so many trivial things."</i>
	Schools	4	<i>"Teachers in your school systems... they're getting reported to and they're calling them quicker than shit for anything, but they don't even understand how to even communicate or not to try to box these children all into 'you're the problem'. Oh, you're already in the system. Oh, you're already going to go down this tunnel. We're just going to keep you in this tunnel because you came out of a DV situation."</i>
	Systems Working Together But Providing Conflicting Information	6	<i>"Police officers need to be cross-trained with what CPS protocols are, there were too many incidences where the police were called in and they gave such a variety of responses. I mean, I had one literally shout up to my son that they gave authorization for me to literally drag him out of there by any means... they were threatening to a nine-year-old."</i>
Coercion and Abuse of Power	Child Welfare	9	<i>"And there's also too much room and too much power for social workers to abuse their cases and their clients."</i>
	No Resources Provided by Child Welfare	8	<i>"Why are we expecting these kids to raise themselves? The state is our guardian. They should be raising us and not abandoning us on someone's doorstep."</i>

Foster Care to Prison Pipeline	Labeling and Criminalizing	15	<i>"When the police have a preconceived notion of a person due to family members or if you have a brother that was in trouble with the law or someone disconnected to you and they almost put you in the same box with that person, and it's like they were looking to almost find something, create something almost if they had to. And it was just really sad being under that microscope like that. And just because you might be related to someone who's a felon or whatever, doesn't in any way make you a bad parent or someone who doesn't love your kids."</i>
	Law Enforcement	6	<i>"They just interrogated him in school and... guided him to answer questions certain ways. And he has this sense of guilt. He has a sense of responsibility that he never should have had... someone who was supposedly an authority figure, he would've said, I think anything that they wanted to hear by saying, 'okay, we'll give you back to your mom in five days'... It's just really sad when people are in positions of power like that abuse, that power."</i>
Foster Care to Prison Pipeline	Education	10	<i>"It was very tough. I was a freshmen, didn't know English... in ninth grade I failed ninth grade all the way through because in one year I moved to three states because I didn't have a stable home. And honestly, I feel bad for people. You can't do school if you don't have a stable environment."</i>
	Labeled as Problem Child & No Recognition of Trauma	11	<i>"I was sleeping in the DSHS office for the first year of being in because of everything that happened to me before I was even in foster care. They had all of that stuff written down about me, and people made all these assumptions about me before even getting to know me. And so I had no one, and I had no foster home to go to. No one cared."</i>
	Parent Incarceration	2	<i>"I have seen it with parents that I've worked with or that end up becoming criminally involved during their case. And then the criminal case holds up their ability to reunify with their kids, which is then why they end up in four-year cases."</i>
	Runaway from Care	2	<i>"When you run away from your foster home, [they used to put a] warrant for your arrest. So that's how my son was taken."</i>

	Utilizing Emergency Response	3	<i>"I got arrested almost three years ago now because of a domestic violence call. I called the police because my ex-boyfriend was abusing me."</i>
Recommendations for Systems Change	Abolition	3	<i>"I don't really believe in that there's a way that we can make the system better because I think that communities that are impacted have the answers that they need. We know how to take care of our families, and it's the under resourcing of our communities that forces us into these systems. And so it's a setup... It's not because they're bad parents, it's because they don't have access. And so I'm not trying to fix the system. I'm trying to find what are community strategies that are community held and led by people that are impacted that are going to resource our communities and keep our families together."</i>
	Communication, Transparency, Accountability	21	<i>"Yeah, I think there's really not transparency with any of the systems within foster care. It's not something that you can look up. It's not something, there are not clear processes for how things happen and how they should happen. And I feel like part of why is because maybe they don't always go the way that they should. And I think that is really problematic."</i>
	Concrete Resources	15	<i>"I just feel like there needs to be more resources and community and support rather than tearing everyone down."</i>
	Culturally Responsive Support	9	<i>"If people just had some cultural competency, some education, some understanding that, like you were saying to earlier, different communities do things differently and that's okay. I mean we're Native American... but we had to get special permission and a court order and all these doctor's notes to be able to put baby in his cradleboard."</i>
	Lived Experience Supports & Advocates	13	<i>"It would be interesting to have a community... one community for foster kids to live in or just people with lived experience to have that community around them. I also think that people could try having more lived experience in the social working field, or at least having a person who's there for that first interaction so that they don't feel so overwhelmed. Because I know for me, when I first reentered the foster care system, I was terrified, absolutely terrified."</i>

"I just wish that there was a person put in place before law enforcement or someone who comes in symbolic of terror essentially. I wish there was a buffer, a person who could be in relationship with the family first to recognize what are maybe the safety risks here. What's maybe the disconnect from safety. Is it fixable without law enforcement and without the larger system at hand? I'm thinking family social worker, family advocate, a mental health support person of some sort."

Mental Health
Supports
Reduction in Law
Enforcement
Presence

2 *"Therapy should be almost required for the children."*

5 *"When CPS gets a call and they got to go to the kid's school to interview 'em or to talk to 'em and they suspect child abuse or sexual trauma, I understand that they got to call the police and maybe give 'em a heads up... but do they have to go into the school... I mean, the kids end up so much more traumatized and then they have to not only field everybody's questions after that, why, what's wrong with you? And then they're ostracized or they're put in these groups."*

Trauma Informed
Training

7 *"More trauma-informed training all around with all the people who deal with the foster care system and everyone involved."*

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Chapter Five: Conclusion

This three-paper mixed-methods dissertation intended to interrogate system failures that perpetuate inequity, family instability, and poor health outcomes. It aims to examine the links between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington State and offer potential alternatives from the perspectives of caregivers and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who work within these systems. Using three interconnected research studies, I explored the points of overlap and intersections between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington State, identified and prioritized recommendations for systems change that might disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline, and developed a framework for incorporating reflexive practice into child welfare research to support collaborative research partnerships that could facilitate transformative systems change. Findings revealed strong support among young adults and families impacted by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems and social workers working within these systems for urgent trauma informed and culturally responsive systems change through policy advocacy and program initiatives that center the voices and experiences of lived experts. Moreover, results from a national sample of research evidence demonstrate that police involvement in child welfare cases is often characterized by more punitive outcomes, and police presence serves as a contributing factor to the racial and socioeconomic disparities within the child welfare system. Taken together, recommendations from this investigation include the development of academic-community partnerships that prioritize lived expertise to advance evidence-informed policy change, implementing trauma-informed training for child welfare responders as a harm reduction strategy, and developing an alternative emergency response system that reduces law enforcement presence and emphasizes culturally responsive, community led care. Collectively, these studies

highlight the need for urgent transformative change. Table 5.1 summarizes the objectives, methods, findings, and implications of all three studies.

Table 5.1. Summary of the three-paper dissertation

Paper	Objective	Methods	Findings	Implications
Paper One	Summarize the current (past 20 years) existing US research concerning the extent and potential consequences of police involvement in child welfare investigations	Literature review utilizing a systematic approach that followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009) guidelines and included both peer-reviewed articles and grey literature	Seventeen studies identified (n = 17). Police involvement in child welfare cases is characterized by more punitive outcomes for children and families, including higher rates of substantiated investigations and more out-of-home placements particularly in cases of neglect. Additionally, policing likely contributes to racial and socioeconomic disparities within child welfare	Need for elimination and/or drastic reduction of police presence within child welfare, specifically in cases of neglect. Alternatives to police involvement may include provision of concrete resources including cash and housing assistance, as well as supportive interventions
Paper Two	Provide an illustration of reflexivity in qualitative child welfare research that offers theoretical and practical guidance as well as specific strategies for engaging in reflexive practices	Applying Walsh's (2003) typology of reflexive practice to offer an illustration and guiding framework following engagement in critical positionality examinations and reflexive practices	Proposed guiding framework to facilitate engagement in reflexive practice within child welfare research	Framework aims to deepen researcher self-awareness, cultivate authentic and equitable research partnerships, and support the co-creation of evidence between researchers, practitioners, lived experts, and community organizations
Paper Three	Examine the points of overlap and intersection between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives from the perspective of lived experts	Multi-phase community-engaged approach that included focus groups, meaning-making and member-checking sessions, and survey development and dissemination	Multiple intersecting pathways through which youth are funneled from the child welfare system into the juvenile legal system. Strong support among lived experts for urgent trauma informed and culturally responsive systems change	Need for Washington State program policy initiatives that support immediate roll out of trauma informed training for all child welfare responders and long-term formal initiative to develop new emergency response system

In Paper One, guided by priorities set by community partners, I sought to summarize the recent (past 20 years) evidence concerning the consequences of police involvement in child welfare cases in the United States. Specifically, I examined child welfare investigation outcomes (e.g., unsubstantiated vs. substantiated cases), out of home placements, general outcomes associated with police and CPS co-involvement in child welfare cases, outcomes specifically associated with allegations of neglect, and racial and sociodemographic disparities and disproportionality when police are involved in child welfare cases. I also explored the extent to which the current evidence offers potential alternatives to police involvement in child welfare cases. I utilized a systematic literature review approach following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) and identified a total of seventeen ($n = 17$) eligible articles that were included in the review, eleven ($n = 11$) of which were peer reviewed studies and six ($n = 6$) were grey literature articles. Results from this review revealed that police involvement in child welfare cases is characterized by more punitive outcomes for children and families, including higher rates of substantiated investigations and more out-of-home placements particularly in cases of neglect. Results also suggest that policing contributes to the well-documented racial and socioeconomic disparities within the child welfare system. Additionally, many of the included articles point to conflicting priorities between law enforcement and child welfare, which often results in a response from law enforcement that relies on punishment and criminalization without the provision of preventive resources that may mitigate future maltreatment reports and investigations. Taken together, recommendations provided in this review would likely support the elimination or drastic reduction of police presence within child welfare, specifically in cases of neglect. Alternatives to police involvement may include provision of concrete resources to alleviate concerns of poverty including cash and housing assistance, as well as supportive

interventions including accessible health, mental health, and substance use treatment, as well as parenting skills trainings.

In Paper Two, I sought to provide an illustration of reflexivity in child welfare research, with the goal of providing practical and theoretical guidance to support collaborative research partnerships. Informed by Walsh's typology of reflexive practice (Walsh, 2003) paper two illustrates the steps taken in applying this typology to child welfare research. A crucial goal of this paper was to encourage child welfare researchers to intentionally incorporate reflexive practices into their work as a means to enable greater collaboration, trust, and authentic partnerships. Since transformative change necessitates partnering with and centering the voices of families and communities that are most impacted by the system, engagement in these practices may be an essential precondition to achieving a more just and equitable child welfare system. This qualitative methods paper utilizes examples from the larger dissertation study (paper three) as an illustration of application and ultimately aims to build a framework for incorporating reflexive practices that will cultivate collaborative partnerships among child welfare researchers, families, and communities. This illustration provided in paper two is not intended to be prescriptive or linear, nor is it meant to be a one-size-fits-all approach to reflexive practice. Instead, it aims to offer some clarity and practicality around reflexivity in child welfare research and provide a scaffolding to support intentional reflexive practices that may ultimately promote child welfare system transformation.

Paper Three is the main outcomes paper, detailing the processes and outcomes of this community engaged dissertation investigation. Through the use of focus groups, ongoing collaboration with community partners through meaning-making and member-checking sessions, and survey methodology, this paper explores the ways in which child welfare and juvenile legal

systems intersect and overlap to create inequities for youth, sheds light on the specific mechanisms by which youth may become incarcerated through their involvement with child welfare and develops potential supportive alternatives to system involvement in Washington State. This study utilized a multi-phase, community-engaged, participatory approach. It began with the development of guiding research questions in collaboration with community partners. Following question development, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Focus groups (n = 5) were then conducted with eligible participants to gather in-depth qualitative insights and focus group data was initially analyzed using rapid qualitative analysis (Neal et al., 2015). Initial focus group findings were shared back to focus group participants and community partners in meaning-making and member-checking sessions, where participants were invited to interpret and refine results in partnership with the research team. Upon completion of meaning-making / member-checking sessions, traditional thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code, categorize, and analyze the focus group data. Insights from meaning-making sessions and qualitative analysis informed the development of a follow-up survey designed to validate and expand upon the qualitative focus group findings. The survey was then disseminated back to focus group participants and the lived experience council, and responses were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and qualitative coding of open-ended items. Community partners and focus group participants generated thoughtful and actionable recommendations for transformative change. Overall, findings demonstrate strong support for a two-tiered approach to transformative systems change in Washington State that includes both short-term and long-term goals designed to reduce harm and disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline. This two-tiered approach includes an immediate rollout of trauma-informed training as a harm reduction strategy, paired with long-term formal policy and program

initiatives to build a new emergency response model that reduces police presence and is rooted in community leadership, lived experience, and culturally responsive support.

Social Justice Implications

This dissertation highlights the need for urgent transformative change. The findings from this dissertation can inform and support transformative change of the child welfare system by guiding the work of currently practicing social workers and other emergency responders, policymakers and those working to develop and implement policy initiatives, and researchers. Any efforts to transform the system must acknowledge disparities faced by historically and persistently marginalized and minoritized youth and families, as well as the driving mechanisms (e.g., structural racism, systemic oppression) of these disparities. Transformative change requires elevating the voices and experiences of those most impacted by these systems through true collaboration between social workers, communities, and lived experts. This type of collaboration requires transparency and vulnerability, actively challenging the dominant narratives by humanizing and decriminalizing system involved youth and families, and social workers prioritizing acknowledgement of complicity, historical and ongoing perpetuation of harm, and unequal power structures. Taken together, the recommendations from this dissertation that would support compassionate equity driven transformation of child welfare policies and practices.

Implications for Social Work Practitioners and Other First Responders

The findings from this dissertation highlight specific recommendations that social workers and other first responders can readily incorporate into their practice. The most clear and actionable recommendation is the implementation of a trauma informed approach when responding to child welfare concerns. The fundamental shift in responding to youth and families from a trauma informed approach includes moving away from the question ‘what is wrong with

you?’ and towards the question ‘what happened to you?’ (Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019; Sweeney et al., 2018). This paradigm shift supports the humanizing and decriminalizing of families involved with child welfare, may prevent re-traumatization of youth and families, and enables social workers and other first responders to develop relationships with youth and families that are founded in trust, respect, dignity, collaboration, and safety (Birch, 2024; Sweeney et al., 2018). Importantly, prior research demonstrates widespread support of trauma informed training amongst both law enforcement and child welfare professionals (Donisch et al., 2016; Ezell et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021) and trauma informed trainings have been successfully implemented with law enforcement and child welfare professionals (Birch, 2024; Conners-Burrow et al., 2013).

Social workers and other first responders can also better support youth and families by attempting to provide individualized guidance and support and collaborating to achieve solutions that do not involve family separation and/or further traumatization. This process begins with a comprehensive understanding of each family’s unique context and goals for support. Additionally, it is imperative for social workers and other first responders to proactively identify gaps in their ability to provide individualized support (e.g., lack of concrete resources, no treatment facilities that enable families to stay together while parents seek treatment). Advocating for policy and program changes that would facilitate better support for families and actively educating other providers about these gaps and recommendations for change is a crucial step toward promoting the health and wellbeing of youth and families.

Moreover, social workers must work to acknowledge and reflect on potential implicit biases that they may hold when working with child welfare involved youth and families. The child welfare system continues to perpetuate racial disproportionality (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020), and the disparities in the child welfare system are often unintentionally

reinforced by well-meaning but under-resourced social workers who work within a system that enables and perpetuates unjust and racialized family separations (Jacobs et al., 2021). Self-awareness from social workers including engagement in reflexive practices and critical examinations of positionality can help facilitate genuine collaborative partnerships between social workers and families through transparent and vulnerable acknowledgements of complicity and unequal power structures. These recommendations for social workers and other first responders provide concrete steps to enhance practice effectiveness, reduce experiences of trauma, and support health and well-being of youth and families. By shifting to a trauma-informed approach, advocating, providing individualized culturally sensitive support, addressing policy and program gaps, and vulnerably reflecting on biases and harmful historical contexts, social workers and other first responders can play a pivotal role in supporting the health and well-being of youth and families.

Policy Implications

This dissertation offers valuable insights for advancing change through policy initiatives, with particular emphasis on the need to develop and support academic-community partnerships that center lived expertise and challenge hierarchical research structures to advance evidence-informed policy change. Qualitative research plays a critical role in shaping policy and driving meaningful change, especially when it amplifies the voices of those most impacted by harmful systems. Such research can help to define and clarify complex problems by illuminating how current policies and programs may fall short, while also offering innovative and impactful recommendations for reform (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Ford & Goger, 2021; Nutley et al., 2007). This not only deepens collective understanding of complex systemic challenges but can also influence how policymakers conceptualize both the problems and their potential solutions

(Ford & Goger, 2021; Nutley et al., 2007). Moreover, previous studies show that policymakers are especially responsive to evidence grounded in personal narratives, and that this type of evidence is most effective at generating new policies that are relevant to constituents and communities (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Steiner, 2005). Therefore, community-engaged qualitative research not only bridges the gap between research and practice, but also serves as a powerful mechanism for advancing evidence-informed policy initiatives that promote transformative systems change.

Overall, findings from this community-engaged dissertation investigation demonstrate strong support for an immediate rollout of trauma-informed training as a harm reduction strategy, paired with long-term formal policy and program initiatives to build a new emergency response model in Washington State. Importantly, there was clear agreement across all groups (those impacted by the systems and those who work within them) with regards to the harms perpetuated by the child welfare and juvenile legal systems, biases within the systems, and recommendations for transformative systems change through the development and implementation of policy initiatives. The strong alignment of perspectives and consistency highlights that the primary barrier to progress is not a lack of consensus regarding the need for transformative change, but rather the absence of policy action to operationalize and sustain such change. This convergence of viewpoints signals that individuals across varying lived experiences and professional roles are already aligned in vision, and what is urgently needed is the commitment and policy leadership to translate this vision into concrete systems change.

This dissertation is designed to serve as a catalyst for change by utilizing empirical evidence and community expertise to inform and influence state-level policy. To advance this goal, the next phase of this investigation involves collaboration with policy specialists to develop

actionable advocacy plans to ensure that recommendations generated in this study are considered by Washington State legislators. Importantly, the implications for policymakers extend far beyond the confines of this dissertation and instead point to the widespread need for collaboration with community members and lived experts throughout the policy making process. Ensuring that lived experts are active participants in developing and disseminating the evidence to support evidence-informed policy change enhances the potential effectiveness of policy advocacy efforts by grounding them in personal narratives, relevant priorities for constituents, and a shared vision for transformative change (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Steiner, 2005).

Implications for Research

The findings from this dissertation also highlight several important research avenues and methodological approaches. Relationships between child welfare and legal systems are complex and often localized. This dissertation focuses solely on Washington State, limiting its applicability to other regions. Further comprehensive analyses of state and federal laws, policies, and practice initiatives are needed to better understand how these systems overlap and intersect in different regions and on a national scale. This warrants further investigation to understand how these variations impact social work practice and research as well as the development and implementation of policy initiatives in regions other than Washington State. Future research should also consider incorporating additional theoretical frameworks to expand upon those offered in this dissertation. For example, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer et al., 1997) may be a useful theoretical framework for expanding upon the current research.

The processes and outcomes presented in this dissertation can serve as a foundation for conducting similar studies in other states and on a national scale, providing an opportunity to

explore the broader applicability of the proposed recommendations and their effectiveness in various contexts. Furthermore, the framework for incorporating reflexive practices presented in paper two of this dissertation can serve as a guide to support collaborative research partnerships that can effectively drive transformative systemic change within child welfare. Research efforts that prioritize collaborative partnerships and focus on extending this research to the national landscape would shed additional light on the child welfare related concerns that often precipitate entry into the legal system and may ultimately disrupt unjust and unnecessary incarceration for both youth and parents on a national scale.

Additionally, this dissertation has important methodological implications for child welfare researchers. Future research on this subject should prioritize community-engaged participatory approaches with lived experts who have been disproportionately impacted by the child welfare system. Engaging with and including the voices of individuals, families, and communities with lived experience is crucial to developing a deep understanding of the conditions that create overlaps in the current systems, ensuring that the solutions proposed are appropriate for those most impacted by these systems, and understanding the specific mechanisms by which the current systems and prior reform efforts have either intentionally or unintentionally perpetuated harm (Skelton-Wilson et al., 2021). Furthermore, incorporating personal narratives from lived experts may be most impactful in driving evidence-informed policy change and developing policy initiatives that are relevant to communities (Apollonio & Bero, 2017; Steiner, 2005). The framework introduced in paper two offers theoretical and practical guidance as well as specific strategies for engaging in reflexive practices that may support collaborative, participatory, and community-engaged research agendas. Future research can utilize this framework to support those community-engaged research partnerships and

agendas. This dissertation not only suggests new research directions but also offers methodological innovations that may ultimately drive transformative change, with a specific focus on promoting inclusivity and prioritizing community partnerships and perspectives of lived experts in research design and practice.

Future Research Objectives and Questions

As I move forward into the next phases of my academic career, I intend to focus my research agenda on the following objectives and questions:

- Analysis of the federal laws, policies, and practice initiatives that create overlap and intersections between child welfare and juvenile legal systems on a national scale.
- What child welfare related concerns precipitate entry into the juvenile legal system and contribute to unjust youth incarceration on a national scale?
- What are community and lived expert driven recommendations for policy and program initiatives that may disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline on a national scale?
- Evaluation and assessment of the effectiveness of current policies, programs, and practices designed to divert child welfare involved youth and parents from incarceration, with an emphasis on understanding their outcomes, identifying gaps, and providing recommendations for effective reform.
 - Overview of existing programs, policies, and practices at the national level.
 - Statistical analysis of effectiveness of these programs, policies, and practices.
 - Additional analyses to examine racial disparities in the application of these programs, policies, and practices (i.e., are these programs serving socioeconomically and racially diverse communities and families).

- Analysis of the barriers that exist for successful implementation of diversion strategies for youth and families involved in child welfare.
- Development of statewide and national policy proposals to provide actionable legislative and advocacy plans to drastically disrupt the foster care to prison pipeline.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the links between child welfare and juvenile legal systems in Washington State and aims to offer potential alternatives from the perspectives of caregivers and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who work within these systems. Through three interconnected research studies, it interrogates systems failures, identifies potential recommendations for policy and program initiatives aimed at promoting transformative systems change, and develops a framework to support ongoing collaborative and participatory research approaches that may effectively advance evidence-informed policy change. Collectively, the findings illuminate an urgent need for transformative systems change to promote health and wellbeing of youth and families in Washington State. Results from this investigation suggest that this transformative change may include developing and supporting academic-community partnerships that center lived expertise and challenge hierarchical research structures to advance evidence-informed policy change, implementing immediate trauma-informed training for all individuals responding to child welfare concerns, and establishing long-term formal initiatives to create a new emergency response system that reduces law enforcement presence and prioritizes community-led, culturally responsive support. The implications span across practice, program and policy development and implementation, and research, with a strong emphasis on prioritizing community-led recommendations for change rooted in lived expertise, community leadership, and culturally responsive equity-based support.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Verbal Consent Process

Prior to the initiation of each focus group, the focus group facilitator to complete a verbal consent process ensuring the following:

- Each participant understands that their participation is entirely voluntary
- They can skip or refuse any questions they do not feel comfortable answering
- They will still receive compensation should they wish to terminate their participation early
- Confidentiality:
 - Assuring participants that their information and testimonies would be kept anonymous
 - Any identifying information will be redacted

Recording of focus group to begin once ALL participants have provided verbal consent

Focus Group Questions

Social Workers

- Briefly, share how your social work practice intersects with the criminal and/or juvenile legal system?
- Describe how, when, and why law enforcement becomes involved in your work?
 - *Prompt:* Are there specific policies or practices that necessitate law enforcement involvement?
- What are your thoughts about law enforcement involvement in your work?
 - *Prompt:* In what ways is it helpful? In what ways is it harmful?
- Do you have a say in and/or control over whether law enforcement becomes involved in any given case? Please provide specific examples.
- If you were reimagining the system, and by that I mean a new way of community and/or professional response to families needing support, what would you propose as an alternative vision?
- What keeps you from implementing these alternatives?
- What do you wish you would have known before beginning your work with the child welfare system?
 - *Prompt:* What would you tell a new social worker before they began their work with child welfare?

Parents/Caregivers

- Briefly, share a bit about your experience with CPS/child welfare/social work. (*Ask EACH group member to answer*)
 - Did this experience lead to law enforcement or criminal legal involvement?
 - What would you have rather happened?
- How necessary do you think CPS and/or related agencies are?
 - *Prompt:* What are the positive and negatives of CPS/Child welfare?

- If you could reimagine the system, and by that I mean a new way of community and/or professional response to families needing support, what would that look like?
 - What would you hope to see as a response to someone who was in a similar situation as you were?
- What do you wish you would have known before your involvement with child welfare?

Young Adults

- Briefly, share a bit about your experience with CPS/child welfare/social work. (*Ask EACH group member to answer*)
 - What would you have rather happened?
- Tell us about your first encounter with law enforcement or the juvenile justice system.
- How necessary do you think CPS and/or related agencies are?
 - *Prompt:* What are positive and negatives of CPS/Child welfare
- How did CPS / child welfare involvement impact your education?
- If you could reimagine the system, and by that I mean a new way of community and/or professional response to families needing support, what would that look like?
 - What would you hope to see as a response to someone who was in a similar situation as you were?
- What do you wish you would have known before your involvement with child welfare?

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials

Young Adult Recruitment Flyer

Young Adult Focus Groups

We Want To Hear From You!

Virtual and In Person Options!

Eligibility:

- 18-26 years old
- English speaking
- Lived experience with CPS / foster care

Join us for a 90-minute focus group discussion about the child welfare system and potential alternatives to better support youth and families. Focus groups will take place in February - April, 2024.

Sign Up With QR Code:



Or Contact:
hscheuer@uw.edu

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE \$70 FOR THEIR TIME

 UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON





Parent & Caregiver Recruitment Flyer

Parent and Caregiver Focus Groups

We Want To Hear From You!

Virtual and In Person Options!

Eligibility:

- Parent or caregiver who has been involved with CPS / foster care
- English speaking

Join us for a 90-minute focus group discussion about the child welfare system and potential alternatives to better support youth and families. Focus groups will take place in January & February, 2024.

Sign Up With QR Code:



Or Contact:
hscheuer@uw.edu

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE \$70 FOR THEIR TIME

 UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON





Social Worker Recruitment Flyer

Social Work Focus Groups

We Want To Hear From You!

Virtual and In Person Options!

Eligibility:

- Social worker in Washington State
- Currently practicing in child welfare, mental health treatment, or hospital setting

Join us for a 90-minute focus group discussion about the child welfare system and potential alternatives to better support youth and families. Focus groups will take place in February & March, 2024.

Sign Up With QR Code:



Or Contact:
hscheuer@uw.edu

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE \$50 FOR THEIR TIME

 UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON





Appendix C: Screening Call Questions

Talking Points & Screening Questions

Study Information

The goal of this study is to examine the links between child welfare and the criminal legal and juvenile justice systems and come up with potential alternatives to these systems. To achieve this goal, we will be holding focus groups with parents/ caregivers and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who work within these systems to learn about their experiences and recommendations for more supportive alternatives. Recommendations for systems alternatives generated from our focus groups will be used for program development and policy advocacy to promote health and wellbeing for families in Washington state.

Screening Questions

1. Do you have lived experience with child welfare / CPS?
2. Did your experience with child welfare occur in Washington state?
 - Are you currently located in Washington state?
 - If yes, what city?
3. If you are involved in the focus groups, you will be asked to talk openly about your history with cps/child welfare. Are you comfortable sharing this information in a group of 8-10 other people who have also had lived experience with child welfare?
4. If you are involved in the focus groups, they will be virtual, and you will be asked to keep your camera on and actively participate. Are you comfortable with this?
5. At this time, we can only include participants with historical / closed investigation with CPS/child welfare. Do you currently have an open CPS case?
6. Can you participate in the 90-minute virtual focus group during the month of February?

Additional Information

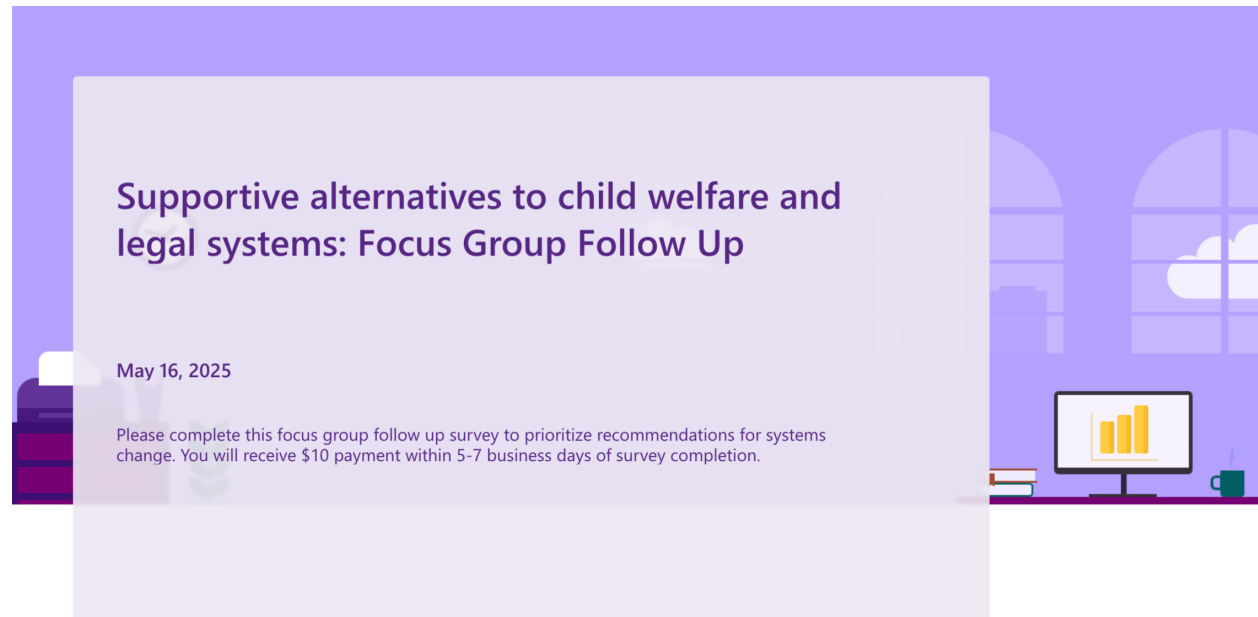
- Your involvement is completely voluntary
- We will ask for your permission to record the focus groups, but the recording will not include your identifying information, and we would store it in a secure place
- You will receive \$70 for participating in the focus group
- After completion of the focus groups, we will contact you and request that you complete a short survey to finalize our results from the focus group. You will receive additional compensation for completing the survey

Final Questions

- Do you have any questions?
- *If they meet all screen call eligibility criteria:* Are you still willing to participate?
 - If “yes”- great, we will contact you in the next few days to schedule focus groups.

- If “no” - no problem, thank you for your time today. Would you be okay with us keeping your information and reaching out to you if there are other ways to participate in the future?

Appendix D: Follow-Up Survey



Supportive alternatives to child welfare and legal systems: Focus Group Follow Up

* Required

Demographics



1. Which of the following best describes you? *

- ☐ Young adult who has lived experience with CPS and/or foster care
- ☐ Parent or primary caregiver who has lived experience with CPS and/or foster care for your child
- ☐ Social worker

2. Are you a member of the lived experience council? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Supportive alternatives to child welfare and legal systems: Focus Group Follow Up

* Required

Priorities and Recommendations for Systems Change



All recommendations below were generated from focus groups and subsequent meaning making sessions with various focus group participants. You may see recommendations that did not initiate in your group. This is an opportunity for you to provide feedback on priorities and recommendations identified in other groups.

3. Please click and move these five recommendations up or down to rank your top priorities for systems change from 1 - 5

1 = most important, 5 = least important *

Trauma informed training for all individuals who may respond to child welfare calls

A community based organization of family advocates with lived experience who respond to child welfare calls alongside other responders (e.g., social workers)

Formal initiative that builds an alternative emergency response system to all child welfare and domestic violence calls that sets youth and families up for long term success (e.g., no law enforcement presence, culturally responsive and trauma informed family advocates, referrals to lived experts)

Prevention resources: creation of a system where youth and parents can anonymously ask for and receive services and support without necessitating a call to child welfare

Mentorship and concrete supports for youth and parents who are involved with CPS and/or foster care

4. Please share what you think is missing from the list of priorities and note anything else that you would like to see prioritized for systems change *

Enter your answer

5. Any additional comments on these priorities and recommendations? *

Enter your answer

Payment Information

6. How would you like to receive payment for survey completion? * 

- ☐ Venmo
- ☐ Cash App
- ☐ Zelle
- ☐ Paypal
- ☐ Mailed Gift Card

Appendix E: IRB Approval



DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

September 22, 2023

Dear Hannah Scheuer:

On 9/22/2023, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Examining the Child Welfare System Through Parent, Young Adult, and Social Work Perspectives
Investigator:	Hannah Scheuer
IRB ID:	STUDY00018834
Funding:	Name: *OSP Not Involved, Grant Office ID: N/A, Funding Source ID: N/A

Exempt Status

HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Category 2(iii)). This determination may or may not be based on the Limited IRB Review process.

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.
- **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your research. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to approach possible subjects or conduct research procedures in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department).**
- HSD does not make determinations on behalf of other institutions. If other institutions are involved in the research, they may need to make their own determination or they may decide to be guided by our determination.

Only certain types of changes to exempt research require that you submit a modification in Zipline. For information about what changes require a Modification, refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#). If you are unsure if your proposed changes require a modification, contact your [HSD team](#) before preparing the modification.

HSD does not review or approve consent plans and consent materials for exempt research. Researchers are still responsible for providing subjects with information about the research prior to their agreement to participate. Refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#) for details about what information should be provided. You may wish to use the optional [Exempt Consent Template](#) as a guide.

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Implemented 07/27/2023– Version 1.5 - Page 1 of 2

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- Wise, K., Carter, L., Bamba, L. A., & Barr, R. (2024). How Do Child Protective Service (CPS) Policies Keep Employees Safe: A Caseworker's Perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 162, 107697. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107697>
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Zeidler-Ordaz, L. (2024). *THE TIES THAT BIND: Relationships Between Law Enforcement and the Department of Children and Family Services in Los Angeles County*.

Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. University of Washington Seattle, WA	Degree Anticipated June 2025
MSW Portland State University Portland, OR	June 2018
B.A. Reed College Portland, OR Major: Psychology	May 2013

PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Publications

Morrison, K. M., Eisenberg, N., Lyons, V. H., Sterling, S. A., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J. M., Beaulieu, D., Boggs, J., Briney, J. S., Danzo, S., Haggerty, K. P., Jessen, A., Kline-Simon, A., Loree, A. M., Morse, E., **Scheuer, H.**, Wang, X., & Kuklinski, M. R. (in press). Implementation fidelity of a virtual adaptation of the Guiding Good Choices program. *Journal of Community Psychology*.

Scheuer, H., Wulz, A., Carmichael, A., Welder, L. (2024). The Continuum of Health Equity Practice & Science: Conceptualizing Health Equity Research and Practice for Injury Prevention. *Injury Prevention*.

Scheuer, H., Kuklinski, M. R., Mariscal, M.A., Haggerty, K.P., Rowhani-Rahbar, A., Zatzick, D., Moore, M. (2024). Supporting Families After Pediatric Traumatic Injury: Illuminating Parent Experiences of Stress and Coping. *Clinical Social Work Journal*.

Scheuer, H., Conrick, K., Mills, B., Solano, E., Arbabi, S., Bulger, E., Dotolo, D., St Vil, C., Vavilala, M., Rowhani-Rahbar, A., Moore, M. (2024). Improving Post-Injury Follow-up Survey Response: Incorporating Automated Modalities. *Injury Epidemiology*.

Danzo, S., Kuklinski, M. R., Sterling, S. A., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J. M., Boggs, J., Briney, J.S., Charvat-Aguilar, N., Eisenberg, N., Kaffl, A., Kline-Simon, A., Loree, A.M., Lyons, V.H., Morse, E.F., Morrison, K.M., Negusse, R., & **Scheuer, H.** (2024). Anxiety, depression, and

- suicidal ideation among early adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of adolescence*.
- Smith, M., Ohman, R., **Scheuer, H.**, Sakamoto, I. (2024). Barriers and Facilitators of Family Presence at The PICU Bedside. *Critical Care Medicine*.
- Scheuer, H.**, Kuklinski, M. R., Sterling, S. A., Catalano, R. F., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J., Boggs, J., Hawkins, J. D., Loree, A. M., Weisner, C., Carey, S., Elsiss, F., Morse, E., Negusse, R., Jessen, A., Kline-Simon, A., Oesterle, S., Quesenberry, C., Sofrygin, O., & Yoon, T. (2022). Parent-focused prevention of adolescent health risk behavior: Study protocol for a multisite cluster-randomized trial implemented in pediatric primary care. *Contemporary clinical trials*, 112.
- Engstrom, A., Moloney, K., Nguyen, J., Parker, L., Roberts, M., Moodliar, R., Russo, J., Wang, J., **Scheuer, H.**, & Zatzick, D. (2021). A Pragmatic Clinical Trial Approach to Assessing and Monitoring Suicidal Ideation: Results from A National US Trauma Care System Study. *Psychiatry*, 1–17.
- Whiteside, L. K., Huynh, L., Morse, S., Hall, J., Meurer, W., Banta-Green, C. J., **Scheuer, H.**, Cunningham, R., McGovern, M., & Zatzick, D. F. (2021). The Emergency Department Longitudinal Integrated Care (ED-LINC) intervention targeting opioid use disorder: A pilot randomized clinical trial. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*.
- Scheuer, H.**, Engstrom, A., Thomas, P., et al. (2020). A Comparative Effectiveness Trial of an Information Technology Enhanced Peer-Integrated Collaborative Care Intervention for US Trauma Care Systems: Clinical Study Protocol. *Contemporary Clinical Trials*.
- Moloney, K., **Scheuer, H.**, Engstrom, A., et al. (2020). Experiences and Insights from the Early US COVID-19 Epicenter: A Rapid Assessment Procedure Informed Clinical Ethnography Case Series. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*.
- Scheuer, H.**, Alarcón, G., Demeter, D.V., Earl, E., Fair, D.A., Nagel, B.J. (2017). Reduced fronto-amygdalar connectivity in adolescence is associated with increased depression symptoms over time. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 266, 35-41.
- Cservenka, A., **Stein H.**, Wilson, A.C., Nagel, B.J. (2015). Neurobiological Phenotypes of Familial Chronic Pain in Adolescence: A Pilot fMRI Study. *The Journal of Pain*, 16(9): 913-25.
- Siegel, M., Milligan, B., **Stein, H.**, Teer, O., & Smith, K. (2013). Telephone administration of aberrant behavior checklist: A pilot study of feasibility in children with intellectual disability and autism. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 17: 265-271.

Presentations

Scheuer, H., Kuklinski, M., Mariscal, M. (2024). Supporting Families After Pediatric Traumatic Injury: Illuminating Parent Experiences of Stress and Coping. Oral presentation presented at the Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research Annual Conference, Chapel Hill, NC.

Scheuer, H., Eisenberg, N., Kuklinski, M., Danzo, S., Caouette, J., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J., Boggs, J., Sterling, S. (2024). Changes in Parenting Attitudes and Knowledge after Virtual Implementation of Guiding Good Choices in Pediatric Primary Care. Poster presented at the Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference, Washington, D.C.

Danzo, S., Kuklinski, M. R., Sterling, S. A., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J. M., Boggs, J., Briney, J.S., Charvat-Aguilar, N., Eisenberg, N., Kaffl, A., Kline-Simon, A., Loree, A.M., Lyons, V.H., Morse, E.F., Morrison, K.M., Negusse, R., & **Scheuer, H.** (2024). Mental Health Problems Among Early Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Applying Findings to Support Youth. Oral Presentation at the Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference, Washington, D.C.

Scheuer, H., Wulz, A., Thigpen, S. (2023). The Continuum of Health Equity Practice and Science: Conceptualizing Health Equity in the Division of Injury Prevention. Oral presentation presented at the Safe States Annual Conference, Denver, CO.

Kuklinski, M., Sterling, S., **Scheuer, H.,** Morrison, K., Jean-Francois, B. (2023). Guiding Good Choices for Health: Increasing the Reach of Effective Family-Focused Intervention Through Virtual Implementation in Pediatric Primary Care. Organized Paper Symposium presented at the Society for Prevention Research Annual Conference, Washington, D.C.

Eisenberg, N., Morrison, K., Morse, E., **Scheuer, H.,** Beaulieu, D., Kuklinski, M., Sterling, S., Veas, R., Beck, A., Braciszewski, J. (2023). The Guiding Good Choices Program: Exploring innovations to support parents and promote youth wellbeing. Symposium presented at the International Congress on Evidence-based Parenting Support Annual Conference, held virtually.

Scheuer H., Conrick K., Mills B., Solano E., Arbabi S., Bulger E., Dotolo D., St Vil C., Vavilala M., Rowhani-Rahbar A., Moore M. (2023). Utilizing Automated Modalities to Improve Post-Injury Follow-Up Survey Response. Poster presented at the Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research Annual Conference, Denver, CO.

Scheuer H., Conrick K., Mills B., St Vil C., Dotolo D., Bulger E., Arbabi S., Solano E., Vavilala M., Rowhani-Rahbar A., Moore M. (2023). Utilizing Automated Modalities to Improve

Post-Injury Follow-Up Survey Response. Poster presented at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Conference, Phoenix, AZ.

Dalene Beaulieu, **Hannah Scheuer**, & Meghann Wolvert. (2022). Guiding Good Choices: Parent Recruitment, Retention, and Satisfaction when using a virtual platform during a global COVID pandemic. Workshop presented at the National Prevention Network Annual Meeting, held virtually.

Hannah Scheuer, Michelle Roberts, & Dr. Douglas Zatzick. (2018). Trauma Survivors Outcomes & Support: Findings and Updates from Nationwide and Harborview Trauma Center Investigations. *Harborview Noon Conference*.

Hernandez K., Alarcón G., **Stein H.**, Nagel B.J. (2016). Anxiety Symptoms are Positively Associated with Set-Shifting Performance in Healthy Adolescents. Poster presented at the International Neuropsychological Society Annual Conference, Boston, MA.

Stein H., Alarcón G., Demeter D.V., Earl E., Fair D.A., Nagel B.J. (2015). Weaker baseline fronto-amygdalar resting state functional connectivity in healthy adolescents who escalate in depression symptoms over time. Poster presented at the Society for Neuroscience Annual Conference, Chicago, IL.

Cservenka A., **Stein H.**, Lyubchik N., Wilson A.C., Nagel B.J. (2014). Neurobiological phenotypes of familial chronic pain in adolescence: a pilot fMRI study. Poster presented at the Association for Psychological Science Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA.

RESEARCH INTERESTS & EXPERIENCE

Interests

Alternatives to child-welfare, systemic reform and abolition, policy-relevant research, development and implementation of policy and program initiatives, childhood trauma, health equity, prevention science, mental health service delivery for historically and persistently marginalized individuals and families

Experience

Individual, Family, & Social Work Perspectives to Disrupt the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline <i>Principal Investigator, University of Washington</i> Mixed-methods dissertation investigation, funded by the Grand Challenges for Social Work doctoral award, aiming to examine the links between child welfare, juvenile legal, and the adult legal systems in Washington state and offer potential alternatives from the perspective of parents and young adults who have experienced child welfare involvement and social workers who are currently engaged with these systems through their practice.	12/2023-Present
Supporting Families after Pediatric Traumatic Injury: Improving Psychosocial Assessment and Care <i>Principal Investigator, University of Washington</i> Pilot study aiming to inform the development of a parent-informed, culturally and demographically responsive, preventive intervention to address parent and caregiver acute stress after pediatric traumatic injury. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies utilized to elucidate the experiences of parents and caregivers of children admitted to the Harborview Medical Center (HMC) pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) following traumatic injury.	06/2022-06/2024
CDC Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) ICRC Internship Program <i>Invited Intern, CDC Division of Injury Prevention</i> University of Washington's nominated student for the CDC's center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) 2023 Internship Program. Internship takes place in the Division of Injury Prevention on a project titled: "Understanding Health Equity in Injury Prevention". Working to develop a health equity initiative to guide future CDC injury prevention projects.	05/2023-01/2024
Guiding Good Choices for Health <i>Graduate Research Assistant, University of Washington, SDRG</i> NIH funded study exploring the feasibility & effectiveness of implementing an evidence-based guidance curriculum aimed at reducing adolescent risk behaviors (Guiding Good Choices) for parents of early adolescents in large integrated healthcare systems. Responsible for building and editing guidance curriculum materials, intervention fidelity coding, preparation of manuscripts and presentations, data management and monitoring.	02/2020-03/2024

Seattle Children's Hospital Fellows and Residents Health Equity Grant <i>Graduate Research Assistant, Seattle Children's Hospital</i> This investigation is a qualitative study to better understand family stressors and their impact on family functioning and mental health, with a particular focus on issues affecting health equity. The goal of this work is to identify system, hospital-level, and provider-level modifiable factors to increase parent and family capacity to be present and participate in their child's care during critical illness. Responsible for conducting qualitative interviews with parents/caregivers post-hospital discharge.	10/2021-12/2023
Trauma Survivors Outcomes and Support (TSOS) Research Program <i>Academic & Clinical Social Worker, Harborview Medical Center</i> Multi-site trauma center NIMH funded study and single-site trauma center PCORI funded study delivering clinical interventions to diverse traumatic injury survivors with the goal of reducing PTSD and depression symptoms, emergency department utilization, and high-risk behaviors post-injury. Responsible for clinical intervention delivery and research duties including participant recruitment and follow-up coordination, IRB communications, summary reports, and preparation of manuscripts and presentations.	07/2018-08/2020
Translational Research of Adolescent Change Lab <i>Research Assistant & Motivational Interviewing Counselor, Oregon Health & Science University</i> NIH federally funded study exploring adolescent health risk behaviors, specifically substance use, and how to create effective interventions to reduce these behaviors. Responsible for conducting motivational interviewing intervention sessions with youth engaged in heavy alcohol use and assisting with preparation of presentations and reports.	04/2017-06/2018
Developmental Brain Imaging Lab <i>Project Coordinator/Senior Research Assistant, Oregon Health & Science University</i> NIH federally funded study exploring the impact of family history of alcohol and substance use on adolescent brain structure and executive functioning. Responsible for recruitment, scheduling, data collection, data processing, IRB communications, and analyses. Administrator of detailed clinical interviews, psychiatric diagnostic screenings, neuropsychological assessments and functional MRI operation.	07/2013-08/2017
Project Options <i>Research Assistant, Adolescent Health Research Program, Reed College</i> Large-scale research and alcohol prevention program within Portland public schools. Responsible for preparing materials for school-wide surveys, processing consent materials, administering school surveys, assisting in focus groups, and behavioral coding.	08/2012-05/2013

CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Seattle Children's Research Institute, Clinical Trainer

11/2024-Present

Motivational Interviewing (MI) clinical trainer for multiple studies within Seattle Children's Research Institute. As the MI clinical trainer, I provide MI training and support to clinical coaches and interventionists working on projects that utilize MI interventions.

Self Space, Therapist

06/2024-Present

Therapist at Self Space Seattle, a group therapy practice providing in person and virtual therapy for individuals, couples, and families. As a therapist at Self Space, I provide therapy services to children, youth, and families utilizing evidence-based approaches including cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, motivational interviewing, mindfulness-based interventions, and parent-management training. I also participate in care coordination with primary care physicians and psychiatric providers.

Brightline, Child and Adolescent Behavioral Therapist

09/2023-06/2024

Behavioral health therapist with Brightline, a comprehensive virtual behavioral health platform for families. As a therapist with Brightline, I provided telehealth therapy services to children, youth, and family utilizing evidence-based approaches including cognitive behavioral therapy and parent-management training and participated in care coordination with primary care physicians, schools, and others relevant to youth care.

Fostering Higher Education, Motivational Interviewing Consultant

09/2021-06/2024

Motivational Interviewing (MI) consultant for Fostering Higher Education (FHE) multi-site research study. FHE is a college readiness program presented by Foster Success, in conjunction with Washington State University and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative. FHE utilizes MI principles to help those who have experienced foster care as they transition from high school into college. As the MI consultant, I provided MI training and support to all education advocates working with foster youth enrolled in the program.

Seattle Children's Hospital, Social Worker

11/2020-08/2023

Social Worker at Seattle Children's Hospital providing clinical social work services including assessment, counseling support, resource coordination, and crisis intervention to children and families in the emergency department and inpatient units.

Family Solutions, Child & Family Therapist Intern Child and family therapist intern at Family Solutions, a community mental health agency serving children and families. Provided client-centered, trauma-informed, solution-focused, individual, and family therapy.	08/2017-06/2018
Washington DSHS: Division of Child and Family Services, MSW Intern MSW intern working with youth involved in founded CPS abuse or neglect cases. Conducted monthly home visits and supervised visits between youth and parents. Additionally, attended court, wrote case notes and case reports, participated in client advocacy and case presentation with treatment team.	09/2016-07/2017
Portland State University Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services, Child Assessment Staff Child assessment team staff for Early Works! Evaluation project at Earl Boyles Elementary School. Collected outcome and process data to determine if school interventions were improving children's success in school and reducing achievement gaps between students. Conducted vocabulary and self-regulation assessments with pre-K and kindergarten students.	09/2016-03/2017
Spring Harbor Hospital, Developmental Disabilities Unit Intern Exposure to therapeutic and research practices and clinical assessment of children with autism and other developmental disabilities. Responsibilities included assisting with therapeutic groups, management of IRB protocols, data collection, data analyses, and writing research articles.	05/2012-02/2013

TEACHING INTERESTS & EXPERIENCE

Interests

Clinical practice skills, adolescent and youth development, Motivational Interviewing (MI), health equity, research methods, social work perspectives in mental health disorders, injury and violence prevention, child mental health.

Experience

Introduction to Motivational Interviewing with Teens, Continuing Education Course, Sole Instructor	Winter 2025
The Northwest School, Prison Studies Elective, Guest Lecture	Fall 2024
INSIGHT Summer Program, Clinical Careers Panel, Guest Lecture	Summer 2024
Clinical Social Work: Practice with Children, Youth, and Families (MSW, SOC 515), Sole Instructor	Spring 2024

Macro Social Work Practice 1: Community and Policy Practice, (MSW, SOC 512), Grader	Winter 2024
UW Pre-Health Exploration Seminar, Career Panel, Guest Lecture	Fall 2023
Integrative Health/Mental Health Practice (MSW, SOC 562), Guest Lecture	Spring 2022
Social Welfare Research and Evaluation (MSW, SOC 506), Guest Lecture	Spring 2022
Motivational Interviewing with Teens (MSW, SOC 596), Sole Instructor	Winter 2022
Motivational Interviewing with Teens (MSW, SOC 596), Teaching Practicum	Winter 2021
Montseny School Barcelona, Spain, Intern English Teacher	Winter 2011

AWARDS, HONORS, GRANTS, & FELLOWSHIPS

University of Washington, Magnuson Scholar	2024-2025
UW School of Social Work, Outstanding Teaching Evaluations	Spring 2024
Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research: 2024 Student Plenary Speaker	2024
Grand Challenges for Social Work, Doctoral Award	2023-2024
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Invited Intern	Summer 2023
NIH T11 Translational Research Training Program, Fellowship	2022-2023
UW School of Social Work, Outstanding Teaching Evaluations	Winter 2022
UW School of Social Work, Top Scholar Fellowship	Spring 2021

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Self Space: Clinical Mentor	07/2024-Present
Serve as clinical mentor to two social work associates who are currently working towards full licensure and ultimately aim to practice independently with children and families.	

Purchaser Business Group on Health: Maternity Care Workgroup Advisory board member for nonprofit health care workgroup aiming to improve maternal health and mental health outcomes.	02/2023-Present
University of Washington, Social Development Research Group, Director Search Committee Doctoral student representative on the search committee for Endowed Director of the Social Development Research Group.	02/2022- 05/2022
Pathways Home Solutions Advisory board member for health care system startup aiming to promote aging in place by providing free in-home services.	11/2020-01/2022
Providence Center for Medically Fragile Children Volunteer assisting with therapeutic groups for medically fragile residents of the Providence Center.	08/2012-08/2016
Children's Relief Nursery Teacher's assistant in classroom of eight trauma exposed preschool aged children.	01/2012-01/2013
Cares NorthWest Volunteer at intake center for child abuse survivors.	04/2011-08/2012

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS & LICENSE

Social Work Independent Clinical License, Credential Number: LW61458493
National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Member
Society for Social Work Research (SSWR), Member
Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research (SAVIR), Member
Society for Prevention Research (SPR), Member