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Invisible Lives: A Qualitative Study of 61 Parents Receiving Child Protective Services (SUMMARY REPORT)

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SUMMARY

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Child Protective Services

S. Maiter, S. Palmer, and S. Manji

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Introduction

Involvement with child protective services (CPS) may be expected to be a stressful experience for parents. Usually their involvement is involuntary, initiated because someone believes they are not caring adequately for their children: this tells them that the community, or someone in the community, does not approve of them as parents. As families who become involved with CPS tend to be economically deprived and socially marginalized, they may view agency intervention as one more signs that they are not accepted by their community; moreover it brings the fear of losing their children, perhaps forever. In this context, it is especially important to understand parents' perspectives, so that service providers can respond sensitively to them through the crisis of CPS entering their lives. A sensitive response contributes to a good working relationship, and to the parents' sense of being respected and valued, conditions that are essential in helping them to improve their family situations.

This research report explores the experiences of sixty-one parents who have had substantial involvement with CPS, with a focus on their own perceptions of this involvement. To better understand the context of parents' experiences, we also asked them to discuss freely their histories, their daily lives, their relationships with family, friends, neighbours, and more formal sources of support. We did not interview CPS

workers or foster carers. Other team members in the Partnerships for Children and Families Project did include workers in their interviews; for our part, it was a massive task to organize the data from lengthy interviews with 61 parents, thus the inclusion of other viewpoints was beyond our capacity.

In soliciting the opinions of parents about the positive and negative aspects of their work with CPS, we have been mindful of the great difficulties under which Ontario Children's Aid Societies are operating. We are familiar with the stressful working conditions and the severe limitations on time available to spend with families. A 2001 workload study of Ontario Children's Aid Societies found that front-line workers are spending less than 30% of their time in personal contact with families and children (OACAS, 2001). Most of workers' time tends to be spent in paperwork to meet the increasing demands for accountability from the provincial government, and the legal requirements involved in carrying out their mandated role of protecting children.

The following is a summary of the full length report for "Invisible Lives: A qualitative study of 61 parents receiving child protective services". For a more detailed description of the daily living realities and service experiences of parents receiving child protective services, please contact The Partnerships for Children and Families Project to request a copy of the full report. Research reports can also be downloaded at no cost from www.wlu.ca/pcfproject.

Methodology

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was employed for the study. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from research participants, as described

below. This interview schedule was developed after a review of the literature. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Two research assistants, using the qualitative analysis software program NVIVO, analysed and organized the data.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from two CPS agencies servicing two of 53 regions in Ontario, Canada. Thirty-nine parents (64%) were recruited from one agency while the other 22 (36%) were recruited from another.

Data Collection

Masters level social work students who had experience working with child welfare service participants conducted the interviews. In addition to bringing their experience to the study, the interviewers received comprehensive two-day training on conducting qualitative interviews. The training included information about the project, orientation to qualitative interviewing, interview conduct, review of the interview schedule, completion of consent forms, sharing of information letter with participants, reading of articles relating to qualitative interviewing, and conducting mock interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were between 1 ½ to 2 hours in length and usually took place in participants' homes. The interviews were with the family's primary caregiver, in most instances the mother, only with one family were both parents interviewed. The goal of the semi-structured interview was to obtain as comprehensive a picture of service participants lives as possible with a particular emphasis on child welfare services and on family life.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced once all interviews were completed. All three authors worked on developing and defining codes from themes and insights that emerged from reading of four transcripts by all three authors. The third author and a master's level social work student then coded and organized the data using the qualitative software package NVIVO (QSR NUD*IST Vivo) for organizing non-numerical data. They coded the first three interviews independently and as they found a good level of agreement in the coding, subsequently only one coder was used for each transcript. Coders were asked to code all statements that were relevant to the coding scheme developed to guard against selective attention to points of particular interest to the coders. As each transcript was coded separately, the coders entered journal memos of categories of significance. The journal memos were a reminder of points in the individual interviews where the coders had self-reflected on dominant themes.

Sample

For the 61 families in the sample, 57 (93%) of the interviews were with mothers only, 3 (5%) were with fathers only, and both parents were interviewed from the remaining family. The age of the participants ranged from 16 years to 47 years with the mean being 31.66 years. The marital status of the participants was as follows: single = 27.9% (17), married = 24.6% (15), living common-law = 16.4% (10), divorced = 16.4% (109), separated = 13.1% (8), and widowed = 1.6% (1). Ninety five percent (58) of the participants were born in Canada while English was the first language of 98.4% (60) of the participants. Participants had between 1 and 6 children. The mean number of

children was 2.18. The number of years that participants had been involved with CPS ranged from 0.08 years to 15 years with the mean being 2.4 years.

Research Findings

The findings have been organized into three main themes: (1) parent's lives, (2) formal and informal supports, and (3) parent's experiences with child protective services.

Part 1: Parent's Lives

Parents in this sample noted a variety of problems that impinged on their families including: unsupportive male partners (61%), wife abuse (34%), non-violent oppression (25%), transient lifestyle (54%), poverty (38%), substance abuse (33%), problems with physical health (33%), mental health problems (31%), poor neighbourhoods (26%), isolation (23%), unemployment (20%), and disability (11%). Clearly, many of the mothers were in oppressive relationships with partners who were either abusive or controlling, while many mothers felt unsupported by their partners. Differentiating the types of conflict for the mothers helps us to better understand the complex and particular ways in which mothers are unsupported and abused. For example, mothers felt unsupported when their partners did not contribute in household chores, caring, nurturing, or disciplining children, and helping during difficult and stressful times. The day to day challenges of raising children within this unsupportive context was strongly felt by the mothers as noted by one whose partner did not help with a colicky child leaving her feeling extremely overwhelmed and drained. This lack of support was especially problematic as these mothers were already feeling isolated and burdened. Abusive

actions included extreme violence, such as hitting punching, and kicking, as well as controlling behaviour such as supervising mothers' movements and actions.

Poverty and unemployment further contributed to isolation and erosion of social supports and networks. Lack of resources also resulted in parents living in 'rough' neighbourhoods where they felt labeled and scrutinized and isolated from their neighbours and the larger community.

Mental health problems, disability, and substance abuse were also present for many parents. Within this context, parents strove to provide for their children, and sought supports in this. Parents endeavoured to find appropriate housing, and to protect their children from rough neighbourhoods. Parents struggled to find employment, and took casual, low paid, insecure jobs so that they could support their families. Parents often had employment that did not offer them security or allow them the flexibility to attend to personal, childcare, and home-related needs. This left them vulnerable to losing their jobs when they were absent for personal reasons. The low wages from their jobs combined with child care costs, left them struggling with trying to make ends meet.

Within the difficult context noted above, some parents were coping with children who presented special challenges. Some children had been physically/sexually abused. Parents also noted children with ADHD, and other mental health and physical health problems that were prevalent from an early age. The behaviours of these children with which parents had been contending appeared to escalate during adolescence. Parents felt overwhelmed by efforts to advocate for their children in the school system and in the social service system. They struggled to obtain the help they felt their children needed

and sometimes approached CPS to obtain this help. However, this help is not always forthcoming.

Parents themselves had difficult, disrupted, and insecure childhoods and had experienced childhood abuse. Twenty-one parents (34%) did not finish high school, 17 parents (28%) reported being physically/sexually abused, and 11 (18%) reported substance abuse by their parents. Family breakdown, witnessing abuse of their mothers by male partners, and conflict with parents was also noted as being traumatic.

Parents talked about family strengths in relation to employment and income, neighbourhoods, housing, recreational and leisure activities, self-improvement through education, and intra-family relationships. Two-thirds of parents mentioned that they, their partner, or both, were working; one-third of parents made positive statements about their work, mostly about being well paid or liking their jobs. Just over half the parents (51%) were positive about their neighbourhoods, with the most frequently mentioned themes being the friendliness and helpfulness of neighbours. Good housing was mentioned by only 16% of parents, with a common theme being the sense of comfort and satisfaction about having one's own home, which had often been a challenge to achieve.

Many parents (59%) discussed leisure and recreational activities. Family activities, mentioned by 46%, tended to be low-cost pursuits, such as camping, walking, swimming, going to the park, and family trips. Only 16% of parents mentioned sending their children to community activities, such as Scouting groups, possibly because the costs made this prohibitive. Only 10% of parents mentioned engaging in their own activities for pleasure: these were diverse, but were also low-cost activities, such as

reading. Many parents (33%) reported their achievements in self-improvement through education, often linked with having ended their regular education prematurely.

Regarding positive aspects of intra-family relationships, 25% of parents discussed relationships with their partners, 25% discussed support received from partners with child care, and 15% discussed their own relationships with their children. By far the most common theme in relationships with the partner was "sharing" of work, activities, and feelings. Support with child care focussed on behaviour that demonstrated the partner's interest and affection for the child, especially when the child was not the partner's own. As for parent-child relationships, the only recurring theme was the concept of spending time with one child to improve the parent-child relationship.

Overall, these parents were employed, and those who had economic stability, good neighbourhoods and housing appreciated this. They tended to choose inexpensive family recreational activities, and tended not to send their children or go themselves to many non-family activities. A substantial number had attempted to improve their situations, by seeking more education after dropping out of school earlier. They valued partners who shared the work of the family with them, and those who spoke positively about their children showed love and respect for them.

Comparing the struggles of families with their strengths, it is apparent that the overwhelming problems of childhood neglect and abuse, serious relationship deficits, including horrendous abuse for some, lack of resources, and a socially toxic environment can constrain parents' capacity to provide the nurturing environment for

their children that they want. Many parents were exhausted and discouraged by the demanding nature of their lives.

Part 2: Formal and Informal Supports

Parents reported that in addition to CPS they accessed supports from social service organizations, friends and neighbours, extended family members, and places of belonging in the community (e.g. church, Rotary Clubs, fitness centers, park). This support was essential for preserving emotional health, supplementing material shortages, providing shelter, expanding social networks, and providing opportunity for recreation and leisure. In addition, the parents' community was instrumental in facilitating personal growth, academic learning, jobs, spiritual healing, and a sense of belonging.

While 74% of parents identified one or more extended family members who had been a source of support in their difficult lives, 30% of parents identified an extended family member that had been unhelpful, and 15% of parents said they had received no support from any of their extended family members. Parents felt that the lack of support from extended family members was due to a history of poor relationships that made it difficult to trust and be close, disagreements with lifestyle and partner choices, family members wanting to pressure and control parents to conform to different ways of living, and family members showing an overt dislike toward the parents and their children.

A substantial number of parents (85%) reported accessing professional and social supports from service organizations in their community. The main services they used were counselling, income supplementing, parenting groups, daycare, daily living supplements, respite, and shelter. Parents used social services, other than CPS, in times of crisis revolving around a need for shelter, respite, income, shortage of food, children's

challenging behaviours, relationship breakdowns, and health complications. While parents expressed that the services were helpful (52%), thirty-six percent of the parents encountered many challenges and disappointments in accessing services. This was as a result of fragmented, inflexible and mismatched services, long waiting lists, unhelpful service providers, and a feeling of stigmatization for using certain services. Hence, parents reported that while services helped to diffuse stress, build skills, and strengthen personal growth, the fact that they were residual, patchy, and disjointed, sometimes nullified the short-term gains and remained ineffective in addressing underlying complex problems. Nevertheless, their life situations compelled them to use these services in the hope that they would get the desired support. Therefore, in addition to friends, neighbours, family, and places of belonging in the community, social service organizations were a necessary and integral part of community supports for parents in the study.

Part 3: Parent's Experiences with Child Protective Services

The large number of parents who spoke about referrals and concrete help indicates that agencies had a good awareness of the resources available to meet the many needs of these families. Parents appreciated referrals that enabled them to access daycare, counselling, assessment, and/or treatment for themselves or their children. They also benefited from concrete help, such as food, shelter, and special education for their children. It was noteworthy that many parents spoke about the emotional support they received from workers, in a context where the agency's role often generates fear and hostility. In particular, the two CPS agencies in the study were, as most other Ontario agencies, going through a period of increased workloads, high worker turnover, with the

added stress of heightened government monitoring and public scrutiny. Yet some workers were able to develop trust and warmth in their relationship, despite these tensions and pressures. Parents particularly appreciated workers who listened and heard them. Even though this may seem like an overused cliché, parents gave concrete examples of when they felt heard. Workers who showed caring and empathy in specific ways were also remarked about. Staying with a parent longer than expected during a stressful time, calling to cancel appointment, sharing some personal information thereby showing personal vulnerabilities were noted by parents as positive qualities that were appreciated.

Respectful approaches to parents are especially important in a CPS agency, which has tremendous power to engender fear and powerlessness in families. Thus, it is significant that some parents felt they were given good explanations of agency processes, including reassurance about agency intentions regarding their children.

Finally, parents spoke positively about foster carers who treated them well, were good to their children, and taught them better ways of relating to their children. A good relationship with foster carers can help parents to feel more positive about the agency in general, and can also allay fears about their children being lost to them or alienated from them. As agency practice does not usually encourage an inclusive approach by foster carers, it seems to have been the individual carers who reached out to these parents.

Many parents described negative experiences with CPS interventions. Concerns around "omission of services" reflected the rationing of services at a time when agencies were experiencing high demand and limited resources. It is painful for families to be denied help because their child is not yet being abused, to experience minimal contacts with workers, and to have a trusted worker replaced with a stranger. It might be helpful to

these parents to be reassured that their requests and expectations were legitimate, but could not be met because of limited resources. This approach might minimize the parents' sense that no one cared about them or their children. As for worker changes, these are sometimes caused by unavoidable staff turnover; however, some CPS agencies have built in changes as part of worker specialization, e.g. a new worker takes over when a child comes into care. Losing a worker can be a crucial event for vulnerable parents who are undergoing a crisis in their lives, and their perspective should be considered when weighing the costs and benefits of a specialized service system.

Parents' sense of being unfairly judged, denied information, or being betrayed reflected the agency's mandatory function, which gives them great power over families, and creates understandable fear and anger in parents. Specific qualities of workers such as appearing cold and critical, particularly when removing a child from the care of the parent, and coming across as insincere were noted as hurtful qualities of the worker. It is understandable that workers would pay greater attention to children during the tense time of an apprehension of a child, however, spending extra time, and taking time to support the parent could alleviate some of the concerns noted. From the parents' descriptions of positive experiences, it is clear that some workers are able to soften their intervention with a gentle and understanding approach that recognizes how difficult the encounter is for parents. Often the same parent spoke positively about one worker and negatively about another, demonstrating that the parent had an open mind toward CPS and would respond well to respectful and supportive treatment.

Workers should make sure that parents have sufficient information about how the agency functions, how their family situation is being viewed, and knowledge about their

rights. An innovative practice, such as Family Group Conferencing provides a structure that gives parents this kind of information and encourages them to consider all possible alternatives for the better care of their children. When it is necessary to make public the agency's negative view of a family in Court, workers should prepare the parents for what they will hear. During placement, workers should always inform parents as soon as possible of important developments in their children's lives, such as hospitalization or a move to a new placement. Respectful treatment along the way can help to reduce parents' feelings that the agency is working against them, and enhance their sense of working as partners in the interests of their children.

Parents' sense of being harassed, and being traumatized by removal of their children, seems to reflect the increasing tendency for CPS workers to model themselves after the police in carrying out their role. The benefits of approaches such as searching a family's living space are probably outweighed by negative effects on the worker-parent relationship. Moreover the practice of involving multiple authority figures in confrontational apprehensions may ensure that the agency is able to take children into care with minimal resistance; but it creates a nightmarish scenario for parents and children. Anecdotal evidence from children who have been part of such apprehensions indicates they often feel kidnapped, and have great difficulty in accepting their placements.

Parents' concerns about foster care should be taken seriously. Agencies sometimes have to use marginal homes, because of the chronic shortage of family caregivers. Parents can provide a different perspective in helping workers to ensure that adequate care is given to children in a particular foster home. Agencies should encourage

foster carers to include parents in their children's lives: positive reports in this study showed that inclusion can generate appreciation and sense of partnership in parents, which is likely to be experienced as supportive by children. Workers can encourage carers to be more understanding toward parents by pointing out the larger context of the parents' lives, especially their earlier lives that have made it difficult for them to be good parents. Foster carers who are inclusive of parents are more likely to keep parents informed about their children, to facilitate increased access, and to maintain some involvement when children are moved back to their own homes.

From the reports of these parents, it is clearly possible for CPS workers and foster carers to develop positive, supportive relationships with parents. It seems that the burden of carrying out CPS functions without adequate resources causes some workers to abandon their social work knowledge and skills, so they become more confrontational and police-like. The workers who had a positive influence on parents were able to establish relationships characterized by caring, and respect, so that parents and agencies could work collaboratively in caring for children in need of protection.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As we examined the extensive data these parents provided, about their histories, daily lives, and interpersonal relationships, we were struck by the barriers they faced in trying to raise their children. In their personal histories, many of the parents in our study did not have a good beginning to their own lives, long before they became parents. They were often lacking models in their families of origin that would help them to assume adult roles. Over 1/4 mothers reported being abused by their parents and almost 1/5 had

parents who were substance abusers. A number of parents spoke of the difficulties of being raised in one-parent homes. A number left home at an early age, because of conflicts with their parents. About 1/3 reported dropping out of school and 1/6 mentioned early marriage and/or parenthood. These disruptive early experiences and their doubts about the models provided by their own families meant that many parents lacked a solid foundation for beginning to parent their own children. Despite this, the positive comments of parents about their current families indicated that they were strongly invested in caring for their children, and appreciated any support they received, informally or from agencies such as CPS.

In their daily lives, many of the parents experienced difficulties with their intra-family relationships, as well as their physical and mental health. In particular, mothers spoke about unsupportive partners, or men who oppressed or abused them, often physically. Substance abuse, physical illness, and mental health were each problematic for about one third of families, respectively. Poverty was an issue for almost 40% of families, and the search for security led over half the families to make frequent moves. Conditions that were largely outside the parents' control—socially toxic neighbourhoods and isolation—were each mentioned by about one-quarter of families. In the same vein, unemployment affected one out of every five families and disability affected one out of every ten families. Moreover, parents were struggling with children's emotional and behavioural problems, including the after-effects of experiencing and witnessing abuse, unusual aggressiveness, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and developmental delays. These problems with daily living reflect the challenging backgrounds of these

parents, ever-present conditions such as poverty and socially toxic neighbourhoods that undermined their efforts, and the cumulative effects of these conditions on their children.

Understandably, the families we interviewed would require a great deal of support to overcome the conditions described above. Our findings show that, while considerable support was forthcoming from formal and informal sources, this was probably insufficient to counteract the interactive effects of the conditions described above. Most of the parents (85%) did access some formal supports from the community, usually at times of crisis, such as lack of money, health emergencies, partner abuse, and unmanageable child behaviour. Half the parents were satisfied with the help they received, while over a third was disappointed, especially because they experienced the services as fragmented and unresponsive. This may be partly related to the crisis nature of their help-seeking. Considering their circumstances, many of the families needed services that were targeted to their special needs and sustained over time rather than ad-hoc responses to crisis. They could also have used support, possibly from CPS, to target and follow through on their help-seeking efforts: some parents mentioned the fear of being stigmatized by approaching certain agencies, while others felt they were denied services that they needed.

Regarding informal supports, parents in general can usually get the help they need from family and friends, when they are temporarily overburdened. For the families in this study, many of whom were chronically in need of support, their family and friends may not have extra resources, may be tired of providing help, or may have serious struggles of their own. Thus, it was not surprising that 15% of parents reported they had received no help from extended family, and 30% felt undermined by at least one extended family. On

the positive side, three-quarters of the parents mentioned support from their extended families and two-thirds mentioned support from friends. This support, however, was clearly not enough, as so many families sought formal support with ongoing crises in their lives, as well as becoming involved with CPS. The potential goodwill and resources of family and friends might be harnessed in a more effective way by CPS workers taking some leadership, e.g. bringing people together in a "wraparound approach" or using family group conferencing. There was no mention of these methods being used with the families.

Given the long-standing challenges in their lives, and the seriousness of their problems that led to CPS involvement, parents' experiences of intervention are crucial in determining whether they can be helped to provide "good enough" care to their children. Because our data-gathering was parent-centred and relatively unstructured, we do not know how many of the 60 families had children in temporary care; but there was no evidence that any of the families had permanently lost their children. Ideally, CPS should focus on garnering enough help for families so that parents are able to meet their children's developmental, behavioural, and emotional needs. It appears that the help parents most appreciated from CPS was with successful referrals and concrete help with necessities. This reflects the level and range of their needs that were not met by the formal and informal supports they accessed. The emphasis on referrals and concrete help is also consistent with parents' most commonly cited negative evaluation of CPS, i.e. the omission of services they had hoped to receive. The unmet emotional needs of parents are also demonstrated by the high value they placed on emotional support, even when it came from workers who potentially had the power to break up their families.

Although parents received some emotional support from family and friends, they clearly needed a great deal of nurturing. Mothers, in particular, who live with unsupportive, oppressive, and abusive partners, and are trying to raise their children in environments that can be unsafe, depressing, and demeaning, require sustained and generous emotional support. When this was not forthcoming from CPS workers, and instead the workers made demands for better performance from them, many parents felt unfairly treated and harassed. Some of these negative feelings might be prevented if workers explained to families the limitations under which their agencies are presently functioning, thereby acknowledging that they can only provide part of the help the family needs, and that workers are often too overwhelmed themselves to provide the emotional support the parents need and deserve. As the workplace study that was part of our larger Partnerships Project indicated, many workers are experiencing "burnout" that cripples them in engaging with families. It would help parents' self-esteem to hear this from their workers, rather than to interpret "burnout" behaviour as an indication that they are not worthy of workers' time and emotion.

In part, worker behaviour that is viewed by parents as unfair and harassing may be related to the frustration of working with unsupported and oppressed mothers, who are often overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting difficult children. In informal discussions with workers, we have sometimes sensed this frustration, and we recall it from our own front-line experiences. It may be helpful to view these parents holistically, recognizing that their limitations are understandable in view of their histories and the barriers they face in their daily lives. We were surprised to find so many positives in the parents' descriptions of their family lives—neighbourhood relationships, family

recreation, and mutual support between partners in caring for their children. As an intervention strategy, positive reinforcement to parents about their successes would encourage them to expand the satisfying aspects of their lives, as well as strengthening their self-esteem.

Despite difficult working conditions, over half of the parents identified their workers as portraying the essential elements of a good social work relationship. Over half viewed their workers as caring, over two-fifths described their workers as genuine, 30% noted empathy, almost one-fifth mentioned good listening, and one-fifth praised their workers for providing help beyond their expectations. These testimonies from parents show that many CPS workers are able to maintain their professional skills and attitudes despite an increasingly stressful working environment. It is hoped that the data we have gathered from parents receiving CPS services can be used to convince government standard-setters that accountability through form-filling should not be the main activity in a good child welfare system.