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Permanency Planning for Youth in Foster Care

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PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Elisa Arteaga

June 2018

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ABSTRACT

Despite the efforts to shorten the time youth spend in foster care, every year about 37, 362 youths emancipate from the foster care system without reaching permanency. Permanency for foster youth has not received adequate attention from the child welfare community due to the belief that youths are unadoptable. Using a qualitative approach, this study will explore the social workers' perceptions related to permanency planning for youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement in foster care and analyze the influence of the social workers' perception on permanency planning for these youths.

This research study found that social workers considered the mental health of youths as most important in considering placement and permanency options. They believe that reunifying the youths with their families of origin was the optimal permanency outcome. However, when this option was not available, they felt that placing the youths with extended family members or family friends under legal guardianship was a good permanency outcome. This study also found that most of the participants limited the youths' permanency options to only those known family members or friends already named by the parents; they did not consider reinstating reunification services to the parents, reaching out to incarcerated parents, searching for maternal and paternal extended family, or searching for lost siblings. Implications for social work research and practice are discussed.

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I would like to thank Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog for her guidance and support through the research process. I would also like to give special thanks to the social workers who took the time to participate in this research study and for their dedication to the work they do with the youths and families involved in the foster care system.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my son, Ryan Arteaga, who has been my motivation and who I now hope to inspire to reach his dreams. To my role models: my parents, Lupita Hernández and Ignacio Arteaga, and my aunt, Leonarda Poretz, who inspired and supported me to reach my dream.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iv |
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION | |
| Problem Formulation..... | 1 |
| Purpose of the Study | 5 |
| Significance of the Project for Social Work | 6 |
| CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW | |
| Introduction | 10 |
| Age of Child | 12 |
| Behavior Problems and/or Juvenile Involvement..... | 13 |
| Social Worker’s Influence on Permanency Outcomes | 16 |
| Theories Guiding Conceptualization | 18 |
| Summary | 19 |
| CHAPTER THREE: METHODS | |
| Introduction | 21 |
| Study Design | 21 |
| Sampling..... | 23 |
| Data Collection and Instruments..... | 23 |
| Procedure | 24 |
| Protection of Human Subjects | 25 |
| Data Analysis..... | 25 |
| Summary | 26 |

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 27 |
| Presentation of the Findings | 27 |
| Mental Health Services..... | 28 |
| Importance of Family Connections and Permanency Planning | 30 |
| Permanency Interventions | 31 |
| Family Search and Engagement | 33 |
| Summary..... | 34 |

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 36 |
| Discussion | 36 |
| Implications | 39 |
| Implications for Social Work Practice | 39 |
| Implications for Social Work Research..... | 41 |
| Conclusion | 42 |

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL..... | 44 |
|-------------------------------|----|

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT | 46 |
|------------------------------------|----|

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| APPENDIX C: SURVEY | 48 |
|--------------------------|----|

| | |
|------------------|----|
| REFERENCES | 51 |
|------------------|----|

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

In any given day in the United States, there are close to half a million children in the foster care system. According to the Children's Bureau (2014) report to congress on the foster care system, on September 30, 2014, there were 415, 129 children in the foster care system in the United States. The report indicates that during the fiscal year 2014, a total of 264,746 children entered the foster care system while 238,230 exited (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). The report also states that more than a quarter (29 percent) were placed in relative homes, and nearly half (46 percent) were placed in non-relative foster family homes (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). Also, about half (55 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their families; and about half (51 percent) of the children who left foster care in the fiscal year 2014 were reunified with their parents or primary caregivers (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). What is alarming about these statistics is the number of children growing up in the foster care system without reaching permanency (permanent connection with a committed adult who can provide unconditional care and affection). Every year about 21,875 youths (9%) emancipate (at the age of 18, the case is dismissed from juvenile dependency court as the person is considered an adult) from the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Permanency for foster youth has not received adequate attention from the child welfare community due to the beliefs that teens are unadoptable and teen placements are unsuccessful due to the adolescents' behaviors (Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services, 2008). Some of those behaviors are related to the trauma that brought them to the foster care system in addition to typical adolescence behavior (Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services, 2008).

As of July 2016, there were 55,162 children in the foster care system in California (University of California at Berkeley, 2017). State demographic information on foster care populations shows that 23.2 percent were White, 22.5 percent were African-American, 50.7 percent were Latino, 2.1 percent were Asian, and 1.4 percent were Native American (University of California at Berkeley, 2017). Permanency information reveals that 37.5 percent of children in care are reunited with their families, 1.2 percent had a legal guardianship established, 0.2 percent were adopted, 0.9 had another plan, 0.4 emancipated from the foster care system, and 59.9 percent are still in foster care (University of California at Berkeley, 2017). In San Bernardino county, there were 4,985 children in the foster care system during July 2016 and only thirty percent of children in foster care in this county, were reunified with their families of origin while most of the them (68%) were still in care (University of California at Berkeley, 2017).

A variety of child welfare policies have been enacted and amended over time to safeguard the rights of children placed in the foster care system. In 1974, the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) was enacted into law with the main goals of preventing out-of-home care and facilitating family reunification and adoption (Townsend, Hignight, & Rubovits, 2008). In 1997 President Bill Clinton signed into law the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) amending the Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). One of the main goals of the amendment was to shorten the time that children spend in foster care without reaching a permanent plan. Other goals include ensuring child health and safety, providing family preservation services, and the promotion of adoption where the reunification efforts fail (Civic Impulse, 2017).

Despite the efforts to shorten the time children spend in the foster care system, many children are unable to be placed in a permanent home in a timely manner, if ever, due to different factors including child race and age, behavior and emotional problems, family functioning, family history of mental illness, substance abuse, and incarceration (Townsend, Hignight, and Rubovits, 2008).

In addition, prior research completed by Pine and colleagues (2009) indicates that social workers' perception about particular children and families (minority, language barrier, low socioeconomic status, single parent household), influences the assessment, services provided and reunification outcomes of these children and families. African American and Latino children are removed from their birth families at a higher rate and are reunified at lower rate due to

different factors including social worker perception of the family, culture, and the problem (s) for which the social worker intervened with the family (Harris & Courtney, 2003; Hill, 2012). Furthermore, family characteristics (marital status, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc.) also influence the social worker's perception about family preservation and/or reunification and the delivery of services (Pine et al., 2009).

Understanding the factors that influence permanency such as age and behavior problems is important because they negatively impact the permanency outcomes of older youths in foster care with behavior problems and juvenile probation involvement. Youth with history of foster care have a higher risk of becoming homeless, suffering from mental health and substance abuse problems, and experiencing low educational achievement and unemployment (Bender, Yang, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015; Hill, 2012). Statistics indicate that former foster youth are more likely to be unemployed (48%), experience homelessness (25%), are ten times more likely to commit a crime, are seven times more likely to abuse drugs, and are five times more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder than the general population (fosterclub.com, 2016). Additionally, youth who emancipate from the foster care system do not have an appropriate support system that can help support and guide them during difficult times (Gustavsson & Scott, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore social worker perceptions related to permanency planning for older youth (thirteen to seventeen) in foster care with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement. Research studies suggest that youth with these characteristics are provided with different permanency plans that focus on long term foster care rather than family preservation, reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption (Hill, 2012; Gustavsson & Scott, 2009).

The findings of this research study inform practice about social workers' perceptions on permanency planning for this vulnerable population and how these perceptions may influence the outcomes of these youths and their families.

This research focused on social workers who serve youths between the ages of thirteen and seventeen placed in foster care and who had behavioral and/or juvenile probation involvement.

A qualitative research design, including in-depth interviews and purposive and snowball sampling was used for this study. Participants were recruited using the researcher's personal network. The sample size for this research was seven social workers.

The researcher developed an interview guide using case vignettes and open-ended questions to explore the workers' perceptions and influence on permanency planning for older youth with behavior and/or juvenile probation involvement.

The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the California State University San Bernardino to conduct the study. The IRB department was provided with information that described the goal of the research, its benefits, as well as a description of the methods which included details about the sample such as size and population. There were no foreseeable risks to participants in this study.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This research is important because older youth in foster care with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement are at higher risk of not reaching permanency. National, state and local statistics indicate that despite the federal efforts to shorten the time that youth spend in foster care, many youth (9%) are unable to reach permanency through family reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption. These youth face poor outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse and delinquency after they emancipate from the foster care system (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Of relevant importance was the role of the social worker in assessing, planning and implementing appropriate and effective measure to ensure that all children in the foster care system are able to form a nurturing and positive permanent connection with an appropriate adult who can support and guide them, especially during difficult times.

The social worker in the child welfare system plays a key role in the lives of children and families referred for services. Despite the rigorous preparation that the social work profession requires and on the job training provided, social worker perceptions are potentially influenced by personal and professional experiences and values, federal laws and regulations, and organization's climate.

To ensure best practice, the California Child Welfare core practice has implemented several initiatives to assist social workers with permanency planning. These initiatives include Child and Family Team Meetings (CFTM) whose main goal is to engage the child and family natural resources to prevent CFS involvement (California Department of Social Services, California Department of Health Care Services & University of California at Davis Extension Center for Human Services Resource Center for Family-Focused Practice, n.d.). In addition, Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings focus on maintaining the family and community engaged to ensure a network of support for the child and family to facilitate reunification and permanency (California Department of Social Services, California Department of Health Care Services & University of California at Davis Extension Center for Human Services Resource Center for Family-Focused Practice, n.d.).

One of the most recent laws implemented to Child Welfare practice in California is Assembly Bill 403, Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) (California Department of Social Services, 2017). Its main goal is to reduce group home placements and the length of time a youth spends in a group home setting and

increase placements in family settings to help the youth form appropriate stable and nurturing lifelong connections (California Department of Social Services, n.d.). This new law will have a direct impact on older youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement as they are often placed in group homes due to higher level of needs.

For these reasons, it was important to study the social worker perception on permanency planning for youth with behavior problems, and/or juvenile involvement.

Additionally, the results of this research study will provide valuable information to evaluate the role of the social worker in the child welfare system to identify potential areas of improvement to enhance the services that children and families receive hence, improving the permanency planning for youth in foster care and their outcomes.

This study focused on one main research question: How social worker perception of foster youth (thirteen to seventeen years old) with history of behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement might influence the social workers' decisions about the permanency plans of the youth.

The findings of this research study may contribute to the profession of social work by providing insight about how social workers perceive permanency planning for foster youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement. The findings may also suggest ways these perceptions might impact the permanency outcomes for these youths. These findings may be of significance

to the Child Welfare Community as they may provide information that can potentially enhance the permanency outcomes of youths in foster care in this county. This could potentially lead to the creation of additional social worker positions at the front end of Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement which can work with the youth and their families to explore and involve their natural supports to avoid entrance into the foster care system. This could be an added support to line workers who deal with the complex needs of the families in order to preserve the family unit and meet federal guidelines of providing a concurrent permanency plan for the youth.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review provided in this chapter focuses on permanency outcomes for youth (thirteen to seventeen years of age) in the foster care system with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement.

A review of the most recent research over the last five years includes topics such as child welfare permanency workers' experience, position, and perspectives (Fluke, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016); recidivism outcomes for maltreated youth in the juvenile system (Height, Bidwell, Choi, & Cho, 2016); homeless youth with a history of foster care (Bender, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015); permanency and placement planning for youth with disabilities (Hill, 2012); and factors associated with reunification (Cheng, 2011).

Permanency is the key desirable outcome for children in the foster care system; permanency can be reached through reunification with family of origin, legal guardianship, or adoption (Shaw, 2008). Youth permanency is defined as a permanent connection with a least one committed adult who can provide a safe, secure, and stable parenting relationship, unconditional commitment, lifelong support, love and legal stability through guardianship or adoption (Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services, 2008). The State of California Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), indicates that the main goals of permanency include

ensuring child safety, preserving families, maintaining family contact and continuity, empowering families to meet their own needs, meeting the children's needs, and preparing foster youth for emancipation and transition to adulthood (Needell & Patterson, 2004).

Different themes emerged from the literature review about permanency planning for youth in the foster care system. First, the age of entrance into the foster care system affects the permanency outcomes (Gustavsson & Scott, 2009; Hill, 2012; Pine et al, 2009). Second, youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement experience lower rates of family reunification or adoption and long-term foster care seems to be the preferable outcome (Gustavsson & Scott, 2009; Hill, 2012; Height, Bidwell, Choi, & Cho, 2016; Pine et al, 2009). Third, social work perception influences the permanency outcomes for this population of youth in foster care (Claiborne, Auerbach, Lawrence, & Zeitlin Schudrich, 2013; Fluke, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016 Gustavsson & Scott, 2009; Hill, 2012; Pine et al, 2009). In the following sections, each of these topics is discussed. Finally, the theories related to this topic, including systems theory and theories related to organizational culture and climate are discussed.

Age of Child

Permanency for foster youth has not received adequate attention from the child welfare community due to the belief that teens don't want to be adopted, are unadoptable and teen placements are unsuccessful (Catholic Community

Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services, 2008). Research studies have shown that permanency outcomes for older youth in the foster care system are not favorable (Hill, 2012; Gustavsson & Scott, 2009; Glisson & Williams, 2013). Among the factors that interfere with the permanency outcomes for older youths in foster care are the age at which the youth enter the foster care system, length of time spent in care, number and type of placements, behavior problems, and loyalty to their families of origin for which they opt out of being adopted (Pine et al., 2009; Park & Ryan, 2009; Townsend, Hignight & Rubovits, 2008).

Adoption for many youths who enter the foster care system during adolescence (thirteen to seventeen) is less likely to occur due to the lack of adoptive families interested in adopting teenagers (Townsend, Hignight & Rubovits, 2008). Most of the adoptive families are interested in younger children, and many youths desire to not be adopted out of feelings of loyalty to their families of origin (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009; Townsend, Hignight & Rubovits, 2008). Older youths are more interested in having some type of planned contact with their birth families (referred to as an open adoption) which can be perceived as problematic to some adoptive families who desire to establish their own parental roles with youth (Cushing & Greenblatt, 2009). During adolescent years, youth are more likely to form special bonds with people of their own age, develop group memberships with friends, and become more independent from the family (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009). This can make the decision to be

adopted difficult for some foster youths who fear being moved from their social circles and losing the connection with their friends (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009).

In addition, the lack of the youths' input on their own permanency planning negatively influences the outcome. The youths want to be consulted about the details of when, where and with whom visitations are planned as many youths fear physical punishment from their parents (Fox & Berrick, 2007). Likewise, many youths want to be part of their permanency planning when they are unable to be reunified with their birth families. Involving the youth in their permanency planning facilitates the discussion of legal permanence and promotes and supports emotional stability (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009).

Behavior Problems and/or Juvenile Involvement

The very nature of foster care is associated with behavior problems that children exhibit as a result of the traumatic experiences that they experienced before being placed in foster care along with the initial removal from their families of origin. A research study conducted in Illinois by Park & Ryan (2009) found that the main reasons for child removal by CPS were physical abuse and neglect, and 6% of those removals was related to the children's problematic behavior (Park & Ryan, 2009). Older youths in foster care are more likely to experience multiple placements due to behavioral problems associated with the loss of their birth families and normal teen age behavior, defiance and/or rebellious, as they are trying to form their own identity (Hill, 2012). The youths' behavioral problems during foster care placement also affect their permanency outcomes. The loss of

their families, extended families, friends, and environment along with multiple placement moves are related to the externalization of behaviors linked to adjustment problems that these youths experience and which have the potential of prolonging their time in the foster care system (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009).

A research study conducted by Hill (2012) involving youth with disability diagnosis (intellectual and/or emotional behavior diagnosis), found that almost all youth in the study experienced a high number of placements which prolonged their stay in foster care. Further, these youths were 1.5 times less likely to have a concurrent permanency plan (working towards family reunification, while at the same time developing an alternate plan such as adoption) outside family reunification or relative care; and only 60% of the youth in the study had an identified concurrent planning on file (Hill, 2012).

A longitudinal study conducted by Park & Ryan (2009) in Illinois which followed 5, 978 youth (between the ages of 3 to 18 years old), in out-of-home care found that youths in group home settings have higher level of mental health care needs and placement instability which decreases their chances to achieve permanency. In another study, Aarons and colleagues (2010) found that the longer a youth stays in foster care, the more likely to experience placement changes such as group home placements due to behavior problems and the less likely to reunified with his family of origin or reach permanency as parenting a youth with these characteristics becomes more challenging.

Other factors that affect instability of placement for older youth in care include changes of social workers and youths' hospitalizations due to behavior problems (Hill, 2012). Youth with a higher level of mental health care needs experience more placement instability, frequent placement changes, and negative outcomes such as increased behavior problems, insecurity and juvenile delinquency which decreases permanency outcomes (Cushing & Greenblatt, 2009; Park & Ryan, 2009; Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Placement instability due to behavior problems has also been linked to low educational achievements, low self-esteem, substance use, juvenile and young adult delinquency, arrest, and incarceration (Scott & Gustavsson, 2009; Ryan, Hernandez & Herz, 2007). Youth involved in the child welfare system and juvenile probation system are at a higher risk for mental health problems, receive harsher treatment in the juvenile probation system, are often placed in group homes, and have higher rates of recidivism (Haight, W., Bidwell, L., Choi, W., & Cho, M., 2016; Barth & Jonson-Reid, 2000).

Social Worker's Influence on Permanency Outcomes

Changes in social workers due to job burnout, staff turnover, experience and ideology (family preservation versus child safety) may potentially affect the permanency outcome of these youths (Fluke, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). Social workers have a strong influence on the initial removal as well as the permanency outcomes of youth in foster care (Pine et al., 2009). There has been long standing racial disproportionality in the foster care system which

seems to indicate that children of color (African-American and Latinos) are more often removed from their families of origin and have a lower rate of reunification due to the belief that minority families are unable to adequately parent their children (Harris & Courtney, 2003; Cheng, 2011; Townsend, Hignight & Rubovits, 2008). Furthermore, the interaction of race/ethnicity and family structure (one-parent vs two-parent family) influences the removal of children from their birth families and prolongs the timing of family reunification, especially among children of color, who are over represented in the child welfare system due to the belief that minority, single-parent families are unable to appropriately provide and care for their children (Harris & Courtney, 2003).

Some of the important factors of reunifying children with their families include ensuring child safety and the ability of the families to meet the needs of the children. A longitudinal analysis of data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that among the most important factors that influence permanency for foster youth are the caseworkers' engagement with families, and matching the services to the needs of the families to promote and support the reunification process (Cheng, 2011). However, some social workers are unable to accurately identify the needs of children and families to provide adequate services to address those problem areas due to the lack of skills and experience to make an appropriate assessment (Hill, 2012).

In addition, social workers' world views and personal and professional values and experiences can potentially influence the decision of family

preservation or child safety (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). For example, a social worker may be inclined to lean towards child safety when making the decision to remove a child from his family instead of providing appropriate services under family maintenance to preserve the family (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). Other factors that influence the outcome of a case referral, reunification process, and permanency include: social worker experience; agency's culture and climate which includes values, beliefs and employee's behavior which are passed from generation to generation and the environment produced by the culture; child welfare policies; and administrators' own ideology have a direct impact on the way the agency carries its mission (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016).

Hence, the outcomes of older youths, especially those with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement are potentially influenced by the perception, skill and experience of the social worker along with child welfare policy changes and agency's ideology as the agency's culture is passed from generation to generation (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). Other factors influencing permanency planning for this population of youth include federal laws and policy changes, agency's ideologies, high caseloads and staff burnout (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Systems theory and organizational culture and climate theory are used to conceptualize the ideas presented in this research study.

A system is a set of elements interacting together to form a functional whole (Harris, 2015). Each element affects the other elements and the whole is also affected by other systems in the environment (Harris, 2015). Thus, systems theory focuses on understanding the complex interactions between systems (individuals, groups, organizations, and communities) in their environment and how these interactions influence each other and their transactions (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). One of the main goals of systems theory is to identify and address problems that impact the systems to establish and maintain equilibrium (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). This theory will help explain how the social worker as a part of the child welfare system interacts and influences the outcomes of children and families involved with the foster care system.

According to the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model, organizational culture and climate theory explain how the rules and norms of an organization impact the effectiveness of the organization. One of the goals of this theory is to explain how the agency's culture influences and affects the relationship between the social worker and clients in delivery of services. Additionally, this theory highlights the importance of transparency, fairness, collaboration, and support in the work place as a way to provide competent services to the clients. This theory will help to explain how the permanency

planning for youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement is potentially influenced by the perception, skill, and experience of the social worker along with the agency's culture (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). Organizational culture includes shared values and beliefs that govern the employees' behavior which is passed from generation to generation of employees and affects the organization's climate (environment) (Proehl, 2001).

Thus, social workers' world view, own personal and professional values and experiences along with the organization's culture and climate influence the permanency planning of these youths.

Summary

This study explored social workers' perceptions related to permanency planning for youth (thirteen to seventeen years old) in foster care with behavioral problems and/or juvenile involvement as perceived by social workers serving youth in the foster care system. Child welfare policy has been enacted and amended in different occasions to safeguard the rights of safety, permanency, and the well-being of children and youth in foster care. However, many youths are unable to achieve permanency through family reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption due to factors such as age, behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement, and face poor outcomes once they exit the foster care system. Of relevant importance is the role of the social worker in assessing, planning and implementing appropriate and effective measures to ensure that all

foster youth are able to form appropriate nurturing and positive permanent connections with adults who can serve of support and guidance. This study explored social worker perception related to permanency planning for this vulnerable population.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This research study explored social worker perceptions- related to permanency planning for youth in foster care with behavior and/or juvenile involvement. This chapter describes the details of how this research study was conducted. The sections covered in this chapter include study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this research study was to explore social workers' perceptions on permanency planning for youth in the foster care system with behavior and/or juvenile probation involvement. This was a descriptive and explanatory research project focusing on different factors involved in the permanency planning for these youths. A qualitative research method was used for this research because it facilitated data collection from the social worker's perception to help explain how social workers' perceptions about youths' age, behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement might impact permanency planning for foster youth.

This was a qualitative study, utilizing interviews with open-ended questions and case vignettes to collect data. Social workers were interviewed

which allowed the researcher to examine their own experiences and perspectives on the factors influencing permanency planning for foster youth. A strength in using a qualitative approach with interviews was that the participants were able to share their own professional experiences to their answers and were not restricted to a limited range of answers. Consequently, data was collected in the form of words rather than numbers (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014).

A limitation of using interviews was that they were more intrusive and less anonymous than surveys, as each interviewee provided his answers in front of the interviewer. This may have caused the participant to answer in socially desirable ways; in the ways he felt the interviewer was expecting him to answer, or withhold important information or details as he might have felt uncomfortable. Also, participation was voluntary; therefore, only social workers interested in discussing their own experiences were used in this study. Further, this study's small sample size limits our ability to generalize the research findings to social workers in other communities or to social workers in general.

This research study aimed at answering one basic question regarding the permanency planning for youth in foster: how social worker perceptions of foster youths (thirteen to seventeen years old) with a history of behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement may impact social workers' permanency plans for these youths?

Sampling

A purposive sample and snowball sample were used for this research using the researcher's personal network. Social workers from the researcher's own personal network were recruited to participate; then they were asked to suggest and/or refer other workers who were knowledgeable on permanency planning to participate in this research. The sample size for this research was seven social workers who provided direct services to foster youth with behavior and/or juvenile probation involvement.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected using case vignettes and a standardized open-ended interview; demographic information was collected as well. The researcher presented two case vignettes based on hypothetical scenarios of foster youth to participants. The researcher then used an interview guide with open-ended questions to ask participants about their perceptions of these cases and the actions they would take related to permanency planning.

The case vignettes were created based on real stories of youths with behavior problems and/or juvenile involvement. Personal identifiable information such as names, birthdates and placement information were changed to ensure confidentiality. Since case vignettes have not been previously utilized for this type of research, they were pre-tested among a group of Master of Social Work Students to verify validity and reliability. One of the limitations of the case

vignettes was that they were newly created for this research. However, the strength of the vignettes was that they represented real life case situations.

The interview guide included questions such as the most appropriate permanency option for the youth, people who the social worker may search for to be engaged in the permanency planning of the youth, and the most relevant characteristic of the youth in which the worker based her permanency recommendation. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Demographic information was filled out by the participants or the researcher at the beginning of the interview. This information included gender, ethnicity, age, level of education, years of experience, current job position and permanency strategies used. For more detailed information about the interview refer to Appendix A.

Procedure

The researcher recruited participants for this study from her personal network and participants were asked to refer other potential participants from their own network who met the requirements of the research. The interview was conducted in a convenient place that allowed easy an uninterrupted conversation such as a coffee shop, restaurant, library, or a home setting.

The researcher reviewed the informed consent with the participant and demographic information was collected. The participant received a copy of the

case vignettes and the questionnaire at the beginning of the interview and was asked for permission to record the interview. An audio recorder was utilized to record the interview for future reference and data analysis. The recordings were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to present the results of the study. At the end of the interview, the participants were thanked.

Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher explained confidentiality procedures to the participant during the recruitment phase. This information was reviewed again during the interview process and each participant read and signed an informed consent at the beginning of the interview (Appendix B).

The recording of the interviews and consent forms of the participating social worker were kept strictly confidential and locked in a desk and they were destroyed at the conclusion of this research study.

Data Analysis

All data collected during the interviews was transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into written form. To differentiate the information provided by the participants, each participant was assigned a unique code used while transcribing. All utterances and comments were documented on the transcription. Physical and facial expressions were documented and described as applicable.

Interviews were conducted and transcribed by this researcher. The transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and coded several times using thematic analysis. The researcher read the transcripts several times for similarities and differences to generate data closeness. The data was grouped utilizing open coding and refined with each review, and then themes were created to classify the data. This provided the researcher with a comprehensive overview of the social workers' perceptions on permanency planning of youth with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement.

Summary

This research study sought to explore social worker perception related to permanency planning for older youths (thirteen to seventeen) with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement placed in foster care with the purpose of informing practice. Interviews actively invited the subjective and unique experiences of research participants and were capable of providing a detailed description of a social reality (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the general findings of this research study which includes demographic information about participants and themes related to social workers' perceptions on permanency planning for youths in foster care with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement. Participants were presented with two different case vignettes and were asked a series of open-ended questions to capture their perceptions.

Presentation of the Findings

The participants included six social workers and one service provider from three different counties, including Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino. Participants ranged in age from twenty-four to fifty years old. There were two male and five female participants of different ethnic backgrounds including African American, Latino, Caucasian, and biracial (African American/Latino). Six of the participants worked for Child Protective Services and one worked for a nonprofit organization providing family search and engagement services in San Bernardino County. The participants' level of education ranged from bachelor's degree to master's level social worker. The combined years of experience

working with this type of population was thirty-nine years with an average of 5.5 years of experience per participant.

Different common themes emerged during the interviews which included the workers' concerns for the youths to receive appropriate mental health services, the importance of family connections and permanency planning, and family search and engagement.

Mental Health Services

In general, all participants considered that behavior and mental health problems are the most challenging youth characteristics in considering permanency placement for youths in foster care. The participants' responses revealed that the more challenging the youths' behaviors, the higher the level of care, and the less likely they are to be placed with a family. 43% of the participants considered that prior to placing the youths with family, the youths' behavior problems needed to be stabilized and that this stabilization could be best achieved in a higher level of care setting, such as a group home or juvenile hall, where the youths could receive appropriate mental health services and supervision. Another 43% of the participants suggested that placing the youths with extended family members and providing supportive services, such as wraparound services to help stabilize and manage the youths' behaviors was a good permanency option.

Along with the behavior problems, the age of the youths was also mentioned as a challenging characteristic in considering placement options, as

one participant stated, "...usually the older the kid, [if] it is a teenager, they [caregivers] say is going to be a trouble kid, so I [caregiver] don't want to deal with that."

In considering the placement options for youths with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement, most of the workers considered that the youths' behavior problems determine the type of placement they need. One participant explained that, "the most relevant [youth characteristic] is his behavior; that is really my point of reference in why he should be in a group home right now."

However, placement decisions are not always easy to make for social workers; one participant stated, "I'm kind of torn between residential treatment for services and the relatives." Other participants considered current family connections with extended family a potential placement, especially if siblings were already placed with those relatives. In addition, another participant considered that placing the youth with his/her mother was the most appropriate placement option and stated, "they [the youth and his/her mother] need to improve and strengthen their relationship as they would always be mother and son."

Hence, workers perceived that the most challenging characteristics in considering placement options were the behavior problems and the age of the youths and many participants felt that before placing the youths with family, their behavior problems need to be stabilized in a higher level of care placement.

Importance of Family Connections and Permanency Planning

All of participants reported that the best permanency recommendation for the youths is to return home by either reunifying with parents or being placed with extended family members or family friends. They also stressed the importance of sibling connections by placing them together in the same home, whenever possible.

The participants also mentioned that families are important in maintaining the youths connected to their own cultural backgrounds, provide a sense of identity, life-long connections, and access to family connections including the parents while remaining in a safe, familiar environment. One of the participants indicated:

They are going to be with relatives, their grandparents who they [children/youth] already know, who they already have some sort of relationship, and therefore it kind of makes it somewhat easier for the circumstances that they [family] are going through. (Interview #2, personal interview, 2017).

All participants mentioned that they prefer a minimum of legal guardianship, the legal authority and responsibility to care for a child which suspends the rights of the parents and can be terminated, as a permanency option for the youths, if adoption was not possible. One of the participants mentioned, "...they [legal guardians] want to leave the possibility open for that

parent just in case; so, I think legal guardianship is probably the most appropriate [permanency option].”

All participants indicated that family is always the first permanency option as it has the potential to make the foster care experience less chaotic for the youths.

Permanency Interventions

Permanency interventions are utilized to bring the family and its natural supports together to assist the family in the reunification process and also to serve as a permanency option for the youths when reunification efforts fail. In this way, the youths are maintained within their own extended network of support.

A variety of permanency interventions were mentioned by the participants which included: Team Decision Making (TDM) and Child and Family Team Meetings (CFTM), meetings focused on engaging the child, family, and their natural support systems to prevent CFS involvement; concurrent permanency review meetings, meetings between the case manager, his/her supervisor, and the adoptions to discuss the permanency planning for the youths; legal guardianships; and adoptions. Participants commented:

“One [permanency intervention] that I like to utilize a lot is the Team Decision Making because not only the parents are identifying the potential legal guardians, foster parents, or relatives who they want this child to be placed [with], but it helps them be part of the planning and is almost as if,

you know, sort of a relief [for the parents].” (Interview #1, personal interview, 2017).

Another participant shared:

What I hear from the FFAs [Foster Family Agencies] is that when permanency planning is done in the front end of it [the intervention] is more useful rather than waiting and trying to get the family involved closer to the end. (Interview #5, personal interview, 2017).

The participants also stressed the positive impact that CFTMs have on the youths’ permanency outcomes and how they do case-mining to gather information about family members that they later utilize to invite them to the CFTMs. Furthermore, one participant stated that the social worker support to and monthly contact with the parents/caregivers helps motivate them to reach reunification.

Another participant shared that among the least useful permanency interventions was not providing enough preventive services to legal guardians caring for teens. This participant explained:

OK, I [legal guardian] took custody of this child at five, they’re [foster youth] now fifteen and they’re out of control. I [legal guardian] don’t know how to cope...and that just sends them [foster youth] back into the system and is a revolving door. (Interview #1, personal interview, 2017).

The participants also felt that engaging relatives who knew that the youth was in foster care and did nothing to obtain placement of the youth was one of the least useful interventions in permanency planning.

In general, participants suggested a variety of useful interventions, as well as some not-so-useful methods, to help provide supportive, permanent networks to youth. This range of options seems to suggest that there is no one “best practice” or hierarchy of interventions to use in particular instances. Rather, participants relied on a myriad of approaches to improve permanency for their clients.

Family Search and Engagement

All participants agreed that family is important and utilizing already identified family members for the youth’s permanency plan without searching for additional connections. Only 29% of the participants considered searching for paternal and maternal extended family members to engage or re-engage them in the youths’ permanency planning. These participants also considered re-engaging the parents whose family reunification services were already terminated as well as searching for missing sibling connections to reconnect the youths. In contrast, one participant mentioned searching for relatives in and out of state and going beyond immediate relatives already provided by the parents. She explained that sometimes “family members tend to only consider who is in their immediate household or their neighborhood and they never consider extended family and family friends.” (Interview #1, personal interview, 2017).

This could be due to the lack of family interactions, or feelings of shame for being involved with the child protective system.

Only 29% of the participants mentioned that the termination of services for the parents wasn't termination of parental rights (parental rights are the legal rights and responsibilities a parent has to a child and they are usually terminated only when a child is going to be adopted); however, they did not elaborate on possible ways in which these parents could be reconnected to their children. One participant mentioned the possibility of checking the status of incarcerated parents to explore permanency options; however, no additional details were provided. Thus, limited family search and engagement to already known members leaves out potential connections for the youths when considering permanency options.

Summary

Overall, all the participants considered that the youths' mental health was of most importance in considering permanency options. They all considered that returning the youth home to their parents was the optimal permanency outcome. However, if that option wasn't available, they felt that placing the youths with extended family members or family friends under legal guardianship was a good permanency option. Regarding family search and engagement, most of the participants limited the youths' permanency options to only those known family members and did not consider reinstating reunification services to the parents,

reaching out to incarcerated parents, searching for both maternal and paternal extended family, or searching for lost sibling connections.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five provides a discussion of the findings of this research study based on the interviews conducted. This study was descriptive and explanatory in nature and focused on social workers' perceptions of the factors involved in the permanency planning of youths in foster care with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement. The study limitations and strengths, implications for social work practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed in this chapter.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to inform practice about social workers' perceptions on permanency planning for youths with behavior and/or juvenile probation involvement and how these perceptions influence the permanency outcomes of the youths and their families. A limitation to this study is its small sample size; however, its strength is that the sample size includes participants from three different counties in southern California, as well as one service provider which is representative of a larger population.

Four central themes emerged including the importance of mental health services, importance of family connections and permanency planning,

permanency interventions, and family search and engagement. The responses provided by the participants of this research study suggest that there is a connection between the social workers' perceptions, systems theory, and the organizational culture and climate.

One of the goals of systems theory is to understand how each element of the system interacts and affects other elements of the same system (Winer & Ray, 2012, p. 129). In this context, each social worker is an element of the child welfare system and enters the collaborative work with children and families bringing his/her own world view (perceptions) about the agency's mandate. The worker's perceptions and assumptions are based on his/her own personal and professional experiences as well as education and training received, which are based on the organizational culture and climate of the agency for which the worker is employed (Proehl, 2001, p. 27). In many agencies, where child welfare is divided in subdivisions or geographic regions, each subdivision constitutes its own culture with its own norms, values, and cultural climate. Hence, one child welfare agency with different subdivisions may experience different organizational culture and climate which influence the workers' perceptions on how to carry out the agency's mandate.

The most common theme that emerged during this research study was the need to provide mental health services to the foster youths and the importance of stabilizing their behaviors before considering placing them with their own family or family friends. This is attributed to a professional tradition of caring and the

child welfare practice of ensuring the safety and well-being of foster youths that are central to the child welfare practice. This is consistent with the literature which suggests that youth are placed in higher levels of care, as opposed to with family members, due to behavior problems (Hill, 2012; Scott & Gustavsson, 2009; Park & Ryan, 2009; Aarons et al., 2010, Cushing & Greenblatt, 2009; Ryan, Hernandez, and Herz, 2007).

Regarding the importance of family connections and permanency planning, the participants provided mixed opinions. While almost half (43%) leaned towards family preservation by placing the youth with extended family and providing supportive services, others (43%) leaned towards child safety by placing the youths in a higher level of care to stabilize the behaviors before considering placing them with extended family. This finding is consistent with prior work completed by Flute and colleagues (2016) who found that social workers' perceptions, professional values, and experience potentially influence their decisions about family preservation or child safety (Flute, Corwin, Hollinshead, & Maher, 2016). This could also be attributed to organizational culture as social workers learn how to do their jobs based on education and training received by co-workers already in the field. In addition, child welfare policies and administrators' ideologies tend to influence the organizational culture and the permanency outcomes of these youths (Flute et al., 2016). Additionally, organizational culture may differ in large agencies divided by regions, with different managers, and different cultural climates.

Participants reported that training on family search and engagement could be improved in child welfare practice. Most participants limited the youths' permanency planning to known family members already named by the parents without much consideration for engaging or re-engaging incarcerated parents, parents whose services had been terminated, or rebuilding lost sibling connections. This could be attributed to the lack of social workers' experience and skills in engaging the families and providing adequate reunification services (Hill, 2012). In contrast, a research study conducted by Cheng (2011), found that engaging the families, matching the services to the family needs, and supporting the reunification efforts were correlated with higher levels of reunification (Cheng, 2011).

Implications

Implications for Social Work Practice

Although many improvements have been made to reduce the time that children/youth spend in foster care, more efforts are necessary to reduce the number of youths who exit foster care without reaching permanency. This is particularly important in the era of Continuum of Care Reform, the goal of which is to reduce congregate placement while increasing family setting placements for youths involved with CFS and probation.

Each social worker is likely to use his/her own world view (perception) about the "best" permanency options and plan for youths in foster care. As a

result, they may overlook the importance of maintaining family connections based on their own convictions of doing what they believe is in the best interest of the youth. Special attention needs to be placed on the outcome of the family as a whole, including successful parental outcomes as well as safety, permanency, and well-being of the youths. This requires that the social workers constantly engage and utilize supportive strategies to encourage the parents to remain committed to the reunification services or to assist in the permanency planning of their children as well as involving the youths in their own permanency planning. Permanency planning in child welfare also requires that social workers enhance their engagement and assessment skills to look beyond the immediate or already named family or family friends to serve as permanency options for these youths. Furthermore, this study highlights the need for social workers to be mindful that permanency planning is a continuous process in which relationships need to be built or re-built over time and that a sense of urgency to connect/re-connect these youths with their families exists at all times.

About 16.5% of the current foster care population in California have extended foster care as a permanency plan, which means that permanent connections for these youths are being delayed, if at all accomplished (University of California at Berkeley, 2017). The findings from this study suggest that social workers may be taking a more relaxed approach to permanency than is warranted. Social workers may need to shift their culture from merely finding a placement to building a network of support for the youth. In the era of social

media, many of these youths have current connections with their families of origin without formal permanency planning. For these reasons, child welfare agencies may benefit from creating specialized units of family finding social workers at the front end to engage and support permanency efforts. These staff could provide additional support to the primary social workers who do not conduct family finding tasks on their own due to the amount of time that this task requires. Additionally, in the era of social media, child welfare agencies may benefit from utilizing search engines and social media to search and engage the relatives of these youths in their permanency outcomes.

Implications for Social Work Research

One of the goals of children and family services is to place children removed from their homes in a least restrictive setting, within their own families whenever possible, and to provide services in the least intrusive manner. Future research should track the types of permanency interventions (CFTMs, TDMs) social workers use, as participants in this study reported using a variety of strategies to provide support to youth. Examining the relative effectiveness of these different interventions would better inform changes in policy and practice, especially if certain interventions were found to be more effective than others. Better tracking of the tools used may enhance the permanency outcomes of these youths. Studying the permanency planning and outcomes conducted by juvenile probation as well as communication processes between probation and CFS on dual status cases may shed a light about the permanency outcomes of

youths involved in both systems. Also, with the addition of Extended Foster Care (EFC), it would be important to study if EFC is now replacing permanency planning for system involved youths. Finally, additional research on this topic might address whether the usefulness of re-thinking the social work approach to permanency planning by stressing the importance of family search and engagement from the beginning of a social worker's education. Additional research might investigate the usefulness of continued emphasis on this issue throughout the professional life of the child welfare worker. In some cases, ongoing training might be warranted to remind the social worker that the termination of parental services and/or rights does not equate to termination of the emotional bonds and contact between youths and their families of origin.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the social workers' perceptions on permanency planning for youth in foster care with behavior problems and/or juvenile probation involvement. A qualitative study designed using face-to-face interviews with social workers providing direct services to these populations of youths was utilized. Seven social workers were interviewed for this study.

The study found that social workers considered the mental health of youths as primordial importance in considering placement and permanency options. They believe that reunifying the youths with their families of origin was the optimal permanency outcome. However, when this option wasn't available,

they felt that placing the youths with extended family members or family friends under legal guardianship was a good permanency outcome. This study also found that most of the participants limited the youths' permanency options to only those known family members or friends already named by the parents and did not consider reinstating reunification services to the parents, reaching out to incarcerated parents, searching for both maternal and paternal extended family, or searching for lost sibling connections.

APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s) ELISA ASTRON

Proposal Title Permanently Substituting for Youth in Foster Care

201754

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

approved

to be resubmitted with revisions listed below

to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

faculty signature missing

missing informed consent debriefing statement

revisions needed in informed consent debriefing

data collection instruments missing

agency approval letter missing

CITI missing

revisions in design needed (specified below)

Committee Chair Signature

Date

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT



College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the social worker perceptions on permanency planning for youth in foster care in San Bernardino County.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine social worker perceptions on permanency planning for youth in foster care.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few questions regarding the permanency planning of youth in foster care, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 45-60 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Lanesskog at 909-537-5501.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2018.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here

Date

I agree to be audio recorded: Yes No

909.537.5501

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. What is your gender identity?
2. Ethnicity?
3. Age?
4. Level of Education?

CASE SCENARIO I

Respond to the following four questions after reading this case

Sixteen-year-old John came to the attention of Children and Family Services in January 2015 due to allegations of physical and emotional abuse by his mother's boyfriend and general neglect by his mother. At the time of the detention, John was admitted to LLUMC due to suicidal ideation (walking into traffic). Since the initial removal, John has experienced multiple group home placements. He is currently placed at juvenile hall due to violent behavior towards group home staff and police officers. Although his mother has remained connected with John by visiting him, she refuses to take him back home and her family reunification services have been terminated. Court reports indicate that John's biological father is incarcerated in Michigan. John has three other siblings ranging from 2 to 8 years of age who reside in Michigan with the grandfather of the 2-year-old child whose background check has cleared. John's mother stated that while the family lived in Michigan, the grandfather of the 2-year-old child helped babysit all of the children.

5. Based on this case scenario, what is **the most** appropriate placement for John?
6. What would be **the best** permanency recommendation for this youth?
7. Who would you search for?
8. What is **the most** relevant characteristic that you considered in making your decisions for John's permanence planning?

CASE SCENARIO II*Respond to the following four questions after reading this case*

Seventeen-year-old Jazmin has been placed in foster care for six years when she was arrested for shoplifting and her mother refused to pick her up from Juvenile Hall due to Jazmin's persistent delinquent behavior. Jazmin has experienced multiple group home placements and is currently placed at Juvenile Hall as she was recruiting group home peers for prostitution. Reunification services for the mother were terminated four years ago due to the mother not following through with the reunification plan. Jazmin has a fifteen-year old sister who lives with her mother. Jazmin's mother and younger sister have not had contact with her for two years. Jazmin's biological father lives in Los Angeles and has children from other relationships. On several occasions, Jazmin has mentioned that she does not need a family. Although Jazmin's father has maintained regular contact with the youth through weekend visits and phone calls, he has not followed through with the background and licensing requirements in order to have Jazmin placed with him. Jazmin reports that when she visits her father in Los Angeles, she spends time with her paternal grandmother, Doris, and her aunt, Theresa. Jazmin also reports that she recently met two adult brothers (paternal side), their wives and children, and maintains contact with them through phone calls and Facebook.

9. **What is the most challenging youth characteristic** when considering placement options for Jazmin?

10. Based on this case scenario, who would you search for?

11. What is **the most** appropriate placement for Jazmin?

12. What would be **the best** permanency recommendation for this youth?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

13. What is your current position?
14. Years of experience working with this population?

15. In the past year, have you utilized permanency planning interventions, if so which one (s)?¹

¹ NOTE: THE CASE VIGNETTES AND SURVERY WERE CREATED BY THE RESEARCHER.

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