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## Higher Education's Effect on Retention: Exploring the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers

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**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

*Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.*

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Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of  
the College of Graduate and  
Professional Studies

Date 12 / 13 / 2022

Dissertation Committee:

*D. John McIntyre*

---

Dr. D. John McIntyre, Chair

*Sara E Salkil*

---

Dr. Sara Salkil

*Jenifer Williams*

---

Dr. Jenifer Williams

Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Higher Education's Effect on Retention:  
Exploring the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by  
Alisa S. Wright  
January 2023

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To my dear siblings, I may be the youngest of the bunch, but I have learned so much from each of you. Remember, even now, you can achieve your wildest dreams. Life can become challenging, but with patience and persistence, you will find yourself at the end of the tunnel. Keep achieving your goals and put your best in everything you do.

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## Abstract

This qualitative research study was an exploration of Child Protective Services (CPS) frontline caseworkers' experiences. The problem investigated was the high number of caseworkers who lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to do their job and the constant turnover of workers within the agency. Although previous researchers have explored many factors that cause caseworker turnover, the research has not focused much on the caseworkers' perspective. Therefore, this qualitative study explored CPS caseworkers' opinions and experiences using virtual semistructured interviews. The study specifically focused on the impact that education and training has on job performance and turnover. The study population was CPS caseworkers who had worked in a large urban community in Texas for 2 years or more. The sample included eight caseworkers who had experienced the turnover firsthand. Thematic analysis of the transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews and data coding using NVivo software led to the development of a coding system to identify patterns and common themes. The findings indicated that for caseworkers, hands-on training, gaining experience, unity between caseworkers, social service training, and leadership support may lead to decreased turnover rates and increased job performance. Agency leaders and other professionals in the social service field may consider the findings to improve caseworker retention and organizational outcomes. These improvements could prompt positive change through leadership and policy adjustments designed to support the needs of CPS caseworkers related to education, training, and retention.

*Keywords:* burnout, CPS Caseworker, case assignable, organizational commitment, services, statewide intake, voluntary turnover

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In 2021 in Texas, Child Protective Services (CPS) had a total of 6,578 caseworkers responsible for investigating the 941,842 child abuse and neglect cases received by statewide intake. At the same time, the caseworker turnover rate increased from 19.9% in FY20 to 26% in FY21 (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.). CPS aims to protect children and vulnerable adults by assessing and addressing safety risks and danger indicators to prevent the neglect, abuse, and exploitation of children and vulnerable adults (Halverson et al., 2018). The employees responsible for carrying out this goal work directly with families, utilizing community aid, and developing plans to address the safety risks and are considered frontline caseworkers. The duties of frontline caseworkers include stringent demands that continuously change as various crises occur in the community (Osborne et al., 2020). These duties often are affected by the constant increase in turnover rates, whether or not caseworkers experience successful outcomes with the children and families they serve, and caseworker education and training. This study focused on the education and training experiences of CPS caseworkers. This chapter is subdivided into five sections, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, definitions of key terms, and a summary.

### **Statement of the Problem**

CPS in Texas has a history of issues with caseworker retention resulting in leaders making drastic changes such as the 2016 decision to remove the minimum education requirement of having a four-year college degree. However, after implementing new educational requirements, the number of caseworkers leaving within their first year continued to increase (Sanchez, 2017). Likewise, despite the changes, interview results continued to illustrate a decline in job performance and organizational commitment, with the top two reasons listed by

employees who left voluntarily being work-related stress and accepting another job (DFPS Rider Reports, 2022). A caseworker leaving decreases mentor availability for college student field placements, increases workloads, produces burnout, reduces job satisfaction, limits organizational success, and causes a repeated cycle of rushed recruitment and training (Sanchez, 2017). Additionally, having more than one caseworker on a case due to staff turnover or lacking knowledge and skills causes disruptions in services, decreases the likelihood of successful family outcomes, and hinders the caseworker-client relationship (Hermon & Chahla, 2019). Research over the past decade has focused on the constant increase in turnover rates within CPS but has not focused on the education and training of caseworkers or the perspectives of such from caseworkers themselves (Lwin et al., 2018; Tavormina & Clossey, 2017). Inadequate preparation and education could lead to a lack of organizational commitment, low confidence, and the prevention of caseworkers from providing services that positively affect families. Without families successfully completing the services, the safety risk remains, causing a repeated cycle of unfavorable outcomes (Hollinshead et al., 2017).

Lacking the confidence, knowledge, and skills to perform their roles successfully is a common problem among caseworkers who work in CPS (Bates & Bates, 2013; Patel et al., 2017; Sanchez, 2017). As an essential organization, CPS may benefit from identifying and evaluating the effects of higher education programs and evidence-based interventions (Molnar et al., 2020). In addition, caseworkers and leaders may benefit from a better understanding of specialized training, educational services, and well-defined expectations from collaborations with higher education institutions. Many child welfare organizations have limited resources to prepare and retain confident, committed caseworkers. Although authors, such as Sanchez (2017), have provided quantitative data regarding the effects of CPS changing the minimum education

requirements, this did not account for the caseworkers' insight regarding their level of education and its effects on their job experiences. Exploring caseworkers' lived experiences and perspectives regarding their college education compared to their on-the-job training may improve caseworker job performance and organizational outcomes while retaining caseworkers who are among the most valuable aspects of the organization (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Scales & Brown, 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas regarding the effects that education and training, such as work-integrated programs, had on their professional success and organizational commitment. This research was designed to explore frontline caseworkers' experiences to better understand what CPS caseworkers need to become as confident and qualified as possible in their roles (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). The pragmatic hope for this research was that it would facilitate suggestions to CPS leaders regarding improvements that address the rapidly declining levels of employee success that have led to high turnover. A broader hope was that it might also strengthen relevant organizations and promote successful outcomes for the families these agencies serve (Hollinshead et al., 2017).

### **Research Questions**

This study examined the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas related to education and training?

RQ1a: What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?

RQ2: How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ3: What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ4: What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Burnout.** Diminishing one's strength; being overstretched, which is followed by exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

**Case Assignable.** A caseworker who has completed all basic skills and development training and is able to have and work their set of cases (Patel et al., 2017).

**Child Protective Service (CPS) Caseworker.** A person who investigates child abuse and neglect cases (Sanchez, 2017).

**Organizational Commitment.** The psychological attachment someone has towards an organization, usually their place of work (Scales & Brown, 2020).

**Services.** Programs that will help with stability, reduce safety risks, and address a family's needs. These include but are not limited to counseling, parenting classes, daycare, domestic violence intervention, crisis interventions, substance abuse treatment, and mental health evaluations (Sanchez, 2017).

**Statewide Intake.** The 24/7 program that initially receives and assesses reports regarding abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children and elderly or disabled adults (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.).

**Voluntary Turnover.** A process in which an employee decides whether to stay or leave the organization (Scales & Brown, 2020).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore CPS caseworker experiences of education and training as it relates to their job performance and organizational commitment. The target problem in this study was caseworkers lacking the skills and knowledge to perform successfully. Despite abundant evidence on caseworker turnover, limited studies have focused on the effects of educational factors such as work-integrated programs (Bates & Bates, 2013; Patel et al., 2017). In addition to adding to existing research, findings from this study could assist CPS leaders in identifying effective strategies for managing the problem of caseworker turnover caused by those who lack the knowledge and skills to be successful. To contextualize the study, the following literature review contains a discussion of the conceptual framework that influenced this study and the past and current literature on caseworker roles, leadership, training, education, and outcomes with client families.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Competent caseworkers are vital to Child Protective Services (CPS) because they have shown a higher organizational commitment (Bates & Bates, 2013; Deglau et al., 2014; Sanchez, 2017). When caseworkers demonstrate organizational commitment, leaders appreciate it because of its history with positive outcomes towards job satisfaction and willingness to accept organizational changes (Lwin et al., 2018; Scales & Brown, 2020). Caseworker competence is established and maintained through education, training, experiences, and supervision (Sanchez, 2017; Scales & Brown, 2020). The current study aimed to explore the perception of CPS caseworkers in a large urban city in Texas regarding the effects of a college education on their professional success and organizational commitment. For this study, empirical research was related explicitly to higher education and turnover amongst CPS caseworkers. However, there are limited data on caseworker education in regard to turnover.

Although it appears that caseworker turnover alone is problematic (Cho & Song, 2017; Griffiths et al., 2019; Sanchez, 2017; Scales & Brown, 2020), job stress as a result of working with CPS should not necessarily be accepted as the sole reason why caseworkers have negative job experiences that lead to their decision to leave (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Osborne et al., 2020). According to Sanchez (2017), the reasons why caseworkers leave include both personal and professional factors such as educational background, quality of supervision, and training. Moreover, Osborne et al. (2020) agreed that such personal and professional characteristics contribute to caseworker turnover but argued that quality preservice training could potentially decrease turnover issues. Specifically, field-based training through higher education social work and child welfare programs supports caseworkers by targeting job satisfaction and burnout.



This review does not address caseworker turnover in supervisor support, second-hand trauma, salary, benefits, unrealistic expectations, or organizational stress. While there is much literature in these areas (e.g., Aguiniga et al., 2013; Madden et al., 2014; McGowan et al., 2009; Searle & Patent, 2013; Wilke et al., 2019), this review focused on caseworker education and training using peer-reviewed contemporary research and findings no older than five years. However, a few articles older than 5 years were included to provide historical context to caseworker turnover and the supporting conceptual framework based on The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute's Workforce Development Framework (2019).

### **Literature Search Methods**

The databases used to conduct the literature review included Abilene Christian University's Margaret and Herman Brown Library, Science Direct, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar. These databases and search engines aided in locating scholarly articles using keywords, including *turnover*, *education*, *training*, *caseworker*, *caseworker education*, *CPS turnover rate*, *CPS caseworker turnover*, *higher education social work programs*, and *work-integrated programs*. The current literature review examined the following topics related to caseworker turnover: (1) the role of caseworkers, (2) the importance of leaders, (3) training, (4) education, and (5) family outcomes.

### **Conceptual Framework Discussion**

When considering a history of high turnover and many changes to education requirements in a child welfare context, a common theme is that CPS caseworkers are often not equipped with the tools and knowledge to do their job effectively. To better understand the relationship between caseworker education and turnover and how leaders can ensure the recruitment of skilled workers, this study drew from a conceptual framework based on The

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute's Workforce Development framework (2019). This framework identified critical processes and components necessary to establish an effective child welfare workforce. According to this framework, education, professional development, and position requirements are primary processes for building an effective workforce. According to the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, these strategies should be utilized and prioritized based on the organization's vision, mission, and values. It is unclear if this large urban community in Texas has an ongoing professional development strategy. However, researchers demonstrated that caseworkers who participate in social work college programs that include an internship or mentoring program have higher retention than those who do not have similar experiences (DePanfilis, 2018; National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Sanchez, 2017).

According to the framework, education plays a vital component in closing gaps in the organization's workforce and aiding the strategic recruitment of caseworkers who will remain on the job and have the tools necessary to create successful outcomes. The purpose of this study was to understand from a caseworker's perspective how education affects components such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, confidence, and other factors that often lead to high turnover rates. Education may have no significant effect on the current issues with caseworker turnover; however, the framework also considers common themes in research such as supervision, workload, and organizational culture. The framework also specifies professional development as a vital component that prepares new and current staff with knowledge and skills to do the job with potential opportunities for advancement. However, although the level is not specified, the authors explained that education provides the foundation of knowledge for a successful hire (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). While the study presented here

did not explore professional development in-depth, it did examine what works well according to caseworkers' perceptions.

## **Literature Review**

Voluntary turnover involves an employee deciding to stay or leave the organization. Voluntary turnover among CPS caseworkers continues to grow exponentially and typically involves those caseworkers who have the most talent and are most valuable to accomplishing goals and objectives pursued by the organization (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Scales & Brown, 2020). This absence of competent caseworkers presents many issues for CPS, including adverse effects on the quality of services provided to families and the extensive deterioration of the organization due to the inability to accomplish organizational goals and standards (Rittschof & Fortunato, 2016). Scales and Brown (2020) recommended increasing the training and education provided to caseworkers to produce positive experiences, thus strengthening organizational commitment from valuable workers. However, their study's quantitative results illustrated no relationship between organizational commitment and voluntary turnover. The authors pointed out that although the quantitative data showed no correlation, the caseworkers who participated in the study repeatedly suggested that the absence of organizational commitment leads to a decrease in turnover (Scales & Brown, 2020). Readers from different backgrounds or with different purposes may vary in the assumptions gathered from the study results. However, Scales and Brown's (2020) study illustrated how obtaining information from caseworkers, the people doing the job under research, can provide an alternative outlook than when utilizing other factors.

### ***Role of Caseworkers***

The CPS system is multifaceted, and the role of the caseworkers is just as complex. Some caseworkers' duties include investigating reports; working with diverse families; providing services; assessing safety; reducing the identified safety risk; testifying in court; removing a child; and demonstrating that those involved exemplify little to no probability of becoming reinvolved with CPS (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Haight et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2019; Piescher et al., 2018; Pitner et al., 2018; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2017). Although CPS does not list all caseworker responsibilities under the job description, all caseworkers experience the responsibility of making decisions that directly affect the livelihood of children and families (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). Several studies suggested factors such as job stress, time pressure, work environment, unmanageable caseloads, and dangers when conducting home visits as the main reasons caseworkers leave (Griffiths et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020; Scales & Brown, 2020). However, those factors are understudied regarding how they are affected by education. Education could improve factors such as intent to stay by providing tools to manage time more efficiently, and face uncomfortable neighborhoods during home visits, thus decreasing job stress (Bates & Bates, 2013; Sanchez, 2017). The higher the performance, the better caseworkers can deal with their complex job demands, but CPS workers who do not have at least a BSW are more likely to have lower job performance than their peers who have earned a BSW or higher (Altman & Cohen, 2016; Bates & Bates, 2013; Deglau et al., 2015; Sanchez, 2017).

Kim et al. (2019) took a different approach to caseworker responsibilities and how it affects the overall caseworker experience through exploring the differences between workload and caseload. Workload is defined as "the amount of time required for workers to complete their required tasks and responsibilities," and "caseload indicates the number of cases assigned to an

individual worker" (p. 1096). Often caseloads remain high due to the caseworker's lack of contact with the family. Findings illustrated that effective workload management increases the caseworker's opportunity to work closely with their assigned families, thereby successfully achieving the ultimate goal of CPS – "safety, permanency, and well-being for the children they serve" (Kim et al., 2019, p. 1096).

The researchers stated that caseloads need to be decreased and kept at a manageable number and that if CPS agencies work on improving the caseworkers' workload, caseloads will simultaneously improve (Kim et al., 2019). However, in 2021, several thousand CPS intake reports were received weekly (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2021). Caseworkers cannot control the number of reports received nor the number of cases assigned to their caseload despite the size of their workload. Strategic preparation, such as participating in higher education social work programs, is aimed at helping students build resilience so that when they become caseworkers, they can withstand the high demands that traditionally come with being a caseworker (Palma-García et al., 2018). However, the authors of both studies agreed that due to the stringent demands, caseworkers need active support from their leaders (Kim et al., 2019; Palma-García et al., 2018).

Kim et al. (2019) suggested that because the caseworker's workload significantly affects the caseworker's psychological and physical well-being, leaders on both the individual and regional levels should focus on minimizing the high number of different tasks caseworkers are assigned. The tasks compete with the responsibilities of the caseworker because caseworkers feel pressured to invest in those tasks, which take away from the actual casework with families assigned, thus leading to an unmanageable workload. Researchers here expressed the need for improved training opportunities and education. However, instead of focusing on education prior

to becoming a caseworker, the researchers stated that supervisors are the key to success regarding effective workload and caseload management, especially for new caseworkers (Kim et al., 2019; Palma-García et al., 2018). Supervisors can provide training to help caseworkers manage their workload more effectively and efficiently (Kim et al., 2019). This method, however, did not take heed to the training and responsibilities required of supervisors themselves, especially in larger areas such as the urban Texas community utilized for this study.

### ***Importance of Leaders***

Brittain and Potter (2009) developed a framework that names three different developmental stages for caseworkers; the beginning stage, middle stage, and consolidation stage. The authors suggested that caseworkers employed for less than 2 years rely heavily on others for guidance to be successful. During this time, caseworkers lack the confidence, knowledge, and structure to do their job, leading to being overwhelmed if not given the proper support. After 2 years, caseworkers become more comfortable with their position and can make mature decisions on independent cases exclusively assigned to them. In this “middle stage,” caseworkers recognize and gain the ability to connect what they have learned through school and training to improve job functions such as independent case management, client behavior predictions, and safety assessments (Phillips et al., 2020). It is not until after 5 years of being a caseworker that Brittain and Potter’s (2009) framework suggested that autonomy is reached and individuals no longer require supervisor support as a critical factor in fulfilling their client needs and job responsibilities (Phillips et al., 2020). Although there are mixed findings regarding caseworker preparation and supervisory support, many findings support the need for caseworkers to be adequately prepared to do their job and for supervisors to be fully trained to provide support and guidance (Griffiths et al., 2019; He et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2020).

Although the current study did not focus on those who supervise caseworkers, it is important to recognize the importance of the role and resources available to leaders to provide their workers with the necessary support to succeed. Whether it is a college education, professional development, mentorship, or internship, research supports the assumption that training strengthens the knowledge of employees (Deglau et al., 2015; Griffiths et al., 2019; Moorhead, 2019). While insufficient training and preparation were often cited as reasons for caseworkers leaving CPS, leaders must remember that supervisors need training just as much as caseworkers (Griffiths et al., 2019). Too often, professionals assume that supervisors contain teaching and mentoring skills because of their position level. However, even when certified, supervisors and caseworkers do not necessarily have practical training components to teach others (Radey et al., 2019). With the proper training, supervisors can create and maintain a positive work environment for caseworkers that encourages a learning environment that supports continued education and strong caseworker performance (Griffiths et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020).

### ***Training***

Training is essential for new and tenured caseworkers and plays a critical role in developing and maintaining a competent workforce (Schwab-Reese et al., 2020). According to Lwin et al. (2018), training has been shown to have positive influences on caseworker attitudes and confidence in skills, but there remains a need for an improved training process that will equip caseworkers with the knowledge, skills, and tenacity to endure their job duties and the effects of working in such a traumatic field. Training has shown to be a critical factor in caseworker retention and helps with the transfer of learning newly acquired skills.

As previously stated, some researchers feel that it is not caseworker education that should be considered but training after the caseworker has been hired that depicts job success. Participants in a study regarding influential factors that help caseworkers succeed within their job expressed feeling unready to complete their job due to little or no training (Robichaud et al., 2020). Participants specifically stated that it was not their academic studies that prepared them for a job with CPS but the "acculturation to the institutional culture" (p. 6) that helped them become more comfortable. However, in the state of Texas, there are current training policies that require new and, in some instances, tenured workers to participate in training that covers essential topics such as serving specific populations, trauma-informed care, sexual abuse, domestic violence situations, and human trafficking (Sanchez, 2017).

New caseworkers must complete practice interviews and assessments to provide "a genuine job-related context" (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d., p. 4). However, most training was computer-based, did not require any field training, was revised no sooner than on an annual basis and did not provide caseworkers with realistic hands-on training to encompass the material taught thoroughly. Although caseworkers received thorough training from CPS, it was beneficial to gain the caseworker's perspective to understand better the training process and thoughts regarding the time provided during training for the caseworker to thoroughly conduct casework themselves while still under the guidance and responsibility of a mentor (Maurici, 2020).

The CPS website did not provide training requirements for new and tenured caseworkers. Instead, the site had a frequently asked question, "I think I could do this job, but will I be trained?" with the answer, "Yes! You will have lots of great training before beginning your job. And while you will visit clients on your own, you will have ongoing support from your co-



workers and supervisor any time you need it” (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.). According to the CPS Title IV-B 5-year plan, the required training period for new caseworkers has been extended from six months to nine months to promote ongoing learning. At the beginning of the training period, new caseworkers get assigned a mentor, someone who has been a caseworker for at least one year, and immediately began fieldwork to gain a realistic preview of the job. Training throughout the nine months included the following:

- “Basic Skills Development,” a blended training that consists of four weeks in class and three weeks in the field
- “Knowing Who You Are,” a two-day training to promote cultural awareness
- “Trauma-Informed Practice,” a computer-based training on the impact of trauma and required annually for all caseworkers

At the end of the training period, caseworkers completed various assessments and quizzes, but the supervisor and program director used a checklist called the Individualized Training Plan to ultimately decide if the new worker was ready to be assigned a caseload and work on their own (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, n.d.). Depending on their background and experience, the caseworker may or may not have agreed with the decision of their superiors. Those who had earned a BSW or MSW had shown to be more prepared to enter the field and work independently (Sanchez, 2017). Some studies revealed participants who expressed that their academics failed to provide realistic preparation for CPS, while other studies reported that their participants indicated that their college social work programs were the component that best prepared them for working in CPS (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Patel et al., 2017). A study involving Texas caseworkers' perspectives regarding their education and training experiences as it pertains to their feelings of job preparation, skill, and outcomes provides leaders

with information on the effects that their caseworkers' education has on job performance and what changes, if any, should be made to ensure adequate training.

Although the training that CPS offered provided a thorough overview of possible events to expect when working with CPS, those who have obtained a social work degree have shown to be better trained, have longer tenure, and be equipped with the tools needed to navigate such a complex human service field (Patel et al., 2017; Sanchez, 2017). CPS is the primary community response to child maltreatment, thus needing caseworkers to fulfill the complex role efficiently. The Child Welfare League of America and the Council on Accreditation of Child and Family Services recommended that the "child welfare workforce have a minimum BSW and highly recommend workers be educated with an MSW for adequate preparation and education for child protective services work" (Patel et al., 2017, p. 26). Training is essential for success on the worker and organizational level, but the training period before caseworkers are on their own and responsible for all the position entails is very brief. As a result of such a fast turnaround, frontline caseworkers must receive the proper training and education before working in the field (Sanchez, 2017).

**Field-Based Training.** Transfer theories have become more prevalent in child welfare agencies due to the positive results it tends to produce (Radey et al., 2019). These types of theories focus on two components: (1) a high level of correspondence between training and work settings and (2) a work climate that strives to support and connect learned material in training to the actual work environment (Laker, 1990; Yamnill & McLean, 2001). Applied to CPS, field-based preservice training provides an outlook of what the job entails while giving a realistic opportunity for potential caseworkers to apply what they have learned in the classroom into practice (Hill et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2020; Radey et al., 2019). Field-based preservice

training is an understudied area but has been a tool used for several decades to prepare potential employees through classroom training, mentoring, shadowing, and unpaid internships (Osborne et al., 2020). To their knowledge, Osborne et al.'s (2020) study is the first empirical support to date of its kind, and the findings align with the transfer theories illustrating that caseworkers who experience the exposure and learning opportunities that field-based training provides are less likely to leave the agency within the first 2 years of employment than caseworkers who only receive classroom training.

Previous research has consistently found that caseworkers who found a high level of organizational support from leaders and peers experienced higher job satisfaction, leading to an increased intent to stay (Griffiths et al., 2017; He et al., 2018). Field-based training places potential caseworkers in real-life scenarios and allows those in training to build relationships with staff who can later provide support when they become professional caseworkers (Osborne et al., 2020). As a part of field-based training, new workers shadow certified workers and participate in the work tasks and settings of a CPS caseworker. There are some studies where caseworkers expressed negative experiences with this type of training due to being too busy to tend to the trainee or allowing the trainee to participate in any work tasks (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). Nevertheless, field-based training allows tenure and new workers to establish supportive relationships that will increase the trainee's job competence, job satisfaction, and intent to stay (Radey et al., 2019).

When analyzing their research study results, Osborne et al. (2020) took a different approach to previous studies by looking at the study participants according to their frontline position of being a conservatorship, investigator, or family-based caseworker (Osborne et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2017). The results illustrated that when caseworkers participate in field-based

training, they do not necessarily have an easier time on the job but are equipped with tools of competence to handle the challenges of being a caseworker. The study, however, is based on field-based training that occurs as a new employee training and not during the attainment of a social work or college degree. The current study added to the research base by gathering caseworker perceptions on the effectiveness of field-based training and its effects on elements that influence turnover (i.e., competence, skills, job satisfaction, and organizational support).

### ***Education***

Some researchers argued that it is too frequent that leaders within child welfare agencies, such as CPS, assume that caseworkers who have acquired a social work degree have more experience and have a higher probability of meeting the high demands of child welfare practice (Lwin et al., 2018). Although social work participants in previous studies expressed an increased feeling of confidence and preparedness after obtaining a degree in social work, research findings illustrated that higher education social work programs often focus on a specific track, such as policy, theory, or research (Cai et al., 2018; Cheng & Lo, 2018; Leung et al., 2020). These specific tracks limit caseworkers and produce potential caseworkers with different skills and perspectives. Some researchers concluded that the lack of alignment in curricula leaves the assumption of social work education corresponding with effective caseworkers unproven and recommended that child welfare organizations reconsider education prerequisites and look further into collaboration with higher education institutions (Knight, 2017; Lwin et al., 2018).

One strategy researchers have studied regarding strengthening CPS caseworker education is providing educational incentives through the Title IV-E education stipend program (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Carr et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2020). Within this federally funded program, child welfare agencies, such as CPS, partner with universities and provide caseworkers financial

assistance (stipend) to pay for a degree in social work. Some universities have partnered with the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) to provide additional incentives. For example, students going through the Title IV-E program at Texas Woman's University (TWU) were assured a career with CPS after graduation (Texas Woman's University, 2022). Although there are mixed results on why students chose to participate in the program, most researchers agreed that the education and training learned through the Title IV-E program have improved both on the caseworker and organizational levels (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Carr et al., 2019).

A more common strategy is providing students with the opportunity to experience the life of an actual CPS caseworker through work-integrated learning programs such as internships, practicums, field placements, shadowing, or mentorships (Osborne et al., 2020; Radey & Schelbe, 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017). Findings from these studies revealed a mixture of challenges with textbook training that did not align with real-life situations, observing caseworkers with no hands-on training opportunities, limited opportunities to go into the field, and other variations in structure and activities (Radey & Schelbe, 2017; Ross-Sheriff et al., 2017). However, although researchers (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Osborne et al., 2020; Radey & Schelbe, 2017) identified these challenges, they stated that very few studies focus on preservice training effects on the issue of turnover rates and family service outcomes.

**Title IV-E Child Welfare Training.** Few articles discussed caseworker education in relation to retention, but there were many studies on the effects of Title IV-E education and the partnerships between the college and public child welfare agencies (Jacquet & Hermon, 2018; Maurici, 2020; Slater et al., 2018). The Title IV-E program began in the early 1900s as a funding resource to stabilize child protection agencies while strengthening the workforce's competencies (Piescher et al., 2018). After completing the program, the Title IV-E alums enter the agreed-upon

work obligation of working for CPS for a minimum of the time equal to what they received from the Title IV-E funding. Each state has its specific payback period; in Texas, the requirement is that those already employed with CPS pay back four months per semester in which a stipend was received. Non-CPS students must work eight months per semester in which a stipend is received (Cheung, 2021; Piescher et al., 2018).

In addition, researchers have associated Title IV-E education and training programs with improvements in recruitment, retention, service delivery, and family outcomes in CPS (Piescher et al., 2018). This specialized training, support, and stipend has effectively prepared students for casework while building their competence and confidence. In a study conducted by Yoder Slater et al. (2018), undergraduate students who participated in the Title IV-E incentive program expressed feeling more prepared despite being younger and newer than their coworkers who did not have the same educational experience. Although this study did not collect data on participants' educational backgrounds regarding their specific degrees, the findings are consistent with previous studies of caseworker capability and preparation (Slater et al., 2018).

Despite showing to be significantly more prepared, competent, and satisfied with their job, thus leading to remaining employed longer with the agency, BSW Title IV-E Scholars and those who do not participate in a BSW Title IV-E program have shown similarities regarding cultural sensitivity, professional relations, and self-care practices (Falk, 2015; Leung et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2018). Although some authors find this surprising (Slater et al., 2018), most child welfare agencies, including CPS in Texas, often focus on these areas in the new employee training and through employee services (Phillips et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2017; Slater et al., 2018).

**Work-Integrated Learning in Higher Education.** Work-integrated learning is a career-focused program similar to field education that many child welfare agencies provide, except it

occurs while the individual is still a college student working towards a social work degree (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). Whether called an 'unpaid internship,' 'volunteer work,' or 'placement,' work-integrated programs involve students being placed with CPS caseworkers whom they shadow and are mentored by. The placements are "an essential part of social work education. It is the place where theory and practice connect, and the social work student has the opportunity to consider the realities of the workplace" (Mooney et al., 2020, p. 54). Although some leaders see these types of programs as ways for students to gain job experience, students who have participated in research studies stated that work-integrated learning programs are the signature pedagogy of social work education and are considered critical to job preparation (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Hewitt et al., 2018). However, some researchers feel there is a gap and blurred lines regarding work-integrated learning. The concern involves establishing the line between work and education, ensuring that organizations follow the law, providing students with authentic learning benefits, and not targeting free labor from vulnerable young people and those eager for professional success (Hewitt et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, educational institutions have been experiencing issues with decreased placements offered to students who need the placement to meet practicum requirements. Researchers stated that there was increasing pressure from industry leaders for work-ready college graduates, which according to Hewitt et al. (2018), had not significantly been achieved by traditional university courses. The number of placements being offered had decreased while the number of students needing to be placed increased. In desperation to ensure students' graduation track was not interrupted, universities often placed students in agencies where it was known that the learning opportunities would be low-level and limited (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Schwab-Reese et al., 2020). In other cases, colleges required students to organize their own

work-integrated learning placements, which had shown many challenges considering limited availability, students unfamiliar with the area, or limited contacts within the child welfare industry (Hewitt et al., 2018). Researchers suggested that leaders increase their support and commitment to providing students with quality placements because quality placements produce better-qualified caseworkers (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Mooney et al., 2020).

According to Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), higher education is a place of professional development where students engage in complex learning that allows them to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It instills the importance of lifelong learning into students that will carry on into the professional environment once they become caseworkers (Mooney et al., 2020). Students who participated in work-integrated learning, no matter the subject, are more competent, prepared, and thrive in postgraduation careers (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Mooney et al., 2020). Researchers acknowledged that field-based training as newly hired caseworkers remains a critical component to success but stated that strategic approaches such as work-integrated learning provided future caseworkers with uninterrupted time to reflect on events in an actual workplace. Students could participate in casework and reflect on the experience without the stressors of the work environment they face once they conduct independent work. Additionally, students develop self-awareness and professional identity that transfers into their careers (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018).

**Collaborations With Higher Education Institutions.** When it came to the relationship between higher education institutions and child protection agencies, students were the main stakeholders, but the student's success depended on the connection between the field education leaders (Hay, 2020). Challenges were minimal between higher education institutions and child welfare agencies in the past. However, the partnership between the two organizations became



neglected due to the increased number of students who chose to become social workers and CPS continuing to face a yearly increase in turnovers. Hill et al. (2019) explained how the relationship between universities and child protection agencies has become commercialized due to a need for an increase in available field placements. Similar to the changes that occurred with CPS in Texas, the authors advised that the current direction of growth and commercialization of higher education increased premature programs and decreased entry requirement standards.

Field educators were asked about field placements where students would shadow a social worker for several weeks. The participants shared that they felt supported and prepared to be field educators, but staffing issues caused additional strains on the remaining staff and adding students into the mixture was said to worsen the already stressful work environment (Hill et al., 2019). Many questions that the researchers asked about the partnership between field educators and higher education institutions, the social workers did not know, thus leading the researchers to feel that leaders within each organization should work on the disconnect between management and ground-level staff before focusing on professional partnerships (Hay, 2020; Hill et al., 2019). The more caseworkers and field educators understand the details, purpose, and expectations that create work-integrated learning programs, such as field placements, the more successful the outcomes have the potential to be (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Hewitt et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019).

In most social work programs that utilize work-integrated learning, students usually spend up to half of their academic course in a supervised placement (Hill et al., 2019). The development and experiences gained through earning a college degree often shape students into successful professionals, but it requires quality support and guidance from educators (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Liversage et al., 2018; Peterson & Aikens, 2017). Recommendations to improve the relationship between higher education institutions and child protection agencies

included universities accurately preparing students to participate in field placements by clearly communicating all the field education process entails (Hay, 2020). Leaders in child protection organizations such as CPS need to have current knowledge of the theories and practices being taught at the partnering college and universities to understand what professors are teaching students in the classroom and what expectations they may have prior to experience in the field (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Hay, 2020; Hewitt et al., 2018). Studies illustrated that communication significantly affected the relationship between field educators and universities. Both organizations need to communicate effectively and routinely, understand the information taught to students, and follow up on what is working well, what needs improvement, and what needs to happen while having mutual support for each other when challenges arise (Hay, 2020; Mooney et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2020).

### ***Family Outcomes***

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (2017) provided an estimate of \$54,000 lost for each caseworker who leaves the agency. The cost to the remaining caseworkers and families served is even greater (Griffiths et al., 2019). When there is a high turnover of CPS workers, a lack in the delivery and monitoring of services has a negative effect due to the absence of workers, lack of training, and stress that falls on the remaining caseworkers who gain the responsibility of covering the work of those who have left the agency (Rochelle & Buonanno, 2018). Turnover also disrupts the relationships between caseworkers and their client families (Osborne et al., 2020). Workers often employ strategies to handle the inevitable stresses of the job. For example, instead of focusing on the needs and goals of the families to see changes in behavior, caseworkers may focus on short-term goals that are quicker and easier to reach, such as service completion (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). These effects present problems because families

depend on caseworkers to provide quality work in delivering ongoing services to address the safety concern and safely end the family's involvement with CPS. Preventative services, such as counseling, parenting, drug treatment, and rehabilitation services, produce better outcomes for families, and without successful completion of the services, the safety risk will remain, and the stress of CPS involvement will be prolonged (Hollinshead et al., 2017). Without proper preparation and education, caseworkers will fail to introduce themselves to families and enroll them in the necessary preventative services to reduce safety concerns.

Desired family outcomes included engagement, service utilization, family preservation, reunification (when applicable), long-term behavioral changes, and little to no chances of recidivism. CPS, as an agency, relies on families to participate in services deemed necessary through multiple assessments to produce better outcomes (Hollinshead et al., 2017). In their study, Halverson et al. (2018) provided evidence that the caseworker's education, skills, attitude, and behavior significantly affect whether or not a parent is likely to engage in services and cooperate with the agency. Education and training provided caseworkers with the tools to offer emotional support to families while making critical decisions on the case. A study by Hollinshead et al. (2017) revealed identical results, illustrating a need to improve caseworker preparation before working with families. Caregivers voiced that caseworker interaction and responses highly affected their experiences and engagement with the agency. However, both studies were from the perspective of the families and not the caseworkers who provide the services.

Researchers recommended further research to gain better insight from the perspective of caseworkers and supervisors regarding caseworker education and how it affects the complex decisions that concern the lives of the children and families involved (Halverson et al., 2018;

Hollinshead et al., 2017). In a study on perceptions of crisis, crisis intervention, and how caseworkers are affected by working with families of severely abused children, the researchers benefited from receiving experiences directly from the workers. Caseworkers answered questions during interviews and provided specific examples of what they experienced first-hand, thus providing unique details unobtainable from anywhere else. Uncovering caseworkers' subjective experiences provided leaders with information that could help them better understand how caseworkers felt and provided interventions that tailored training approaches to increase retention and support their workers. The researchers recommended that leaders within agencies such as CPS explore their workers' individual experiences to develop suitable organizational responses to provide support (Tavormina & Clossey, 2017).

### **Summary**

In summary, CPS caseworker turnover continues to rise. The role of CPS caseworkers is complex and can be overwhelming for caseworkers. Overall, CPS can be a tedious agency to work in and requires caseworkers to work with a diverse population with the expectation that they will establish a strong bond with the children and families to ensure successful outcomes (Pitner et al., 2018; Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018). Although there is very little research about the long-term effects of higher education on casework, client relationships, and organizational outcomes, researchers suggested that caseworkers who experienced practical job training before entering the professional field enabled them to endure the high demands of the CPS environment (Leung et al., 2020; Radey & Schelbe, 2017). Despite this evidence of the need for quality education and training before the caseworker joins CPS, leaders have disregarded college education and sometimes chose to eliminate a college degree as a job requirement as a result of the rapid decline of educated caseworkers and an increase in the need to hire new staff to meet

case intake demands (Leung et al., 2020; Lwin et al., 2018; Sanchez, 2017). Sanchez (2017) conducted a study on CPS in Texas after leaders decided to remove the job requirement of having a college degree, leaving Texas as the only state not to require a minimum of a bachelor's degree and one of a few to not require a degree in social work. Findings from their study supported the author's assertion that the advantages of competently educated caseworkers who have earned a minimum of a 4-year degree positively impact caseworker retention and job performance (Sanchez, 2017).

The literature was inconclusive in assessing the direct relationship between caseworker education and its impact on practice/responsibilities, performance, family outcomes, and decision-making, which are characteristics of positive outcomes (Knight, 2017; Lwin et al., 2018; Osborne et al., 2020). Researchers recommended further research to identify if programs such as these may help in closing the gap that is presently causing a lack of preparation that leads to severe stress, unsuccessful family outcomes, burnout, and high turnover rates (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Cai et al., 2018; Cheng & Lo, 2018; Lwin et al., 2018; Osborne et al., 2020). Foundationally, interviewing CPS caseworkers within a large urban city in Texas provided some clarification of how CPS caseworker education affects job performance and caseworker turnover. This study provided in-depth research on caseworker education while looking into the organizational factors surrounding turnover.

Given that most of the studies employed large samples from perspectives outside of that of caseworkers, it is vital to understand their lived experiences with job preparation and how it affects their work performance. Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive discussion of this study's methodological and design strategies, limitations, and ethical guidelines.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The problem addressed in this research study was the pattern of caseworker retention that, over time, has shown to have some connection with caseworkers lacking the confidence, commitment, knowledge, and skills necessary to serve their client families and manage their workload (Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Hollinshead et al., 2017). The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas regarding the effects that earning a college degree and participating in training such as work-integrated programs had on their professional success and organizational commitment. By researching the experiences of CPS caseworkers in Texas related to educational training and organizational factors, I conducted a study that had the potential to increase awareness of the issues surrounding caseworker retention rates for local CPS employees. CPS and university leaders can use the results of this study to gain knowledge of best practices regarding caseworker education, training, and job requirements amid stressful work environments.

The research questions used to guide this exploration were:

RQ1: What are the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas related to education and training?

RQ1a: What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?

RQ2: How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ3: What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ4: What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?

The first section focuses on the research methodology and explains the rationale for using a qualitative research design. Subsequent sections describe the population, the study sample, materials and instruments used, the data collection and analysis process, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The final section of this chapter is a summary of the topics discussed.

### **Research Design and Method**

This study utilized qualitative research, which was appropriate for understanding participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 1998). Data collection and analysis involved listening, interpreting, and retelling participant stories in a meaningful manner. This type of research did not seek to find a right or wrong answer and did not attempt to separate reality and human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005); instead, it allowed the flexibility to construct the truth through retelling the realities in meaningful form as described from the perspective of the participants. Qualitative research seeks to understand how others define their experiences and places the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection, who then provides descriptive narratives from the participant's perspective (Merriam, 2002). Since this study sought to uncover and describe CPS caseworkers experiences of education and training in their profession, it was informative and descriptive. Therefore, a qualitative research method was appropriate for this study.

Personal stories from study participants can be used to develop meaningful perspectives of participants' lived experiences and explore how individuals experience the world (Riessman, 2002). Personal recollections were used in this study to offer caseworkers, who are a non-

dominant population when it comes to policy development, an opportunity to offer and express their perceptions. The narratives shared by caseworkers provided critical points concerning their education and training that can help researchers and leaders better understand what caseworkers are going through and what is necessary to improve their work experiences, thus improving organizational issues such as high caseworker turnover.

### **Population**

The population studied consisted of CPS frontline caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas. The community was a growing area of approximately 950,000 residents composed of 64% White, 19% Black or African American, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, and 11% Other. The male-to-female ratio was almost equal, with females making up 51% of the population and males 49%. The median age was in the lower 30's for all genders; there was a 58% homeownership rate and an average household income of \$62,187. A fourth of the population had graduated from high school, two-fifths had either attended some college or attained a bachelor's degree, while less than 10% had earned a graduate degree. The DFPS employee statistics website did not provide demographics for each specific city but did do so by county. The city studied was one of 41 cities that made up the county. There were less than 500 CPS caseworkers in the county of the community studied. The majority of the caseworkers ranged from 26 to 45 years old, mainly women, and the majority of races included African Americans and Anglos.

The participants were not under my leadership and did not work directly with me. The chosen participants ranged from new and tenured caseworkers, some who had college degrees and some who did not, some who had worked in different positions within CPS, and other



characteristics that represented a variety of perspectives and experiences. The participants were selected from several of the office locations within the chosen community.

### **Study Sample**

A sample of 8-10 CPS caseworkers were recruited for this study. This sample size was appropriate because qualitative research involves labor-intensive data collection and analysis processes. This population allowed in-depth interviews with participants while ensuring that pertinent data were obtained (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although common themes between participant responses were sought, qualitative research does not focus on generalizing but on developing an in-depth understanding; therefore, having only a few participants was appropriate. Furthermore, this sample size decreased the likelihood of repetitive information that was not beneficial to the study but instead aimed at saturation which was critical in maintaining the information collected in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2018).

Since this study intended to understand the experiences of CPS caseworkers' education and its effects on retention and job performance, purposeful and homogenous sampling was most suitable. Purposeful sampling involves the researcher selecting specific participants from a familiar sample that could purposefully provide an understanding of the particular research problem and study (Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling assisted in selecting caseworkers who could provide their experiences in detail on training and education and how it has affected their job and intent to stay. More specifically, to add credibility, I applied purposeful random sampling, which involved identifying non-random samples of possible participants from a random selection of subjects identified as suitable to participate (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Homogenous sampling helped select the correct type of participants by choosing CPS workers with similar characteristics to understand the shared experiences while comparing the differences

within each experience (Glesne, 2011). All participants shared the same characteristics of being current frontline CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas with the same job demands and type of work each day.

### **Criteria for the Study's Sample**

A criterion sampling method, a form of purposeful sampling, was applied to designate specific criteria required by all participants that directly reflected the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). I used three criteria to determine eligibility for participation in the study. First, since the research questions sought to understand CPS caseworkers' experience, participants had to be current frontline CPS caseworkers who had been employed as a CPS caseworker in Texas for at least 2 years. A caseworker who has worked for at least 2 years would have completed the new employee training and would have at least a year of being case assignable (Sanchez, 2017). Second, to qualify for this study, the caseworkers needed to be in good standing with the agency to avoid any interruption with current investigations and decrease any negative influence on participant responses surrounding thoughts about CPS. Lastly, the third criterion was that caseworker participants who held a degree or certificate in social work must have earned that degree or certificate from a Texas college or university. Each state's social services has its own policies and standards that caseworkers must adhere to. As a result, most higher education social work programs attempt to prepare their students according to CPS policies and standards (Sanchez, 2017). Additionally, these criteria intended to prevent caseworkers from providing experiences of education and training that did not deal with CPS or programs not aimed at preparation for working with CPS in Texas.

## **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited via a recruitment email distributed by the caseworker's supervisor (see Appendix B). I used the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services "DFPS Offices" website page to locate the CPS offices within the study target area. Since there were only five offices and each office had at least one unit consisting of seven frontline caseworkers, I contacted each office to recruit participants. An email was sent to each of the unit supervisors in which I accessed their contact information through the DFPS statewide staff directory that was available to all employees. The email included a brief introduction of myself, an introduction to the study, the requirements of each participant, and an invitation to participate.

Within 48 hours of receiving a response from a prospective candidate, I contacted that person via telephone and finalized their willingness to become involved as a participant in the study. If the telephone call was unsuccessful, I left a voicemail and provided a follow-up email with the same information. I provided written correspondence of an informed consent form. Each participant was also provided with my telephone number and email address to contact me with any questions or concerns.

## **Materials/Instruments**

Data collection was conducted using semistructured interviews to collect qualitative data from the participants. The interview protocol contained questions that helped guide the interviewing process while allowing the participant to decide the direction of the conversation and the amount of information shared (see Appendix C). There were 26 interview questions based on the research questions. The first section contained five open-ended questions addressing the length of time as a CPS caseworker, their level of confidence, and the participants'

experience and perceptions of job preparation. The second section contained five open-ended questions addressing CPS's role in caseworker education and training and questions regarding organizational commitment. The third section included five open-ended questions based on the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute's Workforce Development framework (2019), focusing on social work degree attainment and the experiences of caseworkers who held a college degree in any field and those who did not have a college degree. The fourth and fifth sections included questions that aimed to collect caseworker experiences regarding job preparation specifically provided through CPS and the factors that aided in the lack of caseworker confidence, commitment, knowledge, and skill.

A pilot test was conducted with a local colleague before data collection. The pilot test helped identify weaknesses and limitations within the interview design prior to meeting with the study participants (Chenail, 2011). The interview with my colleague followed the same process as the actual research interviews, including questions, time, and recording devices. Afterward, I made the necessary adjustments to improve the actual research interviewing process.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Semistructured interviews were conducted via phone and Zoom, depending on the preference and availability of the participant. Each potential study participant was contacted by phone to facilitate the scheduling of interviews at the best date and time suited for each participant. The pilot testing of the survey instrument assisted in providing participants with an estimated length of time for the interview. However, there were no time restrictions imposed on the interviews. The first segment of each interview revisited consent, established rapport, discussed demographics, assigned a pseudonym, and addressed any questions regarding the interview or research. Next, the discussion transitioned into the participant's lived experiences

regarding job preparation, education, satisfaction, and personal testimonials each participant was willing to share.

Data collection was completed in one session. The entire interview process was audio-recorded with permission from the participants and then transcribed into text. Lastly, before the data were analyzed, each participant was allowed to review a hard copy of their transcribed interview to ensure the accuracy and clarity of their transcription.

I transcribed the participants' responses verbatim using the interview recordings to avoid losing valuable data. Each transcript was saved with labels "Participant 1, Participant 2, ..... Participant 8." After the recordings were transcribed, the written transcriptions were emailed to each respective participant so that they could review the documents. Through this process, known as member checking, along with the transcript, I shared a summary of the findings with each participant (Motulsky, 2021). Each caseworker was allowed to review, correct, delete, edit, or add for accuracy and validity. Since the research focused on gaining an in-depth insight into caseworker education and preparation, NVivo coding was used to reduce and classify the data generated. This approach to coding allowed the participants' language to be maintained organically without limitations. The transcripts were managed and uploaded to the NVivo software program ("NVivo Information," 2019). The transcripts were used for thematic analysis, following Damayanthi's (2019) 7-step approach to building themes. This approach involved my taking notes while reading and familiarizing myself with each transcript translated into topic codes. Commonalities found in the codes were broken down into core themes before locating themes and subthemes presented in existing knowledge, possible challenges to expected outcomes, or new theoretical development of the empirical issue concerned (Damayanthi, 2019). Although the focus was not to compare caseworkers, data for caseworkers with a college degree,

with a social work degree, and with no college degree was analyzed for any common themes or significant differences.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher is a critical instrument in qualitative research because the researcher is the primary data collector (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I established a bond with participants through a mutual understanding of what the caseworkers face daily in the field. I informed participants of my background and introduced myself to illustrate that I related to and understood their stories, thus interpreting the data correctly. I actively listened to the stories to make participants feel heard and essential (Creswell, 2012). This collaboration with the participants was initiated during the beginning of the interview so that when participants shared personal experiences, the data were not distorted, and the participants answered based solely on their experiences.

In Husserl's (1913) development of phenomenology, a qualitative approach aimed at understanding experiences from the participant's subjective point of view, he proposed bracketing. Bracketing involves researchers identifying their expectations and then purposely putting those ideas aside to examine each individual's personal experience (Smith, 2018). As the researcher, since I worked within DFPS, I identified presumptions, personal biases, and preconceptions that had to be put aside to ensure I collected data from an open viewpoint. For example, I wrote down a list of personal biases that included the assumption that caseworkers felt that education was essential or that those with a social work degree had better experiences than their peers who did not have a social work degree. By recognizing these biases, I managed them in the findings of this study.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical measures were taken throughout the research study. The study was approved by ACU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection (see Appendix A). Potential bias was a concern, primarily because I, as the researcher, worked in the organization studied. All participants were from CPS offices different from my office and had no connection to myself or my direct leaders. Potential bias was also minimized through the participants receiving copies of the interview transcripts to confirm their responses. I was the only researcher and individual with access to secured data. Confidentiality was maintained by securing hardcopies and any physical data in a locked safe to which only I had the passcode. All electronic data were first secured on a backup drive with an encrypted password, and then I shredded any documents and factory reset recording devices used during the study. The data will be kept on the secured drive for 7 years per IRB requirements and then destroyed through overwriting and deletion. As previously stated, anonymity was maintained by utilizing pseudonyms and unique codes in place of participant names. Participants received assurance of confidentiality throughout the process. The participants were also informed that they could discontinue the study without repercussions at any time. There were no rewards for participating in this study.

## **Assumptions**

A major assumption of this study was that the caseworkers would provide honest responses during the interview. It was assumed that the responses would ensure validity and authenticity due to being factual. A second assumption was that using a qualitative methodology would sufficiently answer the research questions and accomplish the study's goal. It was assumed that caseworkers would be interested in the research topic and thus provide in-depth information-rich responses during the interview process. Lastly, due to my experiences with

higher education and time previously spent working as a CPS caseworker, a significant assumption of the study was that caseworker education positively impacted caseworker success.

### **Limitations**

Although there were no concerns regarding caseworkers actively engaging in the interview sessions, the study had the potential limitation of participants failing to be fully transparent for various reasons. Factors including work environment or workload could have affected the caseworker's mental state and willingness to share in-depth experiences fully. Participants had various lengths of experience, but there was a possibility that the majority of the participants would have similar lengths of time with the agency. Although a small sample size was appropriate for this type of study, it was a limitation when doing a study within an agency of such a large capacity as CPS in a major city in Texas. Lastly, a significant limitation of this study was the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the increase or change in work demands. Experiences had the potential to be more related to pandemic issues rather than education and training.

### **Delimitations**

The study focused on caseworker education and how it affects current organizational issues such as caseworker retention, burnout, and client-family outcomes. The study did not seek to find the cause of high caseworker turnover but to determine what educational tools are beneficial to caseworkers to aid in decreasing the current issues of high turnover. The study did not include an in-depth look into what role Title IV-E education has on the caseworker job experience but was open to discussion based on participants' shared experiences with the educational program.



## **Summary**

This chapter describes the research design and method for the research study. The purpose of this research was to explore the educational journeys of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas and the effects their education has had on their work experience. The study participants were eight CPS caseworkers from different areas in Texas with the criteria that they had to be current CPS caseworkers employed for at least 2 years. If a participant had a social work degree referenced in the study, they had to have attended a college or university in Texas or begun a professional career as a caseworker in Texas. This study used a qualitative research design where participants participated in a 60 to 90 minute private telephone or video conference interview. Data analysis included coding and finding emerging themes through thematic analysis. Several strategies were utilized to ensure participants were protected, felt comfortable, and presented in the manner they intended.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore education and training experiences among CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas. Seeking to explore caseworkers' perceptions and outcomes of education and training received inside and outside the organization can provide valuable information regarding the organizational factors surrounding issues such as caseworker turnover, inability to do their job, and low organizational commitment. Qualitative research was used to gather information from eight Texas CPS caseworkers who have worked as caseworkers for at least two years. Through virtual interviews, data collected for the current study included potential reasons for high caseworker turnover and recommendations to leaders for retention strategies. Data were coded using NVivo for accuracy. Data were analyzed to identify common themes and patterns from the participants' responses about their knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints related to caseworker education, training, organizational commitment, and turnover. Chapter 4 presents the caseworkers' responses to the interview questions. This chapter includes a description of the study sample, the research methodology applied to data collection and analysis, a presentation of the study's data and results, and a chapter summary.

### **Description of the Sample**

Eight CPS caseworkers were interviewed to explore their experiences with education, training, and organizational dynamics surrounding their experiences with job preparation and how these factors influenced their success or lack thereof, commitment to the organization, and turnover issues. The eight CPS caseworkers were from different backgrounds, went to different colleges, and had been employed with CPS for different amounts of time. The caseworkers were all currently working as CPS caseworkers performing day-to-day duties related to families and

children with safety concerns and at risk of removal from their homes. The gender representation in the study was seven women and one man. Educational degrees consisted of seven Bachelor's degrees, one minor, and two Master's (see Table A1 for participants' education and Figure B1 for years of experience).

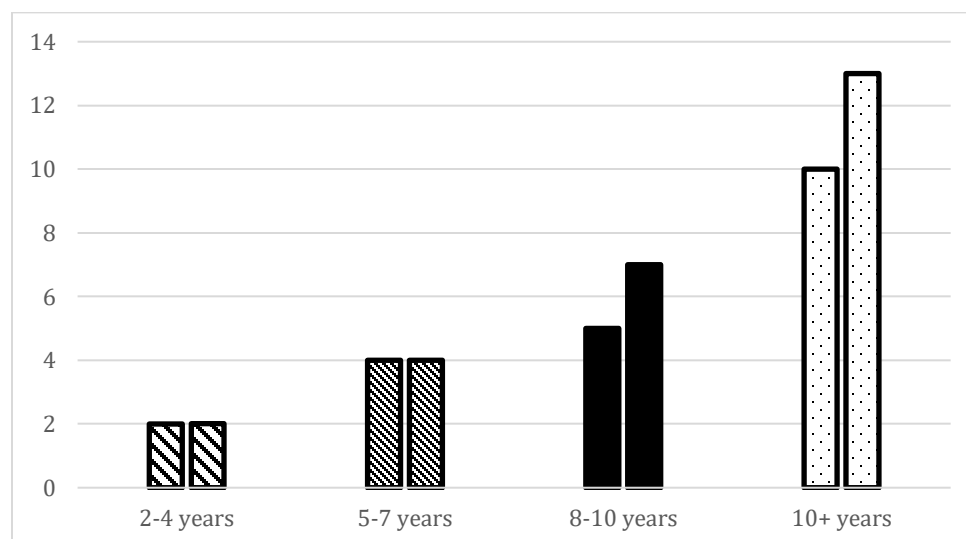
**Table 1**

*Participant Education*

Degree level	Participant degrees in no particular order
Bachelors	Early Childhood Education
Bachelors	Psychology
Bachelors	Child and Family Studies
Bachelors	Criminology and Criminal Justice
Bachelors	Sociology
Masters	Social Work
Masters	Mental Health Counseling

**Figure 1**

*Years as CPS Caseworker*



## **Research Methodology**

Following IRB approval for this study, I began recruiting potential participants. Emails with the study description and request to participate were sent to the supervisors over each frontline caseworker unit. Caseworkers who were interested contacted me after receiving an email from their supervisor about participating in the study. Thirteen potential participants shared an interest in participating in the study. After receiving the consent form, 10 out of the 13 potential participants met the criteria for the study and agreed to participate. One caseworker who expressed interest in participating in the research declined to sign the consent form. A second caseworker withdrew after signing the consent form but informed me that several issues arose on their caseload, leaving them with no time to participate. After those who qualified for the study signed the consent form, a copy of the signed informed consent form was emailed to each participant. I then called each participant to reconfirm that they met the study requirements and scheduled the interview at a time chosen by the caseworker. A total of eight participants completed the study.

Prior to conducting each interview, the participants were given another opportunity to review the consent form and ask any questions regarding the study. Each participant was informed that the interview would be audio recorded, agreed to be audio recorded, and informed that a transcript would be produced, which they would be able to review. For this study, participants participated in individual interviews using 26 open-ended questions. The audio of each interview was recorded to ensure the accuracy of participant responses. Notes were taken of any pertinent information that the participants stated after the recording was stopped. After the end of each interview, the audio recording was saved under the participant's pseudonym. Once all interviews were completed, each recording was uploaded to NVivo for transcription. The data

were then coded, and themes were identified. I then emailed transcripts, any notes taken, and the identified themes to each corresponding participant so they could review that the interview and transcription were accurate and that the data collection was validated through member checking (Motulsky, 2021).

### **Applied Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns through the data collected. This approach is commonly used to conduct data analysis in qualitative studies because it allows the researcher to identify themes and similarities that meaningfully answer the research questions (Damayanthi, 2019). The transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software and coded through NVivo, along with reading the data multiple times to identify repeated wordings and similar phrases. Meaningful sentences or phrases were underlined to identify the vital information in each transcript. The sentences and phrases were broken down, and similar words and short phrases were highlighted according to their assigned code color. NVivo was used to identify the majority of the codes (Table 2); however, each transcript was analyzed by hand afterward to further group patterns, create subthemes, and identify direct quotes that correlated to the specific research questions of the study. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas related to education and training?

RQ1a: What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?

RQ2: How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ3: What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ4: What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?

The subthemes were then grouped by their similarities, and at the end of the data analysis process, five themes related to the research questions were generated. The identified themes were:

1. The importance of unity between caseworkers,
2. Experience creates a successful worker,
3. College degrees that services others work best,
4. Proper preparation requires a combination of training and experience, and
5. Lack of support and incentives from leaders.

Table 2 displays the identified codes used repeatedly by participants. Table 3 presents the research questions and the themes developed through data analysis aligned with each question.

**Table 2***Data Analysis: Codes Used by Participants*

Code	Participant							
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Lack of job preparation	√	–	–	–	√	√	–	√
Experience through jobs dealing w/kids	–	√	√	√	√	–	√	–
Lack of recognition	–	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Lack of positive reinforcement	–	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Lack of encouragement to stay	–	–	√	√	–	–	√	–
Strict deadlines	√	√	–	–	√	√	√	–
High caseloads	–	√	√	√	–	√	√	–
Work as a team	√	√	√	√	√	√	–	–
Need for pay increase	–	√	√	√	–	√	√	√
Need for more leadership presence	–	√	√	√	√	–	√	–
Experience grows confidence	√	√	√	√	–	√	√	√
Experience develops skill	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	–
Discipline rather help	–	√	√	√	–	–	√	–
Rushed training	–	√	√	√	–	√	√	√
Training as a checkbox	√	√	√	√	–	√	√	–
College degree doesn't boost confidence	√	√	√	–	–	√	–	√
Clients need a confident caseworker	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Caseworkers w/Social Work degrees do better	√	√	√	√	–	√	√	√

*Notes.* √ = Repeatedly mentioned participant      – = Not mentioned by participant

**Table 3***Research Questions and Correspondent Themes*

Research question	Correspondent themes
RQ1a. What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?	Importance of unity between caseworkers
RQ2. How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?	Experience creates a successful worker College degrees that services others work best
RQ3. What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?	Proper preparation requires a combination of training and experience
RQ4. What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?	Lack of support and incentives from leaders



## **Findings**

The sample of this research study consisted of seven women and one man of diverse races and ethnicities. Each participant had a different educational background but had at least 2 years of experience working with the Texas Department of Family Protective Services as a CPS caseworker. The interview questions used to guide the interview prompted the participants' experiences and perceptions of caseworker education, training, turnover, organizational commitment, leadership, and strategies that CPS utilized to address these aspects of the job. The data collected from the findings correspond directly with the study's research questions. As a result, the presentation of the data and results of the analysis findings is organized to follow the research questions and the answers elicited from participants' responses.

### ***Research Question 1***

Research question 1 was, What are the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas related to education and training?

There were disparate participant responses that did not support a unified theme. Only one of the participants attended college in preparation for working for CPS, and this particular participant was the only one who had a social work degree. Although several of the participants earned degrees related to child welfare, the majority of the participants expressed an absence of job preparation and struggled to define what job preparation looks like in relation to working with CPS and generally working on a professional level. Regarding training, each caseworker, besides one participant who had been employed for the shortest time, explained that very minimal to no training had been experienced outside of basic skills development, the required training for new employees. The participants were asked how they have experienced education and training as CPS caseworkers:

Participant 7 stated,

I went to college for this and when I was hired as a CPS caseworker, training was really quick. It was really rushed. I went to training for a little bit and then I was kind of thrown out there. They just told you basically what kind of to expect, but it wasn't very thorough.

Participant 5 stated,

Training, it's been kind of stressful because there's a lot of information thrown at you and then you have to wait, you're sitting down for two weeks and then you eventually go back to the field, so it's kind of hard to remember all the information because you're really not applying it, you're just kind of doing a mock of everything in the classes and then by the time you get back to the field, it's like, OK, what did I just learn?

Participant 3 explained,

The first couple of years that you're a caseworker you definitely get a lot more training than you do as you become senior. You have to get certified to become a different level of case worker and those certifications up your pay and then once you earn the multiple certifications, the deep level of training truly in my opinion ends and it's more voluntary. The things that they have us do yearly are not really in-depth trainings about how to talk to people, how to work with people, what's going on in the world, how policies can affect our case work. They tell us those trainings are out there, but they're not mandatory and if we don't make the time, which case workers often don't have the time, then we don't do the trainings.

### ***Research Question 1a***

Research question 1a was, What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?

**Theme 1. Importance of Unity Between Caseworkers.** All the participants explained that their confidence strengthened, and their experience grew significantly due to working with other caseworkers either in their unit or that they met while working within the agency. When asked what role do you believe CPS plays in caseworker education and training, most participants expressed that although leaders do not encourage caseworkers to participate in education and training, leaders are strategic about bringing caseworkers together and ensuring that caseworkers work as a team, learn from each other, and motivate one another to remain committed to the job.

Participant 4 shared, “They would try to build like a unity in our team units and so they were trying to help us have that camaraderie between our units.”

Participant 6 explained,

They try to do a unit type of day where you get to know everybody in the whole entire unit and build like a team atmosphere to kind of keep everyone motivated. They try to pair you with a more senior worker. So let’s say for example, they see you struggling so they try to get a more tenured worker to come help you out. Or they’ll try to see what you’re lacking to see if someone can help you with that.

Participant 8 explained,

I think individuals take it upon themselves to try to encourage people to stay just by being positive and reinforcing positivity when they can, but I see department level or agency level across the state that’s something that can be done on a broader scale and can be done better within where it’s a regular thing, it’s not a choice of just a specific supervisor or leader or manager.

### ***Research Question 2***

Research question 2 was, How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?

As a tentative answer, two themes emerged. The first theme was that it is not a college degree but experience that leads to positive and steady growth regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment. The second theme was that caseworkers who have earned a degree in social work, psychology, humanities, or any social service degree have better outcomes with client families, are able to handle the job, and illustrate higher organizational commitment.

**Theme 2. Experience Creates A Successful Worker.** Theme 2 reflected a need for leaders to provide caseworkers with time and intentional efforts to expose caseworkers to the realities of the job without the pressure of doing the work on their own. Only three of the eight caseworkers felt that a college degree was necessary for a caseworker to be successful and committed on the job. However, all eight participants mentioned experience as a factor in their current high level of confidence as a caseworker, what it takes to grow into a skillful and knowledgeable caseworker, and as the key to connecting with clients and getting them the help they need.

Participant 1 stated, “I don't know what a college degree does, maybe just prepare you for the mindsets before getting it. If you're just thrown out there with no degree, you will learn how to do it.”

Participant 2 explained,

The point is you have to have a calling because a degree is not going to prepare you for what you actually see, because when you're doing a degree, it's more like textbook modules and theories. When you go and actually be a caseworker working in the field it's totally different 'cause those theories of knowledge and modules do not prepare you for what you're seeing on everyday life.

Participant 3 shared,

So, I have two viewpoints on that. One viewpoint is that you don't necessarily need a college degree to do this job. If you were just gifted at talking to people and being able to solve people's problems and etc. I just believe it depends on the person. So there's people out there that you know, can come, not even have a high school degree and be able to do this and then there's other people that I think need multiple degrees in order to do this so it really just depends on the person.

Participant 6 stated,

I would say experience because the longer you're there the more things you see, the better you are at handling certain types of situations. If you're there for a year and you get a very difficult case, you may not know everything to do, you may have a checklist, but you may not know the little things that a more tenure worker would look into as far as someone that is brand new.

**Theme 3. College Degrees That Service Others Work Best.** Although it appeared as though the majority of the caseworkers felt that a college degree was not necessary to help caseworkers better prepare for a job with CPS, thus leading to better outcomes with caseworker skill, turnover, client outcomes, and organizational commitment, they asserted that a college degree in social services produces better-prepared caseworkers. According to the participants,

those who have a degree in subjects such as social work, psychology, and sociology are more empathetic and nonjudgmental towards their clients, are aware of more resources to help reduce the safety risk of those families involved, are more likely to stay, and are more confident in their role as a caseworker. When asked what your thoughts regarding a college degree in regard to caseworker job preparation, skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment are:

Participant 2 explained,

Yes, I saw the difference. One person that had their college degree in business and worked in retail came to CPS and basically the way that person looked at clients was not empathetic. It was more like on paper. Like there was no in between, there was no “I understand” no “I can empathize and sympathize.” It was more like do this, do that. It was concrete, it was no emotions. It was just, this is a job. I can't see beyond that. And sometimes a lot judgmental too.

Participant 3 shared,

A college degree in general may make a person more confident than someone who doesn't have a college degree. However, those who do not have a social work or humanities field degree, will most likely struggle more and have more of a probability of leaving.

Participant 4 stated, “Either have 2 or 3 years of experience in a similar field or obtain a degree specifically in the humanities field/helping people fields.”

Participant 6 expressed, “I feel like you do need a college degree just so you'll have some level of education and give you just a little bit more experience. A degree in social services would be best.”

Participant 3 stated,

A college degree in general may make a person more confident than someone who doesn't have a college degree. However, those who do not have a social work or humanities field degree, will most likely struggle more and have more of a probability of leaving.

### ***Research Question 3***

Research question 3 was, What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?

**Theme 4. There is No 100% Way to Prepare.** From the participants' responses, it is evident that education training did not play a significant role in preparation to become a CPS caseworker. Likewise, the training from CPS has not shown to be helpful and is often not present in developing caseworkers into professionals who can successfully handle the stressful environment of the job and maintain organizational commitment. Several participants expressed that nothing can prepare you for what you will face as a CPS caseworker and that the training provided to caseworkers is not realistic to what occurs in the field.

Participant 1 stated,

Trainings are not realistic to what you experience in the field. I feel like the training gives you perfect world scenarios when it is chaotic more than half of the time. Like the things that they go over in training rarely happens like that.

Participant 3 stated,

The main challenge is that every single caseworker is different, and they've had different experiences in their life. And so, as human beings, they're bringing on their own biases, possibly and depending on what they've experienced or what education they have or what

they've gone through in their own life you can't train any one person the same. There's a lot of things that training could not prepare you for.

Participant 4 stated, "Everybody had a different method of doing things and there was no clear consensus as of how things should actually go. People did things their own way, different leaders had different requirements. Very confusing for new hires."

#### ***Research Question 4***

Research question 4 was, What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?

**Theme 5. Lack of Support and Incentives From Leaders.** The caseworkers were unanimous in their perception that leadership support was lacking. A common subtheme was that leaders often push caseworkers on each other instead of stepping in and using their expertise and experience to guide their workers. Overall, the participants felt that their leaders on all levels failed to take the time out for them, and the lack of support often led to stressed caseworkers and high turnover.

Participant 4 stated, "A lot of times people are stressing cause they don't feel like they know what they are doing and they are not supported enough. If you have a really supportive supervisor that makes all the difference."

Participant 3 stated,

I don't see any type of motivation from leaders and every once in a while our supervisor specifically will tell us something positive, but very rare. So for sure have leaders come out with caseworkers to the field or to their office with them and see the every day to day job. And find out the kind of families that we're truly working with. See that caseloads need to be manageable in order to have quality work. Understand that, yes, this is the job



that we're doing and this is the job that we chose to do, but the pay still have to be fair for what we're doing. Have leaders try to push to society, if at all possible, that social workers matter. And see that we need to not neglect our own children and our own families to help other families get to where they need to be.

Participant 7 stated,

Leaders need to do their job, they need to be educated and trained themselves, and they need to have constant training, not only on how to be a case worker, but also how to lead case workers. So, they need to get back in the field themselves in order to keep up to date on what their workers are going through and they need to support their case workers and not just reprimand them. Like give them some praise. Like hey, this may have been rough case for you, but you did a good job at this. Or in this last case you did a really well job at documenting so when it comes to this case, let's try to do this, you know? Just give him a little bit of encouragement because it doesn't happen.

### **Summary**

In summary, the exploration of the perception surrounding the experiences of CPS caseworkers related to education and training and the organization's role surrounding caseworker turnover. The analytic view obtained from participant responses has provided an in-depth outlook and information on the research questions discussed in this qualitative study. A thematic analysis approach guided the coding process, which led to identifying five themes that aligned with the research questions. The five themes that played a significant role in this study are: the importance of unity among caseworkers, experience creates a successful worker, college degrees that service others work best, there is no 100% way to prepare, and lack of support and incentives from leaders. Overall, all study participants concur that significant changes are needed

within the organization to help better prepare caseworkers beginning with increasing leadership support and helping caseworkers gain experience before working in the field independently.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative research study was performed to address the problem of caseworker turnover that, over time, has shown to have some connection with caseworkers lacking the confidence, commitment, knowledge, and skills necessary to be successful. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas regarding the effects that earning a college degree and participating in training provided by CPS has on their professional experience and organizational commitment. I also explored the organizational and leadership factors surrounding caseworkers' experiences of education, training, and turnover. Research over the past decade has focused on the constant increase in turnover rates within CPS but has not focused on the education and training of caseworkers or the perspectives of such from caseworkers themselves (Lwin et al., 2018; Tavormina & Clossey, 2017). CPS caseworker participants were able to reflect and provide different perspectives and information on the importance of unity between caseworkers, the impact of gaining experience in the field, the advantages of degrees for helping others, the realities of CPS caseworker training and job preparation, and lack of job incentives and leadership support. This chapter summarizes and discusses the research results, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The research results detailed the perceptions of eight CPS caseworkers who have worked for at least 2 years in a large urban community in Texas. The participants shared their experiences and thoughts about education, training, organizational commitment, stress, their leaders, and the high turnover in their agency. They gave their personal insight on the reasons for turnover, the factors that produce a successful caseworker, and strategies leaders should use to

address the issue of turnover and caseworkers lacking the knowledge and skills to be successful. The data collected from the individual interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Five themes were identified that answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas related to education and training?

RQ1a: What role does CPS play in the experience of education and training?

RQ2: How do CPS caseworkers in a large urban community in Texas view college degree attainment regarding caseworker skill development, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ3: What are CPS caseworkers' experiences with on-the-job training and its effects on their job preparation, confidence, and organizational commitment?

RQ4: What, if any, are the mitigating factors influencing caseworkers to experience a lack of confidence, preparation, and skill?

The key findings were pertinent to this research study and resulted in some common themes that were evident throughout the study. For example, each participant discussed the importance of unity between caseworkers during the one-on-one interviews. Participants discussed how working and having a solid relationship with their peers led to gaining more knowledge and that this support often plays a vital factor in the desire to stay committed to the job during challenging times.

Second, participants discussed the impact of gaining experience in the field. Participants expressed that although a college degree has its benefits, it is not necessarily needed and that it is the experience that builds confidence, increases knowledge and skill, and ultimately produces a successful caseworker. Participants did discuss the advantages of degrees for helping others.

Although there was a consensus amongst participants that a college degree does not decrease turnover, participants discussed the benefits that degrees in the helping field have and how their peers who hold a Social Work, Psychology, Sociology, or similar degree display higher levels of confidence, stronger intent to stay, and more knowledge on resources to fulfill the duties of the job.

Third, participants discussed the realities of CPS caseworker training and job preparation. According to the participants, there is no 100% way to prepare for the realities that caseworkers face in the field. The training was said to be beneficial in helping caseworkers understand the step-by-step process of a case, meeting other caseworkers, and making them more knowledgeable on what is expected of them as a caseworker. Furthermore, participants expressed that the lack of job incentives and leadership support can be discouraging at times and has a significant role in the constant turnover among CPS caseworkers.

Understanding the experience of CPS caseworkers in Texas related to educational training and organizational factors is vital. Findings from this qualitative study emphasize current experiences that can increase awareness of the issues surrounding caseworker retention rates for local CPS employees. The findings can also assist with enhancing CPS caseworkers' job experiences and help increase attention surrounding issues of high turnover and caseworkers who lack the knowledge and skills to conduct their job duties successfully. Information provided in this study can provide additional credibility to implementing changes within the organization. Findings from the study can also be beneficial to child welfare and social service agencies by enhancing the processes that occur after a caseworker is hired and throughout the caseworker's time with the agency.

## **Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature**

Previous research indicated that many components stream into the cause of high turnover in Child Protective Services. Researchers have maintained that besides standard components, such as high caseloads, the reasons why caseworkers leave include personal and professional factors such as educational background, quality of supervision, and training (Osborne et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2017). Scales and Brown (2020) recommended increasing the training and education provided to caseworkers to produce positive experiences, thus strengthening organizational commitment from valuable workers. However, several other researchers felt that factors such as job stress, time pressure, work environment, unmanageable caseloads, and dangers when conducting home visits were why caseworkers leave (Griffiths et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020; Scales & Brown, 2020). The findings from previous literature collectively agree that caseworkers need active support from their leaders due to the stringent demands. Participants in this study confirmed these findings and expanded even further by explaining that each factor plays a role in turnover. However, components such as training, work environment, and leadership support aid in handling the other components and are most influential to caseworker success and retention.

The findings also aligned with previous research regarding the effects of training provided by CPS. According to Lwin et al. (2018), training positively influences caseworker attitudes and confidence, but there remains a need for an improved training process. Based on the research findings, preparation prior to becoming a caseworker is not as crucial as the training provided to active caseworkers. This proclamation aligns with previous studies regarding influential factors that help caseworkers succeed in their job. Participants expressed feeling unready to complete their job and stated that it was not their academic studies that prepared them

for a job with CPS but learning from other caseworkers and becoming accustomed to the culture of the work environment (Robichaud et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings concurred with Brittain and Potter's (2009) framework, which names three developmental stages for caseworkers: beginning, middle, and consolidation. This framework explains how caseworkers rely heavily on others to succeed during their first 2 years and how caseworker confidence and knowledge tend to lack if not given the proper support. This finding aligns with the study results as each participant repeatedly expressed that support and guidance are how they learned how to navigate life as a caseworker, strengthening their confidence, thus increasing the intent to stay committed to the organization. Brittain and Potter's (2009) framework suggests that it is not until after 5 years of being a caseworker that autonomy is reached and individuals no longer require supervisor support as a critical factor in fulfilling their client needs and job responsibilities (Phillips et al., 2020). Participants who were either almost at the 5-year mark or past it appeared to have a higher confidence level as a caseworker and felt that factors such as support from coworkers and leaders were more of a tool of encouragement and morale support rather than someone to help teach them how to do their job.

### **Limitations**

In this research study, there were three limitations present in this study. Eight participants were interviewed; although they were from different areas, this small sample is considered a limitation as it considerably limits the generalization of the findings. The small size and area of study resulted in receiving only one caseworker with a social work degree. This limitation did not present a problem to the study because it was not solely focused on those with a social work degree but on caseworkers with different educational backgrounds. Although the results are

based on responses from a specific area in Texas within one agency branch, they do not hinder the study's validity.

Second, although conducting each interview through Zoom was convenient and preferable for the caseworker participants who have busy schedules and travel all over the region, several participants encountered minor glitches from the virtual platform. Several times, the video froze or lagged in and out, making it difficult to hear interview questions and responses comprehensibly. Although it was resolved, it became a distraction to the participant and took away the ability to maintain constant focus during the first section of the interview.

The third limitation of the study involves the voluntary participation aspect of the study. Those caseworkers who were unwilling to participate or possibly felt as though they did not have anything meaningful to share could have had a very different interpretation of the effects of education and training, organizational commitment, and leadership characteristics that affect caseworkers' job experiences. Caseworkers willing to take time out of their busy and hectic schedule to risk sharing personal opinions about their work environment and the behavior of their leaders may differ significantly in commitment and responses.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this qualitative research study, I would recommend further research on the topic with a larger population. A larger sample can help with generalization and provide a more in-depth insight into root causes that lead to high caseworker turnover when considering the high number of caseworkers who feel unprepared to do their job during the first initial years. Additionally, a larger sample may yield more caseworkers with a Bachelor of Social Work degree where the researcher can have a more in-depth insight into any differences or similarities in experiences and opinions between caseworkers. Future studies may find using one



method for data collection as a limitation. As a result, other researchers may find it helpful to employ multiple methods such as focus groups, surveys, and other means to determine CPS caseworkers' thoughts and feelings on education, training, and factors that affect the high turnover rate. Lastly, it would be beneficial to have a deeper insight into the training that CPS provides. Future research should explore caseworker experiences with the types of training provided to caseworkers and how the information is delivered. Several participants shared stories regarding trainers teaching the same information as each other, but each trainer taught the information in the manner that best worked for them. This was said to be very confusing for new caseworkers unfamiliar with the information being taught. Results from a further exploration into caseworker training could support a recommendation to leaders to standardize caseworker training to ensure everyone is learning authentic and perpetual information that can be transferred into practice no matter who conducts the training.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The current findings revealed that a sense of community and belongingness between caseworkers and their peers and between caseworkers and their leaders decreased stress, increased confidence, furthered the caseworker's knowledge and experience, and increased the intent to stay committed to the organization. CPS leaders may determine a more effective screening process and mentorship program for new hires as having purposeful time to understand each caseworker and having ample time for peer collaborations may help reduce stress, feeling lost, and turnover rates within the caseworkers (Choi et al., 2019). The current study illustrated that caseworkers desire ongoing support from their supervisors who will guide them, motivate them, and assist them with job requirements. Because of a lack of recognition and support, caseworkers often quit their jobs, feeling unwanted, not needed, ignored, and incapable of doing

their job (Osborne et al., 2020). With a lack of supervisor support, having caseworkers who have not received education tailored to case management and lack the knowledge and skill to conduct casework appeared to increase the agency's challenges with retaining caseworkers over an extended period.

Although CPS now requires some education or experience and provides a variety of training, participants placed most of the blame on lack of experience and poor training. Therefore, leaders should take heed to the information taught in training given to caseworkers, the amount of information given in each training session, and the pace or amount of time dedicated to training caseworkers and ensuring that they are given a genuine opportunity to gain some experience once hired that will continue being developed throughout the entirety of their time as a caseworker. To ensure this is done efficiently, CPS leaders could benefit from implementing ongoing leadership development training for all employees with supervisory positions. This form of professional development should be well thought out to ensure that it fits the work that leaders conduct, especially the duty of guiding, supervising, and motivating caseworkers. Furthermore, CPS leaders should identify and create a strategic process for caseworkers to advance into leadership positions. According to the research participants, the process to advance involves those who desire to be supervisors to complete a computer-based supervisor assessment consisting primarily of scenario-based questions. Proper training, clear expectations, applicable qualifications, and high standards must be set for advancement opportunities if leaders want strong, successful supervisors who will develop and maintain strong, successful caseworkers.

## Conclusions

This qualitative research study was an exploration of CPS caseworkers' experiences with education and training; the goals were to understand the impact of education and training on job success, organizational commitment, client-family outcomes, turnover and to determine participants' opinions of what leaders could do to better prepare and retain caseworkers. The study participants included eight CPS caseworkers from a large urban community who have worked as CPS caseworkers for at least 2 years. The participants shared their experiences through virtual interviews regarding their experiences with education and training, strategies used by leaders to promote organizational commitment and caseworker education, and the organizational factors that affect caseworker confidence, success, and retention. Five key findings were generated.

The first theme was the importance of unity between caseworkers. The participants stated numerous times throughout the individual interviews that working with other caseworkers provided them with knowledge, support, and comfort as a caseworker. At least once during each interview, a caseworker mentioned that a strategy used by leaders and a benefit of CPS training was getting caseworkers together to meet and create a family-like environment. Second, experience creates a successful worker, which most participants felt was more vital and influential than obtaining a college degree. Tertiary findings revealed that although the caseworkers felt a college degree might not be necessary to be successful and develop characteristics that enable caseworkers to be committed to the organization, there was an agreement among caseworkers that college degrees that focus on helping others have shown to produce confident and committed caseworkers. The fourth theme revealed that CPS training needs much improvement and needs to include training for caseworkers beyond the new

employee training provided in the first couple of years, but that ultimately there is no 100% way to prepare caseworkers for what they will face in the field. This key finding, however, should not take away from the caseworkers' recommendations of improving and increasing caseworker training, but instead should be used as a credible rationale of why leaders should not expect quality and knowledgeable casework from a worker who has only completed training with no experience in the field. Lastly, the fifth theme was the lack of support and incentives from leaders. Findings revealed that having leaders participate in ongoing training, being hands-on with caseworkers, expressing empathy, and providing invariable positive encouragement is key to success and retention.

Finally, participants indicated that leaders need to develop a plan to ensure training is not rushed despite the many vacancies currently present in the organization. The caseworkers felt that when training is rushed, those new caseworkers then fall into the same cycle of being inexperienced but forced into the field on their own with high workload demands and strict expectations from leaders. Those caseworkers then leave, and the remaining caseworkers are pushed to cover the workload of the vacant spots, thus causing a similar cycle of burnout with tenure caseworkers. These findings align with previous research. The theoretical framework revealed that the turnover rate could decrease through education, professional development, organizational culture, workload, and supervision. Further research is required to understand if a social work degree that includes an internship is vital in closing gaps in the organization's workforce and aiding the strategic recruitment of caseworkers who will remain on the job and have the tools necessary to create successful outcomes.

Although the issue of caseworker turnover will be an ongoing issue due to the nature of the job, implementing strategies recommended by caseworkers and taking heed to caseworker

perceptions on education, training, work environment, leadership support, and caseworker retention may decrease the number of caseworkers leaving and the number of caseworkers unprepared to do their everyday job. The study revealed that although a college degree may not be the solution, a remodeled training process for caseworkers with classroom training for basic processes and policies of case management combined with ample time in the field with an experienced caseworker would alleviate some of the issues of caseworkers lacking basic skills and continued high turnover rates. Furthermore, leaders making an effort to seek the opinions and perceptions of caseworkers while ensuring that they are also actively involved in ongoing training would motivate caseworkers to be committed to the organization. Thus, turnover of quality caseworkers would have a high probability of decreasing, families involved with CPS would receive assistance in a timely manner, leaders would not have to focus constantly on hiring new workers, thus saving time and money on recruitment, and the agency would experience organizational improvement as a whole.

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## Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
328 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29145, Abilene, Texas 79699-9145  
325-674-2885



August 29, 2022

Alisa Wright  
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Alisa,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Higher Education's Effect on Retention: Exploring the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers ", (IRB# 22-100 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. If at any time the details of this project change, please advise our office of the change(s) by email, so that the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work!

Sincerely,

*Qi Hang*

Qi Hang (Aug 29, 2022 15:46 CDT)

ACU Executive Director of Research

Additional Approvals/Instructions:

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of research by the Institutional Review Board. If the Primary Investigator is a student and fails to fulfil any of these responsibilities, the Faculty Advisor then becomes responsible for completing or upholding any and all of the following:

- If there are any changes in the research (including but not limited to change in location, members of the research team, research procedures, number of participants, target population of participants, compensation, or risk), these changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
- Report any protocol deviations or unanticipated problems to the IRB promptly according to IRB policy.
- Should the research continue past the expiration date, submit a Continuing Review Form, along with a copy of the current consent form and a new Signature Assurance Form approximately 30 days before the expiration date.
- When the research is completed, inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. If your study is Expedited or Full Board, submit an Inactivation Request Form and a new Signature Assurance Form. If your study is Exempt, Non-Research, or Non-Human Research, email orsp@acu.edu to indicate that the research has finished.
- According to ACU policy, research data must be stored on ACU campus (or electronically) for 3 years from inactivation of the study, in a manner that is secure but accessible should the IRB request access.
- It is the Investigator's responsibility to maintain a general environment of safety for all research participants and all members of the research team. All risks to physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as any risks to confidentiality should be minimized.

For additional information on the policies and procedures above, please visit the IRB website <https://cdn01.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/orsp/human-research/overview.html> or email orsp@acu.edu with your questions.

## Appendix B: Participation Solicitation Email

**Supervisors, please send this to all caseworkers in your unit. Thank you!**

Hello! My name is Alisa Wright, and I am conducting research for my doctoral degree at Abilene Christian University. I am studying CPS caseworker education and training. I would like to invite you to participate in my research.

In order to be included in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- Over the age of 18
- Currently employed as a frontline CPS caseworker
- Have been employed as a CPS caseworker in Texas for at least 2 years
- In good standing with the agency
- If you have a degree or certificate in social work, you must have earned that degree or certificate from a Texas college or university. (If you have multiple degrees, at least one must be from a Texas college/university.)

You cannot participate if:

- You have any involvement in a current investigation
- You are currently under disciplinary action
- Your social work degree(s) were earned in a state other than Texas.

Please note that you do not have to have a social work or college degree to participate in the study.

If you participate in this research, you will be asked to:

- Complete a one-hour interview with me, face-to-face or through virtual conferencing technology such as Zoom. We will choose a time and location convenient for you.
- Review your interview transcription for accuracy (optional)

If you have questions for me or you would like to participate, please email me at: \_\_\_\_\_; Please provide a preferred phone number for me to contact you. You can also call me at \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

(Used as a guide for the researcher during interview)

1. How long have you worked as a CPS caseworker?
2. How do you define job preparation?
3. How did you experience job preparation prior to becoming a caseworker?
4. How confident are you in your role as a caseworker?
5. What has led to this confidence OR What has led to this lack of confidence?
6. How have you experienced education and training in your role as a CPS caseworker?
7. What role do you believe CPS plays in caseworker education and training?
8. What other factors have you experienced that play a role in caseworker education and training?
9. What strategies have you seen leaders utilize to promote organizational commitment within frontline caseworkers?
10. What strategies does CPS use to address caseworkers who lack the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful?
11. What are your thoughts regarding a college degree in regards to caseworker job preparation and skill development?
12. What are your thoughts regarding a college degree in regards to caseworker confidence and organizational commitment?
13. Do you have a social work degree? If yes, what are your experiences with having a social work degree and working as a CPS caseworker? If not, what are your experiences with not having a social work degree and working as a CPS caseworker?

14. What differences, if any, have you noticed from peers who do not have a social work degree? Or What differences, if any, have you seen from peers who do have a social work degree?
15. What challenges does not having a college degree create for CPS caseworkers in case management? Can you elaborate on this with an example that you have experienced?
16. What forms of on-the-job training have you experienced?
17. What challenges are faced with on-the-job training?
18. What benefits do you experience with on-the-job training?
19. Who is responsible for screening and providing training provided by CPS? Describe how this screening is done in your setting.
20. Who is responsible for screening a caseworker's readiness to become case assignable? Describe how or if this screening is done in your setting.
21. What challenges do caseworkers face during the education and training stage? Can you elaborate on this with an example?
22. What factors enable caseworkers to lack the necessary knowledge and skills to be a successful caseworkers and increase their intent to remain with CPS?
23. How can increasing CPS caseworker preparation assist clients? Please provide examples of your ideas.
24. How do your leaders address the issues of caseworkers lacking the skills and knowledge to be successful?
25. What changes can be made to reduce or eliminate turnover caused by caseworkers who do not have the proper education and training to do their job?

26. Do you have any other information you would like to share about the topic of CPS caseworker education, training, and its effects on caseworker job preparation, confidence, turnover, organizational commitment, wellbeing, or client outcomes?