

ICT Use Among Rural Child Welfare Workers: Implications for LIS Education in a Global Context

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will report the research findings on ICT use among rural child welfare workers in North Florida. This study, which represents a collaboration among three different academic units, employed face-to-face interviews and experience sampling via a phone app to collect data about how ICT is being used in the field of child welfare social work and its impact on worker well-being, case outcomes, etc. This research will inform information behavior studies and LIS education interested in research methods as well as information services to the field of social work.

TOPICS

community and civic organizations; information use; research methods; social computing; specific populations

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Studies point to the need for improved IT skills and systems better tailored to social work (Breyette & Hill, 2015). ICT use among child welfare workers in rural communities is likely to be affected by many different factors. These factors include access to broadband (LaRose, Strover Gregg, & Straubhaar, 2011), how the term ICT is conceptualized and operationalized by these workers, the efficacy of the client systems and electronic health records provided by child welfare agencies (Huuskonen & Vakkari, 2010), individual technological skills (Dustin, 2006), agency ICT culture, policy and procedures (Halbesleben, Wakefield, & Wakefield, 2008), and the provision of training in the use of ICT for child welfare workers (Dustin, 2006). It is important to understand the ways that information systems have been formally implemented as well as the use of personal hand-held devices and other technology in the workplace.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the use of ICT among child welfare workers employed in rural settings in North Florida. The study investigated how these electronic tools are used as well as child welfare workers' experiences and facility with ICT. The research questions that guided the study are:

RQ1: How are child welfare workers in rural counties in North Florida using ICT in the performance of child case management?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of child welfare workers of ICT in their professional work?

RQ3: What are the experiences of child welfare workers with ICT in their professional work?

RQ4: What are child welfare workers' perceived level of comfort with ICT?

METHODS

In-depth interviews and a checklist were used to explore the types of ICT child welfare workers are familiar with, their perceived level of comfort with ICT, and how they use them in child welfare case management. Ten child welfare workers in North Florida will participate in this pilot project.

Initial interviews were conducted in order to explore child welfare workers' ICT use in child case management. A checklist was employed to survey the types of ICTs child welfare workers are familiar with and their perceived level of comfort with these technologies. After the initial interviews were completed, participants were asked to participate in experience sampling via the app PACO, in which they responded to short random phone surveys to report their actual ICT use over the course of one week. Phone surveys were followed up with a second interview to determine child welfare workers' ICT practices as well their views and experiences in light of their answers to the random phone surveys.

Thematic content analysis (i.e., unitizing, categorizing, and pattern searching) (Patton, 2008) is the main data analysis technique employed. Statistical analysis is used in the examination of the checklists and short phone survey data.

SIGNIFICANCE

This pilot study of ICT use among child welfare workers has allowed for the collection of baseline data and also the testing of data collection methods. The ultimate goal is to conduct a larger study that will provide a benchmark for current practice as well as recommendations for improvements where needed and help to establish what best practice looks like. Further findings will inform LIS research on user information behavior as well as begin to elucidate what role information professionals can play in helping other professionals use ICTs for information management. The use of experience sampling has been minimal in LIS research and its use in the pilot will inform future research interested in observing context and content. The findings and methods will be relevant to LIS education and research around the world.

CONNECTION TO CONFERENCE THEME

This study is a good example of how local research can have a global reach. We live in an age of dramatic technological change. Around the world more people are connected through smart phones, social media, and other new forms of ICT. Social workers are not isolated from this change. Indeed, social workers around the world use ICT to varying degrees in their work. We know little about which technologies social workers use, how they use them, and, importantly, how technologies impact their work with clients. This knowledge can help social workers harness their ICT skills to aid their job tasks, inform curriculum development in social work educational programs, and lead to the development of best practices. Ultimately, this work can improve social work services around the world and inform LIS education interested in information services to the field of social work.

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