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## Public Perception and Influential Sources Toward Child Welfare Services

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PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND INFLUENTIAL SOURCES  
TOWARD CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

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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 Social Work

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by  
Melissa Teague  
Nicolas Hollis  
May 2021

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: “What is the current public attitude toward public child welfare services and what sources of information have been used to formulate these attitudes?” In answering this question, child welfare agencies would have a better understanding of what populations to promote public outreach, education, or further community involvement based on demographics and/or which venues to implement such outreach.

This study provides information on previous studies where researchers have looked at the general role of social work and used the gathered information to assess public sentiment. In the past research there has been discrepancy in the outcomes of this data. Past research has also reviewed news media and the portrayal of child welfare social workers, but has not attempted to measure the impacts of media and the public’s perception of the profession. With recent societal events, it has become more evident that public perception can be a driving force in policy change. The intent of this study is to identify individual demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, income level, household size, prior child welfare system involvement, etc.) that would show a significant relationship with a developed scale to measure participants’ attitude or sentiment toward child welfare social work.

To obtain participants, a link to the developed survey was posted to multiple social media pages where the primary subject included the specific

region of the High Desert region of San Bernardino County, California.

Participants were also asked to repost the link to the survey to their social media pages in order to increase participant numbers. For this project, 183 participants completed the survey to completion.

Due to the level of measurement of the variables, multiple data analysis techniques were used in order to identify relationships between the independent demographic variables and the score on the sentiment scale. These techniques include t-tests, ANOVA, and correlation.

Of the variables measured for statistical significance, the only variable that showed significance was the participants past levels of child welfare services involvement. This was especially true for participants who had experiences both as a minor and as a parent. As equal as a major finding, income level, news sources, and other demographic identifiers did not show statistically significant differences in sentiment toward child welfare social work.

With the information from this study, child welfare agencies might implement further outreach to the identified populations in order to provide further support. This information can also lead to further research targeted toward the identified population to link this research with other research regarding victimization and perpetration, or to identify which specific factors contribute to the negative perceptions through qualitative analysis.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Problem Formulation

Multiple studies have sought to measure the public's view of social work practice and social workers since the inception of the profession (Aldridge, 1990; Harding, 2018; Mawby, Fisher, & Parkin, 1979). Few, if any, of these assessments have occurred within the United States and even fewer at a specific regional level. This is an essential assessment, as it is the public which the profession serves as the public opinion steers the direction of agency policy and legislation (Chenot, 2011).

In prior studies completed since the 1950's, a common theme arose that the public was not clear as to the role and functions of social workers (Condie, Hanson, Lane, Moss & Kane, 1978; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). It was also found that even though social work was not exclusively defined as child welfare social work, participants in the studies generally assumed and labeled social workers as being associated with child welfare (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Without understanding the work, roles, responsibilities of social workers, especially within the field of child welfare, the public is left to conjure their own perceptions, which might be incorrect at times, including an expectation of intervention where intervention is not warranted or mandated, or whether intervention appears to be

excessive when, indeed, warranted. This lack of knowledge not only impacts the efficiency and delivery of services to clients, but also agency relationships with the public, the attractiveness of the social work career to potential candidates, and can impact the practice and decision making of a child welfare social worker.

Without given knowledge of the processes of the child welfare system, the public is left piecing together their own ideas based on potentially inaccurate sources of information, such as second-hand information from those that have had prior child welfare services experience. Prominent sources of information include the media (Davies, 2014; Gainsborough, 2010; Landsman, 2001; Reid & Misener, 2001) or working in a role exposing someone to the workings of child welfare agencies, including being a mandated reporter. The information available for consumption contributes to an individual's development of their attitude towards a given system.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the current perception and attitude toward child welfare services in the area of the Victor Valley region of San Bernardino County, California and to identify the current sources of information in which people have used to develop this attitude. This information can be beneficial in determining the need for a form of outreach to garner the understanding and support of those that the child welfare agency serves. In determining the current attitude, child welfare agencies might determine there to

be a need for public outreach and determining the sources of information could determine the method in which the agencies engage with the public. The benefits associated with engaging in this outreach includes the potential of bolstering public opinion or attitude toward child welfare services, and consequently, support for child welfare agencies and their practices.

This study also seeks to stratify the results obtained about the attitudes by demographics. The purpose of doing so would be to determine if there is a difference in attitude or perception based on ethnicity, income, or other demographic information. This would inform agencies on whether approaching outreach would be more beneficial to targeting a specific population or in a culturally specific approach.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study seeks to collect data using a cross-sectional analysis to assess the attitude of the general public at the time of the survey. The analyzed data can be used to inform child welfare practice by using a generalist model assessment to gather information regarding the public's current expectations and perceptions of child welfare. Subsequently, assessing this attitude or perceptions about the child welfare services to the public can increase public support and potentially encourage child welfare agencies to implement outreach to the public as a policy. Increased public support would allow for higher marketability of the career and increase rates of retention of child welfare social workers that may feel impacted

by public stigmatization (McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010; Olin, 2013). Additionally, public support would allow better access to clients, more efficient service delivery, hiring of more workers to lower caseloads, encourage the increase of agency partnerships with other service providers, and to expand overall support and appreciation for the role and duties of child welfare workers (McGowan et al., 2010).

Should this study conclude that the current public attitude or perception is more negative than positive, child welfare agencies might seek to engage further with the public in an attempt to modify this attitude and perception. Means by which agencies can engage with the public include the use of social media campaigns, public forums for public engagement or other means of media involvement.

The overall purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: “What is the current public attitude toward public child welfare services and what sources of information have been used to formulate these attitudes?”

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Prior studies include the view of the public toward social work as a profession. These studies also conclude that progress has been made by the public in understanding the work performed by social workers. However, previous studies on the public attitude toward child welfare social workers and child welfare social work practice has been regionally limited. Studies on how social media influences and impacts public perception are also limited. The studies that are available include information on public perception of social work as a general practice and studies on whether the media portrays child welfare social work in a positive or negative image are also limited. This section also includes the theoretical framework utilized within the context of this project.

#### Prior Studies

Two specific areas of prior studies are relevant to this project: the prior studies of the public's perception toward social work as a profession and the image of social work and workers that the media portrays.

#### Public Perception

Areas of public perception regarding child welfare practices are limited. However, the concept of social workers assessing the public's view of the

profession in a general context has been looked at since the beginning of the profession, and has experienced influences from other sources outside of actual engagement with professional social workers.

Multiple studies have been completed since the 1950's in an attempt to gauge the public's perception of social work and the role of social workers (Aldridge, 1990; Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane, 1978; Franklin & Parton, 1991; Pollak, 1961; Staniforth, Deane & Beddoe, 2016). These studies differ widely on the measures used to determine public perception, including the public's knowledge of the educational requirements of social workers, and whether or not an individual would refer someone they knew to a social worker for assistance.

Condie and colleagues (1978) found that the public had become more aware of what and who social workers are. Condie and colleagues also found that the public had been more educated about the role of social workers since the 1950's studies completed before their study. In the Condie study, 250 respondents were contacted at their homes by researchers and were asked demographic questions, asked four multiple choice questions and were provided a questionnaire consisting of true/false questions. One of the substantial findings regarding public perception was that 59 percent of the respondents knew of a social worker and only nine percent would refer someone they knew to a social worker for assistance. Kaufman and Raymond (1996), later completed a study concluding opposing perspectives from the Condie findings (1978). Kaufman and

Raymond (1996) found that for those that have knowledge of social worker roles, there was a more positive perspective toward social workers than those that did not know what the workings of the profession entailed.

Lecroy and Stinson (2004) concluded that the public had an understanding of the social work profession and also recognized the value of social workers, providing conflicting results with the prior study by Condie and colleagues (1978). Social workers were perceived to be more effective than other professions in the areas of intimate partner violence and homelessness. In the area of child abuse, psychologists were viewed as being better capable of addressing the issues. One of the reasons Lecroy and Stinson's results might have differed from the Condie study is the potential for selection bias. Although the sample was selected at random, the primary demographics were white females with higher education, which may have impacted the results.

However, there were some similarities between Lecroy & Stinson's (2004) and Condie and colleagues (1978) studies, including the number of people who reported having known a social worker personally and other variables regarding respondent's perception of social work. The difference between the two studies was regarding a statement associated with whether social workers "have the right to take children from parents" which increased from 19.6 percent (Condie et al., 1978) to 35 percent in the Lecroy and Stinson (2004) study.

In another study by Staniforth, Deane and Beddoe (2016), social workers' expectations of the public's perception were assessed. It was found that social

workers' beliefs about public perceptions were much more negative than what the public actually reported. This study took previously known information from a prior study (Staniforth, Fouché, & Beddoe, 2014) regarding public perception of social work and conducted a new survey with social workers to compare the results. Social workers were asked questions regarding how they expected the public to answer the same questions. Staniforth et al. (2016) concluded that social work professionals have a more negative expectation or outlook on how the public perceives social work or social workers, contradictory to the prior findings regarding the public perceptions.

In a more recent study by Argüello, Baiocchi, and Wolf (2018), the authors used similar variables in assessing the public's perception of social work as did Condie and colleagues (1978) and Lecroy and Stinson (2004). This study sought to update the measure of the public's perception since the prior study. Argüello, Baiocchi, and Wolf (2018) concluded that the knowledge of what social work entails has continued to grow over the decades with people recognizing the roles of social workers and the primary functions of social work. The study found that 80 percent of people recognize the goal of social work is to "ensure/monitor the well-being of individuals" (Argüello, Baiocchi, & Wolf, 2018, p.309). Following the results of the prior studies, this study also found that most people associate social workers with child welfare, which may have an impact on respondents' responses to the previously administered survey questions.

Gaps and Limitations. Some limitations to these studies are that they did not specifically identify child welfare as the role of social workers in their study, as this current study seeks to do. The findings in the 1978 study found that the stereotype of social workers having the role only as “child protectors” dominated the perception of social work and those surveyed did not accurately consider that there were other roles or sectors of social work (Condie et al, 1978). The limitation in consistency can be found within Staniforth and colleagues (2014; 2016) as these studies concluded that the public believed that psychologists would be a better profession at providing services for child protection. Studies that specify the public’s perception of social workers in child welfare specifically are limited.

The Condie and colleagues (1978), Lecroy and Stinson (2004) and Argüello, Baiocchi, & Wolf (2018) studies identify a progression in the public’s belief and knowledge of the social work profession. Since the first study conducted by Condie and colleagues (1978) to the most recent study by Argüello, Baiocchi, & Wolf (2018), the public’s perception has shifted and improved as to the role of social workers being people that ensure the wellbeing of children. Another improvement was that people have shown a positive change in understanding the capacity of social workers as mental health professionals over time.

There are also limitations identified in the methodology used for these studies. In each of these studies reviewed, the respondents were provided a

categorical list of roles that social workers might participate in. Respondents were asked to order the categories to assess for what the public believes social workers do. This method limits the voice of the public to provide a purer perception as to the role of social workers. The measures also used in these studies were to primarily measure for what the public believes are the qualifications, roles, and abilities of social workers to measure the public's perception rather than their attitude.

### Media Portrayal of Social Work and Social Workers

The media has provided minimal benefit to the social work practice, commonly portraying social work negatively when sensationalized events have occurred (Auerbach, Zeitlin, Augsberger, McGowan, Claiborne & Lawrence, 2015). Reid and Misener (2001) sought to identify whether the press (print only) media portrays social work in a positive or negative light. Reid and Misener (2001) concluded that in the United States, the printed media was mostly positive, compared to the United Kingdom's reports being more negative. This is reportedly due to the historical scandals involving child abuse in the United Kingdom (Reid and Misener, 2001).

Aldridge (1990) indicated that the focus for change in the media should be shifted from the local level to the national level. Aldridge concluded that though national level media appears to solely focus on reporting about disasters and negative stories, national media outlets are more focused on profiting from what they report. Aldridge found that the local media tends to portray social work or

social workers in a more positive light. Aldridge recommends that social work groups should not spend resources at the national level and should focus these resources to continue the positive images at the local level, as the image of social work and social workers has become a primary topic of social work group distributed media.

The studies regarding the press portrayal of social work continued in a 1998 study where it was found that of over 2,000 news articles reviewed, only two percent of those articles were written to portray social workers in a positive image (Franklin, 1998; Harding, 2018). Multiple studies assessing the media's portrayal of social workers found similar results (Ayre, 2001; Reid & Misener, 2001; Warner, 2013). Following Franklin's 1998 study, the first study spanning nations compared the media representation of social work from the United Kingdom to the media in the United States (Reid & Misener, 2001). Reid & Misener (2001) concluded that it was social workers associated with child welfare that received the worst of the press' negative writings, but found that in the United States, the press appeared to be much more lenient toward social workers than in the United Kingdom. Reid and Meisner (2001) found that approximately half of the news portrayals of social workers in the United States were positive.

Gaps and Limitations. The studies regarding the media portrayal of social workers appear to be limited by geographical location. The majority of the studies completed have been focused primarily in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand. In the research found, only Reid and Meisner's (2001) study was completed regarding the United States, making the U.S. a minimally researched geographic area on the media's portrayal of social workers. There is also limitation to the scope and depth of the previous research in that it did not attempt to associate the media portrayal of social workers with public perception of social workers.

### Theory Guiding Conceptualization

#### Attitude Theory

In a study completed in New York regarding the public's perceptions and attitudes toward social workers, attitude theory was used as the theoretical framework (Tirado, 2006). This theory attempts to explain the development of an attitude or opinion toward an object. Although this is a psychological theory, this same framework would apply to the current study, as the purpose of the study is to measure and gauge the attitudes and perceptions of the public toward the child welfare system and practices.

In developing attitude theory, the constructs that have garnered the most attention include the effects of attitude on behavior, how both attitude and behavior relate to the development of attitude, and the relationship that

information can have on attitudes (Eagly, 1992). Part of the impact that information can have on attitudes is that individuals develop attitudes toward something, either positive, being a 'good' attitude or negative, being a 'bad' attitude based on the information that is received from any source.

Understanding the origins of how attitudes are developed, agencies collectively or social workers themselves can use media and dissemination of information to shift public support from a 'bad' attitude toward a 'good' attitude.

### Factors Contributing to Attitude Formation

Identified factors that contribute to attitude formation include experience, knowledge of the object taking an attitude or opinion toward, age, peer interactions and received information (Tirado, 2006). This list of factors is not exhaustive, as there are many other factors that can contribute to a person's perception of an object or subject. As a prominent factor, the media has been one of the many subject areas researched in shaping general public perception.

Although multiple studies have been completed with a focus on the public's perception of social workers, in a general definition, few studies have been conducted with focus specifically on the work of public child welfare services. The study of the sources of information which have led to the formulation of this perception is equally as important. Prior studies on media portrayal of social workers have not been specifically focused on public child welfare services and studies have not attempted to find relationships between media influence and perceptions of child welfare.

## Summary

The focus of this study is to explore the current attitudes within a specific geographical area, using Likert scale responses and stratifying the information with demographic responses to identify specific areas or populations that have a better, or worse view toward public child welfare services. This information will assist in identifying more specific areas of outreach needed to assist those with negative views about child welfare services.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study is to describe or identify any relationships between demographic information and attitude toward child welfare services. This study will also consider the level of child welfare services involvement to the individual in consideration to the formulated attitude. This section will cover the study design, the methods of sampling, data collection methods, procedures on how the data was gathered, the protection of human subjects and the data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study is to describe the current attitude toward child welfare services in the Victor Valley region of San Bernardino County based on demographic data collected. This study also describes the public attitude toward child welfare services based on experience or received information used to have formulated this attitude. This study is an exploratory study as very little, if any, research has been conducted in this area. This study was a quantitative, cross-sectional study with a survey administered on the internet.

What can be learned by completing this study as a cross-sectional, quantitative study is an overall indication of the public's opinion toward child

welfare services in this geographical location. What cannot be learned by completing this study in this manner is the very specific reasons why individuals have developed these attitudes and what specific occurrences or information, received at any other given time, has influenced these attitudes.

In completing this study as a quantitative method with online participation, the risk of social desirability responses was reduced as there would be no visible researcher available to influence the participants' decisions. Participants were also able to complete the survey within their own homes or wherever they may feel more comfortable to do so.

### Sampling

The sample from which the data was collected includes residents of the Victor Valley region of San Bernardino County, to include the following cities and county areas: Adelanto, Apple Valley, Barstow, Hesperia, Lucerne Valley, Oak Hills, Phelan, Pinon, Hills, Silver Lakes, and Victorville. The sample was a convenience sample with a web link to a web-based survey posted on popular social media web pages where the primary topics of the social media group pages are geographically specific to this region or area. The sampling was snowball sampling from then on, as participants could also repost the survey link to their followers and friends on social media as well. There were 183 participants included in this study, with the overwhelming majority being female, but all from the targeted geographical area. This leads to a difficulty in

generalizing the results to all residents of the targeted geographical area. There were also underreported ethnic groups, including Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native American respondents. By using this method of sampling, generalization of the results to the entire region is difficult, due to not being random, which also increases the need for participation to offset this deficiency in this study.

### Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected using an online survey posted to local interest social media pages and distributed to others via a snowball method. The data collected included demographic information such as race, age, gender, household income, parentage, number of minors in the home, news sources, occupation, and experiences with child welfare services. Other data also included Likert scale questions regarding the public's agreeance to specific statements about child welfare services. Examples include, "Overall, public child welfare services does enough to keep children safe.", "Overall, public child welfare services provides help for families facing challenges with other systems", and "Overall, public child welfare services take children from their homes without acceptable reasons." As there is no known scale to be used in assessing the public attitude toward public child welfare services, this study used a scale developed by the researchers specifically for this purpose.

As a cross-sectional design study, the independent variables included the demographic questions while the dependent variables included the scores of

responses for the Likert scale questions. A higher score on the Likert scale questions indicates lower approval of the public child welfare services, while a lower score indicates less approval. These two variables were compared to identify any patterns that might exist between this information.

### Procedures

After IRB approval and refinement of the measuring tool, the survey was made available on social media webpages that specifically apply to interests in the geographical region being studied. The survey completion took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The survey was made available until March 1, 2021. The data was collected using Qualtrics, an online survey program made available through the university.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of participants was kept confidential as no identifying information was collected through the online survey, including names, dates of birth, or addresses. All survey respondents were assigned a number as an identification. Informed consent was provided and displayed prior to the start of the survey along with contact information for the researchers and information on where to seek mental health consultation should participants feel this be necessary after the survey. All data collected was stored on a password protected web-based, cloud drive. After one year from the end of the data's

usefulness in relation to this study, the data will then be deleted. The informed consent form did not collect any personally identifiable information, including the respondent's written signature.

### Data Analysis

Using IBM SPSS version 26, the data was analyzed using a multiple progression analysis of each independent variable compared to the average scores of responses provided by respondents indicating a negative or a positive attitude toward child welfare services. This method of data analysis will show which independent variable, or demographic responses, are related to a more positive or negative attitude toward child welfare services.

For this study, the independent variables included what city the participant is from, participant gender, age, household income, occupation, number of minors in the home, type of parentage in the family, most accessed news source, and prior experience with child welfare services, if any. These independent variables were compared to a score acquired through the survey tool to indicate whether an attitude is more positive or negative toward child welfare services.

### Summary

This study identified any patterns that might exist between demographics and prior degree of involvement with child welfare services and formulated attitudes toward child welfare services. In order to explore these specific factors,

this provided study design allowed for multiple participants to be better representative of the High Desert region of San Bernardino County and to provide a more accurate generalizability, albeit not completely precise. Quantitative methods were used to analyze this information.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected. In attempting to identify variables that would have an impact as to someone's sentiment toward child welfare services, the researchers garnered a total of 183 responses to the survey. Participants from various cities or towns in the Victor Valley region of San Bernardino County submitted their responses. Data collection occurred during a period of eight months beginning June, 2020. Throughout this chapter, descriptive statistics, summarization of the analyzed data and results of the study will be discussed.

#### Participant Demographics

In this study, there were a total of 183 participants. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of all the participants in this study. Of the sample, 18 (10.1%) were male, 161 (89.9%) identified as female. Four participants did not self-identify as any gender. Of the cities or towns where respondents reside, 66 live in Victorville (36.1%), 48 live in Hesperia (26.2%), 33 live in Apple Valley (18%), nine live in Oak Hills (4.9%), five live in Phelan (2.7%), four live in Silver Lakes/Helendale (2.2%), three live in Barstow (1.6%), one lives in Lucerne Valley

(0.5%) and one lives in Pinon Hills (0.5%). The majority of respondents were from Victorville representing consistency with the populations of the Victor Valley area.

This sample contained quite a large age range, with participants ranging in age spanning from 22 to 80 years of age ( $M = 43.34$ ;  $Std. Dev. = 12.506$ ). Ethnically, 106 (58.2%) participants identified as White/Caucasian, 42 (23.1%) were Latino/Latina/Latinx, 15 (8.2%) described themselves as Other or mixed races, 12 (6.6%) were Black/African American, 6 (3.3%) were Asian/Pacific Islander and 1 (0.5) was Indigenous/Native American. One participant did not provide an ethnicity.

Participants were able to input their occupation and identify whether they are considered a mandated reporter. The difference between those who were and those who were not mandated reporters was spread almost evenly, with 91 (52.3%) answering “yes”, with 83 (47.7%) answering “no”. Nine participants did not provide this information. The participants’ occupations fit into 12 categories and therefore were recategorized into the following groups: 22(15.3%) were retired or disabled, 10 self-employed (5.9%), 22 identified as caregivers (12.9%), 37 participants worked in the field of education (21.8%), 18 worked in a healthcare related field, including mental health (10.6%), 13 participants worked in the social services field (7.6%), two worked in government positions (1.2%), seven worked in retail/hospitality (4.1%), four were students (2.4%), three were unemployed (1.8%) and 8 worked in the warehouse/logistics field (4.7%). 24

participants worked in categories that were either unclear or could not be categorized into the aforementioned categories (14.1%). Examples include office assistants, real estate, accounting and arts/music categories. 13 participants did not provide a response.

Table 1. Individual Demographic Variables

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	165	89.9
Male	20	10.1
<b>City/Town of Residency</b>		
Adelanto	13	7.1
Apple Valley	33	18.0
Barstow	3	1.6
Hesperia	48	26.2
Lucerne Valley	1	0.5
Oak Hills	9	4.9
Phelan	5	2.7
Pinon Hills	1	0.5
Silver Lakes / Helendale	4	2.2
Victorville	66	36.1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White/Caucasian	106	58.2
Black/African American	12	6.6
Latinx	42	23.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	3.3
Indigenous/Native American	1	0.5
Other/Multi-Racial	15	8.2

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
Mean		43.03
Std. Dev		12.651
Range		58
<b>Mandated Reporter</b>		
Yes	91	53.2
No	83	47.7
No Response	9	4.8
<b>Occupational Category</b>		
Retired/Disabled	22	12.9
Self Employed	10	5.9
Caregiver/Homemaker/ Stay at home parent	22	12.9
Education	37	21.8
Healthcare Related	18	10.6
Social Services	13	7.6
Government	2	1.22
Retail/Hospitality	7	4.1
Student	4	2.4
Unemployed	3	1.8
Warehouse/Logistics	8	4.7
Other	24	14.1

### Household and Parentage Characteristics

Participants were asked to provide characteristics pertaining to their household composition, household characteristics, and characteristics of

parentage. Table 2 provides the information collected from respondents regarding these factors of their households.

Participants were asked to provide their total household income. Because the national poverty line currently begins at \$12,760 annual household income, participants were able to describe their own household income between \$12,760 and below through \$80,001 and above. 10 participants (5.6%) described their income as below \$12,760, 10 (5.6%) were in the \$12,761-\$19,999 range, 33 (18.4%) were in the \$20,000-\$40,000 range, 37 (20.7%) were in the \$40,001-\$60,000 range, 32 (17.9%) were in the \$60,001-\$80,000, 57 (31.8%) described their income as above \$80,000 annually and four participants did not provide their income range. The median household income based on the responses is between \$40,001 - \$60,000.

Participants were asked to provide the number of people in their household and the number of children in their household. The number of minors in the home ranged from zero to 6, with 47 respondents having no children in the home (26.4%), 44 having 1 child in the home (24.7%), 39 having 2 children in the home (21.9%), 25 having 3 children (14%), 13 with 4 (7.3%), seven with 5 (3.9%), and three with 6 children (1.7%). Five respondents did not provide information on the number of children in the home ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $Std. Dev. = 1.5$ ). In response to the total household size, 11 respondents report to live alone with only one in the household (6.0%), 27 respondents have a household size of two (14.8%), 36 with three household members (19.7%), 42 with four household

members (23.0%), 23 with five household members (12.6%), 23 with six household members (12.6%), 11 with seven household members (6.0%), eight respondents with eight household members (4.4%), one with nine household members (0.5%), and one with 11 members (0.5%).

Participants were asked to identify what type of parentage which describes their family. Of the responses, 34 of these households had a single parent (18.7%), 76 had two parents (41.8%), 31 were blended, two parents (17%), two were blended, single parent (1.1%), 16 were considered Other (e.g., foster, guardianship, relative) (8.8%) and 23 participants were not parents (12.6%).

Table 2. Household Characteristic Variables

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Household Income		
Less than \$12,760	11	5.8
\$12,761 - \$19,999	10	5.3
\$20,000 - \$40,000	33	17.5
\$40,001 - \$60,000	38	20.1
\$60,001 - \$80,000	32	16.9
\$80,001 or more	61	32.3
Median	\$40,001 - \$60,000	
Number of Minors in the Home		
0	47	26.4
1	44	24.7
2	39	21.9
3	25	14

	4	13	7.3
	5	7	3.9
	6	3	1.7
	Mean	1.7	
	Standard Deviation	1.5	
<hr/>			
Household Size			
	1	11	5.9
	2	27	14.4
	3	36	19.7
	4	42	23.4
	5	23	12.8
	6	23	12.2
	7	11	5.9
	8	8	4.3
	9	1	.5
	11	1	.5
	Mean		
	Standard Deviation		
<hr/>			
Parentage Type			
	Single	34	18.7
	Two-parent	76	41.8
	Blended, two-parent	31	17
	Blended, single-parent	2	1.1
	None	23	12.6
	Other	16	8.8

### Degree of Child Welfare History, Self-Rated Knowledge, and News Sources

As this study is an attempt to identify the sources of information and the impacts on attitude or sentiment toward child welfare services, participants were asked to answer questions based on their sources of information and experiences. This information is included in Table 3. Participants were also

asked to rate their own knowledge of the child welfare system on a 1-10 scale; 1 being the lowest knowledge and 10 being the highest.

Participants were asked to describe the level of Child Welfare system interaction, including having no history, having only made a report, having a friend who had history with child welfare services, having a family member with history or having personal history either as a minor or as a parent. Responses were then recategorized to indicate the highest level of system interactions. In instances where participants had both personal interaction as a parent and as a minor, data was categorized into a single group as having both. 47 (25.7%) participants reported they had not experienced any interaction with the child welfare system, 14 (7.7%) had experience as a minor, 52 (28.4%) had experience as a parent, 27 (14.8%) have or had a family member who has had experience, 10 (5.5%) have or had a friend who has had experience, 24 (13.1%) have only made a Child Welfare Services report, and nine (4.9%) have had experiences as both a minor and parent with the child welfare system.

Participants were able to select all levels of child welfare interventions which applied. Those levels were then split into a category which indicated the highest levels of intervention with a separate category for those that had experienced both personal interventions as a minor and as an adult.

To assess news media influence, participants were asked to report what their most used source for news or current events is. 64 (35.2%) participants consumed local network news, 28 (15.4%) relied on national network news, 40

(22%) used websites, 47 (25.8%) used social media, and three (1.6) used print media for news.

When self-rating knowledge of the child welfare system as a whole, on a scale of 1-10, participants provided the following results: 14 participants rated their knowledge as a '1', seven participants as a '2', 16 participants as '3', 15 as a '4', 30 as a '5', 19 as a '6', 31 as a '7', 22 as an '8', nine as a '9' and 18 scored their knowledge of the child welfare system as a '10' (mean = 5.82, standard deviation = 2.56).

Table 3. Information Source Variables

Variables	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Highest Level of System Interaction	49	25.9
No history	25	13.2
Has only made a report	13	6.9
Personal/Direct as a	46	24.3
Minor	22	11.6
Personal/Direct as a	10	5.3
Parent	24	12.7
Family Member has had experience		
Friend has had experience		
Multiple experiences		
New Media Source		
Local Network News	64	35.2
National Network News	28	15.4
Print	3	1.6
Website	40	22
Social Media Platform	47	25.8
Self-Rated Knowledge of		

Child Welfare Process		
1 (Lowest Knowledge)	14	7.7
2	7	3.9
3	16	8.8
4	15	8.3
5	30	16.6
6	19	10.5
7	31	17.1
8	22	12.2
9	9	5.0
10 (Highest Knowledge)	18	9.9
Mean	5.82	
Standard Deviation	2.56	

#### Measurements of Attitude/Sentiment

Respondents were asked to provide responses to Likert, scaling-questions to grade their attitude or sentiment toward the child welfare system. Multiple questions were asked, including whether the respondent believed overall, whether children are left at risk, children are removed from homes without justification, and whether the services assist families with other institutions, among other questions. The respondents were requested to provide on a scale of 1 - Strongly Disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree, with the score of 3 being a neutral response. Scores were then totaled to provide a score of a sentiment. Table 4 provides the data on the responses provided by the participants.

Over half of the respondents (52.5%; Mode = disagree) either disagree or strongly disagree that Child Welfare Services (CWS) does enough to keep kids safe at home with another approximate third (32.2%) holding a neutral position on the statement. On whether CWS does enough to keep kids safe in out of home placements, 100 participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed (54.7%, Mode = Disagree) while 52 (28.4%) maintained neutrality. To the statement whether CWS is helpful enough to parents or caregivers, 68 participants (37.2%) held a neutral opinion while 77 (42.1%) disagree or strongly disagree with the statement (Mode = Neutral). When provided with the statement, “Overall, CWS should do more to help parents or caregivers”, 136 respondents (74.3%) agreed or strongly agreed (Mode = Agree). When provided the statements that CWS provides assistance with other systems, including education or medical care, most respondents held a neutral opinion (n=68; 37.2%), while 64 participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (35%). The majority of respondents believe that CWS leaves children in danger, with 80 participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the associated statement (43.7%) while 68 respondents held a neutral outlook (37.2%, Mode = Neural). When asked about whether CWS takes children from homes with or without acceptable reasons, 83 respondents (45.3%) either disagree or strongly disagree that children are taken from homes without acceptable reasons, 59 respondents (32.2%) maintained a neutral response (Mode = 63), and 69 respondents

(37.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that children are taken from homes only with acceptable reasons.

The responses to the scaling questions contained score values of 1-5 and scores were totaled to provide an overall score of sentiment, based on the results of the Likert scale questions asked. The scores range from a possible score of 8 to 40, with a higher score indicating a lower level of sentiment. For the purpose of scoring, the values of responses to questions numbered 16, 18 and 19 on the survey were reversed to ensure that a higher score corresponded to a lower level of sentiment ( $n = 183$ ,  $M = 26.39$ ,  $SD = 5.48$ ). It should be noted that with a mean score of 26.39, the overall sentiment or attitude toward child welfare is not extremely poor, as is historically expected, according to literature.

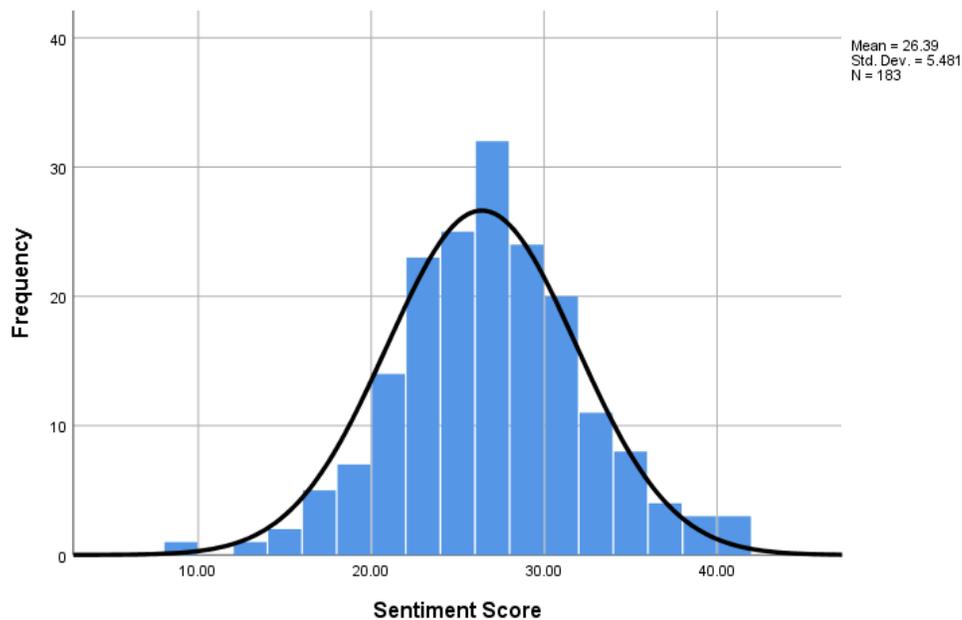


Figure 1. Distribution of Attitude Scores

Table 4. Likert Scale Questions to Measure Sentiment or Attitude.

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Overall, Child Welfare Services (CWS) does enough to keep kids safe at home	Strongly Disagree - 32	17.5
	Disagree - 64	35.0
	Neutral - 59	32.2
	Agree - 24	13.1
	Strongly Agree - 4	2.2
Overall, CWS does enough to keep kids safe in out of home placement	Strongly Disagree - 23	12.6
	Disagree - 77	42.1
	Neutral - 52	28.4
	Agree - 30	16.4
	Strongly Agree - 1	0.5
Overall, CWS is helpful enough to parents or caregivers of children	Strongly Disagree - 17	9.3
	Disagree - 60	32.8
	Neutral - 68	37.2
	Agree - 32	17.5
	Strongly Agree - 6	3.3
Overall, CWS should do more to help parents or caregivers of children	Strongly Disagree - 3	1.6
	Disagree - 6	3.3
	Neutral - 38	20.8
	Agree - 79	43.2
	Strongly Agree - 57	31.1
Overall, CWS provides help for families facing challenges with other system (e.g., schools, medical providers, legal issues, etc.)	Strongly Disagree - 12	6.6
	Disagree - 52	28.4
	Neutral - 68	37.2
	Agree - 41	22.4
	Strongly Agree - 10	5.5
Overall, CWS leaves children in danger	Strongly Disagree - 4	2.2
	Disagree - 31	16.9
	Neutral - 68	37.2
	Agree - 60	32.8
	Strongly Agree - 20	10.9
Overall, CWS takes children from home without acceptable	Strongly Disagree - 20	10.9
	Disagree - 63	34.4
	Neutral - 59	32.2

reasons	Agree - 18	9.8
	Strongly Agree - 23	12.6
Overall, CWS takes children from homes only with acceptable reasons	Strongly Disagree - 15	8.2
	Disagree - 35	19.1
	Neutral - 64	35.0
	Agree - 56	30.6
	Strongly Agree - 13	7.1
Attitude/Sentiment Scale		
8 (higher approval) - 40 (lower approval)		
Minimum	9	
Maximum	40	
Mean	26.39	
Standard Deviation	5.48	

### Presentation of the Findings

Multiple statistical tests were conducted with the use of IBM's SPSS software, version 26, on the data in an attempt to identify variables that have a significant relationship with level of sentiment towards child welfare services. Respective statistical tests were used and dependent on the type of data and comparison needed.

Of the variables tested, including those that were expected to show significant statistical relationships, many showed that these variables do not have a significant relationship with the level of sentiment or attitude toward child

welfare services. These variables include the personal demographics of gender, race or ethnicity, age, and the self-rated knowledge of the child welfare system. For the gender variable, an independent sample t-test was conducted and found no significant relationship. For race or ethnicity, an ANOVA was conducted and also found no significant relationship between the two variables. An ANOVA was also conducted on the most used source for news for individuals participating in this study which did not show a statistically significant relationship. For age and self-rated knowledge score of the child welfare system, a correlation test was conducted and no relationship was found.

The household characteristics were then analyzed, also using respective data analysis techniques, including ANOVA, and t-tests, to determine if there were any household characteristics that had a significant relationship with the sentiment scoring. Of the household characteristic variables and their relationship to the sentiment scores, sentiment levels were not significantly different amongst income levels as concluded using an ANOVA test, while the number of household members and the number of minors in the home showed no statistically significant correlation. The type of parentage was also compared to the attitude scores of participants and was found to not be statistically significant through correlation testing.

Of the variables analyzed, significance was found when the levels of child welfare intervention increased. There was a statistically significant difference between the level of child welfare intervention and attitude scores, as determined

by one-way ANOVA ( $F(6,176) = 2.482, p = .025$ ). A Tukey post hoc test revealed a statistically significant difference in the attitudes between those that have had no child welfare experience ( $24.7 \pm 4.78$  attitude score) and those that have had interventions as both a minor and as a parent ( $30.7 \pm 5.07$  attitude score,  $p = .036$ ).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This study attempted to identify any patterns that might exist between demographics, media influence, prior degree of involvement with child welfare services and the formulated attitudes toward child welfare services. This study design allowed for a large number of participants to be more representative of the Victor Valley region of San Bernardino County and to provide a more accurate generalizability, albeit not completely precise. For the prior studies of public perception, this study found similarities to some and contrasts to other studies previously conducted.

#### Public Perception

The current study more so supports the conclusions of the Condie and colleagues study (1978) as it supports the implied findings that even though the public might have knowledge of the work and role of social workers, the public would be less likely to refer someone they know to a social worker. The findings of this current study also contradict the findings of Kaufman and Raymond (1996) which concluded that the perception of social workers improved with the public's knowledge of the role of social workers. In this current study, it would be those that have had the most experience with the child welfare system that should then

have the higher attitude or sentiment toward social work, which this study found was not the case. The conclusions of this study also appear to support the findings with the results found by Staniforth et. al (2014) in that in the Staniforth study, the public believed that psychologists would be a better profession to provide service for child protection than social workers, indicating a reduced sentiment toward social workers' abilities and effectiveness in child welfare. It was anticipated that the results of this study would show a more positive attitude or sentiment towards child welfare services, especially when the public associates the role of social workers with child welfare practices, coupled with the findings of previous studies that as the knowledge of social work practice increased, that public support or attitude also improved.

### Media Portrayal

As it relates to media portrayal of social workers, this study found that there was no statistically significant relationship between the news source and the level of the news source (whether that source be considered local or national news,) and the respondents' attitude toward child welfare services. The previous studies only sought to measure whether the media portrayal itself was positive or negative towards social workers where this study sought to find a relationship between media consumption and perception toward child welfare social work.

## Attitude Theory

In relation to Attitude Theory (Eagly, 1992), where input and interpretation is used to formulate an attitude, this study attempted to identify patterns and relationships between demographic and attitude toward child welfare services (CWS). The variables that can influence attitude development are limitless and therefore this study should not be used as an absolute identifier or predictor of attitude towards CWS. It should be noted that the level of CWS involvement with an individual can be heavily influential on their perception. The overall nature of CWS functions appears to naturally result in a more negative attitude towards child welfare services.

## Limitations

There were many limitations to this study, including the participant demographics and the study design. First, females were overly represented in the study, preventing a generalization of the information to the overall general population of the targeted region. The second limitation included the manner in which the survey was distributed. Although much of the public uses social media for news and information, and rely less on printed material, the study was limited to those that were either reachable through local neighborhood community applications or reachable via the social media pages that the survey links were posted to. Ethnically, the study garnered low representation of some ethnic or racial groups, such as Native/Indigenous Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders.

As only nine respondents indicated they had experiences with child welfare services both as a minor and as a parent, it would be difficult to generalize this data to all that might have had both experiences as a minor and as a parent.

### Implications

In light of recent societal events, a positive perception of publicly funded and government agencies is important to maintain, including in the social work field. Recently, movements and protests such as the call to defund law enforcement (a comparable societal necessity to child welfare services), highlights the idea that public opinion can lead to changes in policies that govern the field of child welfare services. However, it is also important to remember that the nature of child welfare services is not always positive, nor does it always result in what some would consider a positive outcome, which could influence the attitude development of clients or service recipients. A qualitative study can be conducted to further determine the individual factors or experiences of an individual and their involvement of child welfare services, especially for the group identified that had experiences as both a minor and a parent, in order to narrow down what factors or commonalities might exist within this population. This might be combined with a further review of why participants believe that child welfare services only remove children from their homes for acceptable reasons (indicating there is an agreement on the need for removing children from unsafe homes) but the participants maintain an overall negative attitude toward CWS.

The public's experiences with child welfare services may contribute to their attitude because of the overall nature of child welfare services functions or there may be a higher systemic issue that leads to the poorer outcomes of attitudes. Further research should continue in the areas of public perception in order to further understand the populations for which the agencies serve and how best to meet their needs.

As one of the many facets of attitude formation, child welfare agencies can provide their own stimulation to the public, whether through preventative outreach, public education, or community building, to contribute to the source the general public may use as an input of attitude formulation. Child welfare agencies should expand public outreach in an attempt to maintain close relationships with the community at large in order to better adjust to meet their needs, especially with societal shifts. With increased community outreach, further studies and assessment can be conducted in order to determine whether or not the public perception of child welfare social work can be improved through such interventions and services.

APPENDIX A  
SELF-DEVELOPED SURVEY FOR DATA COLLECTION

1. In what city/town/area do you reside:

Adelanto;       Apple Valley;       Barstow;  
 Hesperia       Lucerne Valley;       Oak Hills;  
 Oro Grande;       Phelan;       Pinon Hills;  
 Silver Lakes       Victorville

2. Gender:

Male;       Female;       Transgender Male;  
 Transgender Female;       Non-binary;  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Race/Ethnicity (select one that you most closely identify with):

White/Caucasian;       Black/African American;  
 Latino/Latina       Asian/Pacific Islander  
 Indigenous/Native American       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Household Income (choose one):

< \$20,000       \$20,000 - \$40,000       \$40,001 -  
 \$60,000       \$60,001 - \$80,000       \$80,001 +

6. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

a. Mandated Reporter? (check one)  yes;       no

7. Number of minors in your home (under age 18): \_\_\_\_\_

8. Type of Parentage (Choose One only):

single (including adoptive);       two-parent (including adoptive);  
 blended, two-parent (e.g., step-parent);  
 blended, single parent (e.g., step-parent);  
 other (e.g., foster, guardianship, relative)

9. Your most trusted source for news (pick one):

Network news (local, KCAL9, ABC7, KTLA5, etc.);  
 Network news (national, FOX News, CNN, HLN, etc.);  
 Print (magazine, newspaper, etc.)  
 Website (latimes.com, sbsun.com, vvng.com, etc.);  
 Social Media platform (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, etc.)



16. Overall, Child Welfare Services provides help for families facing challenges with other systems (e.g., schools, medical providers, legal issues, etc.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

17. Overall, Child Welfare Services leaves children in danger.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

18. Overall, Child Welfare Services takes children from home **without** acceptable reasons.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

19. Overall, Child Welfare Services takes children from homes **only with** acceptable reasons.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

20. Overall, Child Welfare Services provides enough information about how Child Welfare Services works.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

21. Overall, Child Welfare Social Workers want the best for families.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

This study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the public perception toward child welfare services and to identify the sources of information that has contributed to this perception, among adults living in the High Desert region of San Bernardino County. This study is conducted by Melissa Teague and Nicolas Hollis, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Carolyn McAllister, Director of the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to measure the current perception of Public Child Welfare Services among adults

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked of a few questions on their current perception, knowledge of and sources of information about Public Child Welfare Services and demographic information.

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

**ANONYMITY:** Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported with no specific personally identifying information being collected.

**DURATION:** It will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the survey.

**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer all questions and can skip the question or end your participation at any time.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from this study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Carolyn McAllister at [cmcallis@csusb.edu](mailto:cmcallis@csusb.edu)

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2021.

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

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

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



April 28, 2020

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2020-241

Melissa Teague Carolyn McAllister, Nicolas Hollis  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Melissa Teague Carolyn McAllister, Nicolas Hollis

Your application to use human subjects, titled “Public Perception, and Influential Sources of, Toward Child Welfare Services” has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino has determined your application meets the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. The exempt determination does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study

- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2020-241 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Donna Garcia*

Donna Garcia, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

DG/MG

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

Since the start of this project and through data collection, analysis, and final reporting, all responsibilities of this project have been and will be divided equally. The problem formulation was a collaborative effort in defining what was meaningful to both researchers. Identification of resources for use within the literature review was completed by both researchers in equal share and all parts of summarizing, synthesizing, and writing have been done in direct, in-person collaboration. After data collection, data input and analysis will also be done collaboratively due to the number of expected participants.