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THE FACTORS INVOLVED IN CASES OF REMOVAL OF INFANTS: A SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVE

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THE FACTORS INVOLVED IN CASES OF REMOVAL OF INFANTS:
A SOCIAL WORKERS’ PERSPECTIVE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
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by
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine social workers’ perspectives on the risk factors that are associated with cases of removal of infants. A quantitative survey design was utilized, using self-administered questionnaires that were distributed electronically to social workers located in San Bernardino County. The sample consisted of 94 participants, and the majority of the participants were White, non-Hispanic females. The study found that social workers identified substance abuse, the lack of infant’s physical safety in the home along with the age of the infant, and the lack of parents’ readiness to take part of the safety plan as highest risk factors for the removal of infants. Lastly, a surprising finding in this study was that a child’s ethnicity was indicated as a risk factor that increases the possibility of infant removal. It is recommended that social workers continue to receive trainings and other educational opportunities to enhance the social workers’ knowledge, values, and practice skills, to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.
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DEDICATION

I, Mindy Cervantes, would like to dedicate this research project to my family and boyfriend, for always being there and supporting me throughout this journey. I would have not been able to do any of this without you. Thank you for all the love and support you have given me, that has encouraged and motivated me to never give up and accomplish my dreams.

I, Alma Manzano, would like to dedicate this research project to my family for their encouragement and support. Thank you to my lovely parents, Leticia and Alfonso Manzano, for providing me with the inspiration and strength to overcome all adversities and accomplish my goals.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Every year there are vast amounts of children entering the child welfare system. From those entering the system, large proportions of these children are children under the age of one. It has been noted, that infants are one of the largest growing populations in the U.S. child welfare system (Klein & Harden, 2011). The reasons for that may vary, but as we may know, infants are considered one of the most vulnerable populations, as they depend entirely on their caregivers to meet their basic needs for survival. In 2014, 12% of the population of children under the age of one in San Bernardino County had entered the foster care system, being the highest entry rate across every other age group (Webster et al., 2014). Now it is important to note that research indicates that not only are infants one of the largest growing populations in the system, but also that infants are more likely to have their case substantiated and be placed in foster care, in comparison to older children (Wulczyn, Hislop & Harden, 2002).

It is evident that across history, child maltreatment has always been a major issue in society. But the way we have looked and treated the various forms of child maltreatment has varied over time. As of today, we seem to be more aware of the safety and risk factors of abuse and how they may have negative
effects/outcomes on a child, and so therefore more action has been called on to address this problem.

It is well known that early exposure to trauma or maltreatment can affect a child’s health and development. Research has shown that exposure to abuse and neglect can in particular affect a child’s physical and psychological health and behavior (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). In regards to a child’s physical health, an area that can be affected when a child has experienced abuse or neglect is damage to a child’s brain. Impairment in brain development can often lead to cognitive delays, poor self-regulation and emotional dysregulation in children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). With infants, brain development is very critical, as infancy is a time where the brain undergoes major changes, where children are able to gain their ability to talk, learn, reason and develop their thought process (Cohen, Cole & Szrom, 2011).

Social workers in child welfare services are often the ones responding to such cases and assessing for the safety and risk of children. They are often making the major decisions on whether a referral for allegations of abuse will be substantiated or not (substantiated meaning that allegations were found to be true and evident). Therefore, that indicates how child welfare workers have a major part on the decision making process for the removal rates of infants in the child welfare system. In their decision-making process, there may be many factors that contribute to the decision of an investigation of a case. Some of those factors may be, but are not limited to; parental characteristics, child
characteristics (such as age) and child-maltreatment characteristics (such as the type of abuse, the severity of it, etc.). Such factors can be associated with the decisions social workers make in favor of placing infants in the foster care system, and so it is very crucial to get an understanding of the wide scope of what those factors may be.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how Social Worker II and Social Service Practioner (SSP) perceptions are related to the removal rates of infants among the child welfare systems in San Bernardino County. This study, therefore, intended to explore the factors related to substantiated allegations that have lead to removal. Exploring these factors may increase our understanding of Social Worker II and Social Service Practioners’ rationale associated to the removal of infants from their birth families.

This study is important when examining the effectiveness of the child welfare system in protecting the vulnerability of child maltreatment within the infant population. The study sought to address whether the following factors are associated with the removal of infants from their birth family: (a) whether child characteristics impact the decision of removal; (b) whether parental characteristics influences social worker’s assessment of safety and risk of the infant; (c) and whether child welfare practice related characteristics are associated in cases of removal of infants.
The Department of Children and Family Services computerized global address book was utilized from San Bernardino County, in Southern California to obtain participants. This study engaged in a quantitative survey research design that was distributed to a combination of ninety-four Social Service Practioners and Social Worker II’s. A nonprobability sampling design, purposive sampling, was utilized. Which states that the investigators use their judgment and prior knowledge to choose people for the sample who would best serve the purpose of the study (Grinnell et al., 2014).

Knowing what factors are contributing to the increase in infant removal rates is important because such removals often have various effects in an infant’s life. At this age, their developmental growth is crucial for their future well-being. During infancy, it is a time in where the establishment of attachment begins to form, and so it is important to consider that stability plays a major role in this. Having someone who will be attentive to their physiological and emotional needs is necessary to be able to sustain a secure attachment between the caregiver and infant (Cole, 2005). Not only are infants the largest growing population in the child welfare system, but they are also the ones who stay longer in foster care and are less likely to be reunified with their birth parents, which may affect their ability in forming a healthy attachment relationship with others (Cole, 2005). Understanding this may be helpful when assessing safety and risk situations for these children and looking into if removal is necessary.
Significance of the Purpose of the Study

The results of this study are intended to help California child welfare agencies in particular San Bernardino County, Children and Family Services (CFS). Recently, San Bernardino CFS has seen a dramatic increase on the removal rates of infants and therefore is interested in finding out what some of the underlying causes may be. Also as future child welfare workers, it would be important to know what factors may be contributing to the substantiation as well as the removal of this age group and whether any changes need to be implemented to better address this issue.

The usual goal of a child welfare agency is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and their families, and so it will be crucial to understand how the increase of removals of infants is related to that particular goal. Also, it is well known, that social workers use a variety of tools to help measure safety and risk factors when going out on a referral, so determining whether these tools are the ones guiding the removal of infants is important. LeBlanc, Regehr, Shlonsky and Bogo (2011) argued that many of these tools often rely on workers’ subjective judgments and so their responses in assessing risk may be associated with that. Which brings it back to how there may be a relationship between social workers’ perceptions and the cause of high removal rates of infants.

The findings in this study may be able to suggest the need for the development of additional policies that would help address these concerns, and
will leave social workers in child welfare agencies with the knowledge as to why there has been an increase in removal rates of infants among the child welfare system. The findings may also inform social workers if there is anything that can be done or that they can do, to alleviate this fast growing issue within the infant population. Also, identification of the various characteristics associated with the high risk of removal of infants, may help target the types of services needed for prevention and intervention.

The findings of this study will contribute to social work research by increasing the knowledge of how social workers’ perceptions are related to the rates of the removal of infants among the child welfare system. Understanding how particular risk factors may influence a social worker’s decision to remove is crucial in the understanding of how social workers’ views and attitudes may influence their decisions when assessing the safety and risk of infants. Research on this topic has been mainly conducted in areas outside of the United States and therefore this study would contribute to including data from the state of California, which is within United States borders.

This study is relevant to child welfare practice as the focus of this study was to increase the knowledge of how social worker’s perceptions may be related to a social worker’s decision to remove. Child welfare workers take a big part in the decision-making process when assessing the safety and risk of a child, and therefore bringing awareness of what factors they believe may be contributing to their decisions to remove is important for their practice.
Therefore, this study’s proposed research question was whether the perceptions of social workers are associated with the high removal rate of infants.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The number of infants being placed in foster care has dramatically increased over the years (Klein & Harden, 2011). What is not well known is what those factors are that are contributing to the high number of removals of infants among the San Bernardino County child welfare system. Many studies have noted the risks factors associated with the prediction of involvement of infants in the child welfare system, as well as the relationship between the worker-role and the factors identified as risks for maltreatment (Hornstein & Needell, 2011; Klein & Harden, 2011; Williams, Tonmyr, Jack, Fallon & MacMillan, 2011). The literature review will be presented in the following sections: factors associated with substantiated maltreatment and infant removal- Caregiver characteristics, Worker characteristics, and Child characteristics; The importance of empathy in social work. As well as a section on the theories that will help guide the conceptualization of the study.

Factors Associated With Substantiated Maltreatment and Infant Removal

Substantiation for allegations of abuse amongst infants is the highest in comparison to other age groups. Many studies imply that children, who are under the age of one, are more prone to suffer from maltreatment, due to the fact that
they are solely dependent on their primary caregivers. Also, their small size makes them a lot more vulnerable to suffer serious injuries and deaths than any other children in other age groups. Research has shown that infants are at higher risk for maltreatment, and therefore are more likely to be reported for abuse (Williams et al., 2011). Now the level of risk assessed, can be found to be dependent on the child welfare worker. When a child welfare worker goes out on a referral for suspicions of child maltreatment, they are the ones assessing the situations and determining whether or not abuse has occurred. When assessing the risks for maltreatment against infants, child welfare workers are often confronted with stressful situations and challenges. Studies report that a worker’s decision to substantiate is also associated with particular risk factors workers may identify as high levels of risk and indicators that maltreatment has occurred. Some of those factors may include parental characteristics and vulnerabilities such as caregiver substance abuse, mental health issues, and few social support networks. Investigation of cases with infants, are considered high-risk and so therefore, workers may take the importance of these factors much more seriously, resulting in decisions highly influenced by caregiver, and child related characteristics (Tonmyr, Williams, Jack & MacMillan, 2011).

Parental Characteristics

A study conducted in Canada, aimed to analyze the association between caregiver vulnerabilities and the placing of infants in out-of-home care in 763 investigations of infants reported to the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported
Child Abuse and Neglec-2003 (CIS-2003). Their results showed that child, primary caregiver, and household characteristics were significantly correlated with out-of-home care placement (Tonmyr et al., 2011). The likelihood of placement for infants in foster care increased by a total of 164% in relations to each vulnerability found in the primary caregiver. The vulnerabilities most identified were substance abuse, mental health problems and few social supports (Tonmyr et al., 2011). A strength of this study was that the data used measured social workers’ perceptions, which was important to do so because social workers often have the responsibility for placement decisions. The only limitation was that this sample might have had detection bias, since not all incidents of child maltreatment are reported to child welfare agencies.

A study conducted by Williams and colleagues (2011) implied how child welfare workers are often faced with challenges when assessing allegations of abuse of infants that often affect the way risk factors are assessed. In their study they aimed to find the association between primary caregiver vulnerabilities and child’s positive toxicology for drugs at birth, with substantiated allegations of child maltreatment (Williams et al., 2011). In this study, the substantiation of 793 infants in the child welfare system was examined. Data was retrieved from the CIS-2003, where they had surveyed child welfare workers, after intake investigations had been completed about the substantiation of their referrals. From these surveys, the most reported caregiver vulnerability listed in the substantiated cases of abuse, was few social supports at the rate of 46%,
compared to mental health and substance abuse vulnerabilities at the rate of 32% (Williams et al., 2011). Social support networks are very important when caring for young children, having someone there as support can reduce the stressors associated with the care of a child. When parents do not have that, it is more likely that they will see parenting as stressful and may resort to discipline or actions that may endanger a child’s safety and well-being (Williams et al., 2011). In cases of abuse among infants, the most common type of maltreatment is neglect, whether that is medical, or physical neglect. Researchers found that in cases where domestic violence was involved, the more likely a case would be substantiated. The reason as to why parental characteristics may be highly correlated with the substantiation and removal of infants, is that those factors are what are visible to the worker assessing the situation, as children at this age are not able to disclose their exposure to maltreatment. Also several of the parental characteristics noted in the parents can affect their parenting capacity as well as their bond/attachment with their child (Williams et al., 2011).

In a review by Klein and Harden (2011) they examined the risk and protective factors associated with early maltreatment found in various journal articles. They found that child traits and family and caregiver characteristics were highly correlated with early child maltreatment. Within those factors, were parents’ age, educational level, economic hardship, and health (Klein & Harden, 2011). Parents with a lower level of education and poor health status were more likely to be associated with child maltreatment (Klein & Harden, 2011). Other
caregiver characteristics such as mental health issues and substance use, and domestic violence were also found to highly correlate with early maltreatment. The familial characteristics that were found to be evident throughout the various articles reviewed, were few social support networks within the family and a family’s size and structure (Klein & Harden, 2011).

Worker Characteristics

Aside from parental and child-maltreatment factors determining the decision making of child welfare workers, studies have shown that not only are these characteristics associated with the substantiation of abuse but also the stressors workers experience in conflicting situations, may guide their assessments. According to a study done by LeBlanc and colleagues (2012), when workers are exposed to confrontational situations, they may exhibit stress responses that can relatively affect their perceptions of risk. In their study participants were exposed to case scenarios, in where child protection worker would role play an intake assessment. It was noted that from the 96 child protection workers in their study sample, the majority of them, when exhibiting stress, resulted with an increased perception of risk on the case (LeBlanc et al., 2012). It is important to note that higher perceptions of risk in stressful situations
were highly correlated to the type of assessment tool workers were utilizing (LeBlanc et al., 2012). Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to prove that the level of stress has an effect on accurately assessing risk, regarding the removal of infants among the child welfare system.

In a review by Kanani, Regehr and Bernstein (2002) they examined the importance of liability and the association it may have on a worker’s decision on substantiation. Liability considerations can become a major component in the decision-making in child welfare (Kanani et al., 2002). In the literature the authors reviewed data from Canadian court decisions and legislation, regarding social worker liability on the abuse and deaths of children, as well as the breaching of parental rights. When a worker goes out on an investigative referral, there are many factors they have to consider before coming to the conclusion of the outcomes of the case. They have to look at the immediate safety and protection of the children as well as the legal aspect of it (worker liability). For children under the age of one, this is crucial as they are nonverbal and depend heavily on their primary caregivers to meet their basic needs. Allegations for this age group is mainly assessed by direct observation and collateral contacts with parents and other persons, and so therefore may place a limit on the worker’s ability to accurately assess the given situation And therefore, the worker must be more careful in determining the appropriate steps needed to be taken and ensuring decisions are made on mere facts (Kanani et al., 2002). In order to connect with an infant who does not have the ability to verbalize their thoughts, one must
attach with the child on a more personal level. By law, a child welfare worker can be held liable for failing to protect a child, whether that may be leaving them at home with their families and failing to take them into care. As failure to act, in the part of the social worker, can lead to serious injury or even death of a child (Kanani et al., 2002). Also if children are removed and parents feel their rights have been violated due to inadequacy of an investigation, they may claim a violation of their rights. Kanani and colleagues state how important it is to note that often times workers have no control over what will happen with a family, and so as along as a worker acts in “good faith” (utilizing their best judgment and knowledge) to show that their decision was based on the best interest of the child and their family it may reduce the account of liability and prosecution towards the social worker.

In another study, Mills (2012) states that it is very difficult for adults to stay truly connected to the experience of a pre-verbal child. As professionals, it has been suggested in a study to embrace the possibility that a parent can withhold the urge to hurt or place her child in danger if the parent’s capacity to love and protect is incorporated in their parenting (Mills, 2012). The importance from this study is to advocate for professionals to have deeper empathic connections with the families they work with in the field. Provide tools to establish these relations when working with families including being cognizant of families’ situations, display empathy with a nonjudgmental view, and being sincere with families. In a study, Mullins (2011) examined the importance of empathetic understanding and
communication between workers and parents. A successful family reunification with clients who are under the scope of the child welfare system depends on parent participation in services. Increasing the workers' ability to empathize with parent can enhance their relationship while increasing parent participation (Mullins, 2011). Workers may have a negative perception towards parents in the child welfare system which may hinder the interaction with parents. It is important to increase social worker's ability to empathize with parents to ultimately empower and instill hope in all families. Working closely with a supervisor in Children and Family Services is an important element to consider before taking action and removing an infant. During the discussion with a supervisor, different perspectives about situations are considered as well as the safety of the child if they are left with the parent. Busse (2009) described supervision as a deliberate renunciation of action, the supervisor shares the view of the supervised because in any case the supervised have to decide on their plan of action. Being aware in practice about the factors that are leading to the removal of infants and how they are influencing workers’ actions are definitely worth being conscious of.

**Child Characteristics**

When child welfare workers are out in the field investigating referrals on allegations of abuse, it is highly likely that the main priority being considered is the child’s safety. When assessing for risk, research has shown that workers consider the child’s behavior, as well as their emotional and physical health as important factors when determining substantiation and placement (Tonmyr et al.,
2011). Removing children from their homes can be detrimental to their growth and development, and so therefore it is important to consider these factors when removing infants from their primary caregivers. At this age, the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers is very important. Research informs that removal of children at such a young age can cause detrimental effects to their well-being, and may have serious impact in their development and attachment. In infancy the development of attachment between infants and their primary caregivers is important and so studies discuss how the high placement of infants in foster care can have major effects on this.

Many studies have shown that when infants are placed in the child welfare system, they often experience multiple placements, which can have an affect on their ability to develop secure attachments (Cole, 2005). When infants develop secure attachment with their caregivers, they are more likely to develop good relationships with others, as well as experience a healthy emotional and cognitive developmental growth (Cole, 2005). A cross-sectional study done by Cole (2005), aimed to examine the security of attachment in 46 infants placed in the Ohio foster care system. The researcher used Ainsworth’s (1969) strange situation procedure as one of the measures to measure the infants’ level of attachments to their primary caregivers. Of the 46 infants in this study, 67% of them demonstrated secure attachment with their caregivers (Cole, 2005). The findings of this study did not support the findings of the previous studies mentioned, as it was demonstrated that secure attachment was developed even
when infants were removed from their home. Infants were able to develop secure attachments with their foster parents. It is important to note that although infants may be able to develop secure attachments with their foster caregivers, many infants may still experience a loss when they are moved from a foster parent’s home to a more permanent placement, therefore having to re-adjust to a new infant-parent relationship in their new placements (Cole, 2005).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Attachment between an infant and their mother is very critical when developing a bond of connection. With so many children entering the foster system at such a vulnerable age, their bond of attachment can be compromised. Establishing a secure attachment with an infant ensures that they will be nurtured, they will be given affection as well as a sense of safety with their mother. Attachment to the mother occurs earlier than attachment with others, creating a strong and more consistent relationship (Bowlby, 1982). Sroufe (2005) reported the importance attachment is between the infant and caregiver is due to the development and connection with so many critical developmental functions—social relatedness, arousal modulation, emotional regulation, and curiosity. Attachment remains vital to the formation of a human being making it an important concept since the early birth of a person. The initial physical contact between a mother and her child is imperative to the bond they will develop together. Infants who do not successfully develop a secure bond with their caregiver may endure deficiencies in their developmental and socially acceptable
behaviors. Research by Umemura & Jacobvitz (2014) measured infants’ proximity-seeking behavior in which infants are distressed due to being separated from their mother. Their results concluded that hours of nonmaternal care is in fact associated with attachment patterns (Umemura & Jacobvitz, 2014). The purpose of this study is to determine how social workers’ perceptions are related to the high removal rates of infants among the child welfare system. It is important to understand the reasoning behind the removal, due to the crucial deficiencies that can manifest after the removal from the maternal caregiver.

Systems theory is related to this study due to the relationships between an individual has with their environment. Families who live in vulnerable communities may have a higher risk of facing adversities. According to Michailakis & Schirmer (2014) the causes of the social problem are attributed to the environment of the movement (and its members), such as the school or medical care. Families under the scope of Children and Family Services (CFS) have constant interaction with larger institutions that provide a form of service to all clients. Society has many relations with different organizations that aid towards the needs of society. For example, Children and Family Services (CFS) protects children from being neglected, physically, sexually, and emotionally abused by a parent or caregiver. CFS connects parents with resources and programs to equip them with appropriate tools to care for their child in a safe environment. According to Turner (2011), system theory have long been effectively incorporated by social workers in their practice for understanding how
the individual adapts to the environment. Systems theory has two foundational concepts which are the interaction between people and the local environment (Turner, 2011).

Social workers must be aware of the relations families have within their environment in order to identify the most appropriate interventions. Research by Michailakis & Schirmer (2014) explains how problems emerge in communication and what role social systems play, because this can link them with how the modern world has evolved and relate them to the function of the different systems. Utilizing a system theory approach social workers may be aware of the existence of important systems and subsystems and their potential impact on a client’s functioning that can result in a more compressive and effective assessment and treatment plan (Turner, 2011).

Summary

The literature is important to the study in order to review both qualitative and quantitative studies on the topic. We hope that this study will build on a stronger foundation for social workers when assessing the potential removal of infants while being aware of transference, counter transference, and projection. Research has shown that there are many factors associated with the substantiation and removal of infants. Understanding how the perceptions of social worker’s values, knowledge and beliefs may be influencing the increase rate of infants being placed in the foster care system.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the research methods that were utilized in this study. This includes the study design, the sampling method, the data collection process, the measurement tool, procedures, the efforts to protect human subjects and an analysis of the data. Which will be presented and discussed further in detail in the sections that proceed.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine how social workers’ perceptions are related to the removal rates of infants among the child welfare system in San Bernardino County. This was done by exploring the factors related to the substantiation of allegations that have lead to the removal of infants from their families. The factors that were explored included: parental characteristics, child characteristics, family characteristics, as well as social worker characteristics. Addressing whether the following factors are associated with the removal of infants may increase our understanding of how a social worker’s rationale is associated to the removal of infants. This is important as social workers in child welfare services have a major part of the decision making process for the removal rates of infants.
The proposed study utilized a quantitative survey design that includes the use of self-administered questionnaires that were distributed by email. This method was chosen for the reason that it was most convenient for both the researchers and the study participants. This allowed the researchers to obtain a large sample size from the various child welfare offices in San Bernardino County and allowed participants to complete the survey in a timely manner. Utilizing a quantitative survey also allowed the researchers to include the factors found in previous literature that have been found to be associated with the removal of infants. Including these factors provided insight on how a social worker’s perspectives on these factors are related to the removal of infants in San Bernardino County.

The limitations of utilizing self-administered questionnaires may be that the response rate may not have been too high. Social workers in child welfare agencies are already bombarded with many emails daily so it is possible that they might have missed the email that included the link to the study’s survey. Also since the surveys were self-administered, there was a chance that the study participants may have misunderstood questions and no clarification was provided. The research question of the proposed study is: Are social workers’ perceptions related to the high removal rates of infants among the Child Welfare System?
Sampling

The study used a nonprobability sampling design, purposive sampling, as the researchers used their judgment and prior knowledge to choose people for the sample who best served the purpose of the study (Grinnell et al., 2014). Those who best served the purpose of this study were social workers in child welfare agencies within San Bernardino County (both Social Worker II’s and Social Service Practitioners), as they are the ones who are confronted with situations that may result in the removal of children from their homes. The sample size of this study was 94 child welfare workers. This sample was chosen to ensure a representative sample of all the social workers in the San Bernardino area.

Access to a list of potential participants was obtained from the Department of Children and Family Services’ computerized global address book, where contact information of all the social workers within San Bernardino County is provided. Permission to send out a mass email to all the regions in San Bernardino County was obtained from the Department of Children and Family Services.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected by the utilization of a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The first part of the instrument was composed of demographic information questions that include gender, ethnicity, level of education, years of experience as a child
welfare worker, job position and whether participants have worked with a family where an infant child has been removed. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of likert-scale questions that included a list of factors that have been found to be associated to the removal of infants in previous literature. Those factors include parental characteristics, child characteristics and worker characteristics, which were divided into their own category and under each category there was a list of factors related to them. The study’s participants were asked their perceptions on how often they believed each factor was associated with a worker’s decision to remove an infant from their home. This was measured on a five-point likert-scale, the possible responses being “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, and “always”. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that asked social workers for any additional factors they believed were associated with the removal of an infant that might have not been listed in the survey. It also asked their opinions on the top factors they believed were most likely to contribute to removal of an infant.

The measurement tool was created by adapting the format and questions of two pre-existing tools, as there was no pre-existing tool that measured social workers’ perceptions on this topic. The validity and reliability of the measurement tool are unknown, as the tool was created in adaptation of other pre-existing tools. The study’s questionnaire was pretested by distributing the survey to potential participants and asking them for their feedback.
One pre-existing tool that was used for the creation of this study’s questionnaire was from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, *The Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) Maltreatment Assessment* developed by the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (2003). This tool gathered information on caregiver and child characteristics, as well as caregiver risk factors in cases where child maltreatment has been alleged or suspected. The other pre-existing tool was from the study, Social workers’ perceptions of the factors related to reentry by Burak (2011), where the researcher divided the study’s survey into three parts; background information, risk factor ratings, and open-ended questions. In Burak’s survey, she asked social workers’ opinions on the factors related to reentry. Those factors included, parent, child and familial characteristics.

**Procedures**

The survey was a self-administered questionnaire that was sent through an online survey link provided by San Bernardino County. Permission was obtained through administration/agency approvals and careful review because of the specific population of child welfare workers in San Bernardino County, which were chosen for this study. Data was collected by conducting a nonprobability convenience sampling method by soliciting social workers in the Department of Children and Family Services throughout San Bernardino County, using a county-based address book of social workers. This online survey questionnaire was emailed to prospective participants during the month of February 2016 and
March 2016. The process of completion for the questionnaire, took approximately 10 to 20 minutes. Upon the completion of the survey, participants did not receive a compensation for their time.

The data retrieved from each participant is kept anonymous. Participants were provided with a consent form and confidentiality statement at the time they received the email with the link to the online survey. If the participant agreed to the terms of the consent form, an X will be checked off on the consent to participate box. This consent was submitted along with the questionnaire.

Protection of Human Participants

Appropriate measures were taken by the researchers to ensure the protection and rights of participants in this study. All prospective participants completed the study on a voluntary basis. Participants who chose to be part of the study were provided with an informed consent in which they must have marked the appropriate box with an X as an agreement for us, the researchers to use the responses in our study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and any risks or benefits that would occur from participating. Participants were informed that their participation is strictly voluntary, if they wished to withdraw from the questionnaire at any point, they were free to do so. Each survey was assigned a random identification number in order to protect the participants’ identity. No identifying information was collected from our participants. In order to proceed with the questionnaire, participants were asked to check a box that stated they consented to taking the survey, if the
box was checked participants were allowed to complete the survey, without the collection of any identifying information from the participants. Data was stored in a password-protected computer where the researchers and faculty advisor were the only ones with access, to secure the results of the study. All data will be destroyed once the study has been completed.

All participants, as mentioned before, had the opportunity to choose to withdraw from the study at any given time. There were not any repercussions on the participants if they wished to discontinue the survey at any time.

Data Analysis

This study utilized a quantitative data analysis to examine the data in this project. The quantitative analysis involved the use of self-administered questionnaires and nonprobability sampling, purposive sampling. This study used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to examine the responses from our participants. The surveys and data obtained from the surveys were then coded and inputted into SPSS to analyze. The research findings dealing with the factors that lead to the removal of infants were presented using descriptive statistics.

Descriptive statistics included multivariate statistics, frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, and measure of variability in order to describe the sample of the study. Analyses were conducted on the different characteristics measured in the self-administered questionnaires, which included: demographics; likert-scale ratings on the parent, family, and worker
characteristics; as well as the open-ended responses social workers provided on other additional factors that contribute to the removal of an infant.

The demographic characteristics were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics. In particular, each characteristic was examined through frequency distributions, in where it was displayed the frequency and percentage of the occurrence of each characteristic. The characteristics included gender, ethnicity, level of education, years of experience as a child welfare worker, years of experience working for San Bernardino County Child and Family Services, current position, and whether social workers have worked with a family, where an infant was removed.

Descriptive statistics were also utilized to analyze the likert-scale ratings on the parent, family, and worker characteristics. The descriptive statistics included, measures of central tendency, such as the mean, and measures of variability such as the standard deviation. The measures of central tendency and measures of variability were used to identify the factors that were most frequently rated as factors highly associated in cases of removal of infants and those factors frequently rated as the lowest.

Summary

In conclusion, this chapter offered the methodology that was used for this study. This included a descriptive study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, and procedures. This chapter also discoursed the safety measures to protect human rights and the confidentiality of all participants. Lastly, this
chapter discussed the quantitative data analysis and descriptive design that were utilized for the sample of this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will present the data obtained from the responses of the self-administered questionnaires that were utilized in this study. The demographic characteristics of the study’s participants will be reported. This chapter will also present the social workers’ perceptions on parental characteristics, child characteristics, and worker characteristics as risk factors involved in cases of removal of infants in child welfare. This chapter will end with a description of the participants’ responses to the open-ended questions listed in the study’s questionnaire.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

There were a total of 94 participants in the study. The majority of the study’s participants were female, approximately 89% of the sample, and less than 15% were male. In terms of the ethnic of the participants approximately 45% were white, non-Hispanic, 26% were Latino, 14% were African American, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9% identified as being other ethnicities. Over 60% of the participants had a master’s degree in social work, 18% held a master’s degree, 12% held a bachelor’s degree, 3% held a bachelor’s of art in social work, and 5% had other educational backgrounds. The experience participants had as a child welfare worker, ranged from less than 1 year to 35
years with an average of 11 years of experience. Approximately 60% had 10 years of experience or less, 25% had 11 to 20 years of experience, and almost 13% had 21 to 35 years of experience. The number of years participants have worked for San Bernardino County, Children and Family Services, ranged from less than 1 year to 35 years of working with the county. Approximately 66% had 10 years or less working for San Bernardino County, Children and Family Services, 25% had 11 to 20 years, and 10% had 21 to 35 years of experience working for San Bernardino County’s Children and Family Services. Over one third of the participants held the position of a Social Service Practitioner, Carrier, approximately 28% were Social Service Practitioners Intake workers, 27% held other position titles, 7% held the position of a Social Worker II, Intake, and 3% held the position of a Social Worker II, Carrier. When participants were asked if they had worked with a family where an infant was removed, over 90% of the participants responded they had, meanwhile less than 10% stated they had not (See Table 1).
Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (N =94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (N=94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's of Art in Social Work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's in Social Work</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience as a Child Welfare Worker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10 years</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20 years</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-35 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years worked in County</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-35 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service Practitioner, Intake</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Service Practitioner, Carrier</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker II, Intake</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker II, Carrier</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worked with a family where an infant was removed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parental Characteristics as Risk Factors

Table 2 describes the participants’ responses for the parental characteristics that were seen as risk factors involved in cases of removal of infants. The table lists the characteristics in order of those that were most often perceived as a high risk factor involved in cases of removal of infants to those that were least often perceived as a risk factor involved in cases of removal of infants.

When social workers were asked how often each factor of the parents’ characteristics were associated with their decision to remove an infant from their home, they perceived substance abuse as the highest risk factor associated with cases of removal of infants, which includes drug abuse (M = 3.2) and alcohol abuse (M = 2.91). The next top risk factors social workers perceived as high importance in cases of removal of infants, included parents’ mental health issues (M = 2.89), the parent as the perpetrator of domestic violence (M = 2.88), and the family’s prior involvement with Children and Family Services (M = 2.85).

When parents were victims of domestic violence (M = 2.74), the mother was the perpetrator of abuse towards and infant (M = 2.7), the father was the
perpetrator of abuse towards an infant (M = 2.65), and the parents were involved in criminal activity or had a history of it (M = 2.55), social workers saw these characteristics as medium-level risk factors in cases where infants were removed from their homes. In regards to who the perpetrator of the abuse towards an infant, it was noted that in cases where the mother was the perpetrator, social workers perceived it as a higher risk for removal compared to when the father was the perpetrator. Social worker’s perceived parents’ cognitive impairment (M = 2.41), parents’ access to few social supports (M = 2.15), parent’s physical health issues (M = 1.88), and a one-parent household (M= 1.57) as the lowest risk factors found to be involved in cases of removal of infants.

Table 2. Parental Characteristics as Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drug Abuse</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Abuse</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Issues</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>0.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator of Domestic Violence</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Involvement with Children and Family Services</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>0.671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Domestic Violence</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother is the Perpetrator</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father is the Perpetrator</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Activity/History</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Impairment</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few Social Supports</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health Issues</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-Parent Household</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 describes the participants’ responses for the child characteristics that were seen as risk factors involved in cases of removal of infants. The table lists the characteristics in order of those seen as the highest risk factor to those seen as the lowest risk factors involved in cases of removal of infants.

When social workers looked at the child characteristics, they found the lack of infant’s physical safety in the home (M = 3.53) and the age of the infant (M = 3.14) as the highest risk factors leading to removal. What social workers perceived as medium level of risk, associated with the removal of infants, were an infant’s positive toxicology at birth (M = 3.07) and an infant’s physical health (M = 2.79). Infant’s behavior was considered as the lowest risk factor (M = 2.3) by the social workers. In regards to the type of maltreatment, neglect was found to be the factor participants perceived as the highest risk involved in cases of removal of infants (M = 3.44). The second factor perceived as high risk in the removal of an infant was physical abuse (M = 3.4). Sexual abuse (M = 3.38) was the factor found least apparent in cases of removal of infants, based on the social workers’ experiences with cases of removals of infants from their parents.
Table 3. Child Characteristics as Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant's Physical Safety in the Home</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant's age</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Toxicology at Birth</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>0.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Parent-Infant Relationship</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Delay</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>0.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant's behavior</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.926</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 demonstrates the participants' responses for the child welfare practice related worker characteristics that were seen as risk factors regarding the removal of infants. The items in Table 4 are recorded in order of those that were most often seen as a high risk factor involved in cases of removal of infants to those that were least often recognized as a risk factor involved in cases of removal of infants.

In this study, when participants looked at the child welfare practice related characteristics the majority identified the lack of parents' readiness to take part of the safety plan (M= 3.01) and the parents' motivation to change (M= 2.82) as the highest risk factors linked with cases of removal of infants. When social workers
looked at the child welfare practice related characteristics, they recognize parents’ accountability (M= 2.79), parents’ cooperation with the social worker (M= 2.47), and previous encounter with family (M= 2.46) as medium level of risk associated with the removal of infants. Worker-liability (M= 2.39) was distinguish as a low risk factor when it comes to cases of removal of infants. Assessment tool utilized for investigation (M= 2.23) and working under stressful situations (M= 1.81) were perceived as the lowest risk factors found to be involved in cases of removal of infants.

Table 4. Child Welfare Practice Related Characteristics as a Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Readiness to take part of Safety Plan</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Motivation to Change</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Accountability</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Cooperation with the Social Worker</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Encounter with Family</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker-liability</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Tool Utilized for Investigation</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working under Stressful Situations</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>0.907</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Workers’ Responses to Open Ended Questions

In this study, participants were asked in an open-ended manner to list the top three factors in the order that they believed to be associated with the removal of infants. The most commonly repeated identified factors were substance use,
followed by the types of abuse such as physical, sexual, and severe neglect, then the age of the infant. Other factors that were indicated to be linked to the removal of infants included the overall health of the infant, unsafe environment, harm to the child, caregiver incapacity, child’s vulnerability, previous loss of parental rights, and infant positive toxicology. One participant wrote, “… the past actions by the parent, that hurt the child physically, developmentally, or emotionally including substance abuse may increase the likelihood of infant removal” (Participant 1, personal communication, March 2016). A different participant wrote, “…non accidental injuries that are caused by an act or omission of an act, by the parent or caregiver, may increase the probability of infant removal” (Participant 2, personal communication, March 2016). Lastly, another participant indicated prior failed reunification by the parents for the same situation that has led to Children and Family Services contact again, as a risk factor in cases of removal of infants (Participant 3, personal communication, March 2016).

Participants commonly identified domestic violence, followed by lack of support for the family regarding safety plan or family placement, then protective capacity. Other risk factors that were mentioned included caretaker absence, failure to protect, lack of preparation to receive the child home, parents’ criminal history, parents’ ability and willingness to care for the infant. One of the social workers wrote danger-detailed current of future worries of harm, eminent threat of serious harm, recent past or current threat may possibly lead to the removal of
infants (Participant 4, personal communication, March 2016). Another participant wrote mental health concerns and lack of medication compliance and use of resources could possibly result in the removal of infants (Participant 5, personal communication, March 2016). A social worker wrote parents’ impairment and level or degree of functioning as a risk factor, as it impacts parenting an infant (Participant 6, personal communication, March 2016).

Social workers frequently mentioned complicating factors such as conditions that are worrisome, followed by infant with severe medical needs or failure to thrive and parent is uncooperative. Other risk factors included validity in alleged abuse to child or sibling, prior death of another child, lack of adequate provisions and support networks were also indicated by participants.

Participants were given the opportunity to list any other risk factors that were not mentioned in this study that they believed were associated with the removal of infants. One participant responded that the ethnicity of the child is a risk factor that increases the possibility of infant removal. That same participant reported some hospitals call in more Children and Family Service reports to the child abuse hotline when the child is a child of color specifically Hispanic/Latino or African American. The participant continued by reporting that many hospitals deny this act, but many social workers have seen it take place during Risk Assessment Meetings and DARE meetings (Participant 7, personal communication, March 2016). Another participant indicated there are many risk factors including lack of support systems, history of abuse/neglect, level of risk to
the child, age of the child, Children and Family Services policy, safety and well-being of the child, consideration of the Welfare and Institution Code, along with many more issues that are constantly being assessed in a short period of time while in the field working with the situation (Participant 8, personal communication, March 2016). One participant indicated provisions for services is not included in the survey. They continued to report the lack of provisions for the child is a key aspect in assessing for safety particularly in cases where mental health concerns and substance abuse is present. Provisions can include formula to diapers, clothing, housing, and support. Also, they reported, “… the survey does not include the application of Safety Organized Practice in our assessment, and the steps we take to create safety networks for families both before and after removal” (Participant 9, personal communication, March 2016). Another participant responded that,

“… there are too many factors involved with removing a child to try to attempt to understand it or obtain data via a Likert scale; The dynamic of social work is not based on a computer decision and cannot begin to be understood as to the decisions made by simply clicking a button; being in the moment, using all of our senses and intuition to enhance our critical thinking skills, concrete decision making and assessment is what contributes and influence the Department’s decision to remove a child” (Participant 10, personal communication, March 2016).
As evidence by the responses received from the participants, there are many risk factors that participants believe may impact decisions to remove any child.

Summary

This chapter presented the major findings of the study. The majority of participants identified substance abuse, the lack of infant’s physical safety in the home, and the lack of parents’ readiness to take part of the safety plan as the highest risk factors linked with cases of removal of infants. The most reoccurring factors participants responded as being the top three risk factors in cases of removal of infants were substance use, domestic violence, and a variety of complicating factors.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined social workers’ perceptions on the factors associated with the removal of infants within the child welfare system in San Bernardino County. This chapter will present the discussion of the major findings of the study, and link those findings to the existing literature. The implications for social work practice, policy and research, as well as the study’s limitations will also be presented in this section.

Discussion

The study found that social workers in this study perceived that the highest risk factor noted amongst parents was substance abuse. Substance abuse included alcohol abuse, and drug abuse, particularly, drug abuse was lead in substances in the cases where infants had been removed or were more likely to lead to the removal of an infant. In a study done by Tonmyr and colleagues (2011) they examined the factors that were associated with a social worker’s decision to place an infant in out-of-home care placement. Their study found that one of the highest risk factors that was associated with the removal of an infant was substance abuse, which is consistent with the findings of our current study. It was suggested that the reason why substance abuse was seen as a major determinant in the decision of placing infants in out-of-home care, was that
substance-abusing parents are more prone to expose their infants to many adversities (Tonmyr, Williams, Jack & MacMillan, 2011). When parent are under the influence of substances, such as alcohol or drugs, they are more likely to be unconscious of the risks and dangers they are exposing their children to. Investigations of child maltreatment amongst infants are considered high-risk due to their vulnerability and complete dependency on their primary caregivers. So if a parent is under the influence, they may not be able to be as attentive and careful of their children’s basic needs.

Another finding that was presented in our study was in relation to the child characteristics that were seen as risk factors involved in cases of removal of infants. When social workers looked at the child characteristics, they found the lack of infant's physical safety in the home and the infant's age as the highest risk factors involved in their decisions leading to removal. Klein and Harden (2011) reported that infants under the age of one were seen as one of the most vulnerable populations as they depend entirely on their caregivers to meet their needs. If infants are entirely dependent on their caregivers, it is likely that when assessing an infant’s safety and risk in their home, workers will closely examine the age of the child. Klein and Harden (2011) indicated that the age of a child was strongly associated with the possibility of having an infant removed from their home. When social workers receive investigations for child maltreatment, regarding very young children such as infants, those cases are considered high
risk and therefore show how an infant’s age is important when determining their risk and safety.

The lack of infant’s physical safety in the home, includes whether the home environment is considered unsafe for the child. With children at such a young age, such as infants, parents should be extremely careful in removing potential hazardous and dangerous items that may cause harm to a child. When social workers were asked the importance of an infant’s physical safety in the home in their decisions to remove, social workers considered infant’s physical safety as an important factor. This finding was not consistent with those of Williams, Tonmyr, Jack, Fallon, and MacMillan’s study (2011) that indicated that the factor that was considered to be highly associated with a social worker’s decision to place a child in out-of-home care was an infant’s positive toxicology at birth. It was suggested that when an infant’s toxicology at birth was positive for substances, it became a higher risk factor, as it increased the chances of removal, due to the relationship between infant’s toxicology and parental substance abuse (Williams et al., 2011). The reasoning for that may be that substance exposure and parental substance use has been found to be associated with subsequent child maltreatment (Smith & Testa, 2002). They found that when infants tested positive for substances, it was more likely that a child welfare case would be opened (Smith & Testa, 2002). Their findings suggested that positive toxicology indicated that the infant has not only been
harmed by the exposure to substances but was more likely to suffer from future maltreatment (Smith & Testa, 2002).

When examining the type of maltreatment that social workers perceived as the highest risk involved in cases of removal of infants, it was found that neglect was the type of maltreatment that most commonly involved in cases of removal of infants. In a previous study, Palusci (2011) found that allegations of maltreatment amongst young children, such as infants, were more likely to be related with child neglect. The two types of neglect most commonly found to be associated with infants were physical and medical neglect (Palusci, 2011). This appears to be common theme throughout many child abuse allegations, as neglect has been found to be one of the most commonly reported and found to be true and evident type of maltreatment amongst infants (Williams et al., 2011). Children at this age depend on their primary caregivers to meet their basic needs, and so if the caregivers are not being attentive to those needs and do not provide adequate care for them, the children are not able to thrive.

In the current study, the majority of social workers identified the parents’ lack of readiness to take part in the safety plan as a risk factor that is associated with the removal of infants. In a study to predict parent involvement with child welfare services, it was found that substance abuse, intimate partner violence and identifying as Black, Latino or biracial were significant predictors to parental involvement with the child welfare system (Mirick, 2013). Mirick (2013) supports that, “being a person of color predicted higher levels of mistrust in services;
parents of color were more likely to agree with statements such as the child protection worker is “out to get them” and “anything I say they are going to turn around to make me look bad” than white parents; the child service workers’ fear of violence and a lack of understanding of the complexities of the case may lead to a different approach for these families, which could significantly impact engagement” (Mirick, 2013, p. 275).

In the current study, social workers frequently mentioned domestic violence as a risk factor that is perceived to be linked to the removal of infants. In a study, it was identified that having a child with an enduring sickness, along with emotional domestic violence and drug use were positively connected with neglect (Slack et al., 2011). In a different study it was found that 72.5% suffered from neglect in a sample of 303 child victims of violence in the home. (Ben-Natan et al., 2010).

This study applied open-ended questions that allowed social workers to identify risk factors that were not mentioned in the Likert-type scale portion. A surprising finding was that the ethnicity of the child was indicated as a risk factor that increases the possibility of infant removal. Miller, Cahn, and Orellana (2012) stated, “… the belief that racial disproportionality and disparity were most likely caused by poverty and not racism was most often communicated by White participants” (Miller, Cahn, Orellana, 2012, p. 2206). In that same study, however, it was expressed by participants with child welfare involvement, to classify racism rather than poverty as the main factor to racial disproportionality
and disparity (Miller, Cahn, & Orellana, 2012). It is evident that further research may possibly investigate whether the child’s ethnicity is associated with a removal.

Implication for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This study finds substance abuse as the highest parental characteristic for infant removal. This finding suggests that social workers should warrant that parents, who have existing or past substance abuse, have appropriate services to drug treatment programs during and after child welfare involvement. It is imperative to understand the necessity of providing resources to the clients involved in the child welfare system. Specifically, San Bernardino County offers current preventive services for families who come under the scope of child welfare, such as prenatal care for pregnant mothers with existing substance abuse. This program is known as Healthy Babies. At San Bernardino County, along with other counties, there is a current optional service for clients called Parent Partners. Parent Partners provide emotional support and encouragement to parents who are involved with Children and Family Services (CFS). Parent Partners are CFS employees who were former clients in CFS, who successfully regained custody of their children. With their experience and knowledge their goal is to inspire and mentor more parents for successful completion of case plan goals. It would also be important to ensure that parents with child welfare involvement have adequate mental health services and resources.
The findings of this study raise a possible awareness to the clients’ needs and services that should be tailored to meet the needs of the family. San Bernardino County, Children and Family Services offers trainings to social workers to provide knowledge on new implementations of policies, practices and interventions. Current trainings that are offering innovative methods for social work practice include, Safety Organized Practice, Risk Assessments Meetings, and Structured Decision Making Assessment Tools, just to name a few. Although these findings raise an evident awareness on the issue at hand, there was a lack of concern regarding the importance of an infant’s attachment and separation. It is recommend that along with formal trainings, as mentioned above, the importance of attachment should be integrated in current trainings, to ensure that the infant may have an appropriate bond with a caregiver after a removal. Nonetheless, the goal of Children and Family Services is to assure the safety, permanence, and well-being of infants and children in the child welfare system.

Due to the fact that the current study only included social workers’ perspectives, future research should possibly explore a qualitative approach on the perspectives of families who have experienced a removal of an infant. Obtaining families’ perspectives on the removal of an infant may provide a more in depth personal insight.

Limitations

A limitation of the study included the researchers’ inability to access a pre-existing standardized measurement tool with proven reliability and validity, in
measuring social worker’s perceptions on the factors involved in cases of removal of infants. The measurement tool that was utilized in this study was created with the adaptation of two pre-existing tools, *The Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) Maltreatment Assessment* developed by the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (2003), and the questionnaire from the study, Social workers’ perceptions of the factors related to reentry by Burak (2011), as few items were taken from each instrument. Having utilized a measurement tool that was adapted from pre-existing measurement tools, means that the validity and reliability of the tool are unknown.

Another limitation in this study may have been the study’s sample size and how that sample size was obtained. Only ninety-four participants from all the regions in San Bernardino County’s Children and Family Services responded to our questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed via interagency email, and so it is a possibility that social workers in child welfare agencies may have missed the email that included the study’s questionnaire due to the high number of emails they already receive on the job. From those ninety-four participants the majority who responded were carrier workers, therefore the results from this study may not be representative of all social workers within San Bernardino County Children and Family Services, as there are other positions held within whose perceptions were not represented in this study.

The study’s questionnaire included a list of factors that have been found to be associated with the removal of infants, and so the social workers that
participated in this study were asked about their perceptions of how often those were factors associated with being involved in cases of removal of infants. A limitation with that is that there are wide ranges of factors that contribute to the removal of infants that may have not been listed in this study’s questionnaire. Therefore, this would limit our knowledge since we only focused on certain factors that may be considered to be highly associated with the removal of infants.

Within San Bernardino County Children and Family Services, social workers are to inquire the use of Safety Organized Practice tools, used to assist in keeping a focal point on assessing and improving child safety, as well as Structured Decision Making, that incorporates evidence-based practice tools, to aide them in their assessments when deciding on whether they should remove a child from their home. A limitation in this study was that the questionnaire did not include those practices as factors that contribute to a social worker’s decision of removal of an infant from their home, when in turn they are a critical part in the decision-making in child welfare.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the risk factors that San Bernardino County social workers strongly believe to lead to the removal of infants. In order to gain social workers’ perspectives, a Likert-scale questionnaire was utilized in this study. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were given the opportunity to fill-in with the risk factors that they believe should be included
in this study; along with the top three risk factors they believe are associated with the removal of infants. With the responses given by the participants, the study found that parental substance abuse, the lack of physical safety in a home for an infant, and the parents’ readiness to take part of the safety plan as the top risk factors that led to the removal of infants. It is recommend that future social workers continue to receive trainings to enrich social workers’ awareness to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Part I: Demographics Information

2. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

3. What ethnicity do you identify with? (Please select all that apply).
   - African American
   - Asian/Pacific Islander
   - Hispanic
   - Native American/Alaskan Native
   - White, non-Hispanic
   - Other, please specify

4. What is your highest level of education completed?
   - Bachelor's Degree
   - Bachelor's of Arts in Social Work
   - Master's Degree
   - Masters in Social Work
   - Other, please specify

5. How many years of experience do you have as a child welfare worker? (Please round to the nearest year).
6. How long have you worked for San Bernardino County with Children and Family Services? (Please round to the nearest year).

7. What is your current position?

- Social Service Practitioner, Intake
- Social Service Practitioner, Carrier
- Social Worker II, Intake
- Social Worker II, Carrier
- Other, please specify

8. Have you ever worked with a family, where an infant (age 0-1) has been removed?

- Yes
- No
## Part II: Risk Factors - Parental Characteristics

9. For each of the items below, please indicate how often each factor is associated with your decision to remove an infant from their home.*

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<tr>
<td>One-parent household</td>
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<td>Alcohol abuse</td>
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<td>Drug abuse</td>
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<td>Mental health issues</td>
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<td>Cognitive impairment</td>
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<td>Physical health issues</td>
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<td>Victim of domestic violence</td>
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<td>Perpetrator of domestic violence</td>
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<td>Criminal activity/history</td>
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<td>Few social supports</td>
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<td>Prior involvement with the Department of Child</td>
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<td>ren and Family Services</td>
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<td>Father is the perpetrator</td>
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<td>Mother is the perpetrator</td>
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10. For each of the items below, please indicate how often each factor is associated with your decision to remove an infant from their home.*

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<td>Infant's age</td>
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<td>Infant's behavior</td>
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<td>Developmental delay</td>
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<td>Physical health</td>
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<td>Positive toxicology at birth</td>
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<td>Infant's physical safety in the home</td>
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<td>Quality of parent-infant relationship</td>
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<td>Type of maltreatment</td>
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<td>Neglect</td>
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<td>Physical abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
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11. For each of the items below, please indicate how often each factor is associated with your decision to remove an infant from their home.*

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<td>Worker liability</td>
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<td>Working under stressful situations</td>
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<td>Assessment tool utilized for investigation</td>
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<td>Previous encounter with family</td>
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<td>Parents' cooperation with the social worker</td>
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<td>Parents' accountability</td>
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<td>Parents' motivation to change</td>
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<td>Parents' readiness to take part of safety plan</td>
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Part III: Open-Ended Questions

12. Do you believe there are any other factors, not already included in this survey, associated with the removal of an infant? If so, please list them.

13. Please list the top three factors you believe are the most likely to contribute to the removal of an infant.

- First factor
- Second factor
- Third factor

Survey Completed

Thank you for taking the survey! If you have any questions or concerns about the study please contact Dr. Janet Chang at 909-637-5184.

Developed by Mindy Lizbeth Cervantes and Alma Esther Manzano (2015)
INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine how social workers’ perceptions are related to the removal rates of infants among the child welfare system in San Bernardino County. The study is being conducted by MSW students, Mindy Cerqueira and Alina Manzano, under the supervision of Professor Janet Chang, School of Social Work, at California State University of San Bernardino. The study has been approved by San Bernardino County and by the Institutional Review Board School of Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University of San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine how social workers’ perceptions are related to the removal rates of infants among the child welfare system.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few questions regarding their perceptions on a list of factors found to be associated with the removal of infants and how often they believe each factor is associated with a worker’s decision to remove an infant from their home.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to skip answering any questions you do not wish to answer. You can refuse to participate or discontinue your participation at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses and information will remain confidential and anonymous. No identifying information will be collected. The confidential data from these questionnaires will be stored in a password-protected computer and will only be seen by the researchers. The results will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 10-20 minutes to complete the survey.

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 or concerns about this study please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang at 909-537-5184.

RESULTS: Please contact Dr. Janet Chang (email: jchang@susb.edu), or the California State University San Bernardino John M. Pfau Library after December 2015.

By marking below, you agree that you have been fully informed about this survey and you are volunteering to participate.

Place an "X" mark here ________________ Date ________________

909.537.5501
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for participating in this study and not discussing the questionnaire with other people. The study you have just completed was about the social worker perspective on factors that led to the removal of infants. The researchers were particularly interested in the factors that may have led to the removal of infants due to the increase of infant removals in the County of San Bernardino within the last year. It is hoped that the findings from the study will help highlight common factors for the removal of infants in the child welfare system. The results from this study may be used to raise awareness for future and present social workers about the underline factors that led to the removal of infants.

For any additional assistance you may contact Associate Professor Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184. If you would like to obtain a copy of the findings of the study please contact the California State University San Bernardino John M. Pfau Library after December 2016.
REFERENCES


ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two person project in which the authors collaborated throughout. Responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:
   Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano

2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano
   a. Introduction
      Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano
   b. Literature Review
      Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano
   c. Methods
      Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano
   d. Results
      Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano
   e. Discussion
      Team effort by Mindy Lizbeth & Alma Esther Manzano