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THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATION OUTCOMES

Kelly Gasso

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THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATION
OUTCOMES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Kelly Gasso
May 2023

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATIONS

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California State University,
San Bernardino

by
Kelly Gasso
May 2023
Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic essentially changed every system in America. In particular, it has created many unfamiliar challenges for child welfare agencies because they had to make immense changes to how they conducted their established practice. These changes aimed to keep the safety of children at the forefront, and simultaneously integrate higher safety protocols for social workers without putting children at risk. In response, the focus of this research proposal was to understand the effect COVID-19 had on child abuse investigations.

This research project utilized qualitative data in the form of interviews from a convenience sample of child welfare emergency response social workers to explore the impact COVID-19 had on child abuse investigations. Through the use of conventional content analysis, the following themes were identified: Outcomes, Practice Changes, and Types of Allegations. A limitation of the study was the small sample size and its focus on one county, therefore, not being able to generalize to the larger population and other dissimilar jurisdictions. One major finding indicating how COVID-19 changed child welfare practice was the inability to make face to face contact with children, due to social distancing requirements. The results highlight the importance of mental health services being accessible during a crisis, and child welfare agencies being able to adapt to everchanging practice and policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people: My two daughters, Kinslee and Cambria, going through this program was a sacrifice not only for me, but for you two as well. I promise to make our sacrifices all worthwhile. My mother, thank you for stepping in to care for my daughters when I couldn't be there, I will never be able to repay you. My father, since I was a young girl you instilled the concept of confidence into my life, and confidence is what got me through this program. My two sisters, Heather and Katelyn, thank you for keeping me sane and being there for me when I needed it. My fellow interns that turned into some of my best friends, thank you for always supporting me, you are all stuck with me for life. Dr. James Simon, thank you for your professionalism, expertise, and patience. I would not have been able to complete this project without your guidance. My mentor, Tim Seibert, the one who pushed me to pursue my goals, without you I would have never attempted this program.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to child welfare workers around the world who continually strive to keep the children in their communities safe. Your hard work does not go unnoticed, especially during a time of pandemic.

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of COVID-19 on child abuse reports and the outcomes of Emergency Response social worker investigations. This study utilized a post-positivist approach. Chapter one addresses the assessment phase of research to aid in explaining what is being researched, who participated in the research and why the research is important. This chapter addresses the primary research questions for the study, the research paradigm and rationale, a literature review to provide a structured discussion of the issue, a definition of the theory/theories used to ground the study, and lastly the potential contribution of the study to macro and micro social work practice.

Research Statement/Focus/Question

The COVID-19 pandemic essentially changed every system in America. In particular, it has created many unfamiliar challenges for child welfare agencies. Child welfare agencies had to make immense changes to how they conducted their established practice. These changes aimed to keep the safety of children at the forefront, and simultaneously integrate higher safety protocols for social workers without putting children at risk. This study examined those changes.

The goal of this study was to examine if and how child abuse investigations changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focus of this study involved addressing the changes emergency response (ER) workers had to make to how they conduct investigations. The primary research questions include: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted investigation outcomes according to investigating social workers? How have workers adapted their practices in response to COVID-19? What changes have workers seen in the types of allegations that were being investigated during the pandemic?

This research examined if and how child abuse investigations changed during the pandemic. The research focus of this study was to understand the changes emergency response (ER) workers had to make to how they conduct investigations, to analyze the impact the pandemic had and the changes that child welfare agencies were forced to make. In order to assist agencies in determining what changes worked well and what did not work. Furthermore, it is important to understand how investigations changed during the pandemic to illuminate how child welfare-involved families were personally affected by the pandemic, how they responded to a crisis, and how it affected the services provided. The goal of this study was to explore the impact of the pandemic on child abuse reports and the changes that were made to aid child welfare agencies in producing a strategic plan when faced with another disaster or pandemic.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

This research utilized a post-positivist paradigm. The post-positivist paradigm assumes there is an objective reality that can be found in natural settings where people are living out the focus of the study (Morris, 2013). The researcher attempted to remain neutral but may have an impact on the implementation phase (Morris, 2013). Qualitative data is the only data that can accurately represent the post-positivist paradigm (Morris, 2013). During the pandemic, social workers were forced to change their established practice methods, while ensuring children's safety. It is important to observe the changes that emergency response workers had to make to how they conduct investigations in order to understand how the pandemic may have impacted the outcomes of their investigations. This approach to the research cannot be evaluated with numbers and relies on the human experience, which is why the post-positivist paradigm was necessary for this study (Morris, 2013). Qualitative methods were used in the form of interviews with social workers to analyze the changes they had to make during their investigations.

Literature Review

The literature that focuses on child abuse during COVID-19 is still developing as time progresses. Existing literature was used to assist in addressing the issue of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected child abuse investigations. This literature review described the impact of the pandemic, the

contributors to child abuse during the pandemic, the impacts or consequences of child abuse during the pandemic, and explored any existing interventions.

Background

Child welfare agencies are tasked with investigating suspected child abuse reports that are made through the child abuse hotline. Concerned citizens and mandated reporters call the child abuse hotline to file suspected child abuse reports when any child abuse or neglect is suspected. Once the report is made, if the reported information meets criteria for the child welfare agency to get involved, an emergency response social worker is then assigned to investigate the allegations on the referral. Most data that is available regarding how many investigations are received every year is gathered at the state and national level. States provide their data to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, where the data is then composed into a yearly report, with the latest report titled Child Maltreatment 2020. This report states that nationally, child welfare agencies received 3,925,000 referrals alleging maltreatment to 7,065,000 children. Of these referrals, 2,120,000 were made into reports that received a disposition. Out of these reports, there were 618,000 victims, and out of these victims, 357,057 received post response services and 124,360 received foster care services (USDHHS, 2022).

Locally, allegation rates varied between age groups, so for example purposes, the age group of three to five years old was reviewed. From January 2019 to December 2019 in the county under study, allegation rates for children

aged three to five years old were 51.9 per 1,000 children. From January 2020 to December 2020, the rate was 45.1 per 1,000 children (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, n.d.). From January 2019 to December 2019, child maltreatment substantiation for children aged three to five years old were 8.8 per 1,000 children, compared to January 2020 to December 2020, during which the rate was 8.4 per 1,000 (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, n.d.). Therefore, it appears that rates went down, but this is not to say that child abuse went down.

Many different states and countries struggled with the issue of child abuse during the pandemic. It is estimated that 1.37 billion children around the world were forced to stay home from school and remain at home without any contact with their friends or extended family (Cluver et al., 2020). Tensions tend to rise within a family when they are restricted to their homes, which may have had an impact on rates of child abuse. In California alone there has been 8,829 cases of the virus per 100,000 people (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The complicating factors that come along with Covid-19 have had an impact on rates of child abuse. Each case represents a potential parent, child, caregiver, family member, or support system that has been affected by the virus. The challenges that COVID-19 produce all test the vulnerability and resiliency of a family.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Maltreatment

COVID-19 was a global pandemic that affected people around the world. The literature reflects this fact with publications from many different countries addressing COVID-19 and the effects it had on child abuse. Katz & Fallon (2022) reviewed several studies in the United States and Europe to determine the impact of COVID-19 on child maltreatment rates, and they found different results. For example, they reviewed a study in North Carolina on 120 families that were identified as having a high risk of family violence exposure prior to the pandemic. The study showed that high levels of family violence occurred following the lockdown, especially in families with higher baseline violence (Machlin et al., 2022, as cited in Katz & Fallon, 2022). A study from Korea showed that the average number of hotline calls related to child maltreatment significantly decreased in the early stage of the pandemic, but after a few months the calls significantly increased (Machlin et al., 2022, as cited in Katz & Fallon, 2022). Collectively, this tells us that COVID-19 affected different areas of the world in its own unique way. Overall, the pandemic has increased the risk of child abuse around the world in numerous ways including families experiencing the stressors that come with uncertainty of the situation, an increase in male unemployment rates being associated with an increase in hotline calls, a decrease in referrals from police, schools, and nurseries showing there was reduced engagement with public sector organizations, as well as vulnerable families responding to the additional stress of lockdowns with increased violence. Furthermore, it has also

affected workers like nurses and social workers as indicated by raising concerns in providing telehealth including issues with safety and confidentiality, technological challenges, and challenges in working from home (Fogarty et.al, 2022, as cited in Katz and Fallon, 2022). Child welfare service social workers had to change their interventions to involve virtual interventions, along with managing their own personal barriers (Renov et.al., 2022, as cited in Katz and Fallon, 2022). Nurses experienced compassion fatigue after routinely being exposed to patient death and suffering due to COVID-19, as well as experiencing family incomes loss (Stevenson et.al., 2022, as cited in Katz and Fallon, 2022). Thus, it is important to recognize these numerous factors to fully understand the effects the pandemic truly had on child abuse and subsequent investigation outcomes.

Contributors

A common theme throughout the literature suggests that stress is a primary risk factor that contributes to child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, many families experienced increased stress due to social isolation, financial hardship, and extreme changes to daily lives, including school closures and childcare issues (Brown et. al., 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic forced child welfare agencies to alter their policies and practices for investigating child abuse. These changes affected child abuse investigations in ways that were not always ideal. Agencies were tasked with keeping their social workers healthy while continuing to ensure the safety of children. Changes related to identifying and investigating abuse included social workers speaking

with children virtually instead of making face-to-face contact (Pearce & Miller, 2020).

During the pandemic, parents experienced extreme changes to their daily lives including school closures, loss of jobs, isolation, childcare issues, financial hardships, anxiety, and fear. All these changes bring added stress onto a parent, which causes them to be more likely to abuse or neglect their children (Brown et. al., 2020). Vulnerable families who were already struggling before the pandemic seem to have buckled at the added stress, affecting some parents' ability to cope (Herrenkohl et.al., 2021).

Children experienced stress during the pandemic as well since they also faced social isolation. Being isolated from friends and family increases stress and can affect mental and physical health (Brown et. al., 2020). During the pandemic, children with mental health disorders had an increased risk of severe physical assault, and children with special educational needs had a significantly poorer quality of life (Katz & Fallon, 2022). Parents who are lacking social interactions are more susceptible to display child abuse behaviors while remaining at home with their children (Brown et. al., 2020). One study shows a significant connection between negative parenting/distress, and a child's emotional/behavioral problems displayed during the pandemic (Katz & Fallon, 2022). It was also found that parents frequent use of negative parenting strategies was a risk factor for adverse outcomes related to children's mental health, sleep and behavior (Katz & Fallon, 2022). Another study shows that the risk of maltreatment for children with

special educational needs is now higher than prior to the pandemic (Katz & Fallon, 2022). Understanding the stress that COVID-19 brought onto parents makes it easier to see why child abuse occurred during the pandemic.

Another factor that has contributed to child abuse during the pandemic is economic strain. During the lockdown following the onset of the pandemic, many businesses were forced to cease operations. This forced many businesses to lay off their employees temporarily or permanently, which caused many families to struggle financially. In July 2020, of the 16.9 million people who were unemployed in the United States, 9.6 million (57 percent) were unable to work due to pandemic related closures or loss of business (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Although these statistics are not specific to families with children, they give a snapshot of how many people were struggling financially in general. Many factors were associated with contributing to child abuse during the pandemic, but they all included the ultimate risk factor of parental stress.

Impacts

The literature shows that child welfare agencies around the world were forced to alter their policies in investigating child abuse as a result of the pandemic. These changes impacted child abuse investigations in ways that were not always ideal. Two relevant studies (Goldberg et al., 2022; Shadik et al., 2022) focused on how the pandemic negatively impacted different professionals involved with child welfare, and how the pandemic placed a strain on families reunifying. This included parents being unable to visit their children in person due

to social distancing guidelines, which placed a strain on reunification. Parents involved with child welfare are court ordered to complete a case plan, which includes services like substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, and housing supports. The pandemic tampered with parent's progress towards completing their services due to limited access to high-quality services. These studies also suggest that staff turnover, high caseloads, and caseworker stress were all accentuated by the pandemic, which can also impact reunification. Regression on job satisfaction for child welfare social workers was also addressed. This was due in part to increased stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed. This was caused by being concerned for their clients, adapting to changes to policies and protocol, personal health and safety worries, workload, and challenges with technology and obtaining resources.

Renov et al. (2022) mentions that privacy concerns were apparent due to social workers having to conduct interviews with children virtually. Social workers were concerned that children could not be truthful due to the perpetrators being right next to them during the interview, and children getting distracted during virtual interviews. Social workers have noted that finding foster homes for children came with many challenges. The amount of foster home has always been a struggle for child welfare agencies, and the pandemic exacerbated that struggle. Many agencies put their licensures on hold during the pandemic, and many foster homes were not willing to have a child placed into their homes who had been exposed to or tested positive for COVID.

Agencies were tasked with keeping their social workers healthy, while continuing to ensure the safety of children. Changes related to identifying and investigating abuse included social workers speaking with children virtually instead of making face to face contact (Pearce & Miller, 2020). This caused social workers unrest for many reasons including the fear of children being coached, feeling as if they were not getting the full story, and not being able to notice any marks or bruises on a child's body (Pearce & Miller, 2020). Children were no longer being seen daily at school, so if there was abuse going on in the home, it likely went unreported (Pearce & Miller, 2020). Child welfare agencies rely heavily on school personnel to identify abuse and make suspected child abuse reports since they come into contact with children on a consistent basis.

An additional challenge that has resulted from the pandemic is the issue of parents who are emotionally taxed (Tener et.al., 2020). Social workers rely heavily on parents to make necessary changes to prevent children from being removed from their home. Parents who are experiencing emotional distress are going to have a much harder time complying with a safety plan. Social workers were forced to consider emotional conditions of parents while developing a safety plan, all while continuing to ensure the safety of the child. The literature focuses on how COVID-19 has impacted child abuse currently, but it does not yet address long term impacts. Long term impacts will be more available to study as time goes on and new challenges arise. Although there are just a few studies that have looked at the effect of COVID-19 on workers, another related study showed

the negative impact on nurses that led to increased burnout and maltreatment (Stevenson et.al., 2022). Taken together these studies highlight the need to support frontline workers due to the negative effect that COVID-19 had not only at work but also in their personal lives.

Interventions

Additional research is needed to understand how child abuse is affected during pandemics. The literature does not yet have grounded interventions for child abuse during a pandemic, but what is available are many recommendations on how to intervene. Social workers must identify vulnerable families in order to address concerns of child abuse (Rafferty, 2020). It is possible to prevent child abuse in families during a pandemic by providing them services before they reach the point of feeling hopeless. The United States has established the program Healthy Families America, which engages vulnerable families by providing support and guidance in regard to family needs and well-being (Herrenkohl et. al, 2021). The Family Connects International program is a voluntary service that provides services to families in a community by providing referrals specific to a family's needs (Herrenkohl et. al, 2021).

Community agencies where children spend much of their time also need to be better prepared in handling children during a pandemic (Herrenkohl et. al, 2021). Society cannot rely solely on child welfare agencies to intervene during times of crisis. Child welfare agencies, schools, and medical professionals need to collaborate with each other to ensure family's needs are being met. The

Strong Communities project in Greenville, South Carolina utilized outreach workers and volunteers to strengthen relationships, promote early intervention services to ensure wellness, and to connect organizations that serve children (Herrenkohl et. al, 2021). It is the common theme in the literature that early intervention is what is currently believed to prevent child abuse during a pandemic or any stressful situation.

Conclusion

COVID-19 was a radical and complicated time, therefore new studies and developments regarding its impact on child maltreatment are needed. The literature suggests that increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic is likely impacting child abuse rates. However, the literature has yet to examine how such changes to agency practice have affected child abuse investigations from a qualitative perspective. Thus, this study meets this research gap by incorporating the voices of investigating social workers to capture how these changes have affected their day-to-day practice. Additionally, understanding the changes child welfare agencies were forced to make during the pandemic could provide insight into if and why outcomes of investigations changed.

Theoretical Orientation

One theory that was used to ground this study is the family stress theory. This theory brings an understanding as to why maltreatment of children may have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families experienced traumatic

changes during the pandemic including having to homeschool their children, unemployment, and isolation. All of which are bound to add stress onto the family unit.

The family stress theory was developed by Reuben Hill while he was studying wartime separation and reunion (Wu & Xu, 2020). Hill identified a model that explains how families cope with stress differently. The model identifies a stressor (COVID-19), resources or strengths individuals have, and their perception of their current situation (Wu & Xu, 2020). The model then uses these elements to determine how families deal with crisis (Wu & Zu, 2020). A family that is experiencing a pandemic may not have the resources, strengths, or coping skills to deal with the added stress, thus propelling them to abuse or neglect their children.

Another theory that formed a framework for the study is the ecological systems theory, which states that individuals are impacted by the multiple levels of the environment they are in (Sawssan et al., 2017). In order to understand an individual, you must understand the various levels of that person's environment and how they affect each other. The ecological systems theory categorizes the various social systems (environments) that individuals come into contact with. The first environment is the microsystem which includes individuals that the person regularly interacts with. This can include immediate family, friends, neighbors, or classmates. The second system is the mesosystem, which examines the influence of the relationships between the person and individuals in

the person's microsystem. For example, interactions with a child's parents and their school may influence the child. Another environment is the exosystem which consists of extended family members and individuals in the workplace. Factors in the exosystem do not directly touch the person, but still have an influence on the person. For example, a mother experiences high stress at work, which increases her irritability and frustration, which she then brings home and inflicts upon her child. The last environment is the macrosystem which includes the laws and values the individual is governed by. This brings forth cultural influences that shape the person's socioeconomic status, political views, and religious views. It is important to recognize the significance of multiple levels of the environment that surrounds an individual because it ultimately shapes their behavior (Sawssan et al., 2017).

This theory states that every system has an impact on an individual's life. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected individual's, their families, their workplace, and their government. An individual who has conflict in every system in their environment is bound to face many unforeseen challenges. Now imagine the struggles an individual may face when they have lost their job, must homeschool their children and are isolated from the outside world. This may provide an explanation for the impact COVID-19 had on child abuse reports. Families were faced with extreme challenges at multiple levels, and many were not equipped to effectively deal with those challenges.

Potential Contribution of Study to Micro and/or Macro Social Work Practice

The interviews that this study is analyzing may have a substantial impact on social work practice in the child welfare system. COVID-19 was an unprecedented pandemic that the present world has never experienced. The pandemic brought about extreme challenges for child welfare social workers, and much is to be learned from the policies and procedures that were forced to change to adapt with the challenges of COVID-19. On a macro level, the strategies and practice applications that were put into place during the pandemic can be used in future changes in policy. Agencies can use what they learned to facilitate emergency protocol in disasters, in pandemics, and in general use of best practice for the safety and health of the families they serve and the staff who work with them. Agencies have clarity on how their department adapted, which can inform necessary changes for any future pandemics or disasters that may occur. Agencies will be able to identify the impact stress and fear have on their community and may develop services to aid families in coping with these extreme situations.

On a micro level, social workers will have the ability to examine and factually evaluate the ways in which they were forced to alter their investigations due to the pandemic. Social workers will be able to physically see how the outcomes of their investigations changed, which may aid social workers in understanding the impact of stress and trauma in the lives of the families they serve. It is common for child welfare social workers to focus on what a family is

doing wrong, therefore analyzing the results of this study will help social workers realize the effects of a disaster or pandemic on families that are already vulnerable. This may help social workers prepare their families to learn how to cope with situations that involve extreme stress, fear, and isolation.

Summary

This chapter began by introducing the research focus for this study, which is the effects COVID-19 had on the amount of child abuse reports made during the pandemic, and how investigations were changed. The chosen paradigm for the research was introduced as the post positivist paradigms. A theoretical orientation was provided to introduce the family stress theory and the ecological systems theory as they will be used to ground the study. The potential contribution of this study to micro and macro social work practice was included to highlight the importance of this study. A literature review was provided to link the existing literature to the study in regards to the prevalence, contributions, impacts, and interventions of the problem, which also addressing a huge gap in the literature.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Chapter two covers the engagement phase which is where the researcher familiarizes themselves with the study site and any issues that may arise. This chapter describes the study site and explains the services that are offered, the region the study site serves, and the characteristics of its workers and clients. The engagement phase requires researchers to gain entry into a research site through “gatekeepers” that include authority figures, supporters, and potential obstructionists. This chapter identifies potential gatekeepers along with strategies for engaging them. Self-preparation is discussed to describe how the researcher prepared for data collection and what the researcher was sensitive too. Any diversity, ethical, and political issues are presented along with strategies to address them. Technology is also discussed to identify the specific role technology had on the study.

Study Site

The study site was a child welfare agency in a large county in Southern California. The county is a racially diverse county with both rural and urban communities. Emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers were the primary participants. The goal of the child and family services agency (CFS) is to protect children from being abused or

neglected, and receives reports of alleged child abuse or neglect at a child abuse hotline. Investigating social workers then provide intervention and needed services to families when the allegations are found to be true (as indicated in the organization's online profile). Child welfare workers generally must have a Bachelor's in Social Work, or a related degree. Supervising child welfare workers must hold a Master's in Social Work. Child welfare workers must also complete Core for Social Workers, which is a comprehensive training on the child welfare system and practices. Every year, child welfare workers must also complete 20 hours of trainings that are generally provided by the county.

CFS implements family centered programs for children to ensure their safety and permanency with their family when it is deemed safe, or with another family or caregiver when the family is not safe (San Bernardino County Children and Family Services, n.d.). CFS utilizes community agencies and private citizens to provide services and support to families to preserve the family unit if possible (San Bernardino County Children and Family Services, n.d.). CFS social workers are assigned to families that come under the attention of CFS. These social workers team with the family to address their individual needs and assist them in ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for their children. Services that social workers connect their families to include counseling, drug treatment programs, parenting classes, anger management classes and domestic violence classes. Every family and situation are different, so services are tailored to each family's individual needs.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers

One primary goal of this study was to examine how social workers investigations changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was achieved through interviews with social workers. Therefore, investigating social workers themselves served as gatekeepers. The researcher found social workers that agreed to be interviewed and who were willing to release information on some of their investigations. Data collection began about two years after the start of the pandemic, so the researcher asked social workers about things that potentially happened in the past. Social workers had to rely on their memory to identify the changes they made during the pandemic.

Every social workers' investigations were impacted by the pandemic, so the researcher advised the social worker that it was important that these changes were known to the department to prepare for any future disasters or pandemics. The researcher advised management and social workers that analyzing the changes social workers were forced to make showcased the resiliency of the department, which may boost morale within the department. While social workers were predicted to be one of the main supporters of this research, they also posed to be potential obstructionists. There was the chance that if social workers did not agree to be interviewed, valuable information about how investigations had to be changed during the pandemic would not be obtained. The researcher has been employed with the department for four years and has built many relationships

with social workers. The researcher utilized these relationships to build support among social workers who are potential research participants.

Self-Preparation

To prepare for data collection, emergency response procedures and manuals were reviewed to ensure a good understanding of how an investigation is supposed to be carried out. This assisted the researcher in being able to identify the specific changes that child welfare workers made over the course of their investigation. The researcher conducted practice interviews with friends or family to make sure the researcher is comfortable asking questions. While formulating the question that would be asked, the researcher ensured that the questions were kept simple and at a reasonable length, they specified alternatives, addressed both sides of the issue, and did not contain loaded questions (Morris, 2013).

Diversity Issues

Diversity among study participants is one issue that was considered. Child welfare social workers have varying levels of experience, various race and ethnicities, differing political and religious beliefs, and belong to different age groups. An effort was made to include workers with different demographic characteristics and different work experience to make sure the findings represent a broad group of social workers. The researcher must have respect for all

cultures, understand the needs and views of people from different cultural backgrounds, and be able to identify their own personal bias (Goldberg, 2000).

Ethical Issues

The primary ethical issue in this study is that the researcher holds a dual role as an employee and researcher. To start, the researcher is employed at the study site, and only conducted interviews outside of work hours. At the start of interviews, it was emphasized that the researcher was conducting the interview as a researcher and not a colleague. The researcher was the primary data collector and also evaluated and translated the data.

Another ethical concern was the issue of confidentiality and anonymity. The answers that social workers provided during the interview was audio recorded, and the identity of the social worker that provided the answers was kept anonymous. Prior to being interviewed, the social workers were notified of what the study was attempting to find and accomplish. The researcher did not coerce social workers into being interviewed and there were no incentives offered. Lastly, if at any point during the interview the social worker decided they no longer wished to be interviewed, the interview immediately stopped.

The researcher was also sensitive to the fact that some social workers may not have felt comfortable being interviewed as they were essentially providing information regarding some of their cases. Many social workers fear violating family's confidentiality, so the researcher ensured that confidentiality is not broken. The researcher acknowledged that she and the study participants

may have had different views about what constitutes appropriate behavior (Morris, 2013). The researcher became knowledgeable about what study participants were uncomfortable with. If at any point the participant began to feel uncomfortable the interview immediately stopped. Since the researcher is employed at the study site, the researcher was an insider looking outward (Morris, 2013). This could have affected the exchanges between the researcher and the participants, so the researcher ensured that their personal opinion was not introduced.

Political Issues

The primary political issue is that the findings of this study may reflect negatively on the agency. To address this, the researcher did not share the results with any colleagues until they have been approved by management. The agency was provided with the findings of the study, and the agency decided which findings to disclose to workers. The researcher allowed agency leadership to review the findings before submitting the final write-up to ensure that the agency's data accurately represents the agency and the context in which workers were operating. The researcher did not allow the influence of their colleagues to influence the interpretation of the findings (Morris, 2013).

The Role of Technology

Requests for social workers to be interviewed was conducted through email communication. This was to ensure social workers were in agreeance to

being interviewed and made certain that the answers were audio recorded so they could not be skewed. Email communication was also provided as a convenience for social workers to reply at their earliest convenience. The email was sent with an ample amount of time for the social workers to respond.

Summary

Chapter two addressed the engagement phase of the research project. The engagement phase explains how the gatekeepers at the research site were engaged. A description of the study site was provided, along with engagement strategies for the gatekeepers. Strategies regarding how the researcher prepared for the study were addressed, along with any diversity, ethical and political issues that arose. Lastly, the role of technology during the engagement phase was addressed.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Chapter three covers the implementation phase. The implementation phase includes an overview of the participants, including a description of likely participants in the study, and the sampling strategy of the study. Data collection is reviewed and includes the instruments that were used to gather data and the procedures for gathering, recording, and managing data. The type of data analysis that was used is described, and finally the termination of the study is covered.

Study Participants

The study participants were current emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers employed at a large county in Southern California. These social workers had the experience of working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as through the pandemic. Social workers that were included in the study were diverse, including individuals from different races, ethnicities, genders, political beliefs, religious beliefs, with varying levels of education and experience.

Social workers who were able to participate had to meet a few criteria. The criteria included being a current emergency response, alternative response, or open case investigating social worker, having worked as a social worker prior

to the COVID-19 pandemic, having worked through the COVID-19 pandemic, and agreeing to disclose the changes they had to make to their investigations during the COVID-19 pandemic. To promote internal validity in this study, social workers were interviewed throughout all the regions of the county. This ensured that changes department wide were recorded since regions differ from one another. Participants also came from all the different regions of the county.

Selection of Participants

This study employed convenience sampling, including anyone who responded to the recruitment email in the study. Convenience sampling benefited this study as it utilizes a “take what you can get” approach. This allowed the researcher to include people who were easy to reach, which simplified the initial phase of the interview process. The researcher sent the recruitment email out to social workers located in the different regions, and whoever decided to participate was included in the sample. In an attempt to reach other participants quickly, snowball sampling was utilized. The researcher reached out to social workers who initially responded to the recruitment flier and agreed to participate. The participants were asked to identify and refer the researcher to other potential participants. This aided the researcher in obtaining participants who did not respond to the recruitment flier, as their answers were different than those who immediately agreed to participate in the study.

Data Gathering

This study included qualitative data gathering methods, which included individual interviews. This study involved virtual individual interviews with current emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers. These social workers had the experience of working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as through the pandemic. Social workers that were included in the study were diverse, including individuals from different races, ethnicities, genders, political beliefs, religious beliefs, with varying levels of education and experience.

The social workers that received an email were obtained through the deputy director who provided the names of emergency response social workers throughout the agency. Those social workers were then contacted through email by the researcher with the deputy director's approval. The deputy director used the counties employment database to narrow down the social workers who had been employed prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic. This concluded into a list of about 25 social workers. The researcher then sent out a recruitment flyer through email, inviting these social workers to participate in the interviews. A follow up email was sent out after at least ten social workers did not respond to the email.

For the personal interviews, open ended questions were used. The questions were developed in partnership with agency leadership and a research advisor. A copy of the questions is attached in the Materials section. The

questions that were asked include: Have you noticed a difference in the types of allegations you were investigating during the pandemic? Are there any differences in the challenges families are facing? Were you concerned about meeting with families and potentially being exposed? How has the COVID-10 pandemic impacted investigation outcomes? What procedures have had to change as a result of the pandemic? What methods/practices did you find beneficial in providing services to the families you served during the pandemic?

Phases of Data Collection

This study has a post-positivist approach which included conducting online personal interviews with emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers. The researcher read the interview questions to the participants and recorded their answers. Interviews took place over Zoom to ensure convenience for the social workers, and for the researcher to be able to record the interview. In an effort to obtain the necessary interviews from every region, alternate social workers were sought. This ensured that if a social worker was no longer able to participate, another social worker from the same region would take their place.

The researcher was present and led the interviews, which allowed the researcher to control the data gathering setting (Morris, 2013). This allowed the researcher to address any concerns or clarify any questions the participants had in regard to the study or interview questions (Morris, 2013).

Data Recording

To document responses, the researcher utilized visual and audio recording during the interviews. The researcher first gained permission from the interviewee to be recorded and was told they could turn their cameras off or leave them on. Once that was done, a comfort level was established to ensure valid data gathering (Morris, 2013). The researcher took notes during the interviews to assist in processing and clarifying the responses (Morris, 2013).

Data Analysis

This study employed an analysis of the interview data using a bottom-up qualitative approach. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed the responses to the interview questions with an open mind, and formulated codes based off of the various answers (Morris, 2013). These codes identified the who, what, when, why, and how child investigations changed during the pandemic. Once the codes were identified, conventional content analysis took place (described in more detail below), which is where the codes were arranged into categories. Once the categories were established, the researcher made statements about their connections (Morris, 2013). Selective coding occurred, which is where the categories were refined into one theme or concept. There were multiple themes or concepts within this research project since they explain patterns and variations in the data (Morris, 2013). The analysis ended with a conditional matrix. The themes or concepts were analyzed to recognize

the impacts they had on multiple levels of an environment. These levels included individual, family, group, organizational and community levels (Morris, 2013).

This study utilized conventional content analysis because the aim was to describe a phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which for this case was the effects of COVID-19 on child abuse investigations. The conventional content analysis is also appropriate for this study because existing theory is limited and the categories are derived directly from the data, which allows new insights to emerge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method identifies commonalities in the data that is then categorized into themes. In the initial data collecting stage the researcher kept a journal to notate any themes or important concepts that were present in the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher was able to identify common themes within each interview, and then organized them into constructs. This enabled the researcher to identify if any participants had different perspectives or experiences on each topic. The identified data either created a new category or was placed within an already established category.

Throughout the responses from participants, common themes and subthemes were found when reviewing transcriptions. The researcher looked for links between the themes, which began the development of the constructions. After the researcher constructed the units, they were then categorized. The researcher kept the categories organized by grouping the categories and assigning numbers to each category.

Once the categories were completed, the researcher studied the data to identify relationships between the categories. The categories all represent factors that bridge together the main focus of this study, which is identifying the effects COVID-19 had on child abuse investigations and outcomes. The purpose of constructivist research was to utilize the data to bring about awareness to the main factors that caused changes to child abuse investigations during the pandemic. This was done with the goal of child welfare agencies responding appropriately and adapt their interventions during any future pandemics or crisis.

Termination and Follow-up

At the completion of this research, the results were presented to the agency's management team during a meeting. A PowerPoint presentation was used to highlight key headings of the project. Participants were also provided with a web address where they were able to locate the full report. The social workers who participated in the study received the researcher's contact information if there was a need to ever follow up on the study in the future, or if they had any further questions.

The study was published at the university scholar works (<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) website and was also disseminated at the School of Social Work Research Symposium at the end of the academic year. The individuals who participated were able to request a copy of the report if they wished to view the entire report. Handouts were created to provide individuals with a quick review of the results of the study.

Summary

This chapter discussed the characteristics of the participants and how they were selected. For this study, the participants included emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers that worked through the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also discussed the methods of data recording and collection. Specifically, how this study utilized personal interviews. The phases of collection were also addressed, determining that the process included personal interviews. This chapter ended with an overview of the data analysis, which explained how that the data was analyzed.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the evaluation of the study and explains how the data were analyzed. In addition, it discusses the findings of the data, which will then be interpreted. In conclusion, the implication of findings for Micro and/or Macro practice will be addressed.

Sample

The study consisted of a total of eight participants. All participants work or had previously worked for Child Welfare Services prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as through the pandemic. Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire, which consisted of gender identity, age, level of education, length of employment with Child Welfare Service agency, and race/ethnicity. The participants in this study consisted of five females who identified as female, and three males who identified as males. The participants' age ranged from the 21-19 (Two participants), 40-49 (Two participants), and an identical number of participants ranging from 30-39 and 40-49 (Three participants in each age range). A total of five participants were White or Caucasian, one was Black or African America, and two were Mexican, Latino, or Hispanic. Seven participants had been employed with Child Welfare services for three or more

years, and one had been employed for two years. One of the participants held a bachelor's degree, while seven held a graduate degree.

TABLE 1:
Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample (N=8)

	n (%)
Age	
18-20	0 (0.0%)
21-29	2 (25.0%)
30-39	3 (37.5%)
40-49	3 (37.5%)
50 or older	
Gender	
Woman	5 (62.5%)
Man	3 (37.5%)
Other	
Race/Ethnicity	
White or Caucasian	5 (62.5%)
Black or African American	1 (12.5%)
Asian/ Pacific Islander	
Mexican, Latino, or Hispanic	2 (25.0%)
Other	
Years of Employment	
Less than one year	
One year	
Two years	1 (12.5%)
Three or more years	7 (87.5%)
Education	
Some college but no degree	
Associates degree	
Bachelor's degree	1 (12.5%)
Graduate degree	7 (87.5%)

Themes and Subthemes

The following three themes were developed from the interview analysis:

The factors that affected investigation outcomes, the practice changes social workers implemented, and the factors that affected/instigated the types of allegations. Table 2 shows the developed themes, which is followed by quotes that support the common themes.

TABLE 2: The Effects of COVID-19 on Child Abuse Investigation Outcomes

<u>Themes/Subthemes</u>	<u>Description</u>
Outcomes Standard social work practice Increased mental health problems Isolated children	This theme describes the factors that altered or impacted investigation outcomes during the pandemic.
Practice Changes COVID protocols (unable to go inside homes, virtual interviews, COVID screening questions, placing COVID positive children at initial removal, less unannounced visits) Social worker adaptation	This theme describes investigation procedures as well as, methods and practices that had to change during the pandemic.
Types of Allegations Financial struggles Issues related to COVID adjustments	This theme describes the difference in the types of allegations that were investigated during the pandemic.

Theme One: Outcomes

All participants were able to identify contributing factors that they believed impacted their investigation outcomes. The participants stated these factors were directly related to the effects of COVID-19, which became the subthemes. These

included changes to standard social work practice, increased mental health needs, and children being generally isolated. It is important to note how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted investigations in order to be proactive and prepare for any future pandemics.

Standard Social Work Practice

Standard social work practice underwent substantial changes due to the complexities the pandemic brought about. It was specifically asked in the interviews what procedures had to change as a result of the pandemic, and all 8 participants were able to provide an example.

One participant reported that they noticed having a lighter caseload, stating “I noticed that I received significantly less referrals during the initial lockdown of the COVID pandemic due to children not attending school, and not having mandated reporter eyes on them” (Interview SSP #7, 2022).

Another participant stated they noticed there were fewer substantiated referrals stating, “We had less substantiated because it was just more difficult. Workers would state that families had COVID and couldn’t go into the home” (Interview SSP #1, 2022).

Another participant mentioned how court had to be closed due to the pandemic. The participant stated these delays impacted outcomes for the department, as well as families stating:

Court was getting postponed for so many cases at the beginning. I had one family recently, like towards the end that they tried to use that as an excuse

as to why they didn't reunify. That court kept postponing their case which is a valid excuse because they really were. But then also at the same time they weren't cooperating with the department, so it's not like they would have known about their court dates (Interview SSP #2, 2022).

One participant stated she did not necessarily notice any contributing factors that altered or impacted investigation outcomes, but made an interesting opinion stating, "I didn't notice a difference in outcomes, but I could see that could happen. When you are doing things virtually or via phone, as opposed to doing everything in person. I could see things being missed" (Interview SSP #7, 2022).

Another participant explained how social workers had to utilize their social work skills and come up with creative ways to get the job done:

I think we had to get more creative. If we were going to remove children and maybe the children or family had been exposed to COVID, we had to determine where the children were going to be placed. Are they going to come to the office or our center for COVID positive children. How would we find a foster family? Can they stay with a family member instead? We had to get creative, but I don't think it changed our outcome. I think if we were going to intervene further with the family, we got creative on where the children could be placed. With relative placements we made some exceptions for certain things (Interview SSP #4, 2022).

Increased Mental Health Problems

A rise in mental health concerns during the pandemic was mentioned to be an altering factor in investigation outcomes. Three of the participants noticed a rise in the need for mental health services during the pandemic.

One participant stated they noticed a higher need for mental health services stating, “Since the pandemic, I’ve noticed the need for mental health services has increased dramatically. I feel like the pandemic either exacerbated depression and/or anxiety that our clients already had, or it caused people to develop depression and anxiety since the pandemic started” (Interview SSP #7, 2022).

Another participant noted that children experienced mental health needs due to the lockdown stating:

I think we noticed a lot more of the lack of supervision, kids being left home alone and mental health issues. A lot of that had to do with either kids saying “yes I feel lonely or sad”, or just kids not turning on their camera causing them to become frustrated and start crying (Interview, SSP #5, 2022).

Isolated Children

Throughout the interviews, many issues related to children being isolated were mentioned as a factor to participants investigation outcomes. For example, one participant stated:

Children were impacted due to being so isolated, which was noticed when the lockdown ended. When children returned to in person school-based

settings, children were inappropriately touching each other. When I've spoken to teachers and parents, they feel that this is due to lack of social skills and boundaries because they stayed home for the past two years (Interview, SSP#5, 2022).

All participants acknowledged that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic altered their investigation outcomes in some fashion. One participant recognized having a reduced caseload, which is normally considered a positive. Due to the pandemic, it is not necessarily a positive because of the circumstances that were present such as increased mental health needs and children being isolated at home.

Theme Two: Practice Changes

The second theme that came up in the findings is practice changes. When analyzing the data, the researcher found that all participants acknowledged there were investigation procedures, methods and practices that had to change during the pandemic. These changes were made to keep both social workers and families safe. This theme is evidenced by new COVID protocols, as well social worker adaptation.

COVID Protocols

New policies that were established to include COVID protocols essentially changed many long-standing procedures, methods, and practices. It was specifically asked in the interviews what procedures had to change as a result of the pandemic, and all 8 participants were able to describe an example of a policy

or procedure they noticed had to change. One participant mentioned a procedure that was added as a first line of defense to keep social workers safe stating:

We asked screening questions in regards to anyone in the family showing possible symptoms of COVID, or if they had any exposure to COVID. We had to make contact with the family no matter what, so if we were made aware that anyone was COVID positive, we would at least lay eyes on them from a distance. There were many different interventions we could utilize to make sure even COVID positive children were safe. We also used PPE like masks to keep each other and our families safe. Also when we called out sick, the COVID screening questions were asked to us as well (Interview, SSP#1, 2022).

Another participant voiced a concern that she had with a procedure that changed due to the pandemic stating:

We missed out on a lot of face-to-face contacts. Face to face contact was something that was really affected for all spectrums of CFS, because we didn't have it for a while. For case carrying social workers, they had the green light to just do everything via video. For intake workers, if we knew the family was COVID positive, we would complete the interviews outside of the home. If there were concerns inside the home we were missing them because we were not going inside like we normally would. At times, law enforcement would go inside for us, but their definition of a dirty home is different than our definition of a dirty home. Biases could get involved there.

When we could not go inside, we would ask the families to FaceTime us as they would walk us through the home (Interview, SSP#2, 2022).

One participant made a similar observation stating:

How we engaged with our families changed. For example, I contacted one family where the children were ill, and I had to ask them to come to the window so that I could physically see that they were alive and well. As long as I could document that I could see them, that they were alive and well. I could continue the investigation over the phone. At the same time, this was a dangerous situation because you cannot complete a thorough assessment over the phone. A lot of abuse and neglect went undetected, but knowing they were home made it a little but easier to locate them (Interview, SSP#3, 2022).

Another participant provided one example that left a lasting impression on him stating:

We were told not to go to jails to interview parents, so we wouldn't always get the full picture of the investigation. We wouldn't get answers as to parents, relatives or relative placements. They provided us a number to call the jails, but that never worked. Knowing that we couldn't get the full picture, it was disheartening. I think everybody understood that we were doing the best that we could (Interview, SSP#8, 2022).

Social Worker Adaptation

The pandemic certainly brought about new complexities for social workers. These complexities forced social workers to learn to adapt to these changes. The participants in this study acknowledged and showed respect for the adaptation social workers made during an extremely trying time. One participant explained how while he was initially concerned about meeting with families and potentially being exposed, it did not affect his work because he knew he had a job to do. This participant stated:

Initially I was afraid, but then I came to the realization that it is what it is, there is no way around it. There was no reason to hide from it, there's a job to do (Interview, SSP#3, 2022).

This same participant noted a helpful adaptation that he made to his practice was utilizing telehealth and community resources, stating:

Telehealth was definitely a service that was used to adapt to meet clients needs. Telehealth opened up more services available to families and allowed therapists to work remotely with a broader geographic area. I also noticed specific resources expanded such as food resources, utility assistance, and childcare assistance. Food banks doing drive through food distributions. This was an opportunity to ensure that parents needs were met. You had to connect families to these services, we had to educate them on the different means of accessing the same services that were available.

One participant mentioned an adaptation strategy she used to provide services to the families stating:

I would screen families beforehand for any COVID symptoms, that helped me feel a little safer going out and being in person. I think it also helped the families and children that I was working with know that I was taking this seriously, trying to protect them as well as myself. I was also following the CDC guidelines to protect them and myself. Also recognizing that we are all in a crazy time we've never experienced in most of our lifetimes. Being in solidarity with the families. Acknowledging that we are all struggling, we're all impacted by it. Just having compassion during this time, especially because it is a hard time for everyone. Also having conversations with them so you can see how it has impacted them and what they might need (Interview, SSP#7, 2022).

Theme Three: Types of Allegations

When analyzing the interviews, the researcher found that different factors prompted a difference in the types of allegations that were investigated during the pandemic. This theme is evidenced by subthemes of financial struggles, issues related to COVID adjustments, and less privacy for families due to online schooling, etc.

Financial Struggles

Financial struggles were found to be a factor that impacted the types of allegations that were investigated during the pandemic. It was specifically asked

in the interviews if there were any differences in the challenges families were facing, as well as if they noticed a difference in the types of allegations they were investigating during the pandemic. Three participants described families experiencing higher levels of financial struggles during the pandemic. One participant stated:

Families were experiencing financial challenges. People were laid off, lost their jobs, or quit their jobs. We saw a lot of people moving in together with extended family, or families moving in with grandparents. Financial stressors included with more people in the home were challenges families were facing (Interview, SSP#8, 2022).

Another participant mentioned financial struggles stating:

I noticed financial challenges. A lot of people lost their jobs and were struggling to pay rent. There were a lot of people getting kicked out of their living spaces. A lot of families resorted to substance use and families being stuck together full time caused a lot more domestic violence issues (Interview, SSP#4, 2022).

One participant made an interesting connection with how the financial struggles caused by COVID may alter families for the rest of their lives, stating:

Nobody's working, nobody has money, so who is going to buy groceries. It only takes one event, right on the cusp of being impoverished. One event triggers and entire spiral out of control. One thing led to the next level, then

the next level, and then spiraled and snowballed. There are safety nets that can be put into place, but not everybody has that (Interview, SSP#3, 2022).

Issues Related to COVID Adjustments

Issues for families related to COVID adjustments was also found to be a factor that altered the types of allegations that were received during the pandemic.

One participant pointed out the issue of childcare, which was a common struggle for many families during the pandemic. The participant stated, “I noticed an uptick in allegations of lack of supervision, primarily for parents that were still working and their children being at home with schools closed. Children were left without what others would consider supervision (Interview, SSP#3, 2022).

Another participant corroborated this by stating:

I saw a lot of lack of supervision complaints. Some parents were still working out of the home, but the children were completing virtual learning at home. Daycare centers were closed, so children were at home. Teachers would ask children, who’s there with you, and the child would respond with, I’m here by myself. There were times where this would be said, but there was a grandmother or another adult present in the home (Interview, SSP#5, 2022).

Another issue that participants expressed was the stressors of online schooling. This participant stated:

When school was online, we had a lot of reports of parents yelling at their children during online classes. For example, I received a report stating the mother was heard telling the child she was going to whip her but if she didn't turn her camera on for class. We also got a lot of, we see alcohol bottles in the background. Teachers could not see into the home and see how people parent. Some people were judgmental, so I tried to educate them (Interview, SSP#6, 2022).

One participant noted that with children staying in their home, there was concern that some were being overlooked by mandated reporters. This participant stated, "I noticed that I received significantly less referrals during the initial lockdown of the COVID pandemic due to children not attending school, thus not having mandated reporter eyes on them" (Interview, SSP#7, 2022).

Summary

This chapter included the three main themes and subthemes found in the study along with brief summaries and supporting quotes from the transcribed interviews. The findings identified the ensuing themes and subthemes in connection with the effects of COVID-19 on child abuse investigation outcomes by the participants in the study. The first theme included outcomes with subthemes describing the changes in standard social work practice, the increased mental health problem, and the issue of isolated children. The second theme included practice changes with subthemes describing factors related to COVID protocols and social worker adaptations. The third theme included types

of allegations with subthemes describing the factors related to financial struggles and issues related to COVID adjustments. These themes developed from the analyzing and coding done by the researcher once the interviews were transcribed. These themes are representative of first-hand accounts and personal experiences from current emergency response, alternative response, and open case investigating social workers. These social workers had the experience of working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as through the pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

Introduction

In this chapter the researcher included a discussion of the findings and how they compare to current and past literature. Implications for policy, practice and research is also covered, as well as the limitations and strengths of the study. Lastly, communication of findings and dissemination plan is discussed.

Discussion

The data collected in this study clarifies the different factors that the COVID-19 pandemic attributed to investigation outcomes. The findings revealed three major themes that contributed to the effects COVID-19 had on child abuse investigations, as well as factors that attributed to the barriers social workers had to overcome: outcomes, practice changes, and types of allegations.

Research from the literature review and the data both support that social workers were faced with many challenges with the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of outcomes, the data in this study indicated COVID brought about a new standard social work practice. Social workers were faced with new challenges and had to conform their practice to overcome these challenges. A change that many social workers noticed was that they were unable to complete thorough investigations. This is interesting because social workers also noted that they were not receiving as many investigations as prior to the pandemic, but

they were still not able to complete thorough investigations with lighter caseloads. Social workers were able to utilize video conferencing and other virtual tools to conduct interviews with families, but this led to social workers feeling as if they were not getting the full picture.

These findings are similar to a study completed by Katz et al. (2022) that suggests that many investigations were delayed or impacted due to the pandemic. This study similarly noted factors that contributed to these disruptions as school closures, a decrease in child maltreatment reports made to child welfare agencies, loss of jobs, and rising mental health concerns. Another study with similar findings completed by Toros et al. (2023) suggests that child welfare social workers faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include having limited access or information about families circumstances due to social distancing, home visits were obstructed, phone call or video conferences were utilized but were not enough to assess the needs of the child, and having the ability to develop rapport with a child was basically nonexistent.

Another factor found in these data was an increase in mental health problems. The pandemic impacted many different areas of people's lives, including having to lock down, loss of jobs, and family members passing away. All of these factors added stress to already stressful lives. It is no surprise that the added stress individuals were experiencing caused an uptick in the need for mental health services. One study shows that from March 2020 through February

2021, there was a constant 10 percent increase in outpatient mental health service utilization by children and adolescents compared with prior rates (Benton et.al., 2022).

Adegboye et al. (2021) also found that school closures, social isolation, increased financial and emotional stress, and greater exposure to family conflicts contributed to the mental health consequences of vulnerable children. This study also found a correlation between rising mental health problems in children, with parents dealing with financial stress during the pandemic. Another study by Guessoum et al. (2020), takes it step further and considers the vulnerable children who were previously diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. This study states that factors that the pandemic brought about, including lockdowns and fear of infection, could increase the symptoms of children with psychiatric disorders. This is due to the concern of the disruption of psychological care due to the social distancing and lockdowns the pandemic brought about. Taken together, this suggests that during any future pandemics or crisis, child welfare agencies need to remember the negative impact distance learning, fear, family stress, and isolation had on many children and families. Addressing mental health issues early on and focusing on the factors that come along with pandemics or crisis is vital to avoiding any negative long-term effects on children.

Another subtheme found in the data was the issue of isolated children, or children experiencing loneliness. This subtheme may have also had an impact on

the subtheme of an increase in mental health problems. The literature suggests that this isolation is associated with negative consequences on mental health and other health-related behaviors for children (Larsen et.al., 2022). Children who experienced isolation may have experienced anxiety and depression, attributing to the rise in mental health needs. This could then lead to a disruption in children's physical health being affected. Children were forced to remain inside mostly, which can lead to children adopting behaviors of remaining inside and avoiding active activities. During the initial lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were no longer attending school or any other outside extracurricular activities. Children were also not being seen as regularly at doctors' offices, dentists' offices, or other mental health facilities. The isolation children experienced during the lockdown can have negative effects on children's mental health, as well as their physical health (Adegboye et al., 2021). One participant mentioned that he noticed the isolation has impacted children's social development. Children are now having difficulty sustaining appropriate relationships with their peers, as well as adults. Children are also lacking in social skills, specifically communication and emotional regulation. Many children also struggled with having to attend school online and missed out on crucial academic and social development opportunities.

Another main theme discovered within the research was practice changes. The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes to the everyday work of social workers. The main changes appeared to be working remotely, adjusted

protocols, and collaboration with outside agencies. One subtheme of this factor was COVID protocols. This was something that workers in the study discussed as reasons why their investigation procedures, methods and practices changed during the pandemic. With COVID brought about the never before seen method of work for social workers, working remotely. This was ultimately done to keep social workers and families safe by limiting physical contact. Instead of making face to face contact, social workers would utilize video conferencing to speak with families. This brought about challenges for families who did not have access to technology or were unfamiliar with how to use the technology. Social workers were required to adapt to new policies and procedures, all while ensuring children were safe. A similar study acknowledged these changes that social workers had to make during the pandemic, and linked these changes with the personal barriers social workers had to endure, including experiencing burnout and challenges obtaining personalized protective equipment (PPE) (Renov et al., 2022). With these changes, many social workers felt overwhelmed and stretched beyond their capacities, but still proactively reached out to families and connected them to community resources. This displays the resiliency of social workers during the pandemic and implies that the needs of social workers must be addressed to help overcome burnout, and ensure staff sustainability during a future crises or pandemic (Renov et al., 2022).

Social worker adaptation was another important subtheme found throughout the study. In order to effectively ensure a child's safety, social

workers had to adapt to the complexities COVID brought about. The expectation of social workers providing essential services to vulnerable children and families never went away, thus they were forced to adapt. Participants in the study mentioned they were provided with personal protective equipment to wear out into the field. Social workers were also mindful of asking screening questions to determine if a family had tested positive for COVID, or if they had been exposed to anyone who had tested positive for COVID. Social workers had to be flexible when it came to providing services to their clients. The participants mentioned they had to get creative with how they conducted interviews, including interviewing a family outside, or over video conferencing. Social workers also started to prioritize the very urgent cases first. If temporary solutions could be established for the time being, this was also utilized until a more permanent solution could be established safely. Social workers proved to be resilient throughout the pandemic, proving they were capable of ensuring children and families safety, even in a time of crisis.

The last major theme found throughout the study was types of allegations. The onset of COVID brought about a difference in the types of allegations that were investigated during the pandemic. Participants noted that lack of supervision was a rising concern during the pandemic. Many parents had to continue working through the pandemic, and with their children at home and daycare centers closed, they had no other choice but to leave their children home alone unsupervised. Even with parents who were working from home, they

could not provide an ample amount of supervision due to having to complete work tasks. Participants also noted that families were experiencing added stress, which at times caused tension in the home. Parents were also not used to being around each other so often, thus causing more domestic violence incidents.

A subtheme to this factor is financial struggles. Many families faced financial struggles during the pandemic, which created a stressful environment for children and families. It is very difficult for parents to worry about how they are going to make ends meet, along with raising children effectively. This increased financial stress caused many parents to experience depression or anxiety, which at times impaired their ability care for their children and keep them safe. Financial struggles also lead to many other complicating factors, including loss of shelter, inability to purchase food, and going into debt. This also can bring about the issue of being unable to meet a child's basic needs that include clothing, food, and shelter. The pandemic brought about a very challenging time for families, and it is important to note that the effects of families experiencing financial struggles attributed to incidents of child abuse and neglect.

The last subtheme for this factor was issues related to COVID adjustments. Whenever an adjustment is made within an agency, there is going to be complications. COVID forced social workers and the families they serve to make adjustments in a very short amount of time. The issue of limited access to childcare caused many families to leave their children unsupervised. Online schooling also presented many issues for families. Children were experiencing

social isolation with the closing of schools. Families were unable to communicate with loved ones and children were unable to socialize with their friends. This caused many feelings of anxiety and depression, especially within vulnerable communities.

Policy, Practice and Research Implications

Policy Implications

The findings in the research brings awareness to the effects that COVID-19 had on child abuse investigations and their outcomes. During the interviews the researcher found that the majority of participants felt that COVID-19 had a significant impact on the work they had to complete, and in one form or another, affected their investigation outcomes. The study completed by Shadik et. al., (2022), found that CPS staff is one of the professions at highest risk for burnout. This study stated that during the pandemic, social workers experienced heightened anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. These factors were contributors to the cause of social workers not staying committed to working in child welfare during the pandemic, thus wanting to find employment elsewhere. These findings suggest that the pandemic may have been the tipping point for CPS social workers who may have already been experiencing burnout prior to the start of the pandemic.

The participants acknowledged COVID created challenges in conducting their investigations and were compelled to adapt to these changes. Social workers adapted to virtual communication methods, along with experiencing

increased stress. Social workers also adapted to the effects on families COVID brought about as well. The pandemic also increased stress and pressure on families, which may have prompted cases of child abuse and neglect. To prepare for any future crisis or pandemics, child welfare agencies should focus on providing more support to families to assist them in coping with the challenges of a crisis or pandemic.

The pandemic also brought about difficulties providing in person investigations and services. Child welfare agencies brought about virtual services, which has never been utilized in the history of child welfare. Child welfare agencies would benefit from permanently implementing these flexible service delivery models that can accommodate both in person and remote services. This method should be further explored to accommodate improvement. Families are especially vulnerable during times of crisis, so it is important for child welfare agencies to emphasize effective communication. Child welfare agencies should be communicating regularly with families and community service partners to provide the best service possible. As well as communicating to address any concerns or fears. Since safety is the number one priority of child welfare agencies, safety needs to continue to be a priority during a time of crisis or pandemic. Services need to continue to be adapted to ensure that safety can still be ensured. Implementing these policy implications can help child welfare agencies provide effective services to families.

Practice Implications

This research also acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth many practice implications to child welfare agencies in regard to their how they operate and provide services. The most obvious practice implication for child welfare agencies is to continually prioritize safety. The pandemic was such a new phenomenon for this day and age that it left a lot of unknowns for child welfare agencies on how to continue to operate. It is important for agencies to focus on the safety of children over focusing on managing the crisis. This can be done by child welfare agencies focusing on the health and wellbeing of staff, which can result in higher retention rates. Obtaining committed and satisfied staff is likely to improve staff effectiveness in keeping the children they serve safe (Shadik, 2022).

Another important aspect this pandemic brought about is the importance of technology. The use of video conferencing essentially saved child welfare agencies. Without it, many children could have possibly been abused or neglected without any protection, or many social workers would have contracted the virus after being forced to make in person visits. The use of technology should never replace the importance of in person visits, but it provides agencies an alternative when an in-person visit is impossible. Although the lockdown has ended, child welfare agencies should continue to develop methods on how to engage families during times of crisis or pandemic. This way it is not such a struggle to work with families when social workers are unable to make in person

contact. Undoubtedly the pandemic impacted mental health needs of children and their families. Mental health services need to adapt to this need, as well as preparing for another crisis. One way child welfare agencies could do this is by utilizing resources related to the pandemic on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website. Mental health professionals could utilize the webpage titled Resources for Professionals and Others Supporting Young People During Times of Uncertainty (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). This webpage provides ways to support young people during times of uncertainty, including being available, making sure young people know who to contact in case of an emergency, and maintaining young people's confidentiality when disclosing personal or sensitive topics, including during virtual meetings. This webpage also provides additional information and resources for supporting young people, specifically during COVID-19.

Research Implications

Future researchers who conduct a similar study can build off this research by interviewing a wider range of social workers throughout the state of California and throughout the country. This would give a larger sample which would give insight as to how each county was affected individually, and how their individual responses compared to one another. Researchers should also evaluate the different interventions used during the pandemic to determine how successful they were. This could also help child welfare agencies identify their disparities, and work to fix these disparities before another crisis or pandemic occurs. It is

important to understand the impact the pandemic brought forth in not only families, but social workers involved as well. The few studies that have looked at interventions during this time suggest that child welfare preventative services are used significantly less during stay-at-home orders (Whaling et al., 2023; Self-Brown et al., 2022). This implies that families who may need preventative services solely due to COVID-19, are not receiving services. There is a need for increased outreach to families, in order to intervene and provide services prior to a crises or pandemic. Identifying the barriers preventing families from accessing child welfare interventions during lockdowns will assist social workers during future pandemic.

Limitations and Strengths

This study does have its limitations, firstly due to the small sample size of participants that all came from the same child welfare agency in Southern California, which affects its generalizability. Therefore, the findings of this study may not generalize to dissimilar jurisdictions. Another limitation of this study is that the researcher is a current employee at the same agency the participants are employed at. This runs the risks of participants being influenced by bias since they personally know the researcher. This could mean that the participants felt they could not be fully honest with their responses in fear of the agency's reaction to the responses.

A strength of this study was that the researcher individually interviewed the participants over video conferencing, so participants were able to ask for

clarification if they did not fully understand a question. The researcher was also able to ask clarifying questions if the researcher felt like the participant needed to expand on their responses. A qualitative approach to this study was vital to fully understand how social workers felt the pandemic affected their work. The interview questions were open ended which portrayed unique individual experiences. The participants that were interviewed had been employed with the agency prior, during, and after the pandemic, which provided first-hand account experiences of social workers who directly felt the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher also had built rapport with the gatekeepers at the agency, providing the opportunity of obtaining an array of participants that may have otherwise not been possible.

Communication of Findings and Dissemination Plan

These findings better helped the researcher better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic effected children, families, and social workers involved. It also gives a better understanding as to the exact challenges social workers faced, in an effort to target these challenges to improve investigations during a pandemic in the future. This research can also provide a basis for child welfare agencies to formulate best practices for child abuse investigations during a pandemic. As the researcher is an employee of the agency used to collect participants, she met with the Deputy Director to discuss the research findings and collaborate on where changes need to be made. The researcher also shared the findings with participants who requested the information. This study was also

published on the California State University San Bernardino ScholarWorks website, where it is available for other students to view.

Summary

Most of the data found this study aligns with the research found in the literature review in that while child abuse investigations were impacted due to factors produced by COVID-19, social workers believed these factors did not ultimately affect their investigation outcomes. The research acknowledges that the interventions used during the pandemic may need to evolve to better serve children and families. Future researchers of this topic should strive to obtain a wider sample size of participants from various counties throughout the state. The primary limitation of this study was that the sample size was small, and all participants were employed at the same child welfare agency. While the sample size was small, the researcher ensured that the participants were diverse, came from different units within their agency, they were employed before, during, and after the pandemic, and each had the chance to provide their unique experiences. The findings in this study are published on the California State San Bernardino ScholarWorks website, and the researcher shared the findings with the Deputy Director of the agency to provide a better understand of where changes need to be made. The findings were shared with the participants so they were able to compare their experiences with their peers, and work together to bring about change.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: The Effects of COVID-19 on Child Abuse Investigations**Invitation to participate in a research study**

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate how child abuse investigations changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is being conducted by Kelly Gasso under the supervision of Dr. James Simon, Adjunct Professor of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to explore how child abuse investigations changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this research is to examine if and how child abuse investigations have changed during the pandemic. The research focus of this study will involve addressing the changes emergency response (ER) workers had to make to how they conduct investigations.

DESCRIPTION: This research will include interviews with emergency response social workers to analyze the changes they had to make during their investigations. Personal interviews with open-ended questions will be used.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Keeping the identity of participants confidential is of the utmost importance, so the information you provide throughout the interview will be handled as confidentially as possible. While there is always a chance that confidentiality could be compromised, many steps will be taken to avoid this. The recordings of the interviews will be stored on an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. Your name and any other personally identifiable information will not be used. The information will be gathered in a way that will never be linked to the participant who provided it. After the study is over, the recordings will be destroyed.

DURATION: The interview will be approximately 25 to 30 minutes.

RISKS: Some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable. As noted above, you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits to you for participating. However, the strategies and practice applications that were put into place during the pandemic will be used in future changes in policy. Agencies will use what they learned to facilitate emergency protocol in disasters, in pandemics, and in general use of best practice for the safety and health of the families they serve and the staff who work with them. Agencies will have a clear view on how their department adapted, which can inform necessary changes for any future pandemics or disasters that may occur. Agencies will be able to identify the impact stress and fear have on their community and may develop services to aid families in coping with these extreme situations. Social workers will be able to physically see how the outcomes of their investigations changed, which may aid social workers in understanding the impact of stress and trauma in the lives of the families they serve.

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AUDIO: This research will include audio recordings of the interviews. I understand that this research will be audio-recorded. ¶

¶
Initials ____ ¶

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CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Dr. James Simon, Adjunct Professor of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. Dr. James Simon can be reached at James.Simon@csusb.edu. ¶

¶
RESULTS: Participants will be provided with a web address where they are able to locate the full report. The social workers who participated in the study will receive the researcher's contact information if there is a need to ever follow up on the study in the future, or if they have any further questions. ¶

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CONFIRMATION STATEMENT: ¶

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I have read the information above and agree to participate in your study. ¶

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Signature: _____ Date: _____ ¶

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APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL EMAIL



CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2022-179

James Simon Kelly Gasso
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear James Simon Kelly Gasso:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATION OUTCOMES" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Structured Interview Questions

Created by Kelly Gasso

1. Have you noticed a difference in the types of allegations you were investigating during the pandemic? Can you provide an example?

2. Are there any differences in the challenges families are facing?
Please elaborate.

3. Were you concerned about meeting with families and potentially being exposed to COVID-19? How did this affect your work?

4. In your opinion, how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted investigation outcomes? Did you notice a difference?

5. What procedures have had to change as a result of the pandemic?
Can you provide an example?

6. What methods/practices did you find beneficial in providing services to the families you served during the pandemic?

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