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Child welfare workers' perceptions of reunification services: Are timeframes feasible?

Nancy Razo Calderon

Elisa Adriana Hernandez

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CHILD WELFARE WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF REUNIFICATION SERVICES: ARE TIMEFRAMES FEASIBLE?

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

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

by
Nancy Razo Calderon
Elisa Adriana Hernandez
June 2005
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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study explored Child Welfare Worker's perceptions on current reunification timelines imposed by the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997. A survey containing both ordinal and nominal questions was completed by 72 Child Welfare workers in San Bernardino County, Department of Children's Services. The sample consisted of predominately females (80%) with a median age between 41 to 50 years old. The participants were asked to complete 13 questions, including demographics related to child welfare workers feelings on reunification timelines. Descriptive statistical procedures were utilized to determine how child welfare workers felt about shortened timeframes. The implications for social work practice and recommendations for research are discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our research advisor, Dr. Janet Chang for her guidance on this project. We would like to thank the director of the Department of Children’s Services, Cathy Cimbalo, for allowing us to utilize child welfare workers as participants for the study. We are extremely grateful to those child welfare workers who took the time to participate in the project. Without everyone’s participation and assistance this study could not have been accomplished.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to our families, friends and everyone else who helped encourage and support us throughout our educational experience. Your patience and guidance has helped to make this project a success.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One presents an overview of the project. The problem statement and purpose of the study are discussed. Finally, the significance of the project for social work is presented.

Problem Statement

There are numerous reasons children are placed in the foster care system, including abandonment, abuse, and neglect. When a child is removed from a biological parent that is determined abusive or unfit the child is no longer in the custody of the parent. The child welfare system has jurisdiction over the child and has to take responsibility for that child’s physical and emotional needs. One important goal of child welfare agencies is to attempt to reunify the child with the biological parent if circumstances permit. Some parents may be deceased, incarcerated or do not want the child back. Subsequently, a parent is offered the chance to reunify and correct the situation that originally brought the child(ren) into foster care. Parents who are motivated to reunify with their children are offered services to facilitate the
reunification process. These reunification services range from parent education, homemaking services, mental health services, to substance abuse counseling. Child welfare agencies have made it the goal of the child welfare worker to successfully engage the parents in the reunification process.

The role of the child welfare worker in the reunification process is most often multifaceted. At the same time that child welfare workers are facilitating reunification services they also have responsibilities to the children placed in their care. The child welfare worker has to assess risk and make crucial decisions in regards to the best interest of the child. The child welfare worker also has to determine the placement needs of the child, meaning whether to place the child with a relative, in a group home, or in a regular foster home. Child welfare workers have to juggle several matters at one time while keeping the child’s best interest in mind. In the end, the child welfare worker has to make a recommendation on whether the child should be returned home or if parental rights should to be terminated under the timeframes given by the court. Under certain circumstances this can be quite difficult considering the
length of time it might take for the rehabilitation process to occur.

It is the responsibility of the child welfare worker to ensure that "reasonable" services are provided to help facilitate reunification. This can also mean assisting parents with overcoming obstacles that might hinder the completion of services. One problem with this is that biological parents can take several months or even years to complete services. This can create permanency issues for the children who spend a significant amount of time in foster care. Children in this predicament go through a series of placements waiting to be reunified with their families of origin. During the 1970's, child welfare advocates termed this phenomenon the "foster care drift" (Adler 2001, p. 1). At this point in time, federal legislation was quite apprehensive about terminating parental rights, making reunification efforts the overall goal.

During the early 1980's the federal government enacted the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) in response to a significantly flawed foster care system. It was widely believed that children were too often separated from their families with few efforts
being made to reunify them with their parents (Freundlich, 1999, p. 97). Through the passage of time critics argued that too many children were left lingering in the foster care system. This was due to a decline in terminating parental rights and using adoption as a permanency planning option.

In the late 1990’s, the federal government once again proceeded to address the issue of a flawed foster care system. This occurred with the introduction of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). This federal policy regarding child welfare mandated states to conduct permanency hearings within twelve months after a child enters foster care. The permanency hearing will determine whether the child will be returned to the family of origin or be “freed” for adoption. It was ASFA that used termination of parental rights as a core strategy in permanency planning for children in foster care (Freundlich, 1999, p. 98). The philosophy behind this policy is that children will spend less time in foster care if a permanent plan is established within a sufficient timeframe.

The impact of establishing shorter timeframes on reunification services has been significant not only for
parents involved with the system, but also for workers in child welfare agencies. Workers as well as parents are confronted with the consequences when parents are not making progress to reunify within the established timeframes. There may be several issues to be addressed when the "time runs out on the clock." Child welfare workers have to establish a permanent plan within twelve months when there may not be a permanent plan. Child welfare workers can be confronted with dilemmas on difficult cases, especially when the circumstances are not so cut and dry. Are current timeframes adequate or do they need to be extended? On the other hand, child welfare workers might have been waiting for timeframes on reunification services to change. Ultimately, child welfare workers are responsible for making the necessary decisions within the required timeframes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of current child welfare policy, specifically the Adoption Assistance and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), on the perceptions of child welfare workers about their decisions. The question is whether current federal policy
on child welfare provides social workers with sufficient
time to make appropriate permanency planning decisions.
Child welfare workers have been left with the
responsibility of making decisions in less time than
previously.

The study examines how child welfare workers view
the change in timeframes on permanency planning and
reunification services. A large amount of the research on
permanency planning and termination of parental rights
appears to address the implications of policy change for
families rather than implications for child welfare
workers making the decisions. The recommendations of
child welfare workers weigh very heavily in the juvenile
court process. Although, a judge might rule against the
recommendations of the worker, it is very important that
workers make decisions not to place children at risk.
Increasing awareness about workers' perceptions might
also have an impact on education and training for workers
dealing with the pressures of working with difficult
cases under the shortened timeframes.

The study will be quantitative in nature and explore
the perceptions of workers in child welfare agencies. To
help facilitate the study, child welfare workers will be
surveyed regarding their perceptions of current policies governing shortened timeframes for reunification services and permanency planning hearings. The study will concentrate on child welfare workers within San Bernardino County. This exploratory study will address the workers' perceptions and decision-making practices at the 12-month permanency hearing.

The research question will address child welfare workers' perceptions in two main areas: Shortened timeframes for reunification services and permanency planning decisions. This research will specifically address child welfare worker's perceptions of their decisions: how they felt about the 12-month timeframe, how they perceived the effectiveness of their decisions within the 12-month time frame, and whether they felt time limits for reunification services are beneficial for children in foster care.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

Research on child welfare has primarily focused on the amount of time children spend in foster and what can be done to improve a flawed foster care system. However, the research on permanency planning and how child welfare
workers are affected by the change in child welfare policy is limited at best. This project might have both direct and indirect implications for social work practice by stimulating further research on the impact of current child welfare policy on social workers in child welfare.

The results of the study might encourage agency administrators to evaluate whether limited timeframes facilitate or impede the workers' permanency planning decisions within their own agency. In the study, the following question was addressed: "Do child welfare workers feel reunification timelines are adequate under current child welfare policy?"
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two consists of a discussion of the relevant literature and includes a brief historical overview and clarification of family reunification timelines. Finally, the theories guiding conceptualization of the study will be discussed.

Historical Overview of Reunification

Termination of parental rights, as a component of US child welfare policy, is not a new concept, although historically, its role in the context of planning for children in foster care has had several transformations. In the 1970s, foster care policy in the United States emphasized the removal of children from any unsafe environment, and children entered foster care and remained in care for extended periods of time (Klee, 2002). Critics of the foster care system of that era included the United States Supreme Court, which in 1977 in Smith v. Organization of Foster Families (431 U.S. 816, 836) observed that in the New York foster care system "the median time spent in foster care...was over
four years." Many children apparently remained in foster care indefinitely. It became clear that the foster care system of the 1970s was poorly serving children: they were often separated from their families and few efforts were undertaken to reunify them with their parent but, at the same time, there was a general reluctance to free them for adoption through termination of parental rights (Klee, 2002).

The federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (AACWA) was enacted in direct response to the significant problems within the foster care system. The Act, which nationalized many of the rules for foster care, was designed with three goals in mind: prevent the unnecessary placement of children in foster care, reunify families whenever possible, and reduce the time that children spent in foster care by encouraging adoption when reunification was not possible. Time frames were established to ensure that permanency plans were made for each child, including a dispositional hearing no later than 18 months after a child entered foster care. With the implementation of these provisions, the number of termination of parental rights cases increased and the
number of finalized adoptions grew each year (McGowan & Walsh, 2000).

In the years that followed, however, the acceptability of termination of parental rights and adoption as a permanency planning option began to decline as concerns grew that with the emphasis on adoption, inadequate efforts were being made to support and preserve birth families. The commitment to renewed efforts in the area of family preservation translated into new federal legislation in 1993 with the passage of the Family Preservation and Family Support Act.

Child welfare and practice and policy had undergone a shift; the willingness to pursue termination of parental rights and adoption was largely replaced by a philosophy which that in virtually all cases, families should be kept together or when separation was necessary because of protective service reasons, families’ should be reunited. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, adoptions nationally stagnated at 17,000 to 21,000 adoptions of children in foster care per year even as the population of children in foster care increased significantly and median stays in care lengthened (McGowan & Walsh 2000). Criticisms of the emphasis on
family preservation and the de-emphasis on adoption, however, began to grow within a few years. Critics pointed to unsafe conditions for children in families, “reasonable efforts” to reunify families going to unreasonable lengths in terms of effort and time, and the increasing length of time that children remained in foster care (McGowan & Walsh, 2000).

As the criticism of family preservation increased and the overall policy environment placed more emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability, child welfare policy shifted once again in the mid 1990s in favor of greater use of termination of parental rights and freeing more children for adoption. The legislative result of this policy shift was The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA).

ASFA reflects a shift away from the philosophy of family preservation and family reunification set by AACWA and explicitly states that the paramount concern of all child protection efforts must be the health and safety of children, even if that means removing a child from his home. As literature was repeatedly reported as the Act was being debated and then enacted, the provisions related to termination of parental rights were the
cornerstone of "speeding adoptions of abused children" (McGowan & Walsh, 2000). The Act made two significant changes in federal law regarding termination of parental rights.

First, the new law set out certain circumstances under which "reasonable efforts" to reunify children in foster care with their birth families are not required and which as a result, can set the stage for quickly moving forward with termination of parental rights (P.L 105-89).

Second, the law mandates the filing of a petition for termination of parental rights based on certain time consideration: specifically, when a child has been in foster care under the responsibility of the state for 15 of the most recent 22 months (McGowan & Walsh, 2000).

Reasons Adoptions Occur

Before the issue of whether reasonable timelines are given to parents is addressed, it is important to examine the reasons why children are placed for adoption. It has already been discussed that adoption practices have altered, and now reasons adoption occurs will be briefly discussed the.
Neil (2000) examined why children are placed for adoption by using questionnaires completed by social workers in England. Neil found that children fall into three groups according to the reason for their adoption: relinquished infants (14%), those whose parents had requested adoption in complex circumstances (24%), and those children required to be adopted by social services and the courts (62%). All of the 62% of children that were required to be adopted by social services and the courts were adopted because of the harm they had suffered or were considered to be likely to suffer in the care of their birth families (Neil, 2000). This is significant because it addresses the large percentage of adoptions that occur because of the recommendation of social workers and the courts.

Given that there is a large percentage of adoptions that take place because of social workers recommendations there seem to be a lack of literature on the opinions of social workers on whether they feel the time limits set to give parents reunification services are reasonable. Often parents receiving reunification services have several issues that need to be addressed such as domestic violence, substance abuse, physical abuse, and family
reunification are possible given adequate time and appropriate primary and ancillary services.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

One conceptual framework that will be used to guide this research is the ENGAGE model (Engagement, Needs Assessment, Goal setting, Assessment of progress, Goal achievement, Ending work). The ENGAGE model is a process model of the determinates of parenting developed by Belsky and Vondra (1989). Characteristics include the ability to examine multiple interrelated factors identified in the literature as influencing child neglect, the systems perspective of the model, which incorporates both stressors on and support for parenting, and the capacity to identify sources of both vulnerability and resiliency in parents (Belsky & Vondra, 1989). The ENGAGE model for intervention with neglectful families has been widely cited within the literature on child neglect. Three assumptions underlie the model: (1) Parenting is multiply determined, (2) the variable domains are not equally influential in supporting or undermining growth-promoting parenting, and (3) the parent’s developmental history and personal
characteristics influence parenting both directly and indirectly through the broader social context in which parenting occurs (Petras, Massat, Carol, & Essex, 2002).

Another conceptual framework that is useful to guide reunification timelines is systems theory. When applied, systems theory recognizes all the players and their influence (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss, 1999). Understanding systems theory is useful for those working not only with the individuals and families but also in the community.

Summary

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 prominently focuses on expedited termination of parental rights as a strategy of freeing more children in foster care for adoption. At this time, the current research on the topic of child welfare workers' perception on shortened timeframes for reunification services is limited at best. Increasing knowledge about this particular issue might benefit not only child welfare workers, but also the children who are affected by the workers' recommendations.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The following chapter discusses research methods that were used to obtain and analyze data for the purpose of the current study. Topics specifically addressed in this chapter include the study’s design, sampling methods, data collection, testing instruments, and data analysis. Confidentiality and issues regarding the protection of human subjects are discussed as well.

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of shortened timeframes on reunification services imposed by child welfare policy, specifically the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). The research question addresses how child welfare workers perceive the current 12-month timeframe, and whether they think the current timeframe is sufficient. A quantitative methodology was used specifically to address the perceptions of child welfare workers.

Practical methodological implications and limitations of the study included developing a
measurement that accurately assessed the perceptions of child welfare workers. This study used a convenience sample of child welfare workers who were currently employed only in San Bernardino. This might have limited the study's ability to generalize results to the total population of child welfare workers as a whole.

The study focused on measuring the perceptions of the child welfare workers affected by the imposed timeframes. The study was designed to address the following perceptions: how they feel about the 12-month timeframe, how they feel permanency planning has been affected by timeframes, and whether they feel shortened timeframes are beneficial.

Sampling

For the purpose of this study, a convenience sample was used to explore child welfare worker's perceptions. The sample was drawn from the seven child welfare offices within San Bernardino County. Child welfare workers from these offices were selected from the most current phone list out of each office. Each phone list was pulled from the San Bernardino County website. Selection criteria for the sample consisted of workers who are mainly
responsible for making permanency-planning decisions from the time children are placed into foster care to the 12-month permanency hearing. These workers were identified by their current position.

Data Collection and Instruments

The study utilized a survey for data collection purposes. The survey was distributed to child welfare workers selected to participate in the study.

Participants in the study were provided a two-page survey. The survey’s purpose was to measure child welfare workers’ perceptions regarding shortened timeframes for reunification services. The survey utilized an ordinal level of measurement by assigning numerical values to each response. Respondents were asked to select a response from the following: 1 (strongly disagreed), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither, agree or disagree), 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree). The data collected by the survey included the following: child welfare workers feelings about the 12-month timeframe and whether they feel reunification timeframes are beneficial for children in foster care.
The study's dependent variable focused on the perceptions of the child welfare workers in regards to shortened timeframes imposed by current child welfare policy. The survey consisted of questions relating to perceptions and opinions which child welfare workers currently have in working with families on reunification services (see Appendix A).

For demographic purposes, the survey asked respondents to indicate their education level, position, length of experience in current position, age, gender, and ethnicity. Overall, the study utilized quantitative methods to explore child welfare workers' perceptions and opinions. However, the study was confronted with some limitations. A limitation of the study was that it utilized low levels of measurement. Second, the study used a convenience sample of child welfare worker's only in San Bernardino County. Generalization of the findings to child welfare workers as a whole is limited, which could have limitations on external validity.

Procedures

The sample was drawn from child welfare workers in San Bernardino County. Child welfare workers were
selected through current phone listings posted on the San Bernardino County website. Data was collected by means of a survey. The surveys were distributed to child welfare workers in San Bernardino County through interoffice mail. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and an informed consent statement were included with each individual survey. To increase the return rate, respondents were instructed to return the surveys in the same envelope provided. Respondents were given 30 days to return the surveys back through inter office mail.

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect the identity of respondents, surveys did not request respondent names. Respondents received a debriefing statement along with the informed consent form. Respondents were asked to mark an informed consent form before participating in the study. Informed consent advised respondents of confidentiality and that participation was voluntary. The debriefing statement also included contact information if respondents had questions or wished to obtain results of the study. The study’s purpose was clearly stated on both the debriefing statement and informed consent. A check off box was
provided at the bottom of the debriefing statement for respondents to indicate that they read the statement and agreed to participate. There were no immediate or long-term risks projected to occur to respondents. For informed consent see Appendix B.

Data Analysis

After the collection of the surveys was completed quantitative procedures were utilized to interpret the existing data. For the purpose of this study, a descriptive analysis was used to summarize and describe the perceptions of the child welfare workers. Descriptive techniques as frequency distributions were used to compile tables. This procedure was important to help describe what the research question was looking to explore.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research methods to be utilized in the proposed study of the perceptions of child welfare workers on reunification timeframes imposed by the ASFA. The chapter discussed what techniques are going to be utilized in order to collect and analyze the data for the study. The chapter also addressed several
precautions that will be taken to protect human subjects involved with data collection.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Introduction
The purpose of this section is to describe the differences of opinions among social workers regarding family reunification timelines. The demographic information is also presented to provide a description of the sampled participants examined. In addition, tables are supplied in order to provide a visual description of the data analysis results and demographic information.

Presentation of the Findings
The sample was composed of 72 respondents with 80% being females and 20% being males. About one third of the participants fell within the 41-50-age range at 33.3%. The median age was 46. The sample consisted of Caucasians (57.1%), African Americans (21.4%), Latino (10.0%), Pacific Islander (1.4%), and other (10.0%). More than two thirds of the respondents were Carrier Social Service Practitioners (63.8%) while the remaining were Intake Social Service Practitioners (36.2%). The results indicated that half (55%) of the sample had been in their current position one to four years. A large majority of
the respondents reported that they had received a Masters Degree (84.7%). Only 13.9% of the respondents reported that they had a Bachelors Degree and 1.4% had a Doctoral Degree (see Table 1).

Participants’ Perceptions of Shortened Family Reunification Timelines

Table 2 represents the frequency distribution of the items the respondents answered in regards to their perceptions of shortened timeframes on reunification services. As previously mentioned, participants were asked to choose one of the following: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, strongly agree.

In regards to item 1, "I am currently familiar with the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997, the great majority of the respondents indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed (80.3%), 14.1% either disagreed or strongly disagreed and 5.6% neither agreed or disagreed. For item 2, "I feel that current timeframes for reunification services are adequate since the enactment of ASFA," more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed (68.1%). Less than a fourth of the respondents indicated that they
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (N = 69)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity (N=70)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender (N=70)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Level (N=72)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors Degree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters Degree</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Position (N= 69)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrier</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length with Position (N=71)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 2. Respondents Perceptions of Reunification

Timeframes Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarity with ASFA</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Timeframes Adequate</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PP positively affected by ASFA</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ASFA helped reduce # of children in foster care</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Extension of Timeframes</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ASFA beneficial for SW practice</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree or Disagree</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Comments and Suggestions</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adhere to guidelines</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
either agreed or disagreed (19.4%) while the remaining respondents indicated they strongly disagreed or disagreed (12.5%).

Regarding item 3, "I feel that permanency planning has been positively affected by the enactment of ASFA," two thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed (68.1%). Less than a fourth of the respondents indicated that they neither agreed or disagreed (22.2%). A small portion of the respondents reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed (9.7%).

For item 4, "I feel that the enactment of ASFA has helped reduce the time children spend in foster care," more than half of the respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed (54.2%), and approximately a third of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (30.6%). Over 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

In terms of item 5, "I feel that the timeframes for reunification services should be extended," a great majority of the respondents indicated that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed (72.2%), and 11.1% either agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 16.7% of the respondents determined that they neither agreed nor disagreed. In item 6, "I feel that the enactment of ASFA
has been beneficial for social work practice," 56.9% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. 29.2% of the respondents were neutral by indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed. The remainder of the respondents reported that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed (13.9%).

For the last item, respondents were asked to provide any other information or suggestions regarding current timeframes for reunification services. The responses to this open ended question were grouped into three major categories, including (1) flexibility in timeframes, (2) adherence to policy guidelines, and (3) other.

The majority of the respondents were grouped into the first category, flexibility, at 52.6%. This category included responses that appeared favorable toward extending reunification timeframes based on individual cases. One respondent explained "flexibility on timelines is usually practiced based on individual cases...this practice is necessary." Another respondent indicated "for parents who make progress i.e. for drug addiction and need more time, they should get that time." Approximately a fourth (25.3%) of the respondents came within second category, adherence to policy guidelines. This category
consisted of responses in which respondents promoted the current timeframes and the need to adhere to policy guidelines. For example, one respondent expressed “I would like for the juvenile court to adhere more strongly to the guidelines.” A second respondent indicated that “It has been made a legal game whereby attorneys have artificially extended timeframes for parent to receive services and leave children without permanency.

Lastly, the remainder of the respondents fell into the category of “other” at 21.1%. This category consisted of responses that did not fit into the first two categories, but were relevant to the topic of reunification services. For instance, one respondent indicated that “timelines are extended by the courts via continued hearings and extended services.” Other responses in this category included strong feelings about limiting services to parents. For example, one respondent indicated that “I believe all reunification type services should be provided before children are removed from the home and once removed should never go back.” Another respondent felt that child welfare policy negatively impacts minority children and families.
Summary

Chapter four lists the results of the collected data. The following results demonstrated that child welfare workers were in agreement with current reunification timelines imposed by ASFA. In addition, the majority child welfare workers felt that current child welfare policy is beneficial for social work practice.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction
Chapter five presents a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Furthermore, the study’s limitations for social work policy and practice are presented. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

Discussion
The goal of this study was to gain insight into child welfare workers’ perceptions on reunification timeframes based upon the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. A focus of current reunification timeframes is to help provide children with permanence in a timelier manner. The change in child welfare policy placed a new emphasis on reducing the time children move out of foster care and back to their families or to adoption, and increasing the number of adoptions from the pool of children in foster (Wilhelm, 2002). This descriptive study explored child welfare workers feelings and perceptions about working with children and their parents under the current twelve-month
timeframe and establishing permanency for children in foster care.

The study found that the majority of child welfare workers were in agreement with current reunification timelines. Further, the consensus among workers was that the enactment of ASFA was beneficial for social work practice and it helps reduce the time children spend in foster care. The study also found that child welfare workers expressed dissatisfaction with the court system not adhering to the existing twelve-month timeframe. For example, cases in which parental rights are not terminated or a permanent plan not established due to legal "hold ups" in court. Although the majority of workers are in favor of ASFA imposed timeframes there continue to be instances in which delays occur in establishing permanency for children. ASFA does not address problems with the court system, interaction with other laws, and the lack of services available to children and their families (Rinker, 2002).

The study also found that child welfare workers had mixed feelings about current timeframes. They were in support of the current timeframes but also felt that extensions should be allowed in certain cases.
Additionally, one respondent explained that timeframes should be based on circumstances such as drug use, age of the child, etc. This appears to be consistent with prior research on substance abuse issue and the length of time it takes to recover from addiction (Rinker, 2002). It has been demonstrated that it often takes longer than twelve months to overcome problems associated with substance abuse and mental illness (Rinker, 2002). Overall, the general consensus among respondents is that current timeframes are adequate and that the court system needs to adhere to the timeframes established under ASFA.

Limitations

There appeared to be several limitations present with the study. The lack of previous research regarding child welfare worker's perceptions on reduced timeframes posed as one of the biggest limitations for the study. The lack of a strong body of knowledge on this issue made it quite difficult to make a comparison between prior research and this study's findings. Research on child welfare workers' perceptions on reunification timeframes has been limited since the implementation of the ASFA. A literature review produced no article directly comparing
the view of social workers perceptions on reunification timelines.

A second limitation of the study was that it consisted of a convenience sample of child welfare workers in San Bernardino County. The size of the sample (n=72) could also be a factor in reducing the study’s validity. Of the 250 social service practitioner social workers working in San Bernardino County, only 72 responded. This limited the study’s ability to generalize results to the total population of child welfare workers.

Lastly, a third limitation present in the study was the study’s design. Due to the lack of prior research on this topic, a standardized instrument was not located or utilized for this study. The instrument utilized in the study was developed by the researchers and therefore, was based on the subjectivity of the researchers. The study design did not use a standardized instrument and therefore special consideration had to be given on the wording of the questions. The lack of a standardized instrument might compromise both the reliability and validity of the study’s findings.
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 prominently focuses on expedited termination of parental rights as a strategy for freeing more children in foster care for adoption. The intent of the law is to solve problems associated with children’s prolonged stays in foster care which deprive them of the permanency of family and, in many cases, subject them to further emotional and developmental risk.

Researchers found the majority of the social workers that responded indicated that the current reunification timelines appeared adequate. There are, however, questions as to whether expediting termination of parental rights will foster improved outcomes for children. Further research is needed on this topic in so that a more representative sample can be included. A standardized instrument should also be developed to more accurately assess social workers’ opinions on reunification timelines as they relate to parents with substance use disorders.

Lastly, legislation affecting reunification timeframes are not sensitive to drug and alcohol recovery
periods. A range of common parental problems, such as substance abuse, imprisonment, and domestic violence, are not amendable to speedy resolution (Ross 2004). There is research on the benefits of putting children into permanent homes in a timelier manner but little research is given to the relationship between drug and alcohol average recovery timeframes and Child Welfare reunification timelines. Is it reasonable to expect parents to "recover" from their drug/alcohol addiction in time to meet the Child Welfare reunification time frames? Given that 40% to 80% of all child welfare abuse and neglect cases involved parental substance problems (Young, Gardner, & Dennis, 1998). From the perspective of the ASFA timeline, the critical issue is that parents are frequently ordered to undergo drug treatment or other counseling as a condition to regaining custody of a child in foster care. Given the realities of limited funding, it is not uncommon that there are waiting lists to receive such services. Even where services are available, substance abusers often require several courses of treatment before they stop relapsing and some never succeed in breaking the cycle of addiction or significantly improve their ability to function (Ross,
In lieu of this, how key decision-makers weigh indicators for safe reunification with substance-affected parents is important to investigate further.

Conclusions

This project’s research showed that a high percentage of child welfare workers were in agreement with current reunification timelines imposed by ASFA and parents should only get extension on case by case basis.

In addition, the majority child welfare workers felt that current child welfare policy is beneficial for social work practice. The discussion section of this research project was written to provide an incorporation of the researcher’s findings with recommendations for social work policy and practice.

A discussion on the project’s limitations and recommendation for future research was also included so as to allow for expansion on the topic of drug recovery timeframes as they relate to reunification timeframes. This project has demonstrated that more representative research is needed on child welfare workers opinions about reunification services timeframes.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Survey Questions

This survey is designed to measure your perceptions on current reunification timeframes imposed by the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). Please answer all of the questions as honestly as possible by choosing only one answer for each question. When you have completed the survey please use the envelope provided and return the survey through interoffice mail to the Victorville DCS office. Your participation in the survey is greatly appreciated.

1. I am currently familiar with the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA)?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

2. I feel that current timeframes on reunification services are adequate since the enactment of ASFA?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

3. I feel that permanency planning has been positively affected by the enactment of ASFA?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

4. I feel that the enactment of ASFA has helped reduce the time children spend in foster care?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree
5. I feel that the timeframes on reunification services should be extended?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

6. I feel that the enactment of ASFA has been beneficial for social work practice?
   1. Strongly Disagree
   2. Disagree
   3. Neither Agree or Disagree
   4. Agree
   5. Strongly Agree

7. Please provide any other information or suggestions you would like to add regarding current timeframes for reunification services.
DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Please indicate your current level of education.
   1. Associates Degree
   2. Bachelors Degree
   3. Masters Degree
   4. Doctoral Degree

2. Please indicate your current position with the Department of children’s Services.
   1. Intake
   2. Carrier

3. Please indicate the length of time in your current position with the Department of Children’s Services? _____________

4. Please indicate your gender.
   1. Male
   2. Female

5. Please indicate your ethnicity.
   1. Caucasian
   2. African American
   3. Latino
   4. Pacific Islander
   5. Other ______________
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to gather the opinions of child welfare workers on reunification timelines. This study is being conducted by Nancy Calderon and Elisa Hernandez under the supervision of Janet Chang. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board at California State University, San Bernardino.

The study is focused on asking questions regarding reunification services time frames since the passing of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). This federal policy regarding child welfare mandated states to conduct permanency hearings within twelve months after a child enters foster care. The permanency hearing will determine whether the child will be returned to the family of origin or be “freed” for adoption. It was ASFA that used termination of parental rights as a core strategy in permanency planning for children in foster care.

Please answer all the questions. Be as honest as possible and feel free to give your opinions in the spaces provided. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in categorized form only. You may receive the categorized results upon completion in the Summer Quarter of 2005 at the Pfau Library.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When you have completed the survey, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure validity of the study, we ask that you not discuss this study with other participants.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact the project supervisor Janet Chang (909) 880-5184.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of and that I understand the nature and purpose of this study and I freely consent to participate.

PLACE A CHECK MARK HERE: □ TODAY'S DATE: ______________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The study you have just completed was designed to explore how you perceive the current timeframes on reunification services and what if anything, needs to be done to improve existing timeframes. Because participants are most knowledgeable about how this timeline affects them, your input is critical in evaluation program development and improvement.

Please understand that your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and that your participation or lack of participation will neither help nor hinder your involvement with the Department of Children Services.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the survey with other participants. If you have any question or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact the project supervisor Janet Chang (909) 880-5184. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, the results will be available in the summer quarter of 2005 at the Pfau Library.
REFERENCES


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

1. Data Collection:
   Team Effort: Elisa Hernandez & Nancy Calderon

2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Team Effort: Elisa Hernandez & Nancy Calderon

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   a. Introduction
      Assigned Leader: Elisa Hernandez
      Assisted by: Nancy Calderon
   b. Literature
      Assigned Leader: Nancy Calderon
      Assisted by: Elisa Calderon
   c. Methods
      Assigned Leader: Elisa Calderon
      Assisted by: Nancy Calderon
   d. Results and Discussion
      Team Effort: Elisa Hernandez & Nancy Calderon