# Exploring the Perspectives of Biological Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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## Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and related Disabilities (LEND) Program

Westchester Institute for Human Development, University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and New York Medical College

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### Background

- As of 2021, there were 391,000 children in foster care in the US (AFCARS, 2023).
- The child welfare system aims to prevent abuse/neglect, strengthen family relationships, reunite families, and find permanency for children who cannot safely return home.
- Prior research focuses on foster parents’ and child welfare workers’ experiences with limited research on the biological parents’ experiences.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated barriers faced by birth parents regaining custody of their children due to disruptions in services and coordination.

### Objective

- Identify common experiences (among biological parents) with the child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic, while providing safe space to share their perspectives.

### Methods

- Biological parents (n=7) recruited from WIHD Child Welfare programs (NYMC IRB approved)
- Recruitment video created for families and organizations
- Semi-structured interviews conducted
- Community partner: Robyn Brown-Manning, LMSW, PhD.

### Discussion / Limitations

#### Interview Findings:

- Advantages and disadvantages of the COVID-19 reliance on tele-services.
- Biological parents voiced appreciation for being able to share their experiences.
- Despite challenging circumstances, participants still expressed gratitude for foster parents and providers.

#### Unanticipated Findings About Research:

- Many parents expressed fear and distrust which deterred participation.
- Participants were more likely to participate if the interviews were facilitated by a trusted third party.

#### Study Limitations:

- Small sample size
- Narrow geographical constraints
- Limited to maternal perspective

#### Personal Reflections:

- Increased empathy
- Better understanding of the complexities within the child welfare system
- Equitability barrier

#### Next Steps:

- Disseminate interview and unanticipated research findings to community partners

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**Themes**

**Fear/Lack of Trust in the System**

- "Be careful...a misunderstanding can lead to a situation that is very complicated."
- "I’m afraid it (the interview) will be used against me and I will lose my child again."

**Gratitude**

- "Things weren’t made harder because it was my (adult) daughter who had him…."
- "Therapy, social workers, and all have treated me well and I’ve felt comfortable."

**Relationship**

- "Remember that you’re a good parent and you want your children, so don’t listen to… the lies and the bad things that people say about you."
- "They have a very judgmental thinking where everyone who is on welfare or everybody who needs child services is like almost a bad person"

**Bias**

- "I don’t want to be jeopardized & not get the right help because they’re judging me."
- "They were doing virtual visits with children during the pandemic and that was so hard on my mental health."

**Technology**

- "The video calls helped me a lot because it allowed me to see her."

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**Challenges Accessing Services**

- "There was no WiFi, so in order to do my visits and see my counselor and everything, I had to walk to a library and they weren’t really understanding."

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