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# INCARCERATED MOTHERS ACHIEVING REUNIFICATION: PROVIDING SUPPORT TO CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS

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INCARCERATED MOTHERS ACHIEVING REUNIFICATION:  
PROVIDING SUPPORT TO CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS

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

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

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by  
Francesca Priscilla Villarreal

June 2019

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Approved by:

Dr. Gretchen Heidmann, Committee Chair, Social Work

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the barriers to reunification with their children for incarcerated mothers in an effort to provide more support to child welfare social workers who engage with this population. Project participants were selected from one regional office of a child welfare agency in Southern California to complete qualitative interviews. Participants included seven Social Service Practitioners (SSPs), two Supervising Social Service Practitioners (SSSPs), and one Data Analyst. Each participant's interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following the systematic manual coding method with the assistance of Microsoft Word (Ose, S, 2016). Five common barriers were identified: child visitations with incarcerated parents, variances of social worker's knowledge of services and programs provided by institutions, presence of guidance and support, maintaining contact with incarcerated parents, and length of sentence. At the conclusion of the project, the researcher provided findings to study participants and the Deputy Director of the child welfare agency.

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## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my three children: Peter Jr., Anastasia, and Anderson. Thank you for being patient and understanding over the past three years. I appreciate your willingness to play at the playground for hours while I worked on this project.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ASSESSMENT

#### Introduction

Chapter one introduces the research focus for the current study, providing support to child welfare social workers to facilitate improving reunification with incarcerated mothers. The chapter presents the constructivist paradigm and the rationale behind its usage. Furthermore, this chapter provides a literature review focused on incarcerated mothers and the child welfare system and the chosen theoretical orientation. The chapter concludes with possible micro and macro contributions to the practice of social work.

#### Research Focus

Children and mothers involved in the child welfare system experience trauma when separated from one another; this is amplified when a mother is incarcerated. Glaze & Maruschak (2008) reported 61.7% of incarcerated mothers having a child under the age of 18. Prior to incarceration, mothers tend to be the primary caregiver and are not afforded the opportunity to establish a suitable alternative (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Flynn (2014) stated that maternal incarceration causes “isolation, behavioral difficulties in school, anxiety, insecurity, withdrawal, anger and mental health concerns” in the children left behind (p. 177). Child abuse is rarely a reason for a mother’s incarceration. Often, it is due to substance abuse issues or domestic violence (Flynn, 2014).

According to the California Department of Social Services, “positive permanency outcomes are defined as an increase in the number of children reunified with their parents...” (p. 11). For reunification to occur, parents must complete all services specified within their case plan and be granted Family Maintenance (FM). Services outlined in the plan are a result of a social worker assessing the needs of the family in conjunction with the substantiated allegations that led to the removal of the child.

Reunification timelines vary based on a child’s age. Parents of children under the age of 3 will receive 6 months of reunification services. Cases with an older child will initially receive the same six-month window, however, a social worker can petition the court for an extension if the parent displays substantial progress towards completing their case plan.

The Incarcerated Parents Working Group (IPWG) was formed in 2010 to identify institutional barriers and issues that were affecting successful reunification (Downing, 2012). IPWG was comprised of Children’s Law Center (CLC), Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers (LADL), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), CDCR, and the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department.

To collect data IPWG conducted meetings with community stakeholders, surveyed judicial officers and interviewed inmates and correctional staff at the California Institution for Women (CIW) (Downing, 2012). IPWG identified seven barriers to incarcerated parent’s reunification: locating and having parents appear in court proceedings, arranging visitations, program availability while

incarcerated, costs of programs, coordination of dependency court and criminal law attorneys, inadequate training of agency employees, and lack the effect of immigration issues on dependency court (Downing, 2012).

Downing (2012) believed that support and advocacy for incarcerated parents needed to be improved, beginning at the judicial officer level. Like the study completed by the IPWG, this research will discuss barriers that arise for achieving reunification with incarcerated mothers.

### Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

Post Positivism is the paradigm chosen for the current study. According to Morris (2014), post positivism allows the researcher's understanding of the problem to evolve throughout the course of the project. A qualitative and subjective method, the researcher and participants share equally valid perspectives. Post positivism is the appropriate paradigm because it affords the opportunity for the researcher to step back and look at the bigger picture. As more information is obtained, the researcher has the opportunity to reflect on why the problem is occurring. A fluid model, the researcher has the flexibility to develop the hermeneutic dialectic without being confined to a specific hypothesis. This is the best way to study these issues because of the lack of research that currently exists. Having the fluidity will allow for adjustments of the scope and direction of the study as more information is gathered.

## Literature Review

Incarcerated mothers face many challenges when trying to reunify with their children. This literature review will present information on three of the barriers identified in the previously discussed IPWG study. These will include: presence of institutional programs to satisfy their case plan, correctional visitation protocol and limitations, and proper training of child welfare staff.

### Case Plans and Institutional Services

A Case Plan is a state mandated document through Division 31 of the California Department of Social Services Policies and Procedures Manual (Children and Family Services-Confidential County, 2009). "The Case Plan acts as a means where the specific tasks in order to maintain, return the child back to the home or finalize the Permanent Plan are documented" (Children and Family Services-Confidential County, p. 3-BB1-2). Case Plans are created and maintained by carrier social workers using California's statewide tool, CWS/CMS for Family Reunification (FR), Permanency Planning (PP) and Family Maintenance (FM) cases (Children and Family Services-Confidential County, 2009). Supervising Social Services Practitioners are responsible for approving and periodically checking on the progress of Case Plans.

Correctional institutions offer a variety of programs ranging from obtaining a General Education Degree (G.E.D.) to groups that help an inmate confront address the issues that led to their incarceration Parenting is the most common

service required by a case plan and is the most popular service offered in correctional institutions.

Urban & Burton (2015) studied the effectiveness of Turning Points parenting curriculum at Chillicothe Correctional Center (CCC). Normally a 15-class series, it was modified to 10-class series to allot for institutional and time constraints of incarcerated parents. Highlighted lessons included: rebuilding trust, positive discipline techniques, and setting expectations that are developmentally appropriate.

Completion of the series can be used to satisfy parenting case plan requirements when certificates are provided to the social worker. Incarcerated mothers showed an overall increase of knowledge of 42%. Urban and Burton (2015) believed that this growth would end the generational cycle of incarceration by overcoming ineffective parenting.

### Correctional Visits

Monitored visitations with children is a key component to a reunification case plan. Flynn (2014) acknowledged that the location of imprisonment can create a barrier to having visits; incarcerated mothers, on average, are 112 miles away from their children. When asked about his visitation, a ten-year-old boy shared: "...visited once a week – every weekend... [but] sometimes there was arguments [between mum and her partner] and him not wanting to use fuel [to travel to prison] [I overheard these phone conversations]. [I was] pretty angry – I wanted to see mum, and this was the only way I had" (Flynn 2014, p. 184).

Financial burden is common issue when visiting incarcerated parents, typically due to the cost of travel (Flynn, 2014). However, as seen in the quote above, it is important that visitations occur for the overall emotional wellness of the child.

Visitation provides several benefits to the child as well as the incarcerated mother. According to Schubert (2016), incarcerated mothers who receive regular visits exhibit higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression, anxiety, parental stress. Children benefited by having fewer behavioral problems and suspensions from school.

However, there is countering research that outlines the drawbacks of correctional visitations. Loper, Carlson, Levitt & Sheffel (2014) discussed the feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment that a mother feels; these are brought on by the inability to have substantial contact during the visit and the length of time allotted. The sterile and regulated environment can have a negative impact on both parent and child. Correctional visitation rooms are not designed with children and mind and are often not developmentally appropriate. Though it varies by institution, physical contact such as hugging, and kissing is not allowed. This can be distressing to a child who is used to receiving affection from their mother. Furthermore, foster placements reported an increase in a child's negative behaviors immediately before and after the visit.

#### Training of Child Welfare Staff

Resources and funds such as Title IV E, have been utilized to increase the competency and knowledge in the field of social work (Bagdasaryan, 2012).



Though research is scarce in specialized training, it is assumed that a positive correlation exists between the amount of time and funding invested into training and the level of competency of a social worker.

Bagdasaryan (2012) in conjunction with Inter-University Consortium/Department of Children and Family Services (IUC/DCFS) Training Project tested whether MSW Title IV-E graduates performed better on a series of exams compared to Non-Title IV-E MSW graduates. This belief is due to Title IV-E students receiving a stipend, specialized education and internships, and work placements for a committed length of time. Newly hired children social workers (CSW) were given exams that measured their knowledge of case planning, permanency planning and an overview of the child welfare system.

As expected, MSW Title IV-E graduates scored higher than non-Title IV-E graduates. Data showed the benefits of having specialized training; graduates possessed both a specific skill set (e.g. child welfare) and a broad range of knowledge (e.g. social work) (Bagdasaryan, 2012). The researcher feels that the study above can be applied to the belief that specialized training can assist social workers with improving child reunification with incarcerated mothers. In the future, a subspecialty of incarceration could be added to the Title IV-E program since it is prevalent in child welfare.

Studies have shown that availability of institutional services, correctional visits, and specialized training for social workers have proven beneficial to the families serviced by Children and Family Services. The need exists, however, in

relating these three key factors to the reunification of incarcerated parents with their children.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Systems theory, the explanation of “human behavior as the intersection of the influences of multiple interrelated systems”, was used for the current study. This theory asserts that different parts within a system have an influence on the system as a whole. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the study site for this study, are two subsystems that function within the main system of society. Each subsystem has its own administrative body, regulations and processes that govern its daily procedures.

Incarcerated mothers with children in care of the study site are subject to the intersection of these two subsystems. The current study hoped to gain a better understanding of these two subsystems in hopes of utilizing services already in place to improve the reunification process. Both systems have the resources and services in place, but lack in communication and collaboration .

### Potential Contribution of Study to Micro Social Work Practice

The main area of micro social work practice that can be affected by this study is the creation of a specialized worker or unit devoted to providing case management services to incarcerated parents. Creation of this specialization could result in improved case planning and collaboration with institutions that can

assist with improving rates of reunification. Having a better understanding of the special needs of incarcerated mothers and their children could lead to better advocacy efforts with courts granting visitations.

### Summary

The assessment phase was discussed in chapter one. Post-constructivist paradigm and the rationale behind its incorporation in the current study was presented. A literature review providing information on the barriers to reunification were presented. Finally, potential micro level contributions associated with the current study were identified.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ENGAGEMENT

#### Introduction

Chapter two, engagement, presents information about the study site as well as the strategies that will be used to engage the gatekeepers at the study site. Issues pertaining to diversity, ethics and politics will also be discussed. Finally, use of technology will be presented.

#### Study Site

The study site for the current research study was a child welfare agency serving Southern California. The agency works “to provide intervention and support services to families and children when allegations of child abuse, neglect or exploitation are substantiated” (Children and Family Services, 2017). In 2017, the department served 35,588 children; 5,087 of those had substantiated allegations of abuse and/or neglect (Children and Family Services, 2017).

The agency employs bachelor and masters level social workers who are placed on an experience scale ranging from Social Worker I to Social Worker V. There are four main units that a social worker can work under: judicial/disposition, intake, carrier, and adoption. Each unit is overseen by a Supervising Social Services Practitioner (SSSP) and each SSSP answers to a Child Welfare Manager (CWM) for the office, who then reports to a Deputy Director (DD) for the

region. Each unit has different tasks and timelines but they work collectively to tackle the department goals of timely reunification and child care permanency.

CFS serves families of various socioeconomic backgrounds, including incarcerated/institutionalized parents. When a child is detained, a social worker must assess to determine if reunification is in the best interest of the child. If reunification is not deemed detrimental, a social worker will establish case plan (Children and Family Services, 2009).

A case plan is a document that outlines specific services that need to be completed by the parent. Social workers must provide reasonable services and efforts to assist the parent with completing the plan (Children and Family Services, 2009). Reasonable services are defined as “services that are accessible, affordable and achievable for the parent/guardian” (Children and Family Services, 2009, p. 10). Presented at the Jurisdictional Hearing, a parent is given a specific timeline to complete the plan (Children and Family Services, 2009). Children under the age of 3 at the time of removal are given 6 months of services; children over the age of 3 receive 12 months. For incarcerated parents, these timelines are especially important when factoring in their expected release date. For parents whose release dates are outside of these timelines, reunification services will be denied “because the only result of reunification services would be to delay the child’s right to an early and stable permanent plan” (Children and Family Services, 2009, p. 7).

A six-month extension can be granted if a parent shows that their case plan can be completed within the extension or if the department fails to initially provide services without probable cause during the Jurisdictional hearing (Children and Family Services, 2009). AB 2070 has provided an additional extension to 24 months for parents who are in drug rehabilitation programs, institutionalized or incarcerated (Children and Family Services, 2009). For a court to grant this extension, the parent must have regular contact with the child, make significant progress towards case plan and provide evidence of their ability to positively parent the child upon release (Children and Family Services, 2009).

#### Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Site

It was important when initiating engagement that the researcher followed the appropriate chain of command. The initial gatekeeper that the proposal was presented to was the Supervising Social Services Practitioner (SSSP) for the unit that the researcher was assigned; this was done through an in-person meeting. The researcher presented a proposal that included how the department was implementing reunification services with incarcerated parents, the barriers to reunification with incarcerated parents identified in previous studies, and how the researcher planned to use the post positivism paradigm to identify ways to provide additional support to social workers with incarcerated parents working towards reunification. The SSSP then presented the proposal to her overseeing Child Welfare Manager (CWM).

Once both parties approved of the proposal, it was presented it to the DD of the region. The researcher met with the DD to review the proposed interview questions and obtain a letter of approval.

Incarcerated parents are a specialized demographic that takes a high level of expertise to serve. Though the CFS handbook outlines a specific protocol for serving them, few social workers are aware of its existence. Training of new social workers has changed considerably over the years. As a result, workers are given a more generalized understanding of child welfare. When engaging gatekeepers, the researcher focused on the working knowledge of the participants when interacting with incarcerated parents on their caseloads. The researcher showed the necessity of having a specialized position that focused on providing support to social workers with incarcerated parents on their caseloads.

### Self-Preparation

Post positivism required that the researcher obtain information in a naturalistic setting. Focused on qualitative instead of quantitative data, post positivism involves gathering data through first-hand interactions with participants. To prepare for such interactions, the researcher gained background knowledge of incarcerated parents and their intersection with CFS through interning in the Family Services Program (FSP) at the California Institution for Women. One service provided by FSP was providing support to inmates with open child welfare cases. The researcher saw the issues that led to missed court

appearances, inadequate planning for child visitations (personally or over the phone), and social worker's overall lack of knowledge of services provided in the institution.

Post positive interviews were composed of structured questions that ensured that all participants have the same experience (Morris, 2014). The purpose of the interviews was to find commonalities that would allow the researcher to develop a solution to the identified problem. Time management was another component that needed to be controlled by the researcher due to participants having minimal time to participate. Maintaining time constraints for the interviews ensured that interviewees participated.

### Diversity Issues

Close attention was paid throughout the various phases of the study to issues of diversity, particularly with regard to the fact that members of ethnic minority groups are overrepresented among both the incarcerated and foster care populations. According to the 2016 Annual Report for Children and Family Services, of the 5,791 children in out-of-home placements, 4,342 are from a minority group. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reported that African American women were twice as likely to be incarcerated when compared to Caucasian women. Further, African Americans and Hispanics comprise 56% of the incarcerated population despite only making up 32% of the US population (NAACP, 2019). A specific diversity issue that fell within the scope of the research was the existence of social workers who lacked



sensitivity to the needs of incarcerated parents. Furthermore, social worker's perceptions of incarceration reflected in their varied understanding of providing reasonable reunification efforts.

### Ethical Issues

Prior to commencement of the study, a Human Subjects review was completed by the CSUSB Institutional Review Board. Interactions only occurred with social workers who reviewed an informed consent form and provided their signature upon agreement to participate and be digitally recorded. The researcher reminded participants that anonymity was not part of the post positivism paradigm; therefore their identity will not be protected. Digital recordings were deleted from the recording device once it was transcribed onto a Word document. Transcriptions were kept secure on an encrypted unmarked flash drive that remained with the researcher at all times.

### Political Issues

California's Proposition 57 was the main political issue that affected the current study. Proposition 57, passed in November 2016, allows for early release for all non-life inmates and parole considerations for non-violent offenders (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2017). Further, it allows inmates to gain credits that can be used for earlier releases through participation in rehabilitation programs and education. This is a positive when looking at the implementation and completion of case plans because these rehabilitation

programs include: parenting, anger management, substance abuse treatment and counseling; all of which can be required by a case plan (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2017).

A negative of Proposition 57 are visiting concerns for a mother who is paroled to a program that is long distance away from their children's current placement. Though a mother may receive more services and have a better opportunity at rehabilitation, it may be detrimental to either establishing or maintaining a relationship with their children. This logistical concern can increase a social worker's workload since they are transporting children to visits at facilities more often.

When working with a bureaucratic agency that is publicly funded, it is important to focus on their strengths and how to redirect them in a more efficient manner. As seen with CFS, the procedures and protocols exist, the problem comes with training and execution. Keeping this in mind, the researcher ensured that the research remained objective and solution focused.

### The Role of Technology in Engagement

Two main forms of technology were utilized during the engagement phase: electronic emails and phones. Both were used to obtain approvals from deputy directors and to distribute and receive informed consents prior to scheduling social worker interviews. They were also used to provide clarification to study participants.

## Summary

Chapter two, the engagement stage, presented information on the study site, strategies to engage gatekeepers at site, and self-preparation. Issues pertaining to diversity, ethics and politics were also addressed. Finally, the researcher discussed the role of technology throughout the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IMPLEMENTATION

#### Introduction

Implementation is the focus of chapter three. Background information of study participants as well as the selection process for the current study is presented. Additionally, the gathering, recording, and analysis of data are discussed. Lastly, communication of findings and a dissemination plan is identified.

#### Study Participants

Participants for the study included staff members at the Children and Family Services who have been identified as key stakeholders: data analysts, Social Services Practitioners (SSPs), Supervising Social Services Practitioners (SSSPs), and the MSW student researcher. These stakeholders were chosen because of their interaction with incarcerated parents working towards reunification, knowledge of procedures and training given to SSPs, and potential access to data pertaining to reunification outcomes.

#### Selection of Participants

A non-probability convenience sample was used to select participants for the study. The researcher selected individuals that shared an interest in participating in the study and whose schedules afforded them the opportunity.

SSPs were selected from the researcher's regional office. SSPs in other regions were not included in the study due to needing to obtain permission from each region's SSSPs and DDs. The sample size for the research was 10 participants; seven SSPs, two SSSPs, and one data analyst.

### Data Gathering

Data was gathered using previously approved open-ended questions, located in the appendix. Questions were specific to the participant's role at CFS. Slight modifications were made during the course of the interview depending on the responses given. This included rewording questions from a behavioral stance to one that was theoretical in nature. Demographic information, time employed as a social worker and current assignment were gathered as well. Interviews were digitally recorded using a handheld recording device. At the conclusion of each interview, the recording was uploaded to a password-protected computer for transcription, and erased from the recorder. All recordings were erased from the computer after transcription and the written interviews were stored on an encrypted flash drive.

### Phases of Data Collection

Post positivism has one phase of data collection, the Identification of participants and completion of interviews. Using preapproved open-ended questions to guide the conversation, the researcher encouraged participants to share their experiences to find commonalities and trends. Participants were

allowed to choose the time and location of their interview. This was done in an effort to make the participants feel comfortable and open to fully answering the questions.

### Data Recording

Data was collected using a digital voice recorder and interviews were transcribed afterwards. The researcher believed that it was important to fully engage in the conversation and, thus, notetaking was not utilized. Additionally, prior to beginning the interview, the researcher emphasized the need to stay on topic throughout the interview with each participant. This was done in an effort to answer only the questions approved by the DD and stay within the scope of the study.

### Data Analysis

Data gathered in the study was analyzed using Microsoft Word. Transcribed interviews were reviewed and codes were constructed. Quotes from the transcriptions were copied to a Microsoft Word document according to the appropriate corresponding code. Each quote was matched to the participant for reference purposes.

### Termination and Follow Up

Termination occurred at the conclusion of each interview. Participants were verbally thanked for contributing to the study and were given a copy of the

debriefing statement. The researcher is an employee of CFS, stationed in the regional office that was included in the study. As a result, participants had the freedom of asking for updates on the progress of the study.

#### Communication of Findings and Dissemination Plan

A final report will be presented to the DD and participants of the study. In addition to the final written report, the researcher will prepare a PowerPoint presentation that will include brief study highlights that will be given to the DD for her to decide how and when to disseminate. The PowerPoint can be used to pique the interest of the department into creating a specialized position focused on the incarcerated population.

#### Summary

Implementation of the current study was addressed in chapter three. The selection process of study participants was discussed. The process of data gathering, collection, and analysis was presented. Finally, the researcher addressed termination and follow up, as well as communication of research findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EVALUATION

#### Introduction

Evaluation is the focus of the current chapter. Data from completed interviews will be presented. Next, the researcher will perform an analysis using coding to find commonalities and trends. These findings will then be interpreted to find implications for micro practice.

#### Data Analysis

Participants in the study included: seven SSPs, two SSSPs, and one Data Analyst. The specialization areas of the SSPs interviewed included: five carrier workers, one intake worker, and one jurisdictional and detention writer. All participants were stationed in the same region of CFS. Years of social worker experience ranged from three years to twenty-five years. Three males and seven females were included in the study. All participants' level of education exceeded bachelor's level; areas of study in graduate school varied.

SSPs and SSSPs were able to provide responses to the structured interview questions. However, the Data Analyst was not able to answer the given three questions due to the agency not having the information readily available. Upon further research, it was discovered that this level of data collection and analysis was done at the State level. CWS/CMS does not have a



populated field to identify incarcerated parents. A populated field would allow for the data to be pulled; currently this information is found in contact notes.

Interview transcripts were reviewed to find commonalities among the participants, and these were used to develop codes. Though structured questions were used that were based on job function, responses centered on common themes. Analysis of the interview transcripts allowed for the construction of the following five codes: child visitations with incarcerated parents, variances of social workers' knowledge of services and programs provided by institutions, presence of guidance and support, maintaining contact with incarcerated parents, and length of sentence.

## Data Interpretation

### Child Visitations with Incarcerated Parents

All participants in the study lacked experience in taking a child to visit an incarcerated parent, though all of them saw the importance of maintaining a connection between the child and parent. Participant #6 stated, "scheduling visits at a prison is challenging but it is an important part of the reunification. Parents should be encouraged to demonstrate safe parenting skills, without the ill-resulting effects of manipulation and making unrealistic promises, etc." Programs such as the Enhanced Visiting Program (EVP) at the California Institution for Women in Corona (CIW), allows inmates to have visits in a child-appropriate environment. These visits are court-ordered and are monitored by Family Coordinators – social workers who provide feedback to inmates in five areas of

parenting at the conclusion of visits. The researcher saw the positives while interning at the program, but also saw the underutilization of the program.

Many reported courts failing to grant visitations. Participant #4 reported, “in my experience, it is rare that the court orders visitations for an incarcerated parent. Social workers were generally not opposed to children visiting incarcerated parents, but stated they needed to follow court orders. In fact, social workers reported that non-contact visits were more likely to be granted by the court. Participant #5 reported, “in my experience, the court-ordered visitations have stated, or has frequently stated, ‘when the parent is released’ or ‘by letter’ or ‘by phone calls’.” When non-contact visits are ordered, social workers take on the responsibility of monitoring phone calls and receiving letters from incarcerated parents, censoring material when inappropriate.

Two SSPS stated that incarcerated parents were not allowed visitations. For example, participant #7 stated, “well they can’t have visits while they’re incarcerated. They [sic] visits have to resume upon release. So [sic] once they get out, if they contact me then I’ll go over the case plan.” Needing to use the pre-approved questions only, the researcher did not probe as to where they obtained this information. The researcher did refer to the chapter in the CFS Handbook dedicated to incarcerated parents following the interview. There was not a policy or regulation formally preventing incarcerated parents from obtaining visitations.

### Variances of Social Workers' Knowledge

Programs such as EVP at CIW is underutilized primarily because social workers are not aware of its existence. When asked about the availability of programs in institutions, Participant #1 responded, "I'm not aware of the programs in institutions." Participants who *were* aware of programs stated they had limited knowledge of the extent of the programs available. Regarding the existence of programs, Participant #2 stated, "Limited. Some penal institutions will offer an "In Road Program'. The need is for parenting, counseling, and substance abuse." Institutions, especially women's institutions such as CIW, offer a variety of programs ranging from individual counseling to substance abuse treatment programs.

Three participants were aware of programs available at institutions. Participant #6 stated, "During the time a parent is incarcerated, they have an opportunity to participate in the therapeutic programs that will help with improved parenting, interrupt drug addiction or domestic violence cycles." Knowledge of existing programs available at institutions is essential to promoting reunification. As previously stated, timelines exist in the reunification process. Incarcerated parents are especially sensitive to these timelines and need to begin services as soon as possible.

### Presence of Guidance and Support

Currently, CFS does not have a person or unit devoted to working with incarcerated parents. When asked who participants go to for support, four of

them said they did not have anyone. Participant #8 reported, “One of the other barriers would be a high caseload and we don’t have a specialization towards incarcerated parents and I think it’s a whole thing that the County should look at.” High caseloads are an issue within child welfare as a whole. Adding a specialized population to a worker’s heavy caseload makes it especially difficult to provide specific intervention and resources.

Some participants identified institutional staff as their support people. Participant #3 reported, “The correctional officers, yes. He will give you more insight on what’s going on.” Though collaboration between systems is important, social workers should have internal support. In addition to their policies and procedures, each system is geared towards a specific focus when working with an incarcerated parent. Institutions are focused on a parent’s rehabilitation to reduce recidivism, while CFS is focused on addressing issues that contributed to identified safety concerns with children. Having a CFS staff member with knowledge of how to merge to two foci could lead to more effective and efficient case management.

### Maintaining Contact with Incarcerated Parents

Difficulty in communicating with incarcerated parents was discussed by all participants. For example, with regard to her communication with incarcerated mothers, Participant #9 reported that she experienced “very little communication and exclusively by phone.” Participants differed on being able to communicate by phone with incarcerated parents. Participant #5 stated that inmates were able to

call collect, while another stated this was no longer available. “We no longer accept collect phone calls. And when we did it was easier to be in contact with them because they would transfer the call to me. Now there’s [sic], I don’t think we accept collect phone calls anymore.” Referring to the CFS Handbook, phone calls were not addressed. However, the Handbook did outline how to communicate via written form.

Participants were not opposed to communicating in-person with incarcerated parents, but cited proximity as a major barrier. Participant #1 stated, “I would go to them if they were in a close by jail. I would go visit them.” There are three jails and two prisons that are relatively local to the CFS regional office. However, parents are not always housed locally, and those who are may be transferred along the course of their incarceration. Another issue related to in-person visits is the required approval to gain access to the institution. Participant #3 stated, “I mean, so it’s difficult for us to get into the prisons, in the jails is difficult.” Known as a “gate clearance,” social workers who want access to an incarcerated parent must clear a background check prior. This background check takes time to process and must be completed for each institution.

### Length of Sentence

Length of sentence was reported as the biggest barrier to reunification with incarcerated parents. Participant #8 reported, “Generally, we do not support reunification services. There’s little communication between the parents who are incarcerated depending on the length of time. A lot of parents if they are past the

year point in time, they're not offered services and get no FR." Family Reunification (FR) refers to "multifaceted strategies that build on family strengths and address concerns" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). These strategies include visitations, evidence-based services, and parent education. Services are tailored to each family to promote stability and safety (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Length of sentence for an incarcerated parent is not black and white. There are many factors that come into play, such as "milestones" that can be earned by a parent completing rehabilitation programs that move up their release date, or institutional infractions or pre-release procedures that could delay it. These programs may also count towards services identified in their CFS case plan. For instance, a mother may enroll in the Substance Abuse Program (SAP) which will reduce her sentence length while satisfying her case plan requirements of substance abuse treatment and individual counseling. A specialized position could assist CFS social workers in understanding these procedures and, ultimately, in ensuring successful reunification

#### Implication of Findings for Micro Practice

Acknowledging there is a difference between incarcerated and non-incarcerated parents is the first step in providing appropriate case management services focused on successful reunification. Participants expressed a lack of knowledge of institutional programs available, barriers in communicating with and visiting incarcerated parents, and limited experience with courts approving child

visitations. CFS began to address this issue by creating a chapter in the Handbook focused on incarcerated parents. In addition to policy and procedures, the chapter also included a directory of institutions with visiting hours and a contact person.

Though this information exists and is readily available to all CFS workers, very few seem to actually utilize it. The reason for this was out of the scope of this study, but we suspect that participants may not have the time to devote to gaining a better understanding of this population. For this study, the researcher tailored the interviews to be brief after observing the limited amount of “extra” time a social worker had throughout the day. To gain background knowledge and develop this project, the researcher completed 480 hours of internship at CIW, read case management chapters in the Handbook devoted to incarcerated and non-incarcerated parents, along with reviewing countless journals and state reports. This amount of time is not afforded to social workers, especially after they have already completed their 9-month CFS training program.

Based on the findings of this study, we believe a specialized position would allow CFS workers to gain the knowledge and experience needed to overcome reunification barriers with incarcerated parents. Visitations were previously identified as a reunification barrier with participants having limited experience with courts providing approval. A portion of the court’s decision to grant visitations is based on advocacy done on behalf of the parents by their attorney and the child’s social worker. Having someone who understands the

importance of having visits with parents despite incarceration, the ability to prepare and process the visit with a child, and an understanding of the visiting procedures of each institution, may lead to an increase in courts granting approval.

Additionally, having specialized social workers could assist in streamlining the “gate clearance” process, thus eliminating a bottleneck to beginning visitations. These social workers could have standing clearances for institutions that would be monitored and renewed, as needed. Furthermore, relationships between institutions and CFS will be formed due to consistent contact with the same group of social workers. These relationships would help build a mutual understanding of each system with the hope of building a collaboration that benefits both.

### Summary

The current chapter provided an evaluation of the data collected through interviewing 10 participants from CFS. Analysis of the data provided five common themes: child visitations with incarcerated parents, variances of social worker’s knowledge of services and programs provided by institutions, presence of guidance and support, maintaining contact with incarcerated parents, and length of sentence. These themes were explored and used to develop implications for micro social work practice.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### TERMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

#### Introduction

This chapter will present how the researcher terminated the study and how findings were communicated to study participants and the study site. The researcher will address the ongoing relationship with the participants due to being employed at the study site. Finally, the study dissemination plans will be discussed.

#### Termination of Study and Follow Up

Termination with participants of the study occurred immediately after each interview was completed. Participants were allowed to ask questions at the end of the interview and were provided with a debriefing statement. Due to the researcher being employed at the site and interacting with the participants on a daily basis, the researcher provided brief updates about the status of the project when asked. Under the post positivist construction, check-ins and group meetings are not necessary. However, due to the overall goal of advocating for the establishment of a new position at CFS, the researcher thought it was in the best interest of the study to keep the lines of communication open.

### Communication of Findings and Dissemination Plan

The completed study was given to the library of California State University, San Bernardino to be included in the online database, ScholarWorks. A poster was prepared by the researcher that presented research findings at the School of Social Work's poster day. Additionally, copies of the completed study were provided in-person to the participants and Deputy Director. Finally a PowerPoint presentation was created with highlights of the study and given to the Deputy Director.

### Summary

The purpose of the study was to identify barriers to reunification with incarcerated mothers in an effort to provide more support to social workers. In this final chapter, study termination and follow up were discussed. Finally, the researcher stated how findings were communicated and disseminated.

APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

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

Researcher(s): Francesca Villarreal

Proposal Title: Incarcerated Mothers Achieving Reunification: Providing Support to  
Child Welfare Social Workers

# SW1876

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 revision  
 agency approval letter missing  
 CITI missing  
 revisions in design needed (specified below)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Chair Signature

5/31/2018  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

California State University, San Bernardino  
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee  
APPROVED 5/13/18 VOID AFTER 5/30/19  
IRB# SW1876 CHAIR *[Signature]*



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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 reunification process of incarcerated mothers to develop ways to provide support for child welfare social workers in San Bernardino County. The study is being conducted by Francesca Villarreal, a MSW student under the supervision of Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt, adjunct professor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** We are interested understanding the County's current policies and procedures when offering Family Reunification (FR) services to incarcerated mothers. We are also interested in identifying the current barriers to establishing and implementing a Case Plan to incarcerated mothers.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be interviewed using open-ended questions on the reunification process of incarcerated mothers, barriers to establishing and implementing a Case Plan, and procedures that can be put into place to provide more support to child welfare social workers.

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

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** Notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information will be kept on an encrypted flash drive in the personal possession of the researcher.

**DURATION:** It will take 15 to 20 minutes for the initial interview, and 30 to 35 minutes for the final member check-in.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

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

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**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt at Gretchen.Heidemann@csusb.edu.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2019.

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

\_\_\_\_\_ Date  
Place an X mark here

I agree to be digitally recorded: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

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APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT



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**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 reunification process of incarcerated mothers to develop ways to provide support for child welfare social workers in San Bernardino County. The study is being conducted by Francesca Villarreal, a MSW student under the supervision of Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt, adjunct professor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** We are interested understanding the County's current policies and procedures when offering Family Reunification (FR) services to incarcerated mothers. We are also interested in identifying the current barriers to establishing and implementing a Case Plan to incarcerated mothers.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be interviewed using open-ended questions on the reunification process of incarcerated mothers, barriers to establishing and implementing a Case Plan, and procedures that can be put into place to provide more support to child welfare social workers.

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

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** Notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information will be kept on an encrypted flash drive in the personal possession of the researcher

**DURATION:** It will take 5 to 15 minutes for the interview.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

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

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## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Questions were developed by the researcher)

### Demographic Questions

Office:

Unit:

Years of Experience:

### **SSP Questions**

1. How would you describe working with incarcerated parents versus non-incarcerated parents?
2. What is your knowledge of the programs/services available in institutions?
3. How often do you have an incarcerated parent on your case load?
4. What obstacles do you face when working with incarcerated parents?
5. Who do you go to for support when working with incarcerated parents?
6. How comfortable are you with interacting with incarcerated parents? Have you visited a parent that was incarcerated?
7. How often do you communicate with parent that is incarcerated? What do you use to communicate? (phone, letters and/or third party)
8. How effective on the reunification process is a parent appearing telephonically for a court hearing?
9. What is your role in assisting incarcerated parents complete their court ordered visitations?
10. What are some obstacles to taking children to visit an incarcerated parent?
11. How does the visitation impact the child immediately following the visit?
12. What are some barriers to implementing case plan services?

### **SSSP Questions**

1. How do you support an SSP that is providing reunification services for an incarcerated parent?
2. What are the logistical differences between working with incarcerated parents versus nonincarcerated parents?

### **Data Analyst Questions**

1. How is data compiled for incarcerated parents seeking reunification?
2. What are the barriers for obtaining data on this group?
3. What is the percentage of reunification for non-incarcerated parents? For incarcerated parents?
4. Why is there a difference? (If applicable)
5. What steps are the County implementing to address this difference?
6. Is there any financial incentive or funding available for the County to implement strategies to improve reunification rates with incarcerated parents?

APPENDIX D  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT



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**College of Social and Behavioral Sciences**  
*School of Social Work*

**DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate the reunification process of incarcerated mothers in San Bernardino County. We are interested in understanding the County's current policies and procedures when offering Family Reunification (FR) services to incarcerated mothers. We are also interested in identifying the current barriers to establishing and implementing a Case Plan to incarcerated mothers. This is to inform you that no deception is involved in this study.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Gretchen Heidemann-Whitt at [Gretchen.Heidemann@csusb.edu](mailto:Gretchen.Heidemann@csusb.edu). If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) after December 2019.

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