



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

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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.

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...."

Relationship

"Therapy, social workers, and all have treated me well and I've felt **comfortable**."

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**."

Technology

"They were doing virtual visits with children during the pandemic and that was so **hard on my mental health**."

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

Bias

"I don't want to be **jeopardized** & not get the right help because they're **judging me**."

"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**"

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