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CAREGIVER AND SOCIAL WORKER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD WELFARE VISITATION

Christopher Enhelder

Christina Ortiz

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CAREGIVER AND SOCIAL WORKER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACTS

OF COVID-19 ON CHILD WELFARE VISITATION

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

_____

by

Christopher Enhelder

Christina Ortiz

May 2022

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Approved by:

Dr. Joeseph Rigaud, Faculty Supervisor, Social Work

Laurie Smith, M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and adversely impacted service delivery in both the public and the private sector. This qualitative study asked two significant questions: 1) What are child welfare caregivers' perceptions of the impact of COVID--19 on child welfare visitation across the United States? How did child welfare caregivers' cope with child welfare visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic across the United States? A sample of five child welfare professionals who conducted visitations during the pandemic were interviewed (N = 5). Thematic analysis yielded the following five major themes: 1) COVID-19 took the visitation sector by surprise; 2) child welfare workers found it hard to provide visitation services during the pandemic; 3) COVID-19 has created both challenges for family visitations but also opportunities for social workers to obtain new skills, especially in the area of technology; 4) participants wished they received training (or were more prepared) for the impacts of the pandemic on family visitations; and 5) communication among all parties involved is essential for successful family visitations. The findings in this study hold major implications for child welfare stakeholders, including parents, social workers, community leaders, and child welfare officials at local, state, and federal level.

Keywords: COVID-19, child welfare visitation, thematic analysis

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my children and my late wife, Shaunet Alberti. A special thank you to my eldest daughter, Alexx Alberti-Farr, for your support and encouraging words. Words cannot express how grateful I am to have you as a daughter. I would also like to dedicate this to my widow sisters and best friend, Patricia Azpeitia. Lastly, I would like to say, "I did it babe." #MastersIn5

Christina Ortiz

I would like to dedicate this work to my fiancé, Ryan Renno, without whom this project would not have happened. The support and motivation you provided were key to the completion of this project. I would also like to dedicate this work to my mother, who instilled in me from a young age the values and dedication needed to be successful in this field. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this work to all the caregivers who are remaining positive, loving, and resilient through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Christopher Enhelder

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Overview and Scope of a Social Problem

Many families or households in the United States face major social and

behavioral issues, including but not limited to violence, abuse and neglect,

divorce, incarceration, substance use, and mental illness. According to the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), these issues usually create

dysfunction inside the home, primarily for children and youth (CDC, 2020).

Family or household dysfunction can necessitate county or state interventions,

which can result in the removal of the children and youth from the home into the

foster care system. In other words, this phenomenon can be considered a form of

child maltreatment. These experiences and exposures have adverse effects on

children and can necessitate county or state interventions including the removal

of the children or youths from the home and the entering of the affected children

into the foster care system.

The critical concepts of Children and Family Services are the child's

safety, preservation, and reunification. However, there are many ways in which

children can be removed. It is Children and Family Services' hope that parents

strive to regain custody of their children, referred to as the process of

Reunification. Parents/caregivers must achieve specific goals set before them by

the court system via the implementation of the client's case plan. Children and

Family Services gauge this case plan progress through many different

interventions such as parenting classes, therapy, and, most importantly, family

visitation. In effect, data reported from 49 states for the fiscal year 2018 showed

more than one-fifth (22.9%) of child maltreatment victims and just under 2.0

percent (1.8%) of non-victims are removed from their homes when family

dysfunction is present. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS],

2019). Removals have trended downward between 2010 and 2019 despite the

most recent peak of 273,000 children entering care in 2016.

The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974

established Children's Protective Services agencies vested with investigating

suspected child abuse and protecting children (US Congress, P. L. 93-247). On

the last day of 2018, there were approximately 437,000 children in foster care.

During that year, the number of children entering and exiting the foster care

system was estimated at 263,000 and 250,000, respectively (Administration for

Children and Families [ACF], 2019). Among the states, the foster care entry rate

ranged from 1.6 children per 1,000 in a state's population to 14.0 children per

1,000 in a state's population. A chart comparing the number of children entering

and exiting foster care from the years 2010 to 2019 can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Comparison of Youth who Entered Foster Care to Youth who Exited Foster Care from 2010 to 2019
Source: AFCARS data, U.S. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families
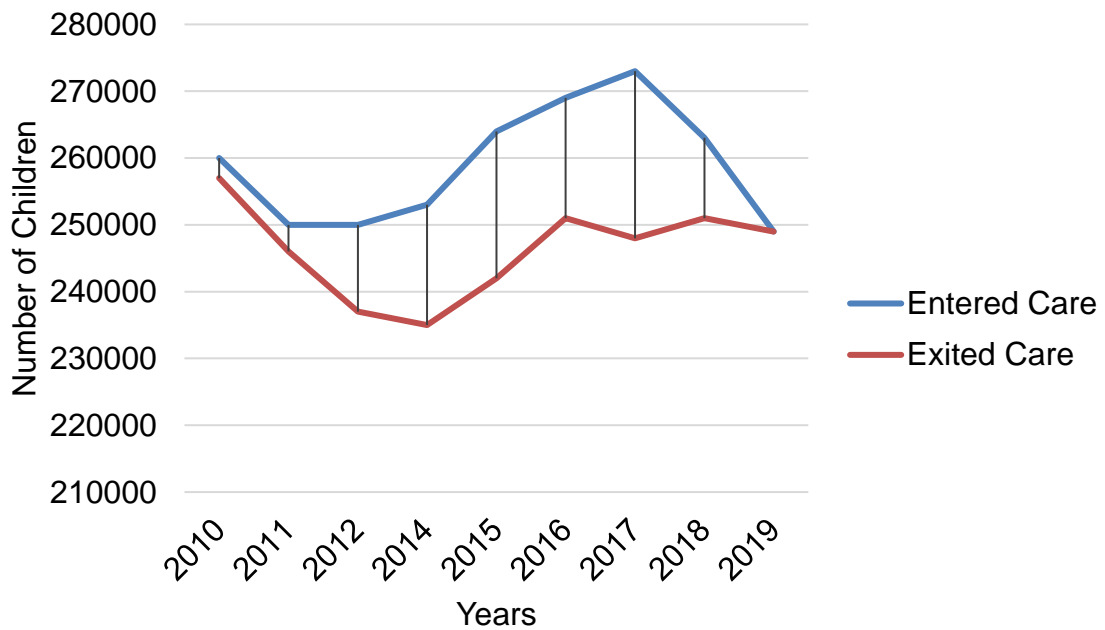
Meanwhile, the percentages of child victims of abuse vary by assigned sex at birth. Statistics recorded at the federal level demonstrated a victimization rate of 48.3% for boys and 51.4% for girls, with less than one percent of sex not recorded (USDHHS, 2021). The 2019 victimization rate of 9.4 per 1,000 for girls was slightly higher than the 8.4 per 1,000 rate registered for boys during the same year (USDHHS, 2021). Figure 2 displays the breakdown of female and male children in foster care as of 2019.

Figure 2. Child Victims of Maltreatment by Sex
Source: U.S. Department of health and human services, 2021
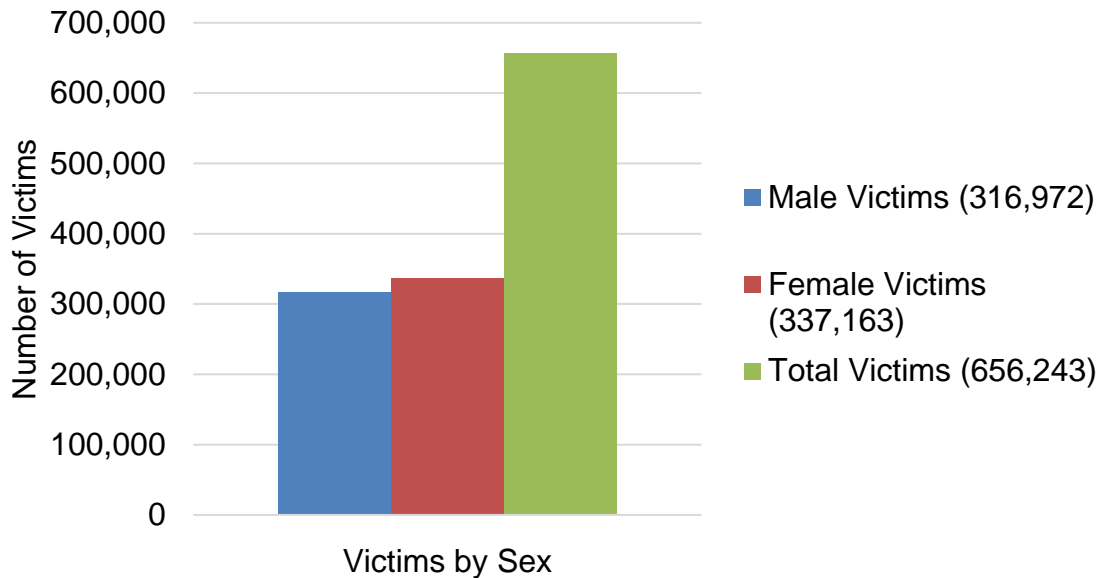
Elsewhere, children experience maltreatment disproportionately based on their race, with an overrepresentation of minority racial groups (USDHHS, 2021). In the United States, the racial distributions of the child population are 50.2% White, 25.6% Hispanic, and 13.7% African American (USDHHS, 2021). However, the proportion of children in foster care does not reflect the general population, with racial thresholds lower for non-Hispanic White children (43.5%), but higher for Hispanic American children (23.5%) and African American children (20.9%) (USDHHS, 2021). The 2019 HHS report found that smaller ethnic minorities, such as American Indian or Alaska Native children, had the highest rate of victimization at 14.8 per 1,000 children in the population of the same race or ethnicity. African American children have the second highest rate at 13.8 per 1,000 children in the population of the same race or ethnicity" (HHS, 2021).

Figure 3 visualizes the ethnic disparities in the foster care system based on the

above data.

Figure 3. Child Victims of Maltreatment by Race
Source: U.S. Department of health and human services, 2021
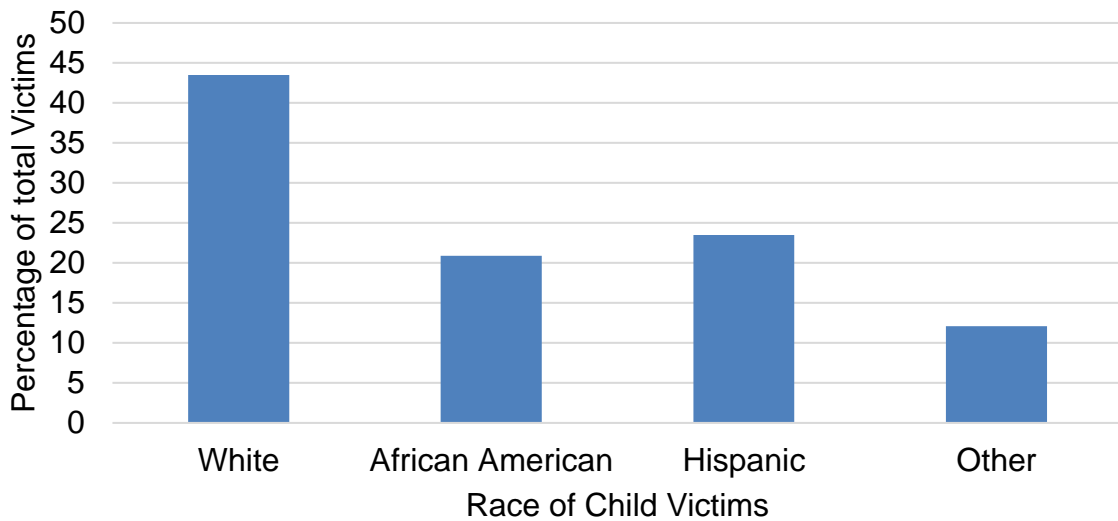
Multifaceted Impact of the Problem

<u>Economic Cost of Foster Care</u>

In 2018 it was reported that California expended $8,234,176 to meet the

match requirement for the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and "an

additional $24,186,163 non-federal state and local expenditures for Title IV-B,

subpart 2 purposes" (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2019).

The total California child welfare system spending for 2020-21 is budgeted at

around $7.1 billion which is more than a ten percent increase from the previous

fiscal year (Legislative Analyst's Office [LAO], 2020). These expenditures, along

with current child welfare spending, make providing services to children and

families who are in the process of reunification very costly to taxpayers.

Expediting the family reunification process for children who must be removed as

well as maintaining placements with minimal State and County involvement for

children who are not in immediate danger will save taxpayer money that can be

spent elsewhere.

Psychological Implications of Removal

Removal from one's parent at a young age has psychological

consequences for young children. As Trivedi (2019) stated,

While the accepted wisdom is that removal is the better option for a child

in a potentially abusive or neglectful home, research demonstrates that

this is not always true. In fact, the bond between children and their parents

is extremely strong and disrupting it can be even more damaging to a

child—even when their parents are imperfect. (p. 527)

This statement from Trivedi is consistent with the Attachment Theory,

originally created by British psychiatrist John Bowlby. Attachment Theory's

assertion being that young children normally react to prolonged separations from

their attachment figures in phases characterized by protest, despair, and lastly

detachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988; Turner, 2011). On behalf of the

American Association of Pediatrics, Kraft (2018) noted that family separation

causes irreparable harm by disrupting a child's brain architecture and will negatively affect their short- and long-term health. It was also found that prolonged exposure to serious stress, also known as toxic stress, can carry lifelong consequences for children.

<u>Major Intervention Aimed at Addressing the Problem</u>

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program (PSSF) is a national scale intervention aimed at tackling the unnecessary separation of children from their families due to family disfunction. It was first established under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 and later reauthorized by the Clinton administration under the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997 (Office of Child Abuse and Prevention [OCAP], 2014). The PSSF is a federal grant program providing funds that enables states and identified Tribes to operate child and family services including "community-based family support services, family preservation services, time-limited family reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services to prevent child maltreatment among at-risk families, assure safety and stability of maltreated children, and support adoptive families" (P.L. 107-133, p. 3).

Eligible states receive PSSF funds based on the number of children receiving benefits through their states' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. A large proportion of PSSF funds (85%) in California are allocated to counties based on the number of resident children, ages 0 to 17, who are at or

below the poverty line. Each county is then responsible for the administration and distribution of PSSF funds locally. Just over 20 percent of PSSF funds have been spent for Family Support and Family Preservation historically. Social workers often engage in programs funded by PSSF funds such as parental education courses, family visit coaching, and specialized trainings on assessing children in various stages of their development (OCAP, 2014).

PSSF funds are crucial to the continuing availability of services to children and families to promote family preservation and family reunification. The goals of the PSSF program are consistent with the stated goals in California's Child and Family Services Plan, for the years of 2020 through 2024, of (1) permanency and stable placements for children and (2) the well-being of children and their families (Children and Families Services Division [CFSD], 2019).

Rationale and Preliminary Research Question

The study explored the difficulty of visitation in the child welfare system due to Covid-19. This study explored how child welfare caregiver's, defined as foster parents, extended family members, or non-related extended family members, and social workers, cope with family visitation during the Covid-19 pandemic in the state of across the United States.

Social workers understand the importance of human relationships. With this understanding, family visitations are a vital tool for reunification of the removed children. This indispensable tool came to a halt in early 2020, when the

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Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) hit the world and forced the United States

into lockdowns. COVID -19 has affected the whole world, killing, as of early

December 2021, about 5,232,562 people in the world (World Health

Organization), including 784,893 in the United States (CDC, 2021).

The damage caused by COVID-19 is developing every day and requires

ongoing study. That is, it is important to understand the long-term effects of this

disease on the child-welfare system across the United States, the largest in the

country. Furthermore, the National Association of Social Workers' (2017) Code of

Ethics stipulates that social workers must "seek to promote the responsiveness

of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs

and social problems" (p. 1). Therefore, this study aims to explore the difficulty of

visitation within the child welfare system across the United States during the

pandemic by asking these two questions:

1. What are child welfare caregivers' perceptions of the impact of COVID--19
   on child welfare visitation across the United States?

2. How did child welfare caregivers' cope with child welfare visitation during
   the COVID-19 pandemic across the United States?

Potential Significance of the Proposed Study

This study increased the body of social work literature and contribute to

the development of social work practice knowledge. This study also extended the

growing body of literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically

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pertaining to American children and families within the foster care system. The interviews conducted in this study will aid future social workers in micro practice by leaving a template of how to interact and engage families in the child welfare system that have been adversely impacted by disrupted services due to a global pandemic. Macro social work practice will be impacted by this study as the findings can be used to bolster policy changes. Lastly, the findings in this study will have implications for social work education by reinforcing the importance of family visitations for current and future social work students and interns as well as child welfare social workers.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contains four sections. The first section is the synthesis of the literature. The second section is the limitations of existing studies. The third section is a synthesis of theoretical perspectives guiding the research. The last section is a critical analysis of theoretical perspectives. This literature review examines the relevant studies that show why visitations within the child welfare system are important and critiques the availability of studies that directly relate family visitations and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Synthesis of the Literature

Studies on the importance of family visitations have been used across the United States. A study of 452 children in foster care, conducted by Florida State University, found that children who had daily contact with their biological mothers showed statistically fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors (McWey et al., 2017). The study chose a nationally representative sample of children based on the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II that adequately simulated the percentages of foster care youth by race, age, and gender. All participants were between the ages of six and seventeen. It was also found that a foster youth's age, race, type of treatment, and placement were associated with how often contact with a biological parent occurred (McWey et al., 2017).

In March and May of 2020, a point-in-time search for publicly accessible documents related to caseworker face-to-face contact and COVID-19 were collected from 49 states and the District of Columbia by researchers at the University of South Carolina (Seay et al, 2021). The researchers found that documents revealed several changes to child welfare policies that affected face-to-face family visitations. This included the use of telephonic and virtual communication due to safety and public health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with some states encouraging these methods over traditional visitations (Seay et al., 2021).

One study conducted in Stanislaus County California collected several responses from caregivers on their perceptions of visitations they participated in during the year 2020 (Partan, 2021). The participants consisted of one male and five female caregivers who had children in differing stages of the reunification process. The researchers of this study, guided by the ideas found within Attachment Theory, distilled the caregiver's responses into categories and themes. The major findings of this study were the overall perceived dissatisfaction the caregivers had of the quality and duration of the visitations with their children (Partan, 2021).

Limitations of Existing Literature

Limitations of existing literature include exclusive biological mother's opinions, a focus on daily face-to-face visitations, and point-in-time search for

publicly accessible documents related to face-to-face caseworker visitation. However, conceptual papers were published about the importance of family visitation (Oehme, 2021; Orlando, 2021; Saimi, 2011) did not directly relate to family visitations during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that the pandemic has only been around for a year and a half at time of writing, and after exploring several databases for peer-reviewed articles with no progress, the literature about family visitations throughout this natural disaster is limited. Because family visitation is so vital for reunification in child welfare, one would expect more studies on that topic. Hence, this study will contribute significantly to the existing literature.

Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives Guiding Research

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) introduced its Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework in 2003 as a research-informed, strengths-based drive to prevent child abuse and neglect in families of children born to five years old (CSSP, 2014). Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) consider early childhood the most significant as well as the weakest point in any child's life. In the initial years of a child's life, intellectual, emotional, and ethical development elements are laid down. Therefore, society cannot fail children in these early years" (Brazelton, 2000). With this in mind, the CSSP worked intensively with researchers and advisors for over a year period to

create a combination of protective factors that decrease the probability of child

abuse and neglect.

The protective factors in the Strengthening Families framework (SFF) both

protect against risk and promote positive outcomes. Rather than being intended

to be implemented in a particular setting, the SFF is adaptable to different

environments and service delivery models. That serves young children and their

families. Strengthening Families is achieved through small but significant

changes in how professionals interact with families, not parallel to but integrated

into existing practice (CSSP, 2014). Furthermore, cross-sector implementation is

the nucleus of the approach. The SSF brings together program-level and system-

level allies from various sectors that assist children and families – providing a

common language and set of outcomes to work toward. Working from a

protective factors approach, workers and service providers insist on supporting

parents' capacity to parent effectively and include them as allies to achieve good

outcomes for their children.

The SFA has a five-point Protective Factor Framework that it uses with the

key protective factor being Parental Resilience. Resilience is defined within the

SFA as "the process of managing stress and functioning well in a particular

context when faced with adversity" (CSSP, 2014, p. 21). Resilience is learned

through exposure to challenging life events facilitated by supportive relationships

and environments. These can include people, culture, institutions, conditions,

and policies. "The outcome of resilience is positive change and growth" (CSSP,

2014). Parents with be able to demonstrate the resilience gained through the SFA when they are "able to call forth their inner strength to proactively meet personal challenges and those in relation to their child, manage adversities, heal the effects of trauma, and thrive given the unique characteristics and circumstances of their family" (CSSP, 2014, p. 25).

The SFA directly relates to this study as parents and caregivers often learn strategies to increase their resilience during visitations in the family reunification process. These can include stress management tools, appropriate child punishment techniques, and trauma minimization for the child. If these visitations are not occurring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the resilience of parents and caregivers, along with the long-term mental and physical health of foster children, will be adversely impacted. This would seem to be consistent with the ideas presented in Attachment Theory.

The profession of Social Work uses many theories to influence and inform practice models used in the field. John Bowlby formulated the key concepts of Attachment Theory (AT) in 1958 as a result of his efforts to understand the socio-emotional development of children (Allen et al., 2014). The main assumption of AT that Bowlby posited was that humans are programmed from infancy to seek connection and comfort from their adult caregiver, especially during distress, to increase their chances of survival (Zeanah et al., 2011). The idea that a caring parent made a life-long difference in person's life had been in the zeitgeist for hundreds of years before Bowlby formulated his theory. Jean-Jacques Rousseau

wrote in the mid-18th century that when women are good mothers, their sons will be good husbands and fathers (Kagen, 2011). In 1970, Mary Ainsworth devised the Strange Situation Test as a way to measure Bowlby's theory and to describe the relationship between the child and caretaker; ultimately leading to the description of three major styles of attachment – Secure, Insecure Avoidant, and Insecure Ambivalent (Ainsworth, 1970). A fourth attachment type, Disorganized, was added by Main and Solomon in 1990 (Main, 1990).

AT is a popular theory used when studying the relationships between children and their parents, especially in public child welfare. Within the last ten years research findings utilizing concepts from AT have trended towards prioritizing birth parent-child relationships and several studies have sought to identify effective interventions to help build the capacity for parents to engage in responsive attachment behaviors (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014; Bosk et al., 2019; Bettmann & Friedman, 2013; Keddell, 2017). The proliferation of AT in research and published articles does not mean there are not criticisms to be leveled at the assumptions it makes and how it is used in practice.

All theories used in the field of Social Work have limitations as all are human constructs. Attachment Theory is no exception and the use of AT to diagnose attachment disorders has come under scrutiny recently. One international critical analysis of AT found the main issue was the vague language used within the theory and AT's inherent subjectiveness (Fitzgerald, 2020). This

has led to a subjectiveness in the diagnosis of attachment disorders that can be influenced by a child's race and social class. In reviewing one hundred referrals to a specialized adoption and fostering program, Woolgar and Scott (2014) noticed that attachment problems were mentioned very frequently and often not sustained upon the completion of a full psychological assessment of the youths. In addition, they found that the referrals had confused attachment problems with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant disorder, and other conduct disorders (Woolgar, 2014).

Critical Analysis of Theoretical Perspectives Guiding Research

The researchers of this study chose to use the Theory Evaluation Scale (TES) to measure the quality of Attachment Theory (AT) and the Strengthening Families Approach (SFA). Drs. Rigaud Joseph and Mark J. Macgowan developed the TES as a way for social work educators, researchers, and students to critically assess the quality of theories that inform social work practice (Joseph & Magowan, 2019). Since its publication in 2019, the TES has been featured in several peer-reviewed publications in the social work literature ((Drew et al., 2021; Joseph, 2020a; Joseph, 2020b; Joseph, 2021; Joseph et al., 2022; Stoeffler & Joseph, 2020).

The TES consists of nine criteria, reflecting constructivist and post-positivist perspectives. These are: coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical assumptions, historical evolution, falsifiability, empirical evidence, boundaries,

utility, and human agency. Validity of the TES was tested by 14 internationally recognized experts in the field of social work. Content validity of the TES was measured using Charles Hubert Lawshe's content-validity ratio and reliability of the TES was determined by obtaining a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.88 (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). The TES has a recommended use of an item-level score of 1 through 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest scores possible in any one criterion. The scores are then tallied, and the theory be placed in one of the following ranges: 30-45 = Excellent; 20-29 = Good; 10-19 = Fair; 1-10 = Poor (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019).

Utilizing the TES to rate AT, the researchers of this study generated a total score of 32 or Excellent. Attachment Theory scores well in all criteria besides criteria seven, eight, and nine which ask if the theory explains boundaries and limitations, accounts for systems within which individuals interact, recognizes an individual as active agents within their environment. This is because Bowlby did not detail the limitations of AT as pertains to the entirety of an individual's life. AT does not directly address the socio-economic and social class differences between individuals and unique stressors that affect families. AT also does not allow for environmental factors to alter the assumption that experiences in early childhood will have life-long impacts, thus reducing an individual's agency. Table 1 contains itemized scoring of AT for each TES criterion.

Under the TES, the researchers in this study also scored the Strengthening Families Approach a cumulative 37. The Strengthening Families

Approach is weak in two categories. The SFA theory has not been tested and proven false via observational and experimental methods scoring a two. Lastly, the SFA is weak in that the theory has been critically tested and validated through empirical evidence. Overall, the Strengthen Family Approach scored an Excellent as an approach. Table 1 also contains an itemized scoring of the Strengthening Families Approach using the TES.

Table 1

Critical Analysis of the Attachment Theory and the Strengthening Families
Approach with Joseph & Macgowan's Theory Evaluation Scale

Criteria	Description	Score	
		AT*	*SFA***
1	The theory has coherence.	5	5
2	The theory has conceptual clarity.	5	5
3	The theory clearly outlines and explains its philosophical assumptions.	3	3
4	The theory describes its historical roots in connection with previous research.	5	5
5	The theory can be tested and proven false via observational and experimental methods.	4	2
6	The theory has been critically tested and validated through empirical evidence.	4	2
7	The theory explains its boundaries or limitations.	2	5
8	The theory accounts for the systems within which individuals interact with people around them.	2	5
9	The theory recognizes humans as active agents within their environment.	2	5
Overall score		**32**	**37**

Theory quality based on overall TES score: Excellent for AT
Theory quality based on overall TES score: Excellent for SFA

***Attachment Theory | *** Strengthening Families Approach*

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter contains six sections. The ways in which the researchers of this study engaged in ethical practice as well as the protections of human subjects will be discussed. The research design and sampling methods are laid out. Instruments and procedures for how the data was collected and stored will be explained. Finally, the sensitizing concepts and processes for the data analysis have been included.

Ethics & Protection of Human Subjects

To uphold the research ethics and protection of human subjects, researchers completed ethics training, obtaining their CITI certificate, before conducting this study. The study obtained approval from the California State University of San Bernardino Institutional Review Board. The researchers went over all phases of the study, including purpose, risk, and any potential benefits to participation while obtaining verbal and written informed consent from all subjects. All current COVID-19 mandates were implemented. These mandates included the use of personal protective equipment as directed by the Center for Disease Control. Participants and researchers, whenever possible, remained six feet apart, proper sanitation procedures were implemented, and temperatures were taken at time of any in-person interview. All physical data collected has been kept secure using a locked file cabinet that is only be accessible to the

researchers. Digital data gathered from participants was stored in an encrypted and shared Google Drive accessed via secure connection and two-factor authentication. The researchers have kept all information that is provided to them confidential, allowing only the researchers conducting this study access to the data. Additionally, two years after the conclusion of this study, all data will be destroyed.

Research Design

Despite the importance of family visitation in the profession of Social Work, due to the understudied nature of family visitations in child welfare and perceptions of caregivers, this study is exploratory. Besides embracing an exploratory design, this study is qualitative. Researchers intend for this study to be cross-sectional as interviews were conducted at one point in time and not continuous. The researchers understand the findings in this study may not be generalized to the entire population of families in the child welfare system.

Sampling

The researchers used a non-probability sampling method to recruit participants for this study. In particular, the snowball method was used in conjunction with the purposive method to collect participants. The researchers were able to gather five participants located across the United States. These participants were caregivers, defined as foster parents, extended family members, or non-related extended family members, and social workers in the

child welfare system who engaged in family visitations within the last year. Researchers placed an emphasis on male parents in the process of reunification as this is a particularly understudied population.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

This study used primary sources of data collection. Data was obtained by the researchers directly from participants through semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended and scaling questions. This question structure was chosen by the researchers because open-ended questions are most often used to "[…] explore topics in depth, to understand processes, and to identify potential causes of observed correlations" (Weller et al., 2018). An example of a study question, also seen in the interview guide included in Appendix A, will be structured as follows: In your opinion, what does a successful family visitation look like during the pandemic? This is consistent with the open-ended question structure chosen by the researchers. Demographic questions, including sex, age range, race/ethnicity, etc, were carefully worded in the research instrument. After the demographic questions have been completed, the most valuable questions were asked early in the interview to combat interview fatigue in participants. This also served to limit the potential for missing interview data.

The procedure for inviting participants to this study included placing flyers at strategic locations including family visitation centers and Foster Family Agencies (FFA). Researchers used personal and student networks, along with

social media (Facebook, reddit, etc.) to recruit participants. The researchers posted a call to participate in the online forums of the NASW website. Professional connections generated by our internships at Riverside and San Bernardino Counties to recruit participants were not used as a means of controlling for biased data or conflicts of interest. This is consistent with the purposive sampling method. In addition, the researchers networked with currently employed Foster Family Agency workers with the purpose of being linked to prospective study participants. Networking efforts were made between researchers and FFA workers via online methods such as email, text, and telephone communication. Participants were encouraged to contact the researchers using telephone calls, e-mails, and/or text messaging to communicate their interest in taking part in the research.

The researchers met with participants on a predetermined date and scheduled times that are convenient to both parties. Interviews were conducted in a variety of ways including telephonic communication and via video conferencing applications such as Zoom. Researchers gave the informed consent form to the participants for signature one day before the interview was scheduled to take place. The researchers asked the participants for their authorization to record the interview and confirmed the participant's consent before beginning the interview. Participants were informed they were able to withdraw consent and stop the interview process at any time. The researchers thanked the participants for their cooperation once the interview is complete and

promptly uploaded the interview and recorded data to a secure folder on the researcher's personal laptop within a secure Google Drive.

Social distancing procedures as outlined by the Centers for Disease Control were followed by all participants and enforced by the researchers. Virtual interviews were the only method considered with participants during scheduling. In this way, participants that have any underlying health conditions, which put them at greater risk for COVID-19, would not be placed in any additional risk. Participants did not need to disclose any underlying health conditions as a virtual interview was the only method available. Participants were not required to inform researchers of any positive results received after the interviews were conducted virtually. Researchers wore all recommended personal protective equipment including but not limited to, face masks with an N95 rating, gloves, and face shields while conducting any research related activity in any in-person settings.

<u>Sensitizing Concepts</u>

The key terms that the researchers have identified as most relevant to this study are Child Welfare Caregivers, Family Visitation, Reunification, and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Below are definitions for each of them.

Child Welfare Caregivers: The researchers of this study defined Child Welfare Caregivers as foster parents, extended family members, or non-related extended family members that participated in family visitation during the coronavirus pandemic.

Family Visitation: The researchers of this study defined Family Visitation as the supervised or unsupervised frequent contact between a child or youth that has been removed from the parent or caregiver's home by a child welfare agency with the goal of reunification.

Reunification: Reunification means the process by which a child welfare agency returns a child or youth to their home under the care of the parents or caregivers from which they were originally removed.

COVID-19 Pandemic: The ongoing outbreak originally declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, of the SARS-CoV2 virus which causes the COVID-19 illness will be referred to as the COVID-19 Pandemic throughout this study (WHO, 2021).

Data Analysis

The interview data collected was transcribed either by hand and with the assistance of an Artificial Intelligence transcription service such as the Temi Application. Transcribed data was analyzed by hand, using an encrypted spreadsheet via Google Sheets and then a thematic analysis was conducted on the interview content. Researchers created a codebook for the gathered data and assigned a numeric code to each interview for confidentiality and anonymity purposes. These numeric codes were organized into themes by the researchers. The demographic variables served for the purposes of descriptive statistics only. To control for chance in the collected data, the researchers gathered interview

data separately and employed Cohen's Kappa to determine interrater reliability (Cohen, 1960). This reliability procedure considers the chance aspect of agreement between this study's raters (McHugh, 2012). The researchers utilized the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software to run their data analysis which includes Cohen's Kappa (Laerd, n.d.).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of this study's five participants. Over half the participants were female with all participants identifying as Cisgender. A vast majority of participants were African American. Less than half of the study participants identified themselves as being Non-African American and Non-White. Most participants were younger, and no participants were over the age of thirty-five. A slight majority of participants identified themselves as current social workers in child welfare with a slight minority stating they were current caregivers of foster children. An equal distribution of education level was disclosed by the study participants regarding the highest level of education, from some college to master's degree. More than half of the participants conducted or were a part of ten or more family visitations during the period between January of 2021 and December of 2021. One participant declined to state a specific number of visitations however they reported it was in the double digits.

Table 2

Study Demographic Characteristics (N = 5)

Variable	*Frequency (N)*	*Percentage (%)*
Age:		
18 – 25	3	60
26 – 35	2	40
Race:		
Black/African American	3	60
Hispanic	1	20
Other	1	20
Gender:		
Male	2	40
Female	3	60
Education Level:		
Some College	2	40
Bachelor's Degree	2	40
Master's Degree	2	40
Employment:		
Caregiver	2	40
Social Worker	3	60
Household Size:		
0 - 5	2	40
6 – 10	1	20
Declined to State	2	40
Visitation Number:		
0 - 3	1	20
10 or More	3	60
Declined to State	1	20

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study aimed to explore the difficulty of visitation in the child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five major themes: surprising nature of visitation during the pandemic, difficult aspect of family visitations, challenges and opportunities that

the pandemic provided, lack of support, and the importance of communication.

Table 3 exhibits the themes that emerged from the data. The researchers will

describe each of these themes below.

Table 3

Study Themes

Themes	Description
Theme 1	COVID-19 took the visitation sector by surprise.
Theme 2	Child welfare workers found it hard to provide visitation services during the pandemic.
Theme 3	COVID-19 has created both challenges for family visitations but also opportunities for social workers to obtain new skills, especially in the area of technology.
Theme 4	Participants wished they received training (or were more prepared) for the impacts of the pandemic on family visitations.
Theme 5	Communication among all parties involved is essential for successful family visitations.

Perceptions of COVID-19 Impacts

The first theme present in the research was that the COVID-19 pandemic

took the visitation sector of child welfare by surprise. This answers the first stated

research question of this study, what are child welfare caregivers' perceptions of

the impact of COVID-19 on child welfare visitation across the United States?

Towards the beginning of the pandemic, Children and Family Services agencies

terminated in-person visitation until further notice often without providing an alternate and standardized means of offering visitation to parents. Although visitation is a right guaranteed by the foster care bill of rights, the ability to provide this service was complicated by many factors that Children and Family Services agencies were not prepared for. Social workers felt overwhelmed by lack of support, resources, and knowledge needed to complete visitations. Participants stated:

> *The thing is I have to give them that time, that personal one on one time, make sure they're okay. Overall, that is my job. (Participant 1)*
>
> *It affected people in so many ways. (Participant 4)*

Through the analysis of the interviews, another common theme that emerged that also serves to answer the first research question was that Child Welfare social workers found it hard to provide family visitation services during the pandemic. Once no-contact visitations were put into place, participants found it difficult to continue contact between family members. Over 60% of the participants used the terms "hard" or "difficult" to describe their ability to provide visitation services to families. The lack of resources for families affected individual visitation productivity. A vast majority of participants felt unprepared for the changes in service the pandemic would require. Participants stated:

> *Sometimes kids don't want to come to the phone, it's hard. (Participant 1)*
>
> *It was really hard, really hard. It was really hard. That's all I can say. (Participant 3)*

The second research question, how did child welfare caregivers and social

workers cope with family visitations during the COVID-19 pandemic, was

answered in three of the most common themes from the data. The first main

theme addressing this question was that COVID-19 has created both challenges

for family visitations but also opportunities for child welfare social workers to

obtain new skills, especially in the area of technology. Participants spoke about

the pressures they felt learning these skills quickly in order to provide family

visitation services while also informing the interviewer that it was those same

skills that kept them afloat during the pandemic. Three participants spoke of

learning brand new technologies such as the Zoom video conferencing

application, the utilization of smart phones for client contact and visitations, as

well as using various Adobe Acrobat PDF functions to assist them throughout the

COVID-19 pandemic. Participants stated:

> *Try to connect ahead of time, because as we know, sometimes links fail,*
>
> *they're broken. Sometimes I got to deal with five to 10 minutes of*
>
> *dysconnectivity issues before a visit. (Participant 1)*

The second theme was that participants wished they had received training

(or were more prepared) for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family

visitations. None of the participants reported that they had any structural training

provided to them by their place of employment that pertained to providing

services during a pandemic. More than half of the study participants shared their frustrations surrounding the lack of technological information sharing. Participants stated:

For some of the older folks or Spanish speaking folks that are not as technologically inclined, I would send them a picture and show them how to edit a picture, just to provide a signature. So, we had to do a lot of that, a lot of helping caregivers and parents walk through them to sign documents online. (Participant 1)

So it was very hard because when it comes to tech savvy, when it comes to the older population, they don't really know how to get on. So it was hard for me as a case manager to show them. (Participant 5)

Lastly, the stressed importance of communication across all parties involved is essential for successful family visitations, which emerged as a theme. All the social workers interviewed mentioned this theme more than once while being questioned. More than half of the responses to study questions related to successful visitations mentioned "communication" and "preparedness". Two caregivers interviewed also stated they valued the communication that made their family visitations successful during the pandemic. In addition, a third of interviewees emphasized the importance of human connection that is facilitated through communication. Participants stated:

Being able to talk to family for more than two hours straight. (Participant 3)

Is one that everybody's on the same page, they agree to the Telehealth visitation online and then everybody would communicate and get along for the sake of the children, for the sake of the family, just communicate. (Participant 5)

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to explore the difficulty of family visitations in the child welfare system due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This study answered how child welfare caregiver's, defined as foster parents, extended family members, or non-related extended family members, and social workers coped with family visitations during the COVID-19 pandemic across the United States. This is paramount for the child welfare system to know as social workers understand the importance of human relationships. It is important to understand the long-term effects of this disease on the child-welfare system across the United States. With this understanding, family visitations are a vital tool for reunification of the removed children. Due to the understudied nature of family visitations in child welfare and perceptions of caregivers, this study is exploratory. Besides embracing an exploratory design, this study is qualitative and cross-sectional as interviews were conducted at one point in time and not continuous. This study interviewed five caregivers and child welfare social workers. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five major themes: surprising nature of visitation during the pandemic, difficult aspects of family visitations, challenges and opportunities that the pandemic provided, general lack of support, and the importance of communication.

Consistency with Previous Research

The findings of this study reflect the findings of Seay et al. (2021) in that the social workers interviewed for this study talked about how their agencies implemented policies that both created barriers to conducting in-person family visitations while providing opportunities for the use of new technology to facilitate virtual visitations. This study's findings are also consistent with the findings of Partan (2021). There was a similarity with the overall dissatisfaction that caregivers reported relating to the quality and duration of family visitations during the ongoing pandemic. Several study participants echoed the themes found in the study conducted by McWey (2017) in that both the social workers and caregivers that were interviewed expressed how important the bond between the children and parents are during family visitations and how fostering those connections led to more positive behaviors by the children.

Implications of the Findings

Implications for Theory

Attachment Theory posits that the quality, consistency of the interactions between young children and their caregivers is key to more positive outcomes later in life. The last theme that emerged in our study coincides with this mindset making even more evident that without consistent communication and visitation parents feel disconnected and unsuccessful. Unfortunately, Covid-19 has been identified as a crisis that Children and Family Services was not prepared to handle. Theme two expresses how unprepared Children and Family Services

were when the pandemic first started. This unpreparedness goes against not only attachment theory but the vision that CFS has.

The third theme identified in the study stressed the importance of social workers obtaining new skills, especially in the area of technology, to improve successful family visitation during the pandemic. The gaining of these new skills by service providers aligns with the Strengthening Families framework's protective factors (SFF). SFF also aligns with themes one and four because SFF looks to build the resiliency of families through crises. Covid-19 has been identified as a crisis that Children and Family Services was not prepared for.

Implications for Research

This study contributes significantly towards the social work body of knowledge and expands the research in the area of family visitations within the child welfare sphere. This study also extended the growing body of literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically pertaining to American children and families within the foster care system. This is a study that has not been done in the field of child welfare before and includes both caregiver and social worker perspectives. There is a penury of research that focuses on family visitations during the pandemic. This study is a contribution towards filling the gap in literature. While theme number three is not a novel addition to the body of research pertaining to the subject matter of family visitations, it should be noted that this study displays novel research at the intersection of social work and

technology. Further, this study shows that any future research done at the intersection of caregiving, social work, and technology will be essential for the field of social work in providing successful family visitations in the child welfare setting.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this study carry significant impacts for micro and Macro social work practice. This study will aid future social workers in micro practice by leaving a template of how to interact and engage families in the child welfare system that have been adversely impacted by disrupted services due to a global pandemic. In conducting this study, the researchers attempted to help the field of social work by broadening the knowledge of providing services to children and families during a natural disaster. Child welfare is key in the profession of social work with many social workers active in this field. Social workers have an ethical obligation to meet the needs of their clients. NASW Code of Ethics quote.

Implications for Policy

Much of the structural procedures and workflow of a child welfare social worker is created through the implementation of policy by those in power. Findings call for more structural support for our child welfare social workers. Lawmakers or policy makers can ensure that services are provided to children and families through similar or future natural disasters by passing legislation that

addresses the real challenges faced by caregivers and social workers mentioned in this study. Based on the information gathered in this study, this legislation should consider: 1) Creating a taskforce that will be implemented upon a future natural disaster and/or pandemic to assess the impact to family visitation services and make recommendations to best mitigate challenges to services. 2) Invest in the continuous modernization of technology that social workers can access for aid in visitation services. 3) Create service standards that social workers can implement to shorten the transition time between in-person and virtual family visitations during a future natural disaster and/or pandemic.

Limitations

      This study had several limitations that should be noted. The first limitation would be the relatively low sample size making it difficult to generalize the findings to the broader population. However, the hard-to-reach nature of the population in this study and given that the researchers were not able to gather participants from their immediate area, the findings of this study were consistent with previous research and should not be discounted. The qualitative methodology used for this study is a limitation as it is more open to bias. This extends to the scope of interview questions asked that may have excluded family visitation services or assistance contributing to a negative skew in the findings. Despite having a relatively diverse sample in terms of race and gender for this study, there is still room for improvement. Due to this focus on the minority

population, this study produced a lack of diversity in the sample. All participants identified themselves as people of color and all identified themselves as Cis gender. It would be beneficial to hear the experiences of those from other demographic groups. Lastly, this study was specific to the period of 2020 to 2021 and included perspectives only pertaining to the impact of one natural disaster, COVID-19, which limited the potential for perspectives related to other natural disasters.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research regarding visitations in child welfare during a natural disaster should include more participants for a larger sample size. More generalizable findings should be gathered from a larger research sample that is more representative of the larger population. Replication of this research should include a quantitative analysis of the findings and include a broader scope in the types of questions asked of participants. Interviews conducted in similar or replication studies should be conducted in-person and include a greater emphasis on structural support for caregivers. Further study should make an effort toward greater diversity by recruiting participants from all backgrounds. This diversity should include a broader range of races/ethnicities as well as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) caregiver perspectives within the child welfare system. The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last time that visitations are restricted, as new variants emerge and other

natural disasters will occur in the future. Therefore, more study is needed to learn

and prepare for future disruptions to family visitations within the child welfare

system.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT:

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to help us understand parent/caregiver perspectives on family visitations during COVID-19 in child welfare. This study is being conducted by Christina Ortiz and Christopher Enhelder, MSW students at California State University, San Bernardino, supervised by Dr. Rigaud Joseph. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, Social Work Subcommittee, California State University, San Bernardino.

DESCRIPTION: You are being asked to complete an interview in which you will be asked to describe your experiences with family visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic within the child welfare system.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you can stop participating at any time. We will not notify your social worker, employer, or colleagues of your decision to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your identity and anything you say will be kept confidential. Only the CSUSB research team will have access to the information you provide. This information will be kept in password protected files. We will destroy the audio recording after transcription, and we will remove any information that might be used to identify you from the transcript. We will not identify you or anything that might reveal your identity in any of our future reports or articles. The only time we would reveal your name is if we were required to do so by a judge or if you tell us that you intend to harm yourself or others (including if you disclose child abuse).

DURATION: This interview is expected to take between 30 and 60 minutes.

RISKS: There are minimal risks to you from participating in this study, such as feeling uncomfortable talking about your experiences.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. What we learn from this study may help us to improve services for clients and for staff.

AUDIO RECORDING: Interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission and these audio recordings transcribed word for word. _____ (check here) I understand that this research will be audio recorded.

CONTACT: If you have questions about this study, you may contact Dr. Rigaud Joseph at (909) 537-5507 or at rigaud.joseph@csusb.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact the Research Compliance Officer, Michael Gillespie at (909)537-7588.

RESULTS: Results from this study will be available one year from your participation date from Dr. Joseph Rigaud at (909)537-5507.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT: 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.

SIGNATURE: Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide:

Demographic Information:
1. Age Range:
   - A.   18-25
   - B.   26-35
   - C.   36-49
   - D.   50+

2. Race/Ethnicity: _____

3. Gender: _____

4. Education Level: _____

5. Type of Caregiver: _____

6. Household Size: _____

7. How many visitations have you had during the Pandemic? _____

Impacts of COVID-19:
1. Tell me about how COVID-19 impacted your family visitations, if any.

2. On a scale of 1 to 5, where do you put the impact of COVID-19 on family visitations?

3. (From previous question) Why did you choose a (answer to question #2, if not a 5) ___ and not a 5?

4. How did you cope with virtual visitations during COVID-19?

5. What resources that you found helpful for visitations during the pandemic?

6. What resources do you wish you had for visitations during the pandemic?

7. What advice do you have for new families with virtual visitations during crisis?

8. In your opinion, what does a successful visitation during the pandemic look like to you?

Created by Christopher Enhelder and Christina Ortiz

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER

November 3, 2021

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-24

Rigaud Joseph Christopher Enhelder, Christina Ortiz
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Rigaud Joseph Christopher Enhelder, Christina Ortiz:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Caregivers' Perceptions of the Impact of COVID-19 on Child Welfare Visitation" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's COVID-19 Prevention Plan for more information regarding campus requirements.

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. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- 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 Office of 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. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-24 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,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

   Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

   Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

   a. Introduction and Literature:

      Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz

   b. Methods:

      Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz

   c. Results:

      Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz

   d. Discussion:

      Joint effort: Christopher Enhelder & Christina Ortiz