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HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT EXTENDED FOSTER CARE SOCIAL WORKERS WHILE PROVIDING SOCIAL SERVICES

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HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT EXTENDED FOSTER CARE
SOCIAL WORKERS WHILE PROVIDING SOCIAL SERVICES

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
Omar Ramírez
Victoria Lopez
May 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study used ten interviews with Extended Foster Care (EFC) workers about their experiences with EFC youth from a county agency before, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative research design. The purpose of the research was to learn from EFC social workers how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to provide services to the EFC youth, negatively or positively, and how supported they felt in delivering these services. Data was collected by interviewing the ten participants via Zoom. Data was analyzed by categorizing the responses with different colors based on the responses. Significant findings were identified regarding agency policies on contacts with EFC youth prior to and during COVID-19, effectiveness of COVID-19 policy on worker safety, COVID-19 restrictions impact social services, and challenges of working with EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions. Also, challenges in delivering mental health services and in building rapport with EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions and obtaining employment and exceptions during COVID-19 restrictions were identified. Recommendations include strengthening the communication strategies to ensure effective communication with EFC youth and social workers which can involve utilizing multiple communication channels and having the social workers provide regular updates and guidance to the new youth since they might need additional support to establish rapport to allow them to connect with the social worker.

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We are deeply thankful for the support and guidance provided by all those mentioned above, without which this research would not have been possible.

- Omar Ramirez & Victoria Lopez

DEDICATION

I want to take this moment to thank my family and friends but, most importantly, my beautiful mother. Growing up, I was raised by my mother as a single parent. I am the youngest of seven siblings and the first one to accomplish obtaining a degree. I have always looked up to and admired my mother for how brave she is and continues to be. Thank you for all the unconditional love you show and give me. I love you with all my heart, mommy!

I want to also thank my partner, Alex, for always being there during my best and worst times. I truly appreciate you and thank you for believing in me in the moments when I did not believe in myself. You are truly my partner, best friend, cheerleader, and soulmate. I love you, amor.

Also, thank you to my research partner Victoria for all the support and dedication on completing this research project.

-Omar Ramirez

Accomplishing writing this thesis meant going through and completing my master's degree in two hard working years. In order for me to get here I had tremendous support from my family. I am extremely grateful for my brother, sister, grandma, and in-laws for supporting me by watching my daughter so that I can accomplish this research. Without their support for me and my education I would not be able to be the first generation of my family line to obtain a master's degree.

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-Victoria Lopez

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

In 2020, cases of COVID-19 were increasing worldwide. By March 19, 2020, there were 6,117 new cases in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). The number of cases was growing rapidly, and little was known about transmission and treatment. Therefore, the state of California enforced a stay-at-home order. Many workers, including social workers transitioned from working in a public setting to working from home. COVID-19 impacted social workers in many ways. Social workers are responsible for serving individuals with the services they require and need. However, during COVID-19, distancing guidelines changed how social workers delivered services to clients (Miller, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many of the practices social workers use to provide services to community members, including youth. COVID-19 mandated everyone globally to attempt to avoid other individuals by social distancing, which meant almost all interactions were virtual. Not having the ability for face-to-face interactions challenged all social workers. Social work is founded on human engagement with one another; this is where social workers gain rapport with their clients. It can also help to assess for any risks or where the client can address their needs. For at least the first year of the pandemic, social workers had to adapt to telecommuting and providing resources/ services to

youths on their caseload through virtual or telephone (Whitt-Woosley et al., 2022).

COVID-19 also increased the burnout and stress that social workers dealt with pre-COVID-19. Adjusting to new practices and communication increased the difficulty of how social workers interacted with clients. Problems that arose were communicating with clients that did not have access to the internet or phone services, the risk of invasion of privacy, and providing resources to clients that were also changing protocols. (Whitt-Woosley et al., 2022). A problem that interfered with social workers during the pandemic was adjusting services to meet the unique needs of extended foster care youths.

Extended Foster Care (EFC), also known as Assembly Bill 12, was signed into law in 2010 to improve the well-being of individuals in the foster care system (CDSS). This new legislation allowed youth aging out of the system at 18 years old to be provided with services until age 21. To stay eligible for the program, the nonminor dependent or NMD must either work towards graduating high school or obtaining a GED, enroll in a college or other program, be employed at least 40 hours a week, or enroll in classes that offer assistance in obtaining employment (CDSS). Extended foster care also continues the independent living program, or ILP, that offers youth knowledge on living alone sustainably. The youth must agree with their social worker for the ILP and make a contract on goals they will practice being ready to live independently. The social worker will keep the youth

accountable by meeting with them monthly to discuss changes in the ILP and goals as well as accomplishments.

Both micro and macro problems arise when researching the effect of COVID-19 regulations and EFC. At a micro level, it challenged social workers to provide the guidance and adequate services the youth in the EFC program need. Social workers were challenged because they had mixed feelings about meeting the foster youth in person to protect their health as well as the health and safety of the youths (Banks, 2020). Many ethical concerns arose in micro-level interventions because social workers felt that restrictions did not allow them to provide service fully (Banks, 2020). Therefore, most social workers opted to break regulations to see clients, such as transporting youths in their cars (Banks, 2020). Additional micro-interventions affected were making monthly contacts, assessing ILP goals achieved by foster youths, and providing guidance to youths.

Macro problems during also arose the pandemic that affected the EFC program. During the pandemic, many social workers did not feel supported by legislation and often felt left to their own devices. In a macro-level intervention, the problem arose when new policies made it harder for clients to receive services (Banks, 2020). Social workers felt that to provide equal and adequate services, they needed more support from the government to assist financially and protect the safety of social workers and youth in EFC.

The Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to identify Extended Foster Care (EFC) social workers' challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to provide social services. For example, what were the effects on the youth's well-being, experiencing challenges within their mental health, education, and employment. Also, how was transitioning into adulthood while trying to meet with their social worker virtually. Were there any challenges building rapport with their social worker not being able to meet in person. This research can also help identify strategies and solutions for navigating a pandemic while providing services to EFC youths. The information found can also be beneficial for future policy changes. Developing new effective policies will benefit the EFC youth, society, and social workers.

The research method utilized in this research study is qualitative research. The study implemented a semi-structured one-on-one interview. This research method was selected to interview different social workers within the Extended Foster Care unit in San Bernardino County. This method also allowed the researchers to ask appropriate questions and collected meaningful data. Furthermore, this research method allowed researchers to understand the complexity of the participant's work and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The findings from this research helped contributed to the field of social work on a micro and macro level. From a micro perspective, social workers learned how to assist EFC youths better when providing services. Also, advocating for new strategies that can be developed to help them. From a macro level, founded new strategies that assisted them better to help the youth transitioned where they can benefit from the services. Also, social workers can better understand how to handle these situations in the future in the case of another pandemic.

This research was conducted to emphasize the importance of social work interventions within the foster care system, especially the extended foster care system. It identified the problems child welfare workers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and assisted lawmakers, agencies, and social workers make appropriate interventions for the EFC. It also gave social workers better support in highly stressful situations which involved continued care during a world pandemic. Additionally, with lawmakers giving attention, funds, and support to what they consider more important issues, this study also helped showed how social workers' duties are essential to our society. Finally, this study helped social work practice as it researched the critical roles of social workers in extended foster care.

The findings from this research helped contributed to the field of social work in child welfare by providing awareness of the components that are

essential for EFC youth to be obtained by child welfare workers. This research demonstrated social work practice on a micro and macro level that influenced EFC youth outcomes. Planning and implementing are crucial for the EFC youth as they require retaining their social services to stay in the program. From a micro perspective, social workers demonstrated planning and implementation by having access to social services to provide to their clients. From a macro level finding new strategies should be explored to assist them better will help the youth transition where they can benefit from the services. However, because of the pandemic's challenges, there needs to be new reform on keeping micro and macro social work as necessary so that EFC youth do not miss out on services. Furthermore, the findings of this study helped identify how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted extended foster care social workers while providing social services.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter incorporates an overview of existing research on how COVID-19 affected social workers and youth, focusing on the social services provided to them. This chapter discusses the workload social workers had to adapt to during the pandemic. This chapter discusses the effects of youth in Extended Foster Care that were provided services pre-Covid. This chapter discusses the importance of a social-worker relationship. This chapter will also discuss how crucial it is to provide services to EFC youth for their successful transition out of foster care and avoid adverse outcomes in their education, mental health, and criminal justice involvement. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the different systems theories that help guide this area of practice regarding EFC youth.

Stress Load of Social Workers During the Pandemic

There were many challenges that social workers had to face when adjusting to the COVID-19 regulations. One of these challenges included building a trusting rapport with the youth/ clients over the phone. It was hard for social workers to ensure that youth had privacy as talking via the phone made it difficult to push confidentiality (Banks et al., 2020). Telecommuting also created a barrier for social workers when evaluating foster youths' homes (Banks et al., 2020). In

some homes, there was no access to the Internet or Facetime, so it tremendously hindered the social work/youth relationship.

Another problem in the social work profession was that they had to care for more "urgent" matters first because of limited resources. It created stress within the profession because it was hard to determine who needed help first. As for the EFC youth, it was shown that they were not prioritized because of the shutdown services. The independent learning plan agreement seminars were not being taught because of the COVID-19 protocols. The lockdown further hindered social workers in helping the youth because they could not assess how to distribute services evenly (Banks et al., 2020).

Services Provided to Extended Foster Care

Extended foster care, or Assembly Bill 12, was created to tackle the massive problem of homelessness, obtaining an education, being prepared to enter the workforce, and lacking sexual education (Tonia, 2013). This bill is crucial to those youths that need a mentor or parental guidance. It allows them to attend classes and seminars teaching about how to apply for college, student loans, financial awareness, career opportunities, and how to obtain mental health services. When comparing children in their family of origin home versus youth in foster care, it is significantly shown how EFC youth lack that emotional or social competence (Tonia, 2013). Therefore, pushing and funding this program is crucial as it allows young adults to prepare to enter the adult world.

Importance of Social Work Relationship with Foster Youth

It was reported that 125,000 foster youth aged around fourteen to eighteen are experiencing placement instability in their foster care (Storer et al., 2014). At least throughout their time in foster care, youth can be placed in at least three different homes (Storer et al., 2014). Social worker builds a healthy relationship with their foster youth by promoting resilience and positive development. A foster youth aging out of the system is more likely to be motivated for college, work, and relationships. Preparing them for self-independence is the main goal for transitional programs such as the EFC program.

Education

Young individuals exiting the foster care system at 18 are at a higher risk of not finishing high school or continuing a postsecondary education than other non-foster youth (individuals that have not been in the foster system). A study showed a comparison between individuals aged 26 that were non-foster youth and those who had exited the foster care system. It was found that former foster youth were three times more likely not to have finished high school or obtained a GED (Courtney & Hook, 2017). Also, a research study showed that 36.3% of non-foster youth completed a four-year college degree. In comparison, only 3.8% of former foster youth completed a four-year college degree (Courtney & Hook, 2017).

Policymakers have allowed young adults to continue participating in foster care after the age 18 to help these individuals pursue their education. Extended foster care allows young individuals to have extra support in helping meet their basic needs, allowing them to focus on their educational goals. EFC also provides opportunities to connect individuals to many different educational supports. For example, obtaining advice on how to apply for college, test preparation for college admission, and guidance on how to apply for financial aid. All these resources can be provided by different social services agencies and including their foster parents (Courtney & Hook, 2017).

Mental Health

When children are separated from their homes and families and placed into the foster care system, they obtain different services to help them with emotional and behavioral challenges by accessing mental health services. These foster youth go through different life experiences, such as traumatic family histories, including removal from their biological parents. A study showed that children in foster care experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This study reported that 60% of the children were sexually abused, and 42% were physically abused (Pecora et al., 2009). Furthermore, the study showed that 18% of foster children who did not experience either type of abuse still had PTSD. It can be from exposure to the community or domestic violence (Pecora et al., 2009).

EFC allows the youth to continue mental health services they might have received while in care before age 18. Foster youths continuing to obtain mental health services will allow them to focus on their lives and future to be successful. It will also allow their therapist and assigned social worker to monitor their progress and identify what is working well for the individual and if any changes to their safety plan need to be made.

Criminal Behavior

Foster youth exiting the care system who have a history or are currently involved in the legal system as a minor are at high risk of continuing to engage in criminal behaviors and being part of the legal system as they age. Many factors play a part in why many youths end up in the legal system. For example, some of them are a history of maltreatment, mental health, substance abuse, challenges in school, and placement instability/ placement type (Lee et al., 2015). Being involved in delinquent or criminal behavior can negatively impact youth lives and potentially interfere with their lifestyle or ability to participate in society fully (Lee et al., 2015).

Young adults who become part of the legal system have a lower opportunity to continue postsecondary education, be employed, or, if employed, hold a stable job for a long time. Many youths do not have additional support when aging out of foster care at 18. Therefore, they turn to the streets, where they gain unhealthy behaviors and unhealthy support that can lead to trouble with the law. For many, it comes to a point where that is all they know and the only

support they have, which makes it difficult to remove themselves from that environment.

The EFC system provides extra support and cares for youths transitioning into adults. It will allow them to continue receiving support and ensure they stay out of trouble. It is also helping them either enter the workforce or into a postsecondary pathway. For many foster youths, making decisions about their adult obligations for the first time is challenging. For others, it can also be a frightening moment to ensure the choices they make can affect the rest of their lives either positively or negatively. It has been identified that the transition into adulthood is a period of freedom from social norms and obligations and allows youths to explore possibilities before making long-term commitments (Lee et al., 2015).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The theories used to conceptualize the ideas in this study are the Resilience model and the Empowerment theory.

There are two theories guiding this research that all help extended foster youth. For example, there is first the theory of resilience, where EFC youth face adversity or highly stressful situations that allow them to show strength. (Herrenkohl, 2013). They often can bounce back from typical challenges but are motivated through guidance from others. A youth that exhibits resiliency is also known to have social skills, self-essential skills, and self-confidence. Having a

mentor helps them deal with obstacles they may face with interactions with others, in school, etc. (Storer et al., 2014).

This theory helps frame the process by emphasizing the social worker's role in providing services for extended foster youths. When foster youth have a mentor in a stressful situation such as COVID-19, they can tackle those adversities. As EFC already has many challenges, such as becoming a self-sufficient adult, they need social workers' guidance and support to succeed. By having those services, they can be supported and have resilience throughout their lives when they are out of EFC services.

Another theory that provides support for this research is the empowerment theory. This theory uses interventions that help support individuals and clients towards better autonomy and retaining control of their life decisions. Using the empowerment theory, social workers can promote positive development when making case plans with EFC youth. Researchers felt that youth encouraged to engage in positive behavior or tasks were more likely to have a healthier transition into adulthood (Storer et al., 2014). Youth with positive role models increases their chances of being prosocial. It is because they learn positive behaviors and engagements with their peers. They are also confident and understand social cues and norms from their surrounding adult relationships. Bonding with their social worker that promotes positive values will allow youths to make better choices and be better people.

Summary

The literature review underscores the challenges confronted by social workers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in fostering relationships with youth and clients, assessing foster youths' living situation remotely, and managing priorities amid resource constraints. It emphasizes the pivotal role of programs such as the extended foster care system, designed to aid youths in transitioning into independent adulthood by addressing issues such as homelessness, education, workforce development and mental health. The review highlights the disparities in education attainment between former foster youth and their peers, underscoring the importance of EFC in providing essential services and resources to bridge this gap. Additionally, it emphasizes the critical need for ongoing mental health services for foster youths, given their own traumatic backgrounds. Furthermore, it highlights the elevated risk of involvement in criminal behavior for youths exiting foster care without adequate support, emphasizing the role of EFC programs in mitigating the risk and empowering youths to make positive life choices.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter contains eight sections explaining this study's research methods and design. Section one is the introduction to the chapter. Section two covers the study design and research methods used. Section three describes the sampling, and section four explains the data collection and instruments that were utilized. Section five covers the procedures and focus on how the data was gathered. Section six discusses confidentiality and protection of human subjects. The seventh section covers data analysis. Lastly, section eight summarizes the chapter.

Study Design

This study aimed to evaluate and explore the effectiveness of how social workers in Southern California provided services to EFC youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both researchers interviewed social workers individually within the extended foster care unit. The answers to the interview questions given by the social workers provided an understanding and feedback on how the services and practices were being implemented by a county children's services agency in Southern California while following protocols and guidelines. It was an exploratory research project due to the limited research on COVID-19-related issues from the EFC social workers' perspective. Since the professional

viewpoints and experiences of the social workers may disclose information that has yet to be studied, this qualitative study utilizes one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions.

The benefit of utilizing this method was to better understand human experiences while being part of the Extended Foster Care program. Another benefit was obtaining new data that has yet to be studied, which can help future research increase understanding of this specific topic. Utilizing one-on-one interviews allowed the researchers to understand how social workers make decisions based on their practice and state guidelines. It also allowed researchers to have successful responses from the interviewee by allowing them to elaborate on their experiences.

A limitation of using one-on-one interviews was that individual biases can occur where one person's distaste can influence recorded responses. High rates of social worker burnout and turnover can also be a limitation when trying to gather participants who have worked before and during the pandemic.

Sampling

This study used non-probability and purposive sampling, allowing us to use specific individuals for the sample based on the research goals. The participants used for this study consisted of current employee of a county children's services agency in Southern California. The study utilized record keeping of the participants from. A list of qualified participants was obtained from a county children's services agency in Southern California under the Extended

Foster Care Youths program. There was a total of 10 participants that were interviewed individually.

Data Collection and Instruments

In this study, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with specific questions that asked the participants who agreed to be part of the research. The demographic and open-ended questions from the interview are provided in Appendix A. The interview questions explored the outcome and experiences of each foster youth while obtaining services. A few questions were asked about their experiences regarding education, mental health, and employment. The instruments used were in-person interviews or via Zoom.

Procedures

After obtaining approval to complete this study from the California State University of San Bernardino (CSUSB) School of Social Work Subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and of a county children's services agency in Southern California, participants were reached out individually. Participants were contacted via phone or email, asking them if interested in participating in the study. It was disclosed to them the purpose of the study and the process of the study. Before the interviews begun with each participant, the researchers allowed each participant to read the informed consent and ask to acknowledge the consent if they wanted to participate. (Informed consent can be located under

Appendix B) The interviews were conducted from November 2023 to January 2024.

Protection of Human Subjects

The interview questions do not ask for personal identifying information such as the foster youth's name or other identifying information of social workers. The email accounts the researchers are using were protected through Duo Identification and can only be accessed through the researchers. The researchers reviewed informed consent with the participants and allowed them to stop at any time upon request. All personal information in the emails were disregarded and deleted after completing the study. The study was approved as exempt by CSUSB IRB #: IRB-FY2023-256.

Data Analysis

This research used qualitative research for the data collection. The researchers collected the information through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Researchers gathered information from the participants from the extended foster youth through questionnaires. The questions on the questionnaires were open-ended and direct. The Constant Comparative Analyses was utilized to analyze the qualitative research. The researchers also collected information about the AB Bill 12 program through social workers at the county. The researchers also gathered this information via Zoom or phone

interviews. The researchers stored the information collected from these interviews on both researchers' locked computers.

Summary

This study used the methods described in this chapter to see how COVID-19 impacted services to extended foster youth. The data collected was qualitative data that provided a general measurement of the difference between EFC receiving services and the impact of no benefits offered. It also measured how social workers felt supported during this time because it will help further find how to identify appropriate safety measures. It also allowed the researchers to help determine what can be implemented for future disasters.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This qualitative study was designed to learn from Extended Foster Care (EFC) social workers how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to provide services to the EFC foster youth, negatively or positively, and how supported they felt in delivering these services. Considering these questions, the researchers conducted ten interviews with subjects working as extended foster care workers for a county agency before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted over Zoom calls from November 2023 to January 2024. All interview subjects had been working with EFC youth before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews averaged 30 minutes, with the shortest being 15 minutes and the longest 45 minutes.

The data in this chapter details agency policies on contacts with EFC prior to and during COVID-19. Also, it covers the effectiveness of COVID-19 policy on worker safety and COVID-19 restrictions impacts social services. Additionally, this chapter presents data on the challenges of working with EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions, challenges in delivering mental health services, and challenges in building rapport with EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions. Lastly, EFC obtaining work employment and exceptions during COVID-19 restrictions, and a summary summarizing the chapter.

Presentation of the Findings

Agency Policies on Contacts with Extended Foster Care Prior to COVID-19 and During COVID-19

All participants had stated that before COVID-19, they had to meet their youth in person once a month. Based on the data collected in the interviews, the agency showed support by allowing the EFC social workers to conduct their work with clients through Zoom or video calls. Once the COVID-19 pandemic had begun, all work was performed technologically and mostly from home. If the social worker needed to meet the youth in person, the agency had a protocol in place regarding social distancing, with the client being at their front door and the social worker on the curb. It was a method that allowed the social worker to engage and deliver services to the youth in person. An EFC social worker also shared that the department “encouraged all workers to take all measures to ensure safety, which include double masks and getting vaccinated.” Some workers even stated that their contact notes were adjusted to the amount of assessment they could do with being online or outside the home. As the COVID-19 pandemic mandates lifted, the EFC social workers shared that the agency quickly changed the policy to no more virtual or call visits, as contacts returned to in-person.

Effectiveness of COVID-19 Policy on Worker Safety

Out of the ten participants, nine felt support from management and administration regarding the effectiveness of the protocols to protect the workers

from COVID-19. The EFC workers shared how being able to telecommute, being provided with sanitary gloves, goggles, hand sanitizer, and wipes, being flexible with working at home, and receiving email notifications whenever someone tested positive reassured them of the spread of COVID-19. However, one participant shared that even with all the personal protective equipment the department provided, they were not 100% protected. This interviewer shared how if they had to pick up their youth from placement, it would mean being less than six feet away because they must provide them with transportation. They also shared how they got COVID-19 for the first time: "If the youth is in the back seat, I am here, she coughed without her mask. You cannot force them to wear their mask." Overall, many felt that the personal protective gear that was provided helped stop the spread to some extent, while one expressed the concern that even with gear, it was still not enough to get sick.

COVID-19 Restrictions Impact on Social Services

There were positive and negative results with social services outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The EFC social workers shared how, for some youth, it was positive that the age restriction policy was extended for those who were going to age out of the EFC program. One worker shared, "EFC was extended for NMD (non-minor dependent) from age 21 to 22." Another worker said, "Everything went as planned because I could still deliver services." For example, this worker could issue bus passes and other services needed by mail.

The negative impact resulted in the ineffectiveness of services as some interviewees shared their experiences with the youth. One interviewee shared that obtaining a birth certificate or social security card was impossible as most government agencies did not allow walk-ins or in-person visits. They also shared that scheduling an appointment to obtain those documents was difficult as it was “so hard to get with someone on the phone, which made it challenging to schedule an appointment.” Four workers agreed that a service they recognized that changed was the Independent Living Program (ILP), a requirement for all EFC youth to stay in the program and receive assistance. One social worker mentioned that “the ILP before was done in-person with the youth, but during COVID-19, it changed to completing it online.”

Challenges Working with Extended Foster Care Youth During COVID-19

Restrictions

Many EFC social workers shared how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the youth negatively. EFC workers faced challenges such as the youth “making excuses to not meet with the social worker or participate in an activity to meet EFC criteria.” Four participants shared how not being able to meet the youth face to face made the meetings impersonal, and the youth were observed to be less communicative. For one worker who had a youth out of state, they could not meet and assess their living situation as travel was restricted. Another four workers felt it was hard for the youth to adjust to quarantine, as an online school, not meeting with friends, and not obtaining their legal documents as they become

adults were adverse outcomes of COVID-19. One participant said, “Mental health services and educational services were difficult. I feel the youth were negatively affected as services were difficult to access.” However, one worker shared that it made it easier for them to contact their youth during COVID-19 versus now.

Challenges Delivering Mental Health Services During COVID-19 Restrictions

The results were slightly even regarding a positive or negative result for providing youth mental health services during the pandemic. Positive results included that the youth were able to access mental health services virtually, which meant that those youth who were already enrolled in mental health services were able to switch to video call. However, five participants shared that because the mental health services are online, many youths were not as engaged with the service providers because of them being online. One worker shared, “One challenging service was teleconferences because some youth wanted to meet with the therapist in person.” Another challenging factor mentioned was that some service providers, such as Healthy Homes Assessment, had a more challenging time reaching the youth as many avoided participations.

Building Rapport with Extended Foster Care Youth During COVID-19 Restrictions

Participants felt that building rapport with the EFC youth was more negative than positive during COVID-19 restrictions. Eight participants shared that one challenge that made it difficult to build rapport with youth was reduced

time with them. One interviewee shares how the youth could hang up or end the discussion by physically closing the door, window shade, or ending the video call. Another participant shared that before COVID, rapport was built through lunch at a restaurant, playing basketball, or walking through a park. The restrictions diminished the relationship as the youth felt the social workers did not care about them. Three participants shared that the major challenge they faced was meeting with the youth for the first time, as the interactions differed from before COVID-19. Two social workers shared that they could build rapport as the youth they serviced already had established an initial rapport. Overall, the social workers with new cases had more difficulty building rapport than those with established rapport.

Extended Foster Care Obtaining Work Employment and Exceptions During COVID-19 Restrictions

A part of the EFC agreement for youth to stay in the program is being employed or seeking employment. Participants were asked if it was harder for EFC youth to obtain employment support due to jobs being cut during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that youth had a slightly more negative experience obtaining a job during the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers shared that some youth had trouble finding jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and others were being laid off. Another factor that stopped youth from finding employment was the fear of COVID-19 and possibly getting sick. One worker mentioned, "It was tough because COVID-19 initially seemed and presented as fatal, which was

erroneous. Because of this belief, many chose not to work." However, four workers shared that the youth on their caseload had no trouble with employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared that the government provided some assistance. The social workers also helped the youths with their resumes and sent any available resources via email or mail.

Social workers were asked if any exceptions were made for those youth who had difficulty obtaining employment. A common positive response was found among the participants. All workers agreed that the youth could remain in an open case and were not dismissed during COVID-19 for the lack of participation. Many social workers shared that regardless of the youth's employment, they still provided all the necessary services to them. One participant shared, "Yes, there were exceptions, and part of that was we could not drop the youth from the program because they could not obtain employment. The department understood the challenges we were all facing, including the youth."

Summary

This study's main question was how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted EFC social workers' ability to provide services to EFC youth. The answers the subjects of this research project provided indicated significant support from the agency during COVID-19 when completing their contacts. Also, the effectiveness of COVID-19 policies on worker safety was a positive outcome for all workers since the agency provided personal protective equipment and flexibility in working from home to avoid as much physical contact. There were also positive

and negative results on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on social services. All participants except for one found working with EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions challenging. Results for challenges delivering mental health services during COVID-19 restrictions were slightly even regarding positive and negative results. For the most part, most of the workers found it challenging to build rapport with the EFC youth during COVID-19 restrictions, except for two. EFC youth obtaining employment was challenging, but exceptions were also made for them during COVID-19 restrictions. Overall, there were different challenges in each area while trying to deliver services to the EFC youth.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study sought to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EFC social workers' capacity to deliver support to this vulnerable demographic. Through in-depth interviews and analysis, significant insights emerged, shedding light on the challenges and successes encountered by the EFC workers. Notably, findings revealed substantial support from the agency in facilitating worker safety through implementing effective COVID-19 policies, including providing personal protective equipment and remote work flexibility. However, despite these efforts, navigating the complexities of service delivery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions presented notable hurdles, particularly in areas such as building rapport, delivering mental health services, and facilitating EFC youth's access to employment opportunities. Results confirmed both viewpoints from the literature review on the importance of EFC social workers in EFC youth's lives and how the pandemic changed that dynamic for some. This study revealed the nuanced dynamics of service provision during these unprecedented times, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EFC social work practice.

Discussion

This section will discuss the challenges the youth experienced when trying to build rapport and communicate and how it reflects existing literature on ensuring privacy and maintaining relationships with the social worker. Also, cover's the impact of providing necessary services and support and how it relates to current literature on challenges faced by EFC workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further discussion will focus on, the challenges that were faced in trying to obtain and maintain EFC job requirements while experiencing fears of COVID-19 transmission and how the literature review emphasizes the importance of employment and support for transitioning youth. Lastly, cover's how the support was delivered to the youth during COVID-19.

Building rapport and communication were highlighted as a challenge to maintaining a good rapport with the youth. One of the challenges that was brought up in the results was maintaining contact with youth, mainly when face-to-face interactions were limited. The interviewees mentioned reduced time with youth and impersonal meetings, while the literature review discusses challenges in ensuring privacy and maintaining relationships over the phone. An EFC worker would have to find an adaptation to build that relationship with the youth and maintain confidentiality. Extended foster youth need to establish a good communication relationship with their social worker. Most youth in the program do not have a support system that can assist them in adjusting to adulthood. Therefore, having a relationship with the social worker will promote trust and

support so that the youth will feel comfortable expressing their needs, concerns, and emotions. The trust forms a foundation for a supportive relationship where the youth feel empowered to reach out to their social worker. It will also assist the youth in receiving access to resources because effective communication ensures they are aware of the services provided. Overall, although the youth that already had an established relationship with their social worker before the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a negative impact, it's important to highlight that youth new to the program had a more difficult time adapting.

Another essential factor that was brought up was the impact on services and support. Both the literature review and study discussed the challenges faced by EFC workers in providing necessary services and support to youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study found difficulties in obtaining essential documents and accessing services like mental health and education, while the literature review highlights how urgent matters were prioritized, potentially leading to a lack of support for EFC youth. When discussing the two, it could be seen how what was important for EFC youth, such as obtaining documents and receiving mental health services, was not a priority for the department.

Many EFC youth are more likely to experience mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD compared to their peers. Access to mental health services is crucial for addressing these challenges, providing therapeutic interventions, and promoting coping skills.

Obtaining legal documents such as birth certificates, social security cards, and identification is essential for foster youth to access services, employment, and financial assistance. Obtaining these documents can create barriers for EFC youth to prepare for independence as they were set back from assessing those services. Because social workers had to prioritize what was important to address, it can be seen as difficult to determine what is a priority for the youth and what isn't. Although some participants were not affected because of their time established in EFC, those new youth entering the program had difficulty adapting.

Another challenge revealed in the study was the effect of COVID-19 on employment requirements for EFC youth. The literature review and study touched on EFC youth's challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study mentions job losses and fears of COVID-19- transmission, while the literature review emphasizes the importance of employment and support for transitioning youth. Many EFC youth need a reliable support system and financial resources as they transition to adulthood. Employment provides them with the means to meet their basic needs, and with stable employment, EFC youth may be able to achieve financial stability and independence. Although it was stated by one participant that the government provided some assistance during the time of COVID-19, it didn't address skill developments that could have been lost. Employment offers opportunities for skill development and career advancement through work experience, the EFC youth

can acquire valuable job skills. The fear of COVID-19 topped youth from obtaining employment; this was something out of EFC workers' control. However, if the independent living program enforced more classes on employment readiness, it could have been a solution to this remedy for future pandemics.

Regardless of the barriers, the literature review and this study emphasize the importance of continued support for EFC youth, especially during COVID-19. The study found exceptions made to ensure youth remained in the program. At the same time, the literature discusses the importance of transitional programs like EFC in providing support and guidance for youth transitioning into adulthood. Many study participants expressed that the department was flexible with making accommodations for the youth to stay eligible for the program and still receive benefits.

One unanticipated result from this study was the difference in how the support was delivered from their social worker to a youth new to the program compared to an established youth. From analyzing the different information the participants shared, it was a common factor that EFC workers who had youth on their caseload longer did not need as much help giving services than those who had new youth. Many respondents with the same youth reported that it was easier for them to transition to telecommunication because they already had an established relationship and services in place for their youth. This means that many of the barriers that were encountered were caused mainly by EFC workers who had new youth on their caseload when the COVID-19 pandemic started. As

it could be expected that building rapport over the phone or video can be less genuine, this factor created a challenge for both worker and youth as they could have a different relationship than those EFC workers with their long-term youth.

Limitations

Limitations to this study were the small sample size, time constraints during interviews, and the potential for response bias as participants may have responded based on their perceptions or recollections of events, which may be subjected to memory bias. More limitations include the lack of longitudinal data as the data appears to capture the experiences of EFC social workers and EFC youth at a point where longitudinal data changes over time and could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic has impacted EFC services and support.

Also, there is a need for more viewpoints on how EFC youth were affected as the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of EFC social workers, with less emphasis on the experiences of the youth themselves. Future research should be done to see how the EFC youth felt about having services altered in their program and how it affected them transitioning into adulthood. It can address some of the limitations by obtaining EFC youth as participants that were participating in the program during the COVID-19 pandemic to get more insight and explore outcomes on how efficient they felt receiving services, support, building rapport, and work employment.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Social workers will continue to service their clients and will work with them through future global emergencies such as pandemics. If there were another national emergency, such as COVID-19, a few recommendations could be made in the agency to be better prepared. A more flexible service delivery that adapts to the changing circumstances during pandemics could be implemented. An example of this could be well-established protocols for in-person interactions that prioritize safety and social distancing but also help create that missing relationship in COVID-19 client-social worker interactions. Strengthening the communication strategies could ensure effective communication with EFC youth and social workers. This can involve utilizing multiple communication channels, and having the social workers provide regular updates and guidance to the new youth since they might need additional support to establish rapport to allow them to connect with the social worker.

Another recommendation is to prioritize and develop protocols for prioritizing essential services and support for clients during the pandemic. This would address the needs of those youth who were new to the program and needed to be referred to services. The support and service they needed require more work and attention than those well-established in the EFC program. Identifying the needs of those entering the program can help them stay caught up.

As for the EFC social workers' support from the agency, some recommendations that can be made are to provide more comprehensive support and resources that ensure well-being and resilience during a pandemic. Throughout the study, many social workers mentioned that the agency supported them with made-available PPE gear. However, no resources for the social worker's mental health, training on self-care, and stress management were available. During a time of uncertainty and chaos, EFC social workers could have also benefited from having those training and services available to help support them. In the future, it will also benefit the agency to develop and regularly review pandemic preparedness plans to ensure it is ready for future pandemic situations. This would include updating policies and protocols based on the outcomes of COVID-19 on the agency and client feedback. Also, collaborate with other agencies to coordinate how to work together for the clients for ready preparedness. By implementing these recommendations, agencies can better prepare for and respond to future pandemics, ensuring clients receive the services they need to navigate challenging circumstances while promoting the well-being of the EFC social workers.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges Extended Foster Care (EFC) social workers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to provide social services to the youth. The study's main findings assist in providing a greater understanding of how the COVID-19 restrictions affect the delivery of

support, building rapport, the youth's work employment, and ensuring the safety of social workers at their agency. The study's main recommendations are to develop protocols to prioritize essential services and support clients during another pandemic or similar situation. Another recommendation is research should also be done on the EFC social workers to focus on and obtain recommendations on resources that can be developed for them in case they need help with their well-being.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Understanding the role of a social worker in Extended Foster Care unit:

- Can you describe your role as an Extended Foster Care social worker?
- How were monthly contacts conducted before COVID and during COVID?
- What protocols were in place, how did they look, and how effective were they?
- Were there any programs/social services that were put on hold during COVID-19 that were beneficial for EFC youth?
- Can you describe your challenges when working with EFC youth? Do you believe these challenges affected the youth positively or negatively? If so, why?

Mental health:

- What mental health services do you provide for EFC youth?
- How has working with those services been a challenge during COVID?
- How have mental health services helped your foster youth during their EFC time?

Housing:

- How was housing implemented during COVID-19 due to quarantine restrictions and social distancing?
- Was funding harder for EFC youth to obtain for housing due to the emergency crisis, COVID-19, of allocating money out to social services?

Work employment:

- What ways do you help EFC youth obtain employment?
- Was it harder for them to obtain services due to jobs being laid off during the pandemic?
- Were there exceptions made for those EFC youths who could not obtain a job?
- How do you feel that affected foster youths from being successful?

Developed by Omar Ramirez and Victoria Lopez

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine how did the Covid-19 pandemic impact extended foster care social workers while providing social services. The study is being conducted by Omar Ramirez, and Victoria Lopes, both graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Smith, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the challenges extended foster care social workers experienced while providing social services to foster youth. This will help researchers understand the direct impact of how EFC workers transitioned EFC youth out of care during the pandemic.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked of a few questions on the job description of working in the extended foster care unit. They will then be asked about the social services that they provide to EFC youth regarding their mental health, employment, and education. Additionally, any other services they provided for the well-being of their clients.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential, and data will be reported in zoom form only.

DURATION: It will take 20 to 30 minutes to complete the interview process.

RISKS: There will not be any directed risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Laurie Smith at (909) 537-3837.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2024.

I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Place an X mark here

Date

APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL



September 26, 2023

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2023-256

Laurie Smith Victoria Lopez, Omar Ramirez
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Laurie Smith Victoria Lopez, Omar Ramirez:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact extended foster care social workers while providing social services." 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.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

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ASSGINED RESPONSIBILITIES

This research project was collaborative effort between the two student authors and researchers, Omar Ramirez, and Victoria Lopez. Both researchers shared all the responsibility from the beginning to the end of the completion of the project. The following sections were completed together: introduction, literature review, methods, results, and conclusion. Both researchers utilized each other learning experience and strengths to achieve the study. Lastly, both researchers contributed to the formatting, editing, and revisions throughout the preparation of this project for submission and publishing.