

5-2022

## FORMER FOSTER YOUTH WHO BECOME CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

Candace Watts

Shantel Ortega

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FORMER FOSTER YOUTH WHO BECOME  
CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

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A Thesis  
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  
Shantel Ortega and Candace Watts

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Approved by:

Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, Faculty Research Supervisor

Dr. Laurie Smith, M.S.W. Research Coordinator

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## ABSTRACT

Former foster youth who become child welfare workers are an asset to the child welfare system because of the combination of their lived experience and professional experience in child welfare, which allows them to understand the circumstances of their clients on a deeper level. This study seeks to uncover the reasons why former foster youth become child welfare workers. There are three main questions that our study seeks to know: What factors lead former foster youth to become workers in child welfare? Do these workers have any advantages because of their past personal experiences with child welfare? And do child welfare workers who were former foster youth consider themselves resilient? In answering these questions, child welfare agencies can understand how former foster youth have transformed themselves to help others in the child welfare system and can learn how former foster youth uniquely contribute to the child welfare system.

Little research attempts to understand the experiences of child welfare workers who were once in foster care. The intent of this study is to identify the factors that lead former foster youth to become child welfare workers. Additionally, this study seeks to uncover any potential advantages they possess because of their shared experiences. Lastly, the study examines the role resiliency has played in helping former foster youth attain a career in child welfare despite being a former dependent of the child welfare system.

This study used a qualitative research design, conducting individual, in-depth interviews with 12 participants who were former foster youth that worked in child welfare. Thematic analysis revealed seven major themes including: Resiliency; Passion for the Profession; Improving the System; Wanting to Do More; Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement; Benefit of Services; and Trauma and Mental Health.

The implications of this study can lead to contributions in social work practice and policy that provide ways to increase engagement, retention, and career satisfaction of former foster youth who work in child welfare. Further research should be conducted to add to our findings. The significance of this study is to aid and improve the current practice of social work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research study would not be possible without the 12 participants who openly shared their personal and professional experiences within child welfare. We thank you for your time, passion, and dedication to help foster youth and families in the child welfare system. Each and every one of you has inspired us deeply.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge our outstanding research advisor Dr. Deidre Lanesskog, for attending to all our research needs. Thank you for calming our nerves about the daunting task of writing a thesis paper and giving us the tools to succeed. We are truly grateful for your support and encouragement throughout this process.

## DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this paper to all my family and loved ones. I specifically want to thank my father Willie Watts and mother Mary Watts for their continual support and encouragement during my time in graduate school. I'd like to acknowledge and thank my sister Maria Watts for her advice and encouragement that came from her firsthand experience of completing the MSW program at CSUSB in 2021. Lastly, I would like to thank my love Cameron Young for applauding and supporting my educational goals and encouraging me to put my educational priorities first. I am truly grateful for this opportunity and experience.

Candace Watts

This thesis work is dedicated to my fiancé, Adrian, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school and life. I am truly thankful for having you in my life. This work is also dedicated to my children, Ava and Adrian, I aspire everyday to be the best version of myself for you.

Shantel Ortega



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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Problem Formulation

Former foster youth who become child welfare workers are an asset to the child welfare system. They have unique personal experiences that are incomparable to other child welfare professionals because of their lived experience. Having been a dependent of the child welfare system, they understand it from the inside out. Their personal experiences hold value and should be at the forefront of policy and decision making, but unfortunately their stories are often left unheard. We can learn a great deal from the experiences that have shaped former foster youths' decision to become employed in child welfare. Understanding their drive to enter the profession can potentially help us discover better avenues to serve current foster youth.

Child welfare is a difficult profession to work in for many reasons. It is common to experience high caseloads, burnout and fatigue. However, research suggests that the highest rates of turnover in child welfare are due to factors such as negative perceptions of organizational policy, high stress, low job satisfaction, a low level of professional and organizational commitment, and the need for a more positive work environment (Kim and Kao, 2014). Considering the fact that child welfare is already a difficult profession to work in for the average person, the decision for former foster youth to become employed in child welfare

is not only noble but is also a display of their resilience. We predict that many former foster youth who became child welfare workers have decided to work in this setting in order to positively impact the system that once directly affected them. Understanding the motivations of former foster youth to enter the profession of child welfare may help to create avenues for more foster youth to contribute to the current system. It is imperative that we learn how foster alumni have transformed themselves to help others in the child welfare system so that more foster youth can also feel empowered to do so.

It is important to know what factors influenced former foster youth to become workers in child welfare. There is limited research that focuses specifically on former foster youth who choose to work in child welfare. Our research attempts to explore the motivation our participants had to work in the child welfare setting. Further, we are interested in learning about their perception of the services or interventions they received while they were in care. For example, it is beneficial to know if a negative experience or encounter was a driving force behind them becoming a child welfare worker. On the contrary, it is also important to know if a positive connection with a social worker influenced their decision to pursue the profession.

It is significant to know if former foster youth have any advantages as professional child welfare workers because of their past personal experiences with child welfare. This research study hopes to identify whether former foster youth who have personal experience with child welfare have any advantages or

possibly disadvantages in working in the profession of child welfare. Self-disclosure can improve the social worker and client relationship which can lead to better treatment outcomes (Knight, 2020). This research is interested in finding out if former foster youth are able to build rapport with their clients more effectively because of the shared experiences they share with their clients. For this reason, it is important to explore other hidden advantages social workers may have because of their lived experience.

This research also seeks to examine whether child welfare workers who were former foster youth consider themselves resilient. We are interested in learning how resilience has been a factor in foster alumni becoming child welfare workers. Resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). Resiliency is the ability to bounce back after stressful life events or adverse environments (Norman, 2000). We would like to know how the resiliency of child welfare workers may serve as an advantage to them in a high-stress profession. In addition, if their personal story of resiliency has empowered or inspired their clients to overcome their own adversities.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivation behind why former foster youth become re-involved with the child welfare system through employment. Research regarding information about the motivation behind former

foster youths' career choices is limited. We believe a qualitative research study will provide an opportunity to gain insight from our participants. Our interviews will shed light on the experiences our participants may have had as former clients of the child welfare system. The feedback from these interviews has the potential to ameliorate child welfare services, so long as their voices are heard, and their experiences are considered important. Our participants have had a firsthand experience of what it is like to be a recipient of child welfare services, as well as a professional in child welfare, therefore they have a unique understanding of the child welfare system that many other professional workers do not have.

The research design we plan to use is qualitative data. Qualitative data is most fitting because our topic is not as established in social work research and because of its complexity. A qualitative approach will capture the different influential factors that lead former foster youth to pursue a profession in child welfare. When conducting exploratory research, a qualitative approach is most fitting. We plan to conduct online interviews with child welfare workers throughout California. Open ended questions will allow our participants the opportunity to share their personal experiences with child welfare. We will inquire about how they perceive their personal experiences and how it shaped them as a child welfare worker. Moreover, the participants will also be asked about their understanding of resiliency and if they perceive themselves as resilient. We believe our research will provide insightful feedback for child welfare workers that could positively enhance how workers engage with their clients.

## Significance of the study

This study is significant to being a platform that allows us to hear from former foster youth who have overcome adversity and have chosen to give back by becoming a child welfare worker. This study can lead us to understanding the next steps we need to take to increase engagement of former foster youth as child welfare workers. Their perspective may help fill in the gaps that exist between service providers and service recipients. Understanding the motivation behind their decisions to enter the workforce, may lead us to discover how we can better help the families we serve. Better social work and client engagement has been shown to provide better outcomes for families involved in child protective services. Additionally, identifying ways that former foster youth have overcome adversity may highlight ways that can be applied in the profession of social work and help others in the system. There is unlimited potential for the benefits that may come from the information that will be received as a result of this study, which has the ability to educate child welfare practitioners and policymakers. We seek to understand how personal narratives coupled with professional experiences in social work can create effective social workers. There are three main questions that our study seeks to know: What factors lead former foster youth to become workers in child welfare? Do these workers have any advantages because of their past personal experiences with child welfare? And do child welfare workers who were former foster youth consider themselves resilient? These three questions are the primary focus of this study.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

There are three areas of relevant research that provide a foundation for the current study. The first body of research focuses on the influential factors that affect foster youth and their career choices. Prior research reveals the barriers to employment that prevent foster alumni from becoming social workers and reveals why some foster alumni have chosen social work as their career choice. The second area explores some of the personal experiences that former foster youth have had while receiving services from the child welfare system. This gives us insight into how their experiences, whether good or bad, may have influenced their career choices. The final area of research looks at resiliency and how former foster youth have risen above adversity to be successful in life. Understanding resiliency prompts us to consider how resiliency can be encouraged in foster youth.

#### Influential factors that affect foster youth and their career choices

Our research topic seeks to discover why foster alumni enter the profession of child welfare, but there is limited literature on this specific topic. However, to get a broader understanding of factors that affect foster youth from becoming child welfare workers, we considered education as a major factor in one's career choice. Literature suggests that former foster youth overall have

poor employment and educational outcomes compared to the general population of youth (Hook, 2010), which directly affects their opportunities to choose any kind of career. Hook and Courtney (2011) suggest that a reason for this disparity among former foster youth is that they are limited in acquiring personal, human, and social capital which affect important factors, such as one's education and personal skill set, behaviors, and connections to others as well as social networks, which all influence employment outcome. Their research indicates that many foster youth don't have the necessary networks or support that they need to help prepare them for future employment. This puts foster youth at a disadvantage compared to the general population who are more connected to their community and have more access to accumulate the personal, human, and social capital that one needs to build their future.

Hook and Courtney's study (2011) revealed that human capital in the form of educational attainment was an indicator of better employment outcomes and youth who earned higher wages, showed to have higher educational attainment (Hook and Courtney, 2011). According to the study of Hook and Courtney (2011), lack of education has proven to be a stumbling block for earning employment and higher wages and it is disproportionately affecting foster youth. Considering that limited access to education affects foster youth and their career choices, it can be understood that this also limits the amount of eligible former foster youth who could work in child welfare. For example, the minimum qualifications for someone to become a child welfare social worker in California requires a bachelor's

degree. Based on what we know from the literature (Hook and Courtney, 2011) there would be much fewer former foster youth who could meet this minimum requirement compared to the general population. There would be much fewer former foster youth who could meet this minimum requirement compared to the general population. Therefore, foster youth have fewer chances of becoming child welfare workers than the general population. That is all the more reason why we need to understand how some former foster youth have risen above their circumstances to be able to do this kind of work.

A study by Tobolowsky et al. (2019), provides more insight into why barriers to education exist for foster youth, which directly affects their future employment opportunities. The study focused on former foster youth who sought education after aging out of the foster care system. The purpose of the study was to find out what educational experiences former foster youth had, as well as discovering what were the hindrances and/or supports that positively or negatively contributed to their experience of obtaining an education (Tobolowsky et al. 2019). The findings from their study focus on the foster youth alumni's perceived value of education, the multiple challenges former foster youth face in getting to and through higher education, and the importance of having support (Tobolowsky et al. 2019). The participants of foster youth alumni from the study viewed education as a way for them to achieve better opportunities and stability for themselves, which was important for them to have so that they wouldn't follow in the footsteps of the caretakers who had failed them (Tobolowsky et al. 2019).

Many former foster youth do not have a positive role model or support person that can aid them in completing a higher education. Our study seeks to explore if former foster youth who are now child welfare workers provide encouragement as a role model to the current foster youth they work with.

Tobolowsky and colleagues' study (2019) revealed the life struggles former foster youth faced that made it hard for them to build relationships and receive support from others. For instance, they couldn't connect with peers or teachers at their schools because they moved around very frequently (Tobolowsky et al. 2019). They also didn't feel prepared to emancipate even after receiving Adult Living courses because such courses didn't cover important topics like how to apply for college (Tobolowsky et al. 2019). Lacking personal and institutional support to encourage their independence were just some of the disadvantages that the former foster youth reported experiencing (Tobolowsky et al. 2019). Taking these factors into account, we can conclude that more must be done to adequately prepare foster youth to achieve educational and employment opportunities. If more support is given to foster youth, they would have higher chances at success in their adult lives and future careers, which could also mean there could be more foster alumni that would possibly consider the profession of child welfare.

In order to help us understand the influential factors of foster youth choosing a profession, we explored why some foster alumni have chosen social work as their career choice. Present literature hasn't examined why some foster

alumni have chosen to work in the specific realm of child welfare, but research highlights why some former foster youth have become social workers. A study conducted by Csikai and Rozensky (1977) attempted to examine the levels of social work idealism in BSW and MSW students and the relationship between these levels and the students' motivation for choosing social work as a career. The researchers used a convenience sample of BSW and MSW students in their first semester. Both levels of students were given a five-page questionnaire to measure their social work idealism. The researchers defined "social work idealism" as thoughts and behaviors that value and promote individual and societal change. The second section of the survey covered the motivations for choosing social work which comprised 14 items. The two statements that received the highest scores were "Each individual has unique qualities that should be valued" and "All people should be encouraged to reach their full potential." The exploratory reasons: growing up in a dysfunctional family, encouragement from family and friends, positive experiences with those in the profession turned out to be only slightly or moderately important in students' choice of social work (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997). This research utilizes the three exploratory reasons why one may choose to enter into the profession of social work. We can compare our findings to those of Csikai and Rozensky since our population has personal experience with children and family services in comparison to BSW and MSW students. This can shed light on the different

influential factors of child welfare workers who have personal experiences with child welfare compared to those who have no prior involvement.

A study conducted by Rompf and Royse (1994) helps us to understand the influential factors that lead students in general to pursue the social work profession. Only BSW students were included in this study at a total of 243 students. The researchers identified seven traumatic life events: parents unhappily married, emotional problems, alcoholism or drug addiction, family break-up, serious or life-threatening illness, child abuse or neglect, and death of a parent, brother, or sister. An astonishing 71% of all social work students had experienced one or more of the seven traumatic life events which were substantially higher than the nonsocial work students. This is relevant to our study because our population most likely has experienced one or more of these seven traumatic events. In addition, when asked if these childhood experiences influenced their career choice approximately 39% of the social worker students answered "Yes" in comparison to the 14% of nonsocial work students who answered "Yes." This indicates their personal life experiences had an impact on their career choice, and that their adverse childhood experiences had a significant impact on them becoming social workers. This supports what we predict about former foster youth, that their decision to enter the profession of child welfare is highly motivated by their personal life experience in the system.

Furthermore, their study found that 24% of social work students credited a social worker to influencing their career path in social work. This implies that a

significant percentage of social work students were inspired to enter the field because of their interactions or personal experiences with a social worker. This study attempts to explore how foster alumni who work in child welfare could encourage current foster youth they are serving to become employed in child welfare themselves. The power of positive interactions with child welfare workers could motivate someone's career choice. This is again why foster alumni hold much value as child welfare workers. This study will examine these ideas further to better understand what brought foster alumni into the field of child welfare, and what kind of impact it has had on them and their work.

#### The Experiences of Former Foster Youth

Another important area of research that impacted our study was finding literature regarding former foster youths' experiences in the child welfare system. Our study is predicting that the experiences former foster youth have had in the child welfare system, whether good or bad, has influenced their decision to become employed in the child welfare system. Although there is no current or formal research that connects foster youths' experience in child welfare to their employment in the child welfare system, literature does provide insight into lived experiences of foster youth.

Peterson (2004) examined the perceptions that former foster youth had of their time in the child welfare system. All the participants in this study were attending college at the time and were asked questions about which factors they believed contributed to their independence and participation in college, as well as

the factors that enhanced or limited their opportunities to attend college. They were also asked about the services they received while in child welfare, how they prepared for emancipation, and what support and preventative programs could have assisted them in becoming independent and attending college (Peterson, 2004). Through a semi-structured interview process, 10 participants were asked these types of questions and the findings suggest that 70% of foster youth participants did not receive any service to prepare them for emancipation nor did they receive help from their foster parents or birth family (Peterson, 2004). This indicates that many foster youth may consider their experiences in child welfare as negative due to the lack of preparedness that was offered to them prior to emancipation. These experiences that are negative are likely to have an impact on how foster youth choose their future career paths.

The qualitative data also found that most former foster youth felt that they were forced to learn how to become independent on their own, feeling alone and without support, which is why most of them felt unprepared when leaving the foster care system (Peterson, 2004). Although the majority of participants felt unprepared, it was stated that their main priority was to get out and leave care, and many felt a sense of freedom upon leaving the child welfare system (Peterson, 2004). The information from this study implies that most foster youth want nothing more than to leave the child welfare system because of negative feelings and experiences, however, were resilient to seek higher education despite the lack of support from their guardians nor the child welfare system.



These negative feelings towards the child welfare system have the potential to either deter foster youth from entering the profession of child welfare, or to motivate them to join the workforce in order to improve outcomes for foster youth which will be explored in our study.

### Foster Youth and Resiliency

Former foster youth who become child welfare workers demonstrate resilience. Their decision to enter the child welfare profession despite having negative experiences receiving services is a powerful testament to the ability to overcome obstacles and choose to help others navigate similar life circumstances. The current literature doesn't feature the inspiring stories of resilience in foster alumni who decide to enter the child welfare profession, however some research highlights how resiliency has been cultivated in former foster youth.

Despite adverse childhood experiences former foster youth endure in life, literature supports they can become resilient with the presence of caring adults in their lives. A 2017 study done by Darlene Neal examined the success of foster youth transitioning out of care and into rigorous academic institutions upon their high school graduation. The study asked questions to both the foster youth transitioning out of care and to the supportive adults in their lives such as teachers, counselors, extended family, and community members (Neal, 2017). Former foster youth were asked what they thought were the factors that either helped or hindered their process to enroll in a university (Neal, 2017). The adults

were asked what they thought were the factors that contributed to the foster youths' success and also, what they thought their role was in contributing to that success (Neal, 2017). The participants of this study came from voluntary participation in a survey that was administered to college students who identified as former foster youth through the university (Neal, 2017).

The results of the survey and interviews revealed several protective factors that motivated former foster youth to successfully transition out of care and into attending a university (Neal, 2017). A common motivation for success among foster youth was their desire to defy the odds and resist their difficult circumstances (Neal, 2017). They spoke of using their past experiences in foster care as an aspiration to attend college (Neal, 2017). Having supportive environments and supportive adults in their lives were other protective factors that were named (Neal, 2017). This is significant to our research because foster alumni who become child welfare workers have the potential to be powerful role models of resiliency and inspire current foster youth to be resilient. The findings from Neal's study (2017) imply that protective factors can motivate foster youth to become successful following their emancipation from foster care, and former foster youth can be intrinsically motivated to succeed. This supports our research because foster youth can be resilient whether their experiences in child welfare were negative or positive. We want to understand how foster alumni became encouraged to work in child welfare and uncover how their resiliency motivated them to help themselves, and others.

## Theory Guiding Conceptualization

Resiliency theory will be used to guide our conceptualization of our study. Resiliency theory is most fitting for our study because it is the framework that explores how youth grow up to be healthy adults despite experiencing adversity in their lives (Zimmerman, 2013). The researchers consider that the participants in our study who were former foster youth have faced adversity in their life because of their involvement in the child welfare system. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the factors of resilience that helped these individuals overcome their childhood experiences to become child welfare workers. Resilience theory looks at the positive individual, social, and contextual factors that have contributed to the positive outcomes in a person's life despite their trajectory for being at higher risk of behavior, mental, or health problems (Zimmerman, 2013). This study seeks to use resiliency theory to explore what positive factors may have helped our participants to become resilient in their lives.

## Summary

This study attempts to understand the influential factors that lead one to become a child welfare worker after having personal experiences with children and family services. Research revealed many social workers credit their personal experiences as influencing their career choice. Our study seeks to understand if

those who self-identify as former foster youth see their personal experiences as an influential factor in becoming a child welfare social worker. Though some findings show prior involvement with social work was present when discussing the influential factors of becoming a social worker, this study will explore the dynamics of this relationship in more detail. Furthermore, research highlights resilience when discussing former foster youths' success in attaining higher education despite adverse childhood experiences and trauma. This study will identify the presence of resilience in our participants and explore how this may assist them in their profession.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHODS

#### Introduction

The researchers utilized a qualitative design to answer three research questions. Qualitative data was most fitting because the research topic was not as established in social work research; it was exploratory. When conducting exploratory research, a qualitative approach is most fitting. The researchers used purposive sampling and contacted current or previous child welfare workers within the Inland Empire region of Southern California to identify those who work

in child welfare and were once a recipient of child welfare services. The researchers conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews via the online video conferencing website, Zoom, with child welfare workers from the Inland Empire and one participant who was from out of state. The out of state participant heard about our study and met the qualifications, so they also participated in the interview.

### Study Design

This study used an exploratory/qualitative design to examine the experiences of former foster youth who are currently employed as child welfare workers and have worked at least one year in child welfare, to explore what motivated them to enter this profession. The researchers conducted an open-ended interview that was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the influential factors that lead former foster youth to become child welfare workers? (2) Do they have any advantages because of their personal experiences with child welfare? (3) Do child welfare workers who were former foster youth consider themselves resilient?

### Sampling

A combination of purposive non-random sampling and snowball sampling methods were used in this study. The participants were recruited from child welfare agencies in the Inland Empire, however a participant out of state was also interested in participating in the study. The population of interest to this

study is former foster youth who are current or previous child welfare workers, therefore criteria to participate included being a former foster youth who has worked in child welfare. If participants were previously child welfare workers, they must have had at least one year of experience working in child welfare. The sample consisted of 12 participants between the ages of 27 and 57 and the majority of the participants were female. Most participants were recruited by word of mouth through the researcher's personal contacts with professionals who know child welfare employees. The researchers would contact those by text message or email to discuss the purpose of the study and to confirm their interest to participate.

Other participants were recruited via email and flyers that were sent out at county child welfare agencies within the Inland Empire, with granted permission from the county. The researchers used informed consent to convey to participants that participation in this study was completely voluntary and individuals should only participate if they were interested in doing so. The recruitment email provided a description of the purpose of the study and eligibility requirements for participation. The email also informed potential participants that we would need at least 30-45 minutes of their time to complete an interview online and those participants would receive a complimentary \$35 Amazon E-gift card. We asked the participants who met the criteria to provide the researchers with their names and phone numbers in order for them to be contacted. The researchers then made an appointment with the participants to be interviewed at

a time that was convenient for them. Interviews were set up via Zoom, and the interview was recorded with granted permission by the participants.

### Data Collection and Instruments

The data collection instrument used in this study was developed by the researchers. The instrument consisted of six demographic questions: ethnicity, age, gender, highest educational attainment, years in child welfare, and current job title. The instrument also consisted of ten semi structured interview questions focusing on: respondent's motivation for entering the profession of child welfare, the influence that being a former foster youth had on their decision to work in this field, if they consider themselves resilient, how their resilience has helped them to be where they are today, who or what may have helped them to become resilient, their feelings and experiences of receiving foster care services in the past, their feelings and experiences about working in child welfare as a foster alumni, what unique challenges or barriers they may have as former foster youth working in child welfare, and what unique advantages they may have as former foster youth working in child welfare.

### Procedures

Potential participants were reached via email, which included a description of the purpose of the study and eligibility criteria. The email also informed potential participants the interview would take between 30-45 minutes of their time. The participants who met the criteria provided the researchers with

their names and phone numbers in order for them to be contacted to make an appointment with the researchers to be interviewed at a time that was convenient for them. Flyers were also utilized to recruit participants which included information about the purpose of the study, possible risk, and researchers' contact information. After obtaining approval from child welfare agencies, a flyer was posted in break rooms. The flyer was also emailed to the staff. Interviews were set up via Zoom and the interview was recorded with granted permission by the participants.

Before conducting the interview, participants were provided an informed consent to sign. The informed consent covered the purpose of the study and a clear description of the type of questions to be asked. Moreover, confidentiality, risk, and benefits of the study was also included in the informed consent. Participants were asked to initial that they understood the interview would be recorded. Also provided to all participants in the informed consent was the faculty advisor's contact information if they had any further questions. By signing, the participants acknowledge they are 18 years of age or older, have read and understood the document and agree to participate in the study. A \$35 Amazon E-gift card would be given to all participants. Permission from the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained for this study on December 30, 2021 and expires on December 30, 2022.

#### Protection of Human Subjects



The researchers prioritized maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants in this study. The researchers asked participants for their name, age, gender, and ethnicity, however the researchers kept participants' names separate from data and did not disclose participant's' names in any part of the study. Participants' names and other identifying information remain confidential. The demographic descriptors that are collected cannot be linked to participants' names in the study. To protect their personal identifiable information, all data that was collected from any interviews, recordings, or records have been stored in a password protected computer. Researchers will use pseudonyms and/or numbers to identify the participant responses/video-recordings. All forms of data will be destroyed three months after it has been analyzed.

There were some potential emotional, physical and/or psychological short-term risks involved with our study, however, support and resources were provided to all participants. Discussing past involvement in foster care may elicit negative emotional and psychological anxiety. Discussing adversities may trigger deep emotions and may also create stress. Stress can present physical symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, sweaty palm, aches and pains, and trouble sleeping. The researchers were prepared to offer immediate consolation to participants who appear to be experiencing emotional stress and anxiety.

The researchers are aware that every individual's conceptualization of their personal experience is different. Prior to the interview, the researchers

provided every participant a debriefing statement prior to informing them of the potential risks of participating in this study. Some risks that were identified were potential emotional, physical and/or psychological short-term risks in answering some of the questions. The debriefing statement also included counseling services and emergency hotline numbers. Additionally, the respondents were told they were not required to answer all the questions, could stop at any time, and had the option to skip any questions. Additionally, for this research project, there were no risks related to contracting COVID-19 because the interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online video conferencing website, which mitigated any COVID-19 risks. Participants did not have any direct benefits in the study; however, the findings and information will contribute to our knowledge of factors that help foster youth to become resilient. Participants may intrinsically benefit from being a part of a study that seeks to understand the experiences of foster youth, so that social workers can better support their resilience.

### Data Analysis

To assess current child welfare workers' subjective experiences and to acquire their perspectives and meanings associated with responses to their own involvement with child welfare, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews lasting up to forty-five minutes. The approach was derived by phenomenology and supported through the use of an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) informed approach to the data analyses. As an approach that is 'participant oriented', Interpretive

Phenomenological Analysis approach allows the participants to express themselves and their lived experiences without any constraints. Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014) provide a set of flexible guidelines for IPA which can be modified by individual researchers according to their research objectives. The first stage of IPA involves close reading of the transcript numerous times. The researchers made notes about their observations and reflections about the interview experience or any other thoughts and comments of potential significance. In the next stage, the researchers transformed their notes into emergent themes. The next stage involves the researchers seeking relationships and clustering themes. The researchers identified any connections between emerging themes, grouping them together according to conceptual similarities, and providing each cluster with a descriptive label (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Lastly, researchers must write a narrative account of the study. It is crucial that each theme is described and exemplified with extracts from interview(s), followed by analytic comments from the authors.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

For our qualitative research study, the researchers used a combination of purposive non-random sampling and snowball sampling. The researchers interviewed a total of 12 participants who worked in the child welfare setting. All participants were interviewed in February 2022. All 12 participants were either a current or former child welfare worker. The results of this study answered the following research questions: (1) What are the influential factors that lead former foster youth to become child welfare workers? (2) Do they have any advantages because of their personal experiences with child welfare? (3) Do child welfare workers who were former foster youth consider themselves resilient? After collecting the data, common themes were identified and categorized into 7 major themes including: Resiliency; Passion for the Profession; Improve the System; Wanting to Do More; Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement; Benefit of Services; and Trauma and Mental Health. In this chapter, the demographics of the research participants and the identified themes are detailed.

#### Demographics

The ages of our 12 participants ranged from 27 and 57. The majority of the participants were female with only three of the participants being male. Four of the participants identified as white, two participants identified as Mixed-Race,

three participants identified as African American, two participants identified as Hispanic, and one participant identified as Native American. All participants had worked in the child welfare setting for at least two years. The average number of years our participants worked in child welfare was 10 and ranged from 35 years and two years. All participants graduated from high school, one participant completed some college, five participants obtained bachelor's degrees, and six participants obtained master's degrees. Most of our participants were based in Southern California within Riverside and San Bernardino County, and one participant was from Wisconsin. Of the 12 participants, three no longer worked in the child welfare setting. Of the 12 participants, three continued to work in the child welfare setting in a different capacity, as a clinical therapist, program specialist for the county, or supervisor for the county. Therefore, half of the participants continued to be employed in child welfare as case carrier workers or peer and family assistants.

## Results

### Resiliency

All participants attributed resiliency as an important factor in their ability to overcome the barriers from their past and be able to work in the child welfare setting. Participant 9 stated that resiliency has helped them to overcome a lot of childhood trauma. They had to work very hard to overcome everything that happened to them as a child. Participant 9 stated, "I would say that I'm pretty

resilient, and I feel like most foster youth are.” All participants were confident in their resilience and acknowledged their ability to move forward in life despite difficulties. Participant 3 stated,

I feel like I have developed just a figure-it-out type of personality, ability to problem solve, ability to have confidence in myself, ability to understand my self-worth, ability to understand that my experiences are valuable.

When I speak about resilience, that’s where I feel like my resilience comes from...that’s gotten me to where I am because child welfare work...it’s hard work.

Participant 12 also expressed that their resiliency has helped them to persevere in this field of work. They stated, “I consider myself very resilient...I’m able to deal with a lot. I guess I could say I’m able to work and navigate the chaos more than others. That’s how I believe I survived 21 years in this field.” All participants shared that the negative experiences they had endured did not stop them from becoming resilient and moving forward with their lives.

### Passion for the Profession

Many participants stated that a career in child welfare requires an individual to be truly passionate about the work. Participant 1 stated that one needs a specific kind of dedication and passion to do this job well, “because if you don’t, you will get swallowed up by this career”. Participant 12 stated, “Money is not enough to keep you doing the job. You have to really like what you

do. You have to really wanna be here. It's like this job is a calling." Many participants stated that their passion to help foster youth motivates them to stay in the child welfare career. Participant 2 stated "That's the satisfaction part of the job, when you see that your work is actually making a difference. That's the benefit that I like to see and that's what keeps me going in the midst of a stressful environment." Participant 7 highly suggests for former foster youth to work in the field of child welfare because they will be able to help another person who has experienced the same or similar things as they once did which "is a very, very rewarding thing that not many people can say they get in their job." Participant 7 also stated that being a former foster youth who works as a social worker in this field "won't feel like work. It's gonna feel like you're going to somewhere you enjoy every single day versus another job...". Participant 7 expressed that it is a fulfilling position because you can change lives by sharing your personal experience that can positively impact foster youth. "I think that you would enjoy it way more than anything in the world", said Participant 7. Participant 6 stated, "I think going through the foster care system, I think that's what the main thing is about, getting into the field or just having a passion to help other people." All participants expressed a passion for helping others while working in the field of child welfare, which was their main motivation for working in this field.

## Improving the System

All participants expressed the need for the child welfare system to be improved, and had the desire to be a part of that change by working in the child welfare setting. Participant 5 stated,

I really want to make change in the child welfare system instead of just complaining about it. The first way to do that is to actually become a social worker and work for a child welfare system. That's why I chose to participate in this field.

Many participants stated that their negative experiences as a foster youth is what motivated them to want to change or improve child welfare services for future foster youth. For example, Participant 7 stated, "I didn't feel very supported, and I didn't feel very encouraged by her (the social worker). I wanted to be a better social worker and give back to the foster youth to give them what I didn't get." Many participants attributed their negative experience in foster care to the lack of relationship they had with their social worker. For example, Participant 9 expressed a lack of connection and support from their social worker stating,

It seemed like majority of the social workers I had genuinely did not care, or maybe they were burnt out...that let me down about child welfare, and that's also why I wanted to change it, because I wanted to be the person who cared, and I want to be the person who actually takes time.

Participants desired to improve the child welfare system by being the change that they wished to see. Participant 8 explained that they went into the



profession to be that one person who makes a difference, wanting to make a change and wanting to change the child welfare system for the better. The majority of participants expressed that their experience receiving child welfare services as a foster youth, served as an example of what they did not want to be as a professional in the field. Participant 3 stated, “(my experience as a former foster youth) gave me a base of who I didn’t want to be as a social worker...I didn’t want to be just somebody that came in and out and just did the bare minimum”. Participant 4 stated

I’m gonna do this because foster children need to be heard...I watched her (my social worker) closely and was taking notes in my head of everything I’m gonna do differently...I knew there needed to be improvements in the system.

Few participants expressed that they encountered social workers that they connected well with as a dependent, however some participants were inspired to be like the person who helped them. Participant 9 implied wanting to be like a social worker who made a positive impact in their life, stating,

What motivated me is that I had some pretty bad social workers, and I also had one really amazing social worker, when I was a foster youth...I had that one really good social worker who I felt genuinely cared for my well-being, and so I entered the foster care system as a child welfare worker in order to be that one worker that really cares about their kids.

Similarly, Participant 11 stated being positively impacted by their independent life coach worker and stated that this person “helped me know that just because I’m a foster kid doesn't mean I can’t do anything, so I went into the county to try to be that social worker for other foster kids”. All participants, whether motivated by negative or positive experiences, were motivated to enter the field of child welfare to improve the system through their service delivery to foster youth and families.

#### Wanting to Do More

All participants expressed that not having the capacity to do more for their clients was one of the most difficult aspects of being a former foster youth who works in child welfare. Participants expressed a desire to do more than what is possible due to the constraints by the profession. Participant 1 stated they feel like they are contradicting themselves as a social worker when they decide they are going to do whatever they can to help kids out, and then are limited due to issues with funding and policy. Participant 1 stated

We can do this because we work as a government entity, and I know we got the money to do. We have the funds to do this, so why can’t we do this? Aren’t we supposed to do whatever we can for these youth? Why are we sitting here and not doing something about it? ’Cause you’re telling me because so and so at a higher level said no, because of the money issue,

and stuff like that. Please. I'm not doing it for—I'm not doing it for me. I'm doing it for them, so please help them out.

Several participants expressed that they sometimes go above and beyond for their clients, wanting to do more, because they feel personally compelled to do so as a former foster youth. Participant 8 stated,

It's just that I know what it was like to be in the foster care system, and because I do, I want to do more. More than I can, really. That's definitely been one of the things that I've been affected with...

Participant 1 expressed, "there's been a few instances in certain situations with kids on my caseload where I go the extra mile because I know that if I was back in foster care right now, I would want that for myself, you know what I mean?". Most participants expressed that high case loads prevent them from being able to do more for their clients. Participant 9 stated,

You're very stretched thin, and you have a really hard time reaching all of them (clients) that you wanna reach. That was a huge challenge and barrier for me, is that I'm very empathetic, and I wanted to reach all of them, and because of caseloads, it's impossible

Participant 3 stated that the amount of work and caseloads don't allow for social workers to actually do the work that is needed to prevent children from becoming dependent, to successfully reunify families, and to keep them from coming back to the system. Participant 3 continued saying "...You don't have time. The workload, the caseload, you don't have time to do true social work".

Participant 12 stated that they want to be more accessible to the families they are working with, however “it is very hard when you have 50 to 60 kids on the caseload, and you’ve got all these requirements that you have to meet in state and federal requirements, of the county, department”. They continued saying “...social workers can’t really be expected or really do their job if you’re carrying such a high caseload. I mean there’s just no way”. All participants expressed being limited in their capacity to do more for their clients which served as a challenge or barrier to them in their career.

### Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement

One of the biggest advantages all former foster youth expressed was their ability to understand, relate and engage with their clients because of their shared experiences. For example, Participant 9 stated, “I do feel like I have a better understanding than other social workers would, an understanding because I was in those shoes before”. Many participants expressed similar sentiments, explaining that their lived experience in foster care is what provided their deep understanding of what their clients go through. For example, Participant 10, stated, “I’m somebody who’s literally been in their shoes. I think it has helped me to be able to create some understanding, even as far as the youth themselves.” Participants implied that their lived experience in the child welfare system also made it easier for them to build rapport, make connections, and inspire current foster youth. Participants explained how they can use their similar experiences to

relate and motivate current foster youth. Participant 8 implied the benefits of using their relatability with clients and shared,

Now, as a child welfare worker working with foster youth, I've been able to use my own experiences and the fact that they can relate to me to inspire them and motivate them and let them know this is not the end. This is just the beginning. You can work your way out of this, and there's people to help you.

Similarly, Participant 7 used their lived experience to empathize and encourage foster youth who felt like no one understood them, stating,

A lot of the times, when you're in the system, you don't feel like you have anyone that can relate to you, who understands you. You often tell your social workers, "You don't know how rough it is. You don't know how hard it is to live my life," but when I work with them, they can't say those things to me because I can tell 'em, "Hey. I do know what you're going through. I've been through it. I've overcome it. If I can do it, you can do it."

Most participants feel they have more compassion for the clients they serve because they understand them on a deeper level. Additionally, Participant 12 indicated the advantage of being able to understand their clients' difficult circumstances due to their lived experience. Participant 12 shared,

Just being in this capacity will give you an advantage 'cause you'll already have compassion for the children that you work with, and you could look

past the anger, understand their frustrations, and so forth, more than those folk who have not experienced what you've experienced.

Further participant 1 expressed,

An advantage I feel [I have is] I'm able to understand youth on a deeper level, not just doing my job as a social worker, but on a real life one-on-one communication with the child or the youth to be able to understand their feelings and to know exactly where they're at, not just a pinpoint or a checkpoint or a rough estimate, like exactly, and to be able to feel their hurt, to feel their pain, and to be able to want to do something about it.

Not all participants self-disclose their personal experiences being a former foster youth. However, those who felt it would benefit their client by self-disclosing expressed that it helped the youth be more willing to share. Participant 2 shared,

I'm able to tell my story to those youth who may be troubled and going through something. They may be more receptive—they're more receptive to hear it from me than those who just went to school and studied the subject. I have more of an insight, and they listen more when I actually speak, and I tell 'em where I come from. They're more inclined to listen to me because we have common ground.

Participant 7 discussed the benefits of sharing their experiences by stating, "I could build that rapport, and they were more willing to talk to me and open up versus a regular person who doesn't have the same experience. They

probably wouldn't share as much with them as they would myself.” Similarly, participant 7 explained a “lightbulb connection” when a youth realizes they have a social worker who actually understands them and can relate to them. All participants expressed the biggest advantage of having similar experiences with their clients helps them engage more effectively and build rapport.

### Benefit of Services

Participants expressed that they either benefited from services or wished they had the chance to benefit from services and placed an important value on the accessibility of services for the children they serve. Participants explained that they were not aware of all the benefits they qualified for and placed importance on educating their clients on the available services and resources. Participant 9 stated,

I feel like as a foster youth, you have a little more ability to advocate for their needs, especially because when I was in foster youth, there's so many programs that I didn't even know about that I wish I would have known about when I was in high school, that I coulda taken advantage of in college, or even after college, to help me out. Now that I know about those programs, I want to get all of that information, as much as I can, to my foster youth.

Most participants that felt they benefited from services happened after they graduated high school and attended college. Participants 3, 5, 7, 8 and 10

spoke highly of the services they received in college and felt it supported their higher education. Participant 7 shared that she did not feel like the county services were helpful but once she entered college is when she felt she benefited from services. Participant 10 shared that she would have been homeless many times if it was not for the services she received from extended foster care. One participant experienced not being eligible for benefits after 18 because he was not assigned a worker. He stated, "I know at 18, I had to fend for myself. I had to really fend for myself. I didn't get all these additional services and support that everybody else got." This participant has been called by supervisors and colleagues a "connoisseur of services" because of their knowledge of various resources. Participant 1 further stated,

I'm grateful to know of all these services because in reality, I could give a person knowledge. I can give a person opportunity, especially the youth...I still, wherever I can, if a social worker comes up to ask me about services, I'll let 'em know.

Participant 3 benefitted from ILP services and expressed that it was beneficial because they felt a strong sense of community with the support of mentors and constant encouragement. Participant 8 stated that they benefited from being a part of the Renaissance Scholars Program in college. All participants whether they themselves directly benefited from services or not recognized the importance of services and the impact they can have on a youth's success.



## Trauma and Mental Health

All participants offered advice to foster youth who may be considering a career in child welfare. By far the biggest advice was for them to work on their trauma and mental health before entering this field because they are more susceptible to experiencing secondary or vicarious trauma in the field. Participant 8 stated, "...acknowledge your traumas and work with them. Try and heal from them, just because you might think that because it was so long ago, you're over it now, you will get blindsided and you might get triggered." Participants when discussing their trauma referred to it as "emotional baggage" and the importance of addressing it. All participants discussed the profession as being emotionally demanding and the importance of addressing any triggers. Participant 7 stated, "I would tell them as long as you're able to emotionally handle it. Because you do go through a lot, and you do hear a lot, it may trigger you." Participants also spoke of the importance of having self-awareness to avoid countertransference. Participant 11 stressed,

Work on your own trauma first. Learn what your triggers are. Learn how to cope with them. Learn how to not have that countertransference so that you don't go in and have your heart shattered every single time you get a case or something that might be related to what you went through as a child.

Participants also suggested therapy to former foster youth who are considering a career in child welfare. Participant 9 stated,

I feel like you need to be in some form of therapy, or have gone through your traumas of your own, because you're gonna get cases that trigger you. You're gonna get cases that you relate to heavily. I feel like if you're reliving your own trauma, and you haven't processed that trauma yet, you're not gonna be helpful to your clients

Participant 4 stated, "Do the hard work. Do the therapy. Do the self-examination when people call you out on somethin'..." Participants also recommended being aware of any bias and having boundaries when working with your families. Participant 2 stressed the importance of taking breaks in order to restore your mental health in this profession. All participants when giving advice to foster youth who are considering a career in child welfare emphasized self-awareness and acknowledging bias.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The following chapter discusses the findings from the interviews obtained from the 12 participants of this study. Additionally, this chapter compares the study's findings to existing literature related to foster youths' experiences in child welfare, employment, and resiliency. Barriers and advantages are identified from the findings that lead to a discussion of practice implications for work in child welfare. Furthermore, limitations and strengths of the study, and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research are illustrated in this chapter.

### Resiliency

Most of our participants acknowledged their resiliency and were connected to individuals whom they believed had supported their resiliency. This reflects what the literature suggests about former foster youth who are resilient with the presence of caring adults in their lives (Neal, 2017). Every participant named people who made an impact on their lives, for example, high school teachers, college professors, family members, foster family, social workers, coaches, and mentors. Participants also mentioned that being involved in the community, connected to God, or participating in activities they enjoyed were also factors that supported their resiliency. Every participant also stated that their resiliency not only helped them to overcome their childhood trauma, but also

helped them to be resilient as a professional in the demanding field of child welfare. Their sentiments about the strength and resiliency that is needed for former foster youth to work in child welfare implies that former foster youth must be sure that they have the mental and emotional capacity to work in the field that could be triggering.

Literature suggested that supportive environments and supportive adults serve as protective factors to increase resiliency in individuals who have experienced adversity (Neal, 2017). Social work practice can support resiliency in foster youth by connecting them to supportive environments such as social groups and a community of people they feel connected to. Child welfare workers can link foster youth to environments that serve as protective factors such as mentorship programs, interest groups, clubs, and activities they can enjoy with their peers to encourage relationship building and support. In addition, child welfare workers can use a strength-based approach to support resiliency in foster youth. The impact that child welfare workers can have on the resiliency of foster youth cannot be underestimated. For example, Participant 11 stated that their ILP worker was a huge motivator in their life and inspired them to go to college. Child welfare workers can be an example of a caring adult in the lives of foster youth, serving as a protective factor, which can help to support their resiliency.

## Passion for the Profession

All of our participants went into the field of child welfare in order to help children and families go through the system that they were once a part of. Not one participant mentioned the salary as the reason they entered the field. Participants expressed that child welfare work is difficult and requires a genuine passion to help clients. Their passion for the career was fueled by their firsthand experiences in the system. This is consistent with the findings from Rompf and Royse (1994) which revealed that social work students were influenced to choose a career in social work due to their personal traumatic childhood experiences. Former foster youth who become child welfare workers have a special, unique passion to serve clients in the field which translates into a higher quality of service delivery that they provide.

Child welfare would greatly benefit to employ more former foster youth into the field who can inspire policy, foster youth, child welfare professionals, and staff with their ability to passionately advocate for the child welfare client population. An increased representation of former foster youth as child welfare professionals can lead to a higher quality of service delivery, due to the exemplary passion and dedication that former foster youth have in their work. Social work practice in child welfare can seek to provide more employment opportunities for former foster youth who would like to work in child welfare. Social work practice can increase the involvement former foster youth have in the

child welfare setting as well as increase their professional benefits as an incentive.

### Improve the system

The participants' desires to improve the child welfare system were motivated by the experiences they had with their former social workers. There were more reports of negative experiences than positive, as the majority of participants did not have a genuine connection with their social workers and did not perceive their social workers as being helpful. Participants put an emphasis on wanting to be the change in the system by advocating for foster youth while in their professional roles. Many participants expressed not feeling heard, encouraged, or supported by their former social workers and they did not receive quality service. Some participants stated that they never or rarely ever saw their social worker. Our participants' feelings were consistent with the literature from Peterson (2004) that revealed many former foster youth felt alone, without support and unprepared when leaving the foster care system. The participants in our study wanted to improve the system by working in child welfare to improve the quality of service delivery, which required being more present to the needs of the client and ensuring that they had access to all the resources and support available to them.

Improving service delivery in child welfare requires child welfare workers to be available and present to the needs of their clients. There are barriers, such

as high caseloads, that may prevent social workers from attending to their clients and servicing them as deemed necessary. Additionally, findings from this study imply that clients of the child welfare system benefit from workers who build a genuine connection with them. Interpersonal and rapport-building skills such as active listening and empathy can improve relationships between clients and child welfare workers. Improving service delivery can also include increased staffing, retention, and training of child welfare workers. An increased number of child welfare workers may decrease caseloads, which may increase the amount of time that child welfare workers can spend helping their clients. An increase in support and training may also improve service delivery. For example, providing child welfare workers with a mentor who would help them to navigate policy, paperwork, case management, and client engagement may help them to be more successful and last many years in the field. Guaranteeing increased opportunities for training and mentorship may benefit service delivery of child welfare workers, which would improve the child welfare system as a whole. Providing better service delivery to clients has the potential to alleviate common barriers children in foster care face.

### Wanting to Do More

Not being able to do more for their clients was a major barrier for former foster youth as child welfare workers. This finding was not well-addressed in the literature, however the topic seemed important to our participants. Participants

expressed that, factors such as high caseloads, and issues with funding and policy prevent them from helping the needs of their clients. For example, participants expressed that at times it is not possible to provide the same level of services to every child because of these barriers mentioned. They are unable to do more for their clients for reasons that they cannot control, which creates frustration and lower job satisfaction. For example, Participant 1 stated that when these limitations happen, they feel like they are contradicting themselves as a social worker who is not able to help kids out even though they represent a government entity that is funded to help the kids. Participant 12 believed that the department has the potential to do so much more to help, but there is a disconnect preventing any change from happening. Child welfare could do more to help their clients if systemic changes were made to decrease the limitations and barriers that child welfare workers face in the field.

Systemic changes cannot occur without change in policy; however policy change cannot happen without the advocacy and support for change. The barriers and concerns that child welfare professionals share should be a top concern for the policy and decision making that affect this field. Child welfare professionals who are frontline workers are able to identify the gaps in policy, funding, and staffing that prevent them from doing more for their clients and their voices must be heard. This implies that changes need to be made to improve child welfare practice and to address the common limitations that professionals encounter in the field. In addition, making changes in policy to increase child



welfare workers' ability to do more, may lead to an increase in job satisfaction and employee retention.

### Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement

Child welfare workers who were once former foster youth have an undeniable advantage of being able to understand, relate and engage with their clients because of their shared experiences. This topic is not well discussed in the existing literature; however, our anecdotal reports from this study implore us to recommend future research on the benefits that relatability has for foster alumni as professional child welfare workers. Our participants expressed advantages in engagement and rapport building with their clients due to sharing the commonality of once being a foster youth. Participant 6 stated those who have experiences with being in the system have better insight on what it is their clients are going through and what their needs are. Their ability to build rapport and demonstrate empathy allows them to establish a relationship with their clients. Their clients are less likely to be guarded because they feel seen and heard. Additionally, because their clients view them as authentic and genuine, they are more likely to open up to their worker. This leads to the worker being able to provide better services and resources. Child welfare workers who were once former foster youth are able to inspire the youth on their case by sharing how they overcame adversity.

Increasing the frequency of better engagement may improve service delivery and better outcomes. Though the value of family engagement is widely accepted in the field, it is often absent which leads to unsuccessful efforts to support family and children. A barrier to engagement is the presence of the court process and law enforcement. Families may lose trust for their workers if they do not receive the positive results after a court proceeding despite meeting case plan goals. Workers hold authority positions which may lead to children and families feeling powerless. Workers must be truthful and transparent with their families to avoid disappointment and resentment. Training and coaching for staff are essential in developing better engagement skills. Child welfare workers who were once former foster youth that possess these skills should be the trainers. They can utilize role playing with staff and offer feedback. These trainings must be long enough to allow intensive modeling and practice of these skills. To increase the effectiveness of training and coaching, the practice should be continued in the field. This will allow the staff to see the skills modeled in actual practice and receive coaching on their own skills. Lastly, to ensure engagement practice is effective in the agency it must be measured. Interviewing families and children who are receiving services is the most effective approach.

### Benefit of Services

Another theme that came up in the research is the experiences of receiving services as a foster youth and how it has impacted their practice as a

child welfare worker. More than half of the individuals interviewed indicated the services they received while in care were not helpful; however, the services they received while pursuing higher education were beneficial. During the interviews two individuals missed out on ILP services because social workers did not follow up and eventually were ineligible to participate. Many participants feel they go the “extra mile” for their clients because they would have wanted that for themselves while in care. On the contrary, individuals who had positive experiences with receiving additional services in care because of a social worker, ensure they do the same for their clients by being familiar with resources that can benefit them.

Agency staff must be informed of the services and resources children and youth qualify for both while in care and after, and those services should be offered to every client. Our findings were consistent with the literature from Peterson’s study (2004), which found that 70% of foster youth participants did not receive any services to prepare them for emancipation nor did they receive help from their foster parents or birth family. Child welfare workers must be aware of the importance of additional services for foster youth. Services for foster youth can be essential in preparing them for emancipation. According to Peterson (2004), foster youth reported negative feelings towards child welfare services due to the lack of preparedness for emancipation. In order to assure access to services, staff trainings should inform child welfare workers of foster youths’ right to services. Agencies can share data about how services can alleviate some of foster youths’ needs and improve outcomes. Lastly, agencies should be familiar

with any social media and/or apps that have compiled a list of resources and provide them to their clients.

### Trauma and Mental Health

Prioritizing mental health was a common theme that persists in former foster youth who became child welfare workers. Furthermore, the importance of addressing trauma and triggers was prevalent amongst participants. While the literature review did not recognize former foster youth addressing trauma, it did report that 71% of BSW students had experienced traumatic life events, including child abuse and neglect, which influenced their career choice to become a social worker (1994). Our participants offered advice to current or former foster youth who are considering a profession in child welfare to attend therapy to work through their experiences in foster care which can alleviate potential triggers. They acknowledged the importance of practicing self-awareness and the willingness to address any bias or countertransference. Lastly, many individuals shared that though they went through tough times growing up it has made them the person they are.

Those former foster youth who share with their social worker they are interested in a career in child welfare must be educated on the importance of addressing their own trauma. Social workers can ensure these foster youth are receiving therapy services both while in care and once they exit care. Social

workers can be honest and transparent with the youth on any relevant information or advice about working in child welfare. Social workers who were once former foster youth themselves can be a great asset for the foster youth who are considering a career in social work. Lastly, they can highlight the qualities they attained because of their experiences.

### Limitations of Study

The researchers identified several limitations of this study. The researchers were limited in the number of participants who were available to interview. Although online interviews provided a convenient and accessible way to participate, it was difficult to recruit a larger number of participants due to pandemic conditions and worker shortages. Another limitation we identified was that our research participants were not representative of other potential participants for our study who reside outside of California. We do not have enough data that represents a larger population, preventing us from being able to generalize these findings. Additionally, this study could not compare results from previous literature because very little research has explored former foster youth who become child welfare workers.

### Research Implications

This study inspires new research questions about the number of former foster youth who are working in the child welfare system. Future research should

examine the numbers and experiences of former foster youth who work in the child welfare setting. This research can further our understanding of the impact that former foster youth have as professionals in this field.

We also recommended that future research examines employment retention rates for former foster youth who work in child welfare. Our research findings revealed that former foster youth were motivated to work in child welfare due to their passion to improve the child system and consider themselves resilient, therefore the researchers speculate if those factors also influence former foster youth to remain employed in this field longer than other child welfare workers. Further research could reveal if the passion and dedication that former foster youth have for the profession also translates to higher retention rates in employment.

## Summary

Former foster youth who become child welfare workers are an asset to the child welfare system and have several advantages because of their lived experience that gives them an ability to engage clients, relate, understand them and deliver quality service. They exude a passion for the profession that is greatly influenced by their desire to help foster youth go through the system that they endured. The seven themes revealed in this study identifies barriers that affect former foster youth as child welfare workers that include wanting to do more for their clients and coping with secondary trauma and triggers in the field.

Information was also provided on the importance of foster youth being able to access services and how to support resiliency in foster youth. Future research is highly recommended for further identification of advantages and barriers former foster youth may experience as professionals in the child welfare setting.

APPENDIX A:  
INFORMED CONSENT



## RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate the influential factors that motivated former foster youth's decision to become child welfare social workers. This study is being conducted by Shantel Ortega and Candace Watts under the supervision of Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog Professor of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to explore the motivation behind why former foster youth become re-involved with the child welfare system through employment. Research regarding information about the motivation behind former foster youths' career choices has not been sought, and is scarce to nonexistent. Furthermore, when discussing former foster youths' success in attaining higher education despite adverse childhood experiences and trauma research highlights resilience. We will identify the presence of resilience in our participants and explore how this may assist them in their profession.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked 10 questions focusing on: respondent's motivation for entering the profession of child welfare, the influence that being a former foster youth had on their decision to work in this field, if they consider themselves resilient, how their resilience has helped them to be where they are today, who or what may have helped them to become resilient, their feelings and experiences of receiving foster care services in the past, their feelings and experiences about working in child welfare as a foster alumni, what unique challenges or barriers they may have as former foster youth working in child welfare, and what unique advantages they may have as former foster youth working in child welfare.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time.

**CONFIDENTIAL:** There will be no identifiable information collected that will link the participant to the responses to protect the participant's privacy. Researchers will video record the interview via zoom and it will be stored on a computer database. Computers and zoom accounts are password protected. Data will be destroyed after three years.

**DURATION:** The interview will last 30 - 45 minutes.

**RISKS:** There are some potential emotional, physical and/or psychological short-term risks involved with our study, however, they will be support and resources for those in need. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

**BENEFITS:** Participants will not have any direct benefits in the study; however, the findings and information will contribute to our understanding of any advantages child welfare social workers who previously had personal experience with children and family services possess.

**COMPENSATION:** All respondents will receive a \$35 Amazon gift card after completing the interview.

**VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH:** I understand this research will be Video Recorded Initials\_\_\_\_\_

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Lanesskog at (909) 537-7222.

**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 2022.

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: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B:  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **Study of Why Former Foster Youth Became Child Welfare Social Workers**

### **Debriefing Statement**

The reason for this study is to explore the motivation behind why former foster youth become re-involved with the child welfare system through employment. Participation in this study is voluntary. Results of the study can be obtained from CSUSB ScholarWorks database. Additional information and questions can be directed to Deirdre Lanesskog at (909) 537-7222. Some risks of this study may include potential emotional, physical and/or psychological short-term risks in answering some of the questions. Participants will not have any direct benefits in the study; however, the findings and information will contribute to our understanding of any advantages child welfare social workers who previously had personal experience with children and family services possess.

If you have experienced any distress by the questions of this study additional information for emergency hotline numbers and counseling services are available below.

You may call the National Alliance on Mental Health line at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or text TEXT NAMI TO: 741741 Monday through Friday, 10 am–6 pm, ET.

You may also call or text California Toll Free Mental Health Warm Line at 1-855-845-7415 for non-emergency emotional support and referrals, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

APPENDIX C:  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Demographic questions**

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Educational attainment:

How long have you worked in child welfare:

What's your current position?

1. What motivated you to enter the profession of child welfare?
2. Did being a former foster youth influence your decision to become a child welfare worker?
3. Do you consider yourself resilient?
4. If so, how did your resiliency help you be where you are today?
5. Who or what has helped you to become resilient?
6. What were your feelings and experiences of receiving foster care services in the past?
7. What feelings and experiences do you have with working in child welfare as a former foster youth?
8. What unique challenges or barriers do you have being a former foster youth working in child welfare?
9. What unique advantages do you feel you have being a former foster youth working in child welfare?
10. What advice would you give current or former foster youth who wants to become a child welfare worker?

Interview Questions Created by Candace Watts and Shantel Ortega

APPENDIX D:  
IRB APPROVAL



Candace Watts &lt;007414609@coyote.csusb.edu&gt;

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**IRB-FY2022-111 - Initial: IRB Admin./Exempt Review Determination Letter**


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do-not-reply@cayuse.com &lt;do-not-reply@cayuse.com&gt;

Thu, Dec 30, 2021 at 1:25 PM

To: candace.watts4609@coyote.csusb.edu, Deirdre.Lanesskog@csusb.edu, sylvia.ortega2963@coyote.csusb.edu



December 30, 2021

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
 Administrative/Exempt Review Determination  
 Status: Determined Exempt  
 IRB-FY2022-111

Deirdre Lanesskog Candace Watts, Shantel Ortega  
 CSBS - Social Work  
 California State University, San Bernardino  
 5500 University Parkway  
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear Deirdre Lanesskog Candace Watts, Shantel Ortega:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Why former foster youth became child welfare social workers" 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 45 CFR 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-19 circumstances 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.**

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

Both research members collaborated on all sections to fulfill the responsibilities of this research project. Each person was initially given the primary responsibility for completing various sections of the chapters, however, both research partners reviewed, added to, and revised all sections. For Chapter One, Candace was primarily responsible for completing Significance of the Study and Shantel was primarily responsible for completing Problem Formulation and Purpose of the Study. For the Literature Review in Chapter Two, Candace was primarily responsible for completing the following sections: Introduction, The Experiences of Former Foster Youth, and the Summary. Shantel was primarily responsible for completing: Influential Factors that Affect Foster Youth and Their Career Choices, Foster Youth and Resiliency, and Theory Guiding Conceptualization. For chapter 3, Candace was primarily responsible for completing the following sections: Study Design, Sampling, Data Collection and Instruments, Procedures, and Protection of Human Subjects. For chapter 3, Shantel was primarily responsible for the Introduction and Data Analysis. Shantel also created the informed consent form, the debriefing statement, and the email recruit flyer and Candace structured the interview questions for participants and formatting the thesis to university standards. For Chapter Four, Candace was primarily responsible for completing the Introduction, Demographics, and Results for the following themes: Resiliency; Passion for the Profession; Improve the System; and Wanting to Do More. For Chapter Four, Shantel was primarily

responsible for completing the Results for the following themes: Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement; Benefit of Services; and Trauma and Mental Health. For Chapter Five, Candace was primarily responsible for completing the Introduction, Limitations of the Study, Summary, and the following sections of the Discussion: Resiliency; Passion for the Profession; Improve the System; and Wanting to Do More. For Chapter Five, Shantel was primarily responsible for Research Implications, and the following sections of the Discussion: Understanding, Relatability, and Engagement; Benefit of Services; and Trauma and Mental Health. Contributions in all sections of this study were provided by both research members. Additionally, both members collaborated and advised on all sections.