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## Preferred Practices to Retain Black Female Caseworkers Employed in Child Welfare

Anna Koehle

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Preferred Practices to Retain Black Female Caseworkers  
Employed in Child Welfare

by  
Anna Koehle

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education

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2023

## **Approval Page**

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## Abstract

Preferred Practices to Retain Black Female Caseworkers Employed in Child Welfare. Anna Koehle, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: child welfare, caseworkers, retention, Black female caseworkers, Black women, racism

The problem addressed by this study was that the turnover rate among social workers has been highest for Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retention. Ten experienced Black female caseworkers in child welfare were interviewed; participants represented five U.S. states. Participants were asked about mentorship programs, preservice training, financial incentives, major concerns related to retention, and recommendations for retention initiatives to specifically address the needs of Black female caseworkers. Themes emerged related to Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Mentorship programs should be culturally responsive and include opportunities to build relationships within the organization. Preservice training activities should include simulations that are realistic and reflective of job duties and responsibilities; should be standardized for efficacy; and should include components addressing race and racism in child welfare. Low pay rates and inequitable salaries present challenges retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Financial incentives focused on meeting the needs of Black female caseworkers and their families are essential for retention. Additionally, student loan forgiveness needs to be more accessible to fully benefit Black female caseworkers. In terms of preferred practices, addressing racism is essential for retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Organizational culture impacts the experiences of Black female caseworkers. Most caseworkers feel undervalued, which needs to be addressed through organizational strategies that reflect value for the unique experiences of Black female caseworkers.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Child welfare workforce stability has continued to be an ongoing issue across the United States (Casey Family Programs, 2017). The turnover rate for child welfare social workers and caseworkers has been reported at 30%–40% each year, with an average tenure of less than 2 years (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021). Turnover is most frequently attributed to work-related stress and burnout and impacts the ability to ensure children and families remain safe, have permanent connections, and maintain physical and mental well-being.

The problem addressed by this study was that the turnover rate among social workers has been highest for Black female child-welfare caseworkers (Griffiths et al., 2017; Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2019). High turnover is defined as an annual turnover rate over 25% (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Some researchers have found a relationship between caseworker race/ethnicity and turnover, with Black caseworkers being more likely to leave an agency than their White counterparts; however, very little research has explored why this difference in tenure exists (Faller et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2017). Racial identity is associated with distinct experiences for workers in the United States (Channer & Doel, 2009). Lawrence et al. (2019) concurred with Channer and Doel (2009) that racial identity should be a consideration in the development of strategies to reduce turnover and improve retention. In response to this growing concern, child welfare agencies have begun to explore innovative approaches to improve organizational inclusion practices to reduce turnover by workers of color (Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2022).



### *Phenomenon of Interest*

The phenomenon of interest in the study was effective retention strategies for Black female child-welfare caseworkers. Griffiths et al. (2019) conducted a study to explore workforce recruitment and retention efforts of child welfare agencies. Findings emphasized the importance of ensuring retention efforts are culturally responsive. The researchers suggested that in order to comprehensively address issues related to workforce retention, child welfare agencies should try to meet the needs of the portion of the workforce leaving the field at the highest rate.

This study was designed to expand on the work of Renner et al. (2009) and Griffiths et al. (2017). The researchers described the need for qualitative research to explore strategies that influence caseworker retention and the need to understand what influences Black child welfare workers to consider leaving in greater proportions compared to their White peers (Griffiths et al., 2017; Renner et al., 2009). Using a descriptive research design, Griffiths et al. (2017) found workplace factors affect employees. These factors include workload (e.g., number of cases, on-call responsibilities), job recognition, peer support (e.g., mentoring, communities of practice), supervision (e.g., clinical case support and oversight), sense of accomplishment, professional development (e.g., learning opportunities and skills development), and training (e.g., preservice training) influenced the tenure of child welfare caseworkers (Griffiths et al., 2017). They noted agreement among researchers concerning the need to understand what influences child welfare professionals of color to experience job dissatisfactions, which in turn influences intent to leave. In addition, Griffiths et al. (2017) suggested further exploration of barriers to job satisfaction, including salary, job

demands, organizational culture, and workplace climate, is vital to improving retention of this critical population.

### ***Background and Justification***

Child welfare services (i.e., child protective services, family preservation, foster care, independent living, and adoption) are federally mandated and administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Children's Bureau, 2022). State child welfare services are monitored by the Children's Bureau. Over the past few decades, the Children's Bureau has partnered with many states to support the implementation of recruitment and retention strategies for child welfare staff (Radey et al., 2017).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that jobs in social work would increase by about 12% between 2014 and 2024 (Salsberg et al., 2017). Additionally, 22% of social workers entering the child welfare workforce each year are Black (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). Whereas most child welfare workers have reported feelings of satisfaction with their roles supporting and protecting children and families, child welfare also remains a field with a high risk of burnout. Researchers have shown 10% of Black caseworkers have considered leaving their jobs, and 8% have considered leaving the field of child welfare completely due to stress and burnout (Fitzhenry et al., 2022).

The problem is particularly significant because approximately 54% of Black families involved with the child welfare system are supported by Black caseworkers (Blakeslee et al., 2014). Some researchers have supported racial matching between caseworkers and clients in human services (Blakeslee et al., 2014; Perry & Limb, 2004). Blakeslee et al. (2014) found clients with the same cultural background as their

caseworkers have better service engagement, including more improved quality of assessments and better access to culturally appropriate services. Retaining a workforce representing those most served by child welfare systems is critical (Blakeslee et al., 2014). Child welfare organizations have demonstrated an effort to improve workforce diversity over the past few decades by including cultural competency in federally funded child welfare education and training programs, but standardized practices have not been established to address turnover for Black female child-welfare caseworkers (Blakeslee et al., 2014).

Johnco et al. (2014) suggested that as child welfare agencies strive to address critical workforce issues, they should try to move beyond removing the factors contributing to turnover. Johnco et al. elaborated that these agencies should aim to identify and implement strategies to improve retention and workforce diversity. Child welfare agencies have made efforts to improve retention through training provided by federal Title IV-E funds and state funds. Further research was needed to examine what influences Black child-welfare caseworkers to leave their roles at higher rates than their White counterparts. Further research was also needed to understand effective recruitment practices and interventions (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021).

### ***Deficiencies in the Evidence***

Griffiths et al (2017) studied child welfare workforce turnover by comparing job satisfaction of caseworkers who were leaving, staying, or undecided about their job. The researchers revealed Black social workers were more likely to serve in urban areas where increased opportunities are available for lateral movement. However, the researchers called for additional research to understand what influences Black professionals to

consider leaving the field of child welfare in greater proportions than their White counterparts.

To understand the experiences of Black child-welfare caseworkers, Montgomery (2022) studied the unique experiences of Black social workers as frontline practitioners and members of the Black community while serving Black children in the child welfare system. Montgomery provided evidence that systemic and organizational bias impacts outcomes for children and families involved with the child welfare system, despite changes in laws, policy, and practice. Montgomery highlighted the experiences of Black caseworkers working with Black families in organizations with anti-Black culture and found although many caseworkers were overwhelmed by the countertransference of racial trauma, some were motivated to be part of the solution. Montgomery called for additional research on the lived experiences of those most closely impacted by the child welfare system, including Black parents and caregivers, Black children and youth, Black students and educators, and Black child-welfare workers and social work practitioners.

The National Association of Black Social Workers (1972) advocated for the placement of Black children with Black families for their well-being and that of the Black community. However, the work of the association has not included the impact on Black social workers. Despite a small body of research to support the benefits of matching caseworkers and clients by race/ethnicity to create opportunities for connection through shared experiences and to limit bias, research is limited on the benefits of matching Black caseworkers with tenured Black child-welfare case workers and agency leaders for the purpose of mentorship and ongoing support.

The experiences of Black professionals in helping professions have been studied

in the United States and Europe. Lipscomb and Ashley (2020) revealed that Black mental health clinicians felt both fulfilled and emotionally drained when helping Black clients address racial trauma. Whereas Black clinicians felt a deep connection to the shared experience with clients, they also felt overwhelmed navigating their own experiences of racial trauma paired with the countertransference of clients' racial trauma (Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020). The study did not explore how these feelings and experiences impacted job satisfaction. The researchers called for further research on how the countertransference of racial trauma impacts Black professionals and what strategies may be put in place to ensure the retention of Black professionals through representative support, collaboration, and mentorship.

Dombo and Blome (2016) studied how child welfare organizations responded to the secondary traumatic stress experienced by caseworkers. The results of the study supported prior research demonstrating how vicarious trauma affects caseworkers and contributes to turnover and burnout. The study affirmed the need for better organizational responses to vicarious trauma, as workforce turnover has been a systemic problem for many public child welfare agencies (Dombo & Blome, 2016). Although the researchers connected burnout to workforce turnover, the study was limited by not examining vicarious trauma by caseworker race/ethnicity and by not investigating strategies for workforce retention.

### ***Audience***

Child welfare services impact every community across the country. In Fiscal Year 2019, child welfare agencies received 4.4 million child abuse and neglect referrals involving 7.9 million children and youth (Children's Bureau, 2021). Having a stable,

responsive workforce is critical to agencies' ability to respond to these situations. The audience for this body of research includes researchers, child welfare organizations, caseworkers, children, youth, families, foster parents, and communities (Ellett et al., 2007; Leffler & Ahn, 2022; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010; Williams & Glisson, 2013).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined for the purpose of this phenomenological study.

*Black* was defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (para. 3). Black is not exclusively African American but includes those of Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin, and Afro-European descent. For the purpose of this research, Black also includes those who are biracial or multiracial who identify as Black.

*Casework* was defined by Ijaz (2022) as “the study of individual problems in its total setting” (para. 1) and the practice of supporting the individual's needs comprehensively to promote the attainment of a socially healthy life.

*Caseworkers* or *social workers* are individuals performing professional social work services involving direct service interventions to address the problems and meet the needs of vulnerable populations including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.).

*Child welfare* was defined by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018) as the continuum of services to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. Child welfare includes services to prevent child abuse and neglect (prevention and family preservation) and the investigation of reports of possible child abuse and neglect (child protective services). Child welfare also includes the placement

of children with relatives or foster families when they cannot be safely maintained in their home of origin (foster care) and providing services to achieve permanency for children and youth leaving foster care (reunification and adoption).

*Child welfare organization or agency*, according to U.S. Code (2017) Title 42, refers to the state, territorial or tribal “administrative agency that is responsible for meeting the health and mental health needs of all children in state custody and for the for social work concerned with the welfare and vocational training of children” (§ 3797cc-3 [b][1]).

*Retention* was defined by Khalid and Nawab (2018) as the process whereby the employees choose to remain in their job, role, or organization for the maximum period or until the completion of the role objectives.

*Social work*, according to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), is a “practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (para. 2).

*Turnover* was defined by Edwards and Wildeman (2018) as the amount of time caseworkers remain in their jobs, the rate at which caseworkers leave child welfare agencies, or the number of new and tenured caseworkers working at a child welfare agency at any given time. The researchers also defined turnover as the measure of child welfare workforce stability.

*Workforce*, for the purposes of this study, refers to the well-trained, highly skilled, well-resourced professionals who provide services and support to keep children and families safe, stable, and healthy (Lee et al., 2020).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retention. For decades, workforce needs have shifted with changing views about work–life balance and the disproportionately aging workforce in child welfare (Renner et al., 2009). Several state and federal initiatives have been created to address workforce recruitment but have offered little support to address retention and how race and gender influence retention (Harris & Davis, 2018; Madden et al., 2014; Potter et al., 2009; Renner et al., 2009). Lipscomb and Tejada (2021) found a need for representation, modeling, and a trusting relationship to make the work environment more attractive to Black male social workers. According to Pepple and Davies (2019) and Sedivy et al. (2019), research is needed on the specific types of support found to be most effective for retaining Black female child-welfare caseworkers.

A study site was not used for this research. The subjects for this phenomenological study included Black female child-welfare caseworkers who were selected from a variety of locations and organizations. The goal of this study was to ascertain preferred practices for retention of Black female child-welfare caseworkers with the expectation that results would identify retention initiatives to be developed and implemented in the future. For this study, the researcher explored the individual and common experiences of Black child-welfare caseworkers with preferred practices for retention. The researcher collected data through interviews and provided an in-depth analysis of the participants' views of the phenomenon of interest.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to explore perspectives and practices found in research on Black female child-welfare caseworkers. A thorough literature review revealed important topics pertinent to this exploration. These topics included (a) child welfare defined, (b) historical concepts of child welfare, (c) child welfare workforce characteristics, (d) challenges the child welfare workforce experiences, (e) child welfare workforce turnover, (f) child welfare workforce retention, and (g) preferred practices for retention in child welfare. The literature review included analysis and summaries of studies related to these areas as well as the theoretical framework underlying this study. This chapter concludes with the research questions that guided this phenomenological study.

The databases used for this literature review included APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, and ProQuest. Key words utilized for journal article searches included *Black caseworkers*, *Black social workers*, *Black female social workers*, *child welfare workforce*, *child welfare turnover*, *child welfare workforce retention*, and *workforce retention strategies*. The limitations for the literature search included peer-reviewed journals and professional websites only, from 2016 through 2022. Some earlier statistics and studies published in peer-reviewed journals were cited due to the limited amount of research on this specific population.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study was approached from the ecological systems perspective of individual experiences. The ecological systems theory involves personal and environmental factors that impact individual experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Bronfenbrenner (1974)

looked at ecology through a biological lens. He examined all living things in the context of the environment. The ecological systems theory is used to understand and explain the exchanges of people with their environments (Guy-Evans, 2020). In this theory, an individual interacts with five environmental systems: (a) microsystem (institutions and groups), (b) mesosystem (interconnections of microsystems), (c) ecosystem (links between social settings not involving the individual), (d) macrosystem (overarching culture), and (e) chronosystem (pattern of environmental events and transitions across the lifespan; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Guy-Evans, 2020).

The Bronfenbrenner (1974) ecological systems theory was initially used in psychology but soon expanded to social sciences and social work. In social work, the ecological systems theory is used to explain the relationship between individuals and their physical and social environment over time (Teater, 2014). When applied to social work, the ecological systems theory operates from the assumption that individuals seek to transition through life stages (Guy-Evans, 2020). The individual seeks to transition in a manner maintaining harmony in the personal perceptions of self and environmental fit across various environments (Teater, 2014). The ecological systems perspective assumes stress or conflict occurs throughout the lifespan in the physical and social environment. Stress results from a misalignment of the individual's perception of their strengths, abilities, knowledge, and resources with what is needed and available to address stressors or challenges (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Conflict across the lifespan allows the individual to be adaptive to their environment.

The intention of this researcher, through this phenomenological study, was to explore preferred practices to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The

ecological systems theoretical framework supported the exploration of human experience specific to physical and social environmental stressors. This study focused on the needs and perspectives of Black female child-welfare caseworkers in direct services positions. Within the context of the ecological systems, the study sought to understand how strategies for alignment between the individual (caseworker) and the environment (child welfare organization) may improve retention of Black female child-welfare caseworkers.

### **Child Welfare Defined**

At its conception, child welfare was defined as the legal practice by a single judicial entity of removing children from unsafe homes and placing them in foster homes, orphanages, or institutions (Paddock et al., 2013). The early approach to child welfare services did not include any services or support for parents and caregivers. Over the decades, child welfare has evolved (Paddock et al., 2013). Child welfare is no longer a service provided by a single government entity but a multifaceted system of programs and services to support children and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). Child welfare is now defined as a network of public and private services and supports to promote the well-being, permanency, and safety of children” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020, p. 7). Child welfare has evolved to focusing on preventing abuse and neglect, reunifying families, and creating permanency for children and youth (Children’s Bureau, 2022).

### **Historical Concepts of Child Welfare**

Legal protections for children are seen in U.S. history as early as the 1600s (Myers, 2008). Myers (2008) explained that during this time, children were viewed as the property of their parents. However, some early laws permitted local officials to remove

children from their families of origin given evidence that the parents were not raising the child properly. The author explained that these laws existed but were not federally enforced or standardized. Almost 200 years later, in 1875, the first U.S. organization dedicated to child protection was created, and the field of child welfare came into existence (Myers, 2008). The emergence of child protection and child welfare organizations was the result of attention to child abuse and neglect and the changing perceptions of the needs of children (Myers, 2008).

Despite the emergence of charities and organizations serving and protecting children, no federal oversight or regulations around child protection existed until the creation of the Children's Bureau in 1912 (Preibisch, 2022). Child welfare continued to grow, and by 1922, there were approximately 300 child protection organizations across America. According to Myers (2008), during the 1930s there was an increased call for governmental oversight of child welfare services. During this time, child welfare services were provided by courts, police, and charity organizations. For some rural communities, child protection and child welfare services did not exist at all.

Attention to child welfare and child protection increased significantly in 1962 with the work of Henry Kempe on child abuse (Preibisch, 2022). According to Preibisch (2022), Kempe established battered child syndrome, bringing attention to the impact of abuse and neglect on child development. Preibisch explained the Children's Bureau was responsive to Kemper's work and followed it with the first federal child abuse reporting laws. By 1967, all 50 states had implemented these laws. In 1974 the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was signed into law as the first comprehensive law governing modern child welfare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Throughout the history of child welfare, debate has continued over the types of out-of-home care most appropriate for children (Myers, 2008). Myers (2008) outlined how from the 1850s to the 1950s child welfare professionals and researchers pondered the benefits of foster care versus orphanages. Ultimately the field of child welfare pivoted to the foster care approach, and orphanages were no longer used as out of home care by around the mid-20th century (Myers, 2008). For many years, foster care was determined to be the most appropriate setting for child victims of abuse and neglect. However, starting in the 1970s, perceptions of foster care shifted, and many of those concerns persist today about the separation of children from their families (Myers, 2008).

By the early 2000s, child welfare social workers and caseworkers represented the largest number of professionals working in mental health and child and family services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Wells et al. (2014) explained how during this time their accountability for child welfare agencies increased as well as collaboration with other areas of human services (e.g., mental and behavioral health, education, judicial, etc.) to ensure the needs of children and families were met.

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System reported the number of children involved with the U.S. child welfare system increased from 2014 to 2017, with approximately 438,000 children involved with the child welfare system in the 2018 federal fiscal year (Lindell et al., 2020). In response to the crisis of children being placed in out-of-home settings, the Family First Prevention Services Act was signed into law in 2018 (Lindell et al., 2020). Lindell et al. (2020) described the Family First Prevention Services Act as the beacon for child welfare agencies and professionals, focusing on preventing children from entering foster care and keeping children in their

families and communities of origin.

Child welfare continues to have oversight by the federal Children's Bureau. Today, the Children's Bureau (2022) collaborates with state, tribal, and local child welfare agencies to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families. The work of this federal agency is now accomplished by providing federal guidance; funding for child welfare services; research and program development; training and technical assistance; and ongoing monitoring of compliance with federal, state, and local child welfare laws and regulations (Children's Bureau, 2022).

### **Child Welfare Workforce Characteristics**

The child welfare workforce has been considered the most valuable asset to agencies and organizations serving vulnerable populations (Lizano et al., 2021). Child welfare agencies historically have struggled with the recruitment and retention of caseworkers needed to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families (Lizano et al., 2021). As social work has gained traction as a profession requiring specific education, skills, and expertise, more attention has been given to understanding who makes up the child welfare workforce (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018).

### ***Historical Child Welfare Workforce Characteristics***

Social work did not emerge as a profession until the 20th century (Myers, 2008). Prior to this time, child welfare was performed by untrained volunteers and philanthropists. Around 1919, charitable organizations providing child welfare services saw the need for training of volunteers who worked in child-serving organizations (Preibisch, 2022). Around the same time training was implemented, charitable child welfare organizations began to employ full-time paid workers to care for the children

(Myers, 2008). These organizations also began to implement training programs for volunteers and paid staff. The training programs were expanded to summer institutes, eventually leading to the development of social work schools (Myers, 2008). In the early years of the profession, social work and child welfare were largely influenced by psychology. According to Myers (2008), as the field developed, the influence of other disciplines emerged, such as sociology, biology, and medicine.

Presently, child welfare is one of the larger occupational groups (Salsberg et al., 2017). Child welfare professionals serve in a variety of roles including social workers or case workers, family services specialists, child protective services workers, case managers, and case aides (Levine, 2005). The work of child welfare professionals is supported by other human services professions, including law enforcement, mental health services, medicine, juvenile justice, and public education (Wells et al., 2014).

According to Levine (2005), during the 1960s and 1970s, the demand for child welfare workers increased significantly due to the emergence of state and federal laws regarding the care of children. The author explained when the demand for child welfare workers increased, many organizations hired caseworkers without a college degree in social work or human services. Today, most child welfare caseworker positions require a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) or another human services discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology, human services, or criminal justice). The child welfare workforce has remained largely female (Levine, 2005).

### ***Current Child Welfare Workforce Characteristics***

Over 7,000 child welfare caseworkers are employed in the United States (Children's Bureau, 2021). These caseworkers work in public and private agencies

supporting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. With such a vast workforce, child welfare consists of a variety of unique caseworker characteristics (e.g., education, training, demographics, location, etc.) influencing caseworker experiences (Edwards & Wildman, 2018). The George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (2019) studied Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates to gain better insights on the demographics and experiences of the child welfare workforce postgraduate school. The researchers found 88% of MSW graduates were female, with White females representing the largest percentage.

In the comparative study, the researchers looked at self-identified Black, White, and Hispanic caseworkers to understand each population's unique experiences in relation to their counterparts entering the workforce. In the study, 90% of Black social workers were female and tended to be older than their counterparts and more likely to have enrolled in an online MSW program (George Washington University Health Workforce Institute, 2019). Black social workers more frequently work with clients in poverty: 84% compared to 62% of White social workers (George Washington University Health Workforce Institute, 2019). The researchers found Black social workers were also more likely to be working in child welfare after their MSW program and were more likely to report both job and wage dissatisfaction. The research supported the need to better understand the unique experiences of Black female social workers and effective retention strategies. Black children and families are overrepresented in the child welfare population, and representation in the workforce is the key to success for some children and families (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2022).



## **Challenges Child Welfare Caseworkers Experience**

Child welfare caseworkers serve vulnerable children and families daily. Caseworkers are expected to make decisions about family systems while upholding local, state, and federal policy and regulation (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2022). Because the work involves meeting the needs of people, the job requires caseworkers to be available to clients outside of typical business hours. Child welfare work often comes with high demands and minimal infrastructure to provide ongoing organizational and supervisory support to caseworkers, which may lead to decreased worker well-being and turnover (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Radey & Wilke, 2021). Understanding the effect of the demands of frontline child welfare casework has been a focus of research for many years.

Researchers have identified challenges leading to caseworker turnover (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2019). The most often cited challenge in child welfare casework is burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) described burnout as “a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 103). Symptoms of burnout include exhaustion, feelings of detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of professional accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Travis et al. (2015) studied burnout in child welfare caseworkers. Using a quantitative, theory-driven, longitudinal model, the study explored how prolonged exposure to stressors impacted caseworkers’ decisions to leave and which dimensions of burnout had the most impact on the likelihood of retreating from work activities. The researchers conducted the study with child welfare caseworkers and a caseworker

supervisor from a large, urban child welfare agency. Approximately 50% of participants had a degree in social work. The researchers' findings were consistent with prior research correlating emotional exhaustion with depersonalization. Travis et al. also found emotional exhaustion was correlated with withdrawal and exit over time, meaning caseworkers exposed to stressors over a period were more likely to leave their jobs. Lastly, the researchers found work withdrawal was an indication of exit-seeking behaviors in caseworkers. Younger caseworkers were found to be more likely to withdraw due, in part, to a lack of support and resources that more tenured workers might have established. Implications for the research include child welfare agencies taking a strengths-based approach to turnover and focusing efforts on what is working. Travis et al. called for future research to understand the types of organizational supports that create workforce engagement.

Eisenberger et al. (2016) described the measure of organizational support as the perception an employee has about their organization's attitude and appreciation for the employee's contributions and concern for the employee's overall well-being. Dombo and Blome (2016) studied organizational support in public child welfare agencies for secondary traumatic stress experienced by caseworkers. The purpose of the study was to investigate the responses of organizational leaders to vicarious trauma by child welfare agencies across the United States. The population for the study was child welfare agency directors from five of the 10 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regions. Dombo and Blome's study supported prior research demonstrating how vicarious trauma affects caseworkers and contributes to turnover and burnout. Their study affirmed the need for better organizational responses to vicarious trauma, as workforce turnover is a

systemic problem for many public child welfare agencies. Although their findings connected burnout to workforce turnover, the findings were limited because the study did not examine vicarious trauma by caseworkers' race/ethnicity and did not consider the impacts of racial trauma as a form of vicarious trauma (Dombo & Blome, 2016).

Understanding the impacts of trauma and other stressors on child welfare caseworkers is necessary to attract and retain highly skilled professionals in child-welfare social work (Madden et al., 2014; Potter et al., 2009). Trujillo et al. (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study of 202 MSW stipend graduates who graduated between 2006 and 2016 to understand motivations to remain in the field after graduation. The researchers found a caseworker's decision to remain on the job or satisfaction with the job was not significantly correlated to social-emotional support. However, feedback from the focus-group revealed peer support was an important factor in continuing to work for the organization or maintaining satisfaction with employment. Trujillo et al. found that for the social workers who remained in their jobs, less burnout, traumatic stress, and time pressure influenced the decision to remain on the job. The researchers also found positive organizational culture and climate, opportunities for professional development, and peer support were related to increased intent to stay and job satisfaction among social workers. They found those who remained on their jobs stated in the focus group the most influential factor to staying in their job was peer support, which provided opportunities for learning and social emotional support on the job (Trujillo et al., 2020).

### **Challenges Black Caseworkers and Social Workers Experience**

There is a long-standing history of Black women in the social work profession (Boyd, 2017). Social work was one of the few professions available for Black women in

the early 20th century (Boyd, 2017). Black women historically have been drawn to the social work profession as a means of uplifting and advancing the needs of Black families (Boyd, 2017). Some research has shown Black students continue to be recruited to social work programs at higher rates than other students (Obasi, 2022). Lewis (2018) noted the number of Black women in social work exceeds the number in most other occupations.

Despite the influences of Black women in the history of the profession, the body of research on the experiences of Black child welfare caseworkers is limited. Some researchers have focused on diversity characteristics and organizational diversity, including Black caseworkers (Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2019). Hwang and Hopkins (2015) is an example of research examining diversity characteristics and retention in child welfare. Hwang and Hopkins conducted their research with caseworkers who identify as racial and ethnic minorities in their organization. The population for their study primarily included caseworkers of color. They examined diversity characteristics including feelings and experiences of inclusion and work-related effects with caseworker turnover.

Hwang and Hopkins (2015) found diversity characteristics were related to turnover, supporting previous research. The researchers also found when organizations have intentional inclusion practices, individual workers who identify as racial or ethnic minorities feel more committed to the organization and their jobs. Their findings suggest that to address the unique experiences of caseworkers of color, organizations must implement practices responsive to the unique needs of minorities. Racially and culturally responsive practices improve feelings of inclusion and commitment, resulting in improved retention. Hwang and Hopkins's study highlighted the need for improved

diversity management in child welfare agencies. The researchers called for race- and ethnicity-specific efforts including peer support, mentoring, and representation in decision-making bodies to improve retention of caseworkers of color.

Some researchers have found Black female social workers report incidents of racism leading to their departure from a position or agency (Obasi, 2022). Obasi (2022) studied the experiences of Black female social workers in Northern England using the Africanist Sista-hood framework. The researcher used snowball sampling to ensure access to underrepresented populations in research. The purpose of the study was to understand Black female social workers' experiences with identity, race, and racism and how those experiences lead to feelings of being visible, overly visible, or invisible to others in the organization while on their jobs. Obasi found Black social workers experienced feelings of isolation in child welfare agencies with few other Black workers. The researcher also found Black social workers who experienced racism or microaggressions attributed these experiences to their decision to leave their jobs. The researcher found issues of intersectionality throughout the research highlighting the increased challenges for Black employees who are also female. Obasi called for further exploration of the experiences of Black social workers to support the implementation of Black perspectives and lived experiences in social work education and practice.

The unique experiences and perspectives of Black social workers have been an area of research not only in the United States but also in Europe (Obasi, 2022). Channer and Doel (2009) examined the experiences of Black female social workers in the United Kingdom who enrolled in the Post Quality Child Award training program. The goal of the training program was to improve child-welfare service provision by new child-

welfare social workers. The purpose of their study was to understand the experience of Black social workers in the Post Quality Child Award program, including experiences of recruitment and selection, agency supports, factors influencing course completion, and the specific experience of being a Black participant in the program. Channer and Doel found personal determination and desire for promotion were the main influences for program completion, which aided in better job-skills development and job satisfaction. Several themes emerged from their research, including a perceived lack of agency support; a lack of sufficient training curriculum to teach workers how to support Black families; and a general feeling of isolation among Black female child-welfare social workers who work in White spaces. A lack of understanding of the needs of Black child-welfare social workers and differences in training experiences and completion demonstrated a need for further research.

The lack of racially and culturally responsive organizational support and retention strategies have affected social workers and their experiences and motivations in their jobs (Channer & Deol, 2009; Obasi, 2022). Feelings of isolation affecting job satisfaction and tenure has been demonstrated by Black professionals in other helping professions (Harris & Davis, 2018; Lipscomb & Tejada, 2021; Shillingford et al., 2022). The field of nursing has similar workforce demographics as child welfare, with 89.4% of the workforce being female and 27.5% being ethnic minority, meaning Black, Hispanic, or Asian (Doede, 2017). Also, like child welfare, Black nurses leave their jobs at higher rates than their White counterparts. Doede (2017) examined this phenomenon and hypothesized race was a predictor of job satisfaction. Through secondary data analysis of the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, Doede found Black nurses had higher rates of job

dissatisfaction and intent to leave. The researcher also found wages and benefits were predictors of turnover in Black nurses. Although her findings identified predictors of turnover among Black nurses, the study did not determine causality but provided implications for retention strategies (Doede, 2017).

Understanding retention and effective organizational and role-specific strategies to improve retention amongst Black caseworkers is vital to the child welfare workforce (Channer & Doel, 2009; Doede, 2017; Obasi, 2022). Prior researchers called for improved workplace harassment policies, policies to address discriminatory requests from clients, and task forces to include Black employees in company decision- and policy-making procedures to increase job satisfaction and retention (Doede, 2017). However, the retention of Black social workers also may be impacted by their experiences serving the disproportionate number of Black families in the child welfare system (Montgomery, 2022).

Montgomery (2022) examined the experiences of Black child welfare social workers placing and matching Black children to permanency resources. The purpose of her study was to understand how anti-Blackness shapes the way Black children are served in the child welfare system. The participants included child welfare professionals from across the United States who self-identified as Black. All participants had served in a child welfare related role in the previous 10 years. Several themes emerged from her research, including the experiences of anti-Black organizational culture in child welfare agencies. This anti-Black culture is reflected in how services are provided to Black children and families as well as in the recruitment and retention of Black child welfare professionals. Montgomery's study participants identified a need for the implementation

of practices to hire and retain skilled, Black child-welfare social workers. Montgomery also found study participants identified a need for professional development opportunities on Black cultural beliefs for all workers to promote inclusivity in the workforce.

### **Child Welfare Workforce Turnover**

Turnover in child welfare has been studied extensively (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Bosk et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2017; Potter et al., 2009; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010; Wilke et al., 2019). The field of child welfare has recognized the ongoing issues of caseworker recruitment and retention over decades. To adequately address turnover in the child welfare workforce, researchers have studied strategies to understand employee motivations to leave or stay on the job (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2019). Much of the existing research has supported child welfare organizations with understanding the types of support the workforce finds most helpful in navigating the complexities of the caseworker role (Johnco et al., 2014; Radey et al., 2017; Searle & Patent, 2013; Strand et al., 2010).

Griffiths et al. (2017) studied turnover in the child welfare workforce by comparing job satisfaction of caseworkers who were leaving, staying, or undecided about their job. The study involved caseworkers self-reporting their intentions to leave or remain in their jobs but did not include caseworkers who already left their positions. The researchers found turnover rates as high as 30%–40% in the study; caseworkers of color were less likely to remain in the positions. Black social workers were more likely to serve in urban areas with increased opportunities for lateral movement, which could influence the intent to stay. The researchers called for additional research to improve retention strategies through understanding what influences Black professionals to consider leaving



the field of child welfare in greater proportions than their White counterparts to improve retention strategies (Griffiths et al., 2017).

Many child welfare caseworkers obtain either a BSW or an MSW before entering the workforce (Salsberg et al., 2017). Understanding the early professional experiences of these caseworkers has been a focus of research (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020; Griffiths & Royse, 2017; Trawver et al., 2021). Boraggina-Ballard et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-method study of child welfare workers' motivations to leave or stay in their jobs in the 1st year of employment after completing an MSW program. The theoretical frameworks for the study were the self-determination theory and the transfer of learning theory, which speak to personal characteristics and application of training concepts influencing a caseworker's job satisfaction and perceived effectiveness in their role. The researchers found caseworkers who chose to stay in their jobs 1 year after graduate school were motivated to do so by their connections with the children and families they serve, opportunities to learn and develop, and the ongoing training offered by their agency. Caseworkers with an intent to leave 1 year after graduate school attributed their decision to mandatory overtime, lack of support from leadership, and the stress of the work. The Boraggina-Ballard et al. study revealed many caseworkers experienced discrepancies between training or internships with the true expectations and demands of child welfare casework. Participants in the study also cited lack of mentorship, role ambiguity, and insufficient training as influences on their perceptions of the job (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021).

Identifying factors contributing to turnover has been influential in understanding the needs of the child welfare workforce. Another important consideration for

understanding and reducing turnover is identifying when caseworkers are most likely to leave their positions. New caseworkers without prior child welfare experiences are particularly vulnerable to turnover in the 1st year (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Searle & Patent, 2011; Trawver et al., 2021). Wilke et al. (2019) studied the timing of departure in caseworkers (particularly early departure). The research focused on the differences between caseworkers who leave their jobs early (i.e., the first 6 months of employment) and those who stay and what factors influenced early departure. The framework for the study was based in organizational psychology, proposing that onboarding new staff is a developmental process where new staff become familiar with their role and engaged in the organizational structure and culture. The quantitative, longitudinal study used four measures: worker characteristics, organizational influences, experiences in the work setting, and transition to independent casework. Wilke et al. found organizational influences of transition from training to casework, initial caseload, role ambiguity, and inconsistencies in training versus agency practice had a greater impact on early departure than personal influences. A limitation of the study was that the researchers did not examine caseworker demographics or experience working with diverse populations. Stress and burnout were also not measured as factors impacting caseworkers' decisions to leave. Implications for agencies from the study include focusing on orientation and socialization experiences for new hires to promote retention (Wilke et al., 2019).

### **Child Welfare Workforce Retention**

Understanding why child welfare caseworkers leave their jobs has been instrumental in the development of strategies to support retention of caseworkers (Dombo & Blome, 2016; Travis et al., 2015). Prior research focused primarily on turnover;

however, around 2000, the early support from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau in addressing workforce recruitment and retention shifted the focus of research from turnover to retention (Renner et al., 2009).

Efforts for retention have been supported by federal initiatives to improve child welfare outcomes nationwide (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). The Children's Bureau awards funding to states and territories for a variety of programs to address ongoing issues in child welfare (Romero & Lassmann, 2017). The issue of workforce recruitment and retention has been a focus for the Children's Bureau work for many years (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018; National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2022). Retention of highly skilled, trained child welfare caseworkers is necessary to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children and families receiving services from the child welfare agency (Children's Bureau, 2020). Personal factors influencing retention include self-efficacy, gender, relevant professional experience, job satisfaction, job commitment, education, and preparation (Madden et al., 2014). Organizational factors influencing retention include caseworker workload, peer support and supervision, training, professional development, and commitment to the organization (Madden et al., 2014).

The Children's Bureau awarded eight regional grants to address workforce recruitment and retention in 2003 (Potter et al., 2009). This work was expanded to include more states in 2008. One of the grants funded the Western Regional Recruitment and Retention Project to examine workforce needs across five sites spanning three western states. The program sought to implement an organizational assessment, agency-

based mentoring, and strategic workforce planning to address the workforce needs (Potter et al., 2009). The implementation of the project revealed although 80% of the workforce felt their education adequately prepared them for the workforce, identified needs were greater standardization of role expectations and responsibilities, on-the-job training, and diversity across all levels (Potter et al., 2009).

Understanding caseworker retention goes beyond the efforts of the Children's Bureau. It also involves the examination of strategies implemented by public and private child welfare agencies. Renner et al. (2009) studied a workforce retention strategy in Missouri focused on supervisory support and engagement. The program included training supervisors as mentors and implementing peer support for supervisors. The researchers hypothesized that the implementation of supervisory strategic plans would improve retention. The hypothesis was partially upheld, as supervisors were retained at a higher rate than predicted. However, the minimal increase was followed by a sharp decrease in frontline caseworkers over the 4-year period. Although mitigating factors might have influenced the decrease in worker retention (including the privatization of child welfare services), Renner et al. called for future research to collect qualitative data to explore more in depth how the worker-supervisor mentoring relationship influences retention.

Radey and Wilke (2021) examined caseworker retention in the first 18 months of hire. The researchers used the job-demands resource model as the theoretical framework. The premise of the job-demands resource model is that job demands, organizational resources, and personal resources impact well-being and thus impact retention. The longitudinal, quantitative study examined entry-level child welfare caseworkers. The researchers organized caseworker responses into five categories of work experiences:

“floundering, surviving through supervisor, surviving through role, surviving through supports, and thriving” (p. 57). Radey and Wilke found that across the five categories, caseworkers had a variety of job demands and resource combinations, meaning their experiences in their roles were not identified in a binary (good vs. bad) fashion. The researchers found job demands and job resources were independent factors related to caseworker retention. Caseworkers’ demand and resource profiles at 6 months of employment were reflective of retention at 18 months. This finding could indicate strategies for retention must be the focus of the first 6 months of employment. Lastly, the study revealed that individual aspects of the role and adequate support from peers and the organization may improve retention without additional organizational strategies to address workload and work environment (Radey & Wilke, 2021).

### **Preferred Practices for Retention in Child Welfare**

Commitment to the field of child welfare and adequate workplace support may increase caseworker retention by 46% (Johnco et al., 2018). Johnco et al. (2018) sought to find the contributing factors influencing retention, turnover, and perspectives of workplace problems. The purpose of their research was to gain the perspectives of child welfare caseworkers and supervisors who left their jobs. Their participants included caseworkers and casework supervisors from private child welfare agencies across the United States. All participants provided direct casework service to children and families. The researchers used structured interviews to obtain information on factors contributing to caseworkers staying or leaving their work in child welfare. The reasons caseworkers and supervisors identified for staying were different from the reasons identified for leaving. Retention is not about the removal of factors contributing to turnover but rather

the development of strategies influencing the motivations and intent to remain in the job. Factors influencing retention in Johnco et al.'s study included supportive environments (providing and receiving support) and opportunities in the organization (experience and knowledge development). Johnco et al. identified the following strategies for retention: (a) caseload reduction, (b) administrative support and assistance, (c) increased salaries and benefits, (d) financial and promotional incentives, (e) additional training, and (f) improved hiring practices.

### ***Peer Support and Mentoring***

The positive impact of mentoring and coaching on the experiences of new employees has been demonstrated in research across many professions (Trawver et al. 2021). Although terms are often used interchangeably, subtle differences exist in the programmatic goals and types of support seen in each program (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018). Whereas coaching is a structured learning process focused on the transfer of knowledge and skills, mentoring is reciprocal learning with shared accountability (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018; Trawver et al. 2021).

Addressing child welfare workforce recruitment and retention should not solely happen within child welfare organizations. Prior efforts to improve recruitment and retention were supported by efforts of the federal government (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020; Romero & Lassmann, 2017). In 2003, the U.S. General Accounting Office conducted a study of 27 states to examine child welfare workforce recruitment and retention efforts (Romero & Lassmann, 2017). The General Accounting Office identified mentoring as a promising practice to improve retention, combined with comprehensive training programs for caseworkers and financial incentives to attract top talent. Romero

and Lassmann (2017) conducted a study to explore some of the findings of the General Accounting Office study. The purpose of their research was to evaluate the benefits of mentoring programs within child welfare agencies. Using the systematic review methodology, the researchers included child welfare caseworkers working in public or private child welfare agencies as well as mentors and mentees engaged in organizational mentoring programs. The researchers also required any study included in their review to have an outcome measure of benefits of mentoring programs.

Romero and Lassmann (2017) then evaluated how child welfare caseworkers benefited from formal versus informal mentoring programs as a retention strategy. They found informal mentoring increased personal satisfaction, growth, and skills development for both mentees and mentors. Romero and Lassmann found formal mentoring programs yielded a 2% higher retention rate 7 years poststudy compared to the rate of caseworkers who were not provided with formal mentoring programs. Their findings supported prior research in child welfare and other professions identifying mentoring as an effective retention strategy (Romero & Lassmann, 2017).

The implementation of mentoring programs has been a strategy to address child welfare workforce issues for many years (Harris & Davis, 2018; Shillingford et al., 2022; Wilke et al., 2019). Alaska's Office of Children's Services implemented a 6-month new-worker mentoring program adapted from the child welfare skills-based coaching model (Trawver et al., 2021). Trawver et al. (2021) studied the program implementation and early outcomes of the program. The purpose of their study was to obtain the perspectives of key program contributors on the impact of the mentoring program. Their participants included stakeholders who helped develop the program, Office of Children's Services

senior leadership, caseworker supervisors, and mentors working in the program for more than 6 months. The researchers used a qualitative, multimethod, case-study approach.

Trawver et al. (2021) found developing the role of mentor as a separate, paid position, staff and supervisors were not overburdened by the responsibility of mentorship. New employees in the program largely reported a positive impact, though most also felt the program should extend beyond the first 6 months of employment. Trawver et al. called for future research to explore the impact of mentoring programs on existing or tenured employees as well as mentorship in rural or remote organizations.

Mentoring programs have been used in many professions as a strategy to improve diversity and inclusion and to support professionals of color in their workplaces (Harris & Davis, 2018; Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020; Lipscomb & Tejada, 2021). As the need for organizational diversity and inclusion efforts has increased, some researchers have demonstrated how mentoring improves work experiences for people of color by providing mutual opportunities to explore culture, identity, and intersectionality in the workplace (Francois & Davis, 2021; Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lipscomb & Ashley, 2020). Shillingford et al. (2022) studied professional support for counselor educators of color using the theoretical framework of critical race theory. The researchers found culturally responsive mentoring (i.e., mentoring by culturally relatable, tenured faculty) and purposeful engagement improved the experiences of counselor educators of color. Shillingford et al. called for future research to include the exploration of advocate-mentor programs, identity-driven mentoring, and a mentor–mentee selection process in which mentees select who they find most relatable. Additionally, van Zyl (2022) studied the use of mentorship programs to support Black workers. The research examined culturally



responsive mentoring and how these programs support career development in Black social workers. The researcher found shared identity supports the establishment of positive mentoring relationships. The researcher's finding also emphasized that same-ethnicity mentorship creates a sense of belonging and opportunities for effective empathy about issues of racism in the organization.

Similar to some research findings about Black child-welfare caseworker turnover, Black math teachers have shown a higher turnover rate than any other racial group (Harris & Davis, 2018). Harris and Davis (2018) studied experiences of Black male math teachers in a mid-Atlantic U.S. school district. The school district in their study created the Male Teachers of Color network as a strategy to support Black male teachers and improve retention. The researchers found although not all participants remained in their positions, participants in Male Teachers of Color felt less isolated and were more comfortable asking about and receiving guidance on the culture of the school district. Effective retention systems included academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, feelings of belonging, and an inclusive organizational culture. Harris and Davis called for future research to include the implementation of programs like Male Teachers of Color to enhance onboarding and retention infrastructure.

Peer support is a critical component of agency support for child welfare caseworkers (Peple & Davies, 2019). Sedivy et al. (2019) studied different types of organizational support on retention with a focus on peer support. The purpose of their study was to understand how two types of peer support were associated with caseworker retention. Their study participants were child-welfare caseworkers providing direct services to children and families in one county and two statewide agencies. The

researchers found peer support influenced caseworkers' decisions to stay. Sedivy et al. provided suggestions for agency implementation of peer support, including ensuring access to group and individual support, formal and informal support, and monetary incentives for those workers who serve as mentors. Though the researchers provided evidence of the need for peer support, they called for future research on the specific types and aspects of peer support.

Pepple and Davies (2019) studied peer support in caseworkers in Nigeria. The purpose of their study was to understand how caseworkers' racial self-identification and peer support between coworkers impacted feelings of belonging and organizational commitment. Their study participants were caseworkers from public and private agencies across Nigeria. The researchers found that Indigenous employees whose ethnic and cultural identities reflected the ethnic and cultural identities of their organization (e.g., leadership, organizational culture, etc.) reported better feelings of psychological safety. Such psychological safety afforded improved relationships with coworkers, thus highlighting the need for peer support. Pepple and Davies called for further qualitative research in this area to gain an understanding of the unique needs of Indigenous caseworkers or caseworkers from marginalized groups.

Caseworkers from marginalized and underrepresented populations have described unique experiences in the workplace, requiring responsiveness from organizations to meet those needs (Albrecht & Keen, 2009; Francois & Davis, 2021; Harris & Davis, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2019). Providing specialized support to people of color in the workplace contributes to an improved sense of belonging in the organization (Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2019). Some researchers have found Black social

workers are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their jobs and compensation, which speaks to the need to better understand how to create work environments and organizational support to meet the professional and cultural needs of Black social workers (Griffiths et al., 2017; Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2019). For example, Lipscomb and Tejada (2021) studied Black male social workers in nonprofit organizations and efforts to recruit, mentor, and retain these workers. Their findings indicated nonprofits are not considering the unique needs of Black male social workers in their hiring, training, and ongoing support practices (Lipscomb & Tejada, 2021). The researchers identified a need for representation, modeling, and a trusting relationship to make the work environment more attractive to Black male social workers (Lipscomb & Tejada, 2021).

As diversity and inclusion efforts emerge in child welfare agencies, the need to elevate the experiences of Black caseworkers continues. Despite ongoing efforts across the United States to improve child welfare outcomes and workforce stability, little research exists on strategies for retaining Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The literature has shown themes and preferred practices of peer support, mentorship, preservice training, and financial incentives to address retention in the child welfare workforce (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020; Harris & Davis, 2018; Obasi, 2022; Romero & Lassmann, 2016; Searle & Patent, 2011). However, few researchers have explored how Black female child-welfare social workers perceive and engage with the preferred practices. The needs and experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers may be different from other caseworkers who engage in these preferred practices and therefore require further exploration (Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2019). By

focusing the present research on the solutions rather than further investigation of the problem (i.e., turnover), findings may have implications for future efforts to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers.

### ***Financial Incentives***

Social work, like many other public service fields, is known for low wages (Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016; Griffiths & Royse, 2017; Johnco et al. 2014). Some researchers have found social workers have a median monthly wage 31% lower than other helping professions like nursing and approximately 20% lower than other professions (Lewis, 2018). Low wages are associated with turnover in the child welfare workforce (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Salsberg et al. (2020) surveyed MSW graduates and found almost 40% reported inadequate compensation; Black social workers reported higher rates of dissatisfaction with compensation. Dai et al. (2020) studied wage inequality across professions in Hong Kong and found starting salaries and wage inequality between caseworkers and those in leadership roles largely influenced the likelihood of caseworker turnover. However, Hu and Hirsh (2017) found caseworkers with higher salaries had improved job commitment and performance. In response to the challenges associated with low wages in child welfare, financial incentives have been the focus of some retention strategies across the United States (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020; Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016; Strand et al., 2010).

Student loan forgiveness programs funded by the U.S. government date back to the 1960s (Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016). Student loan forgiveness programs are financial incentive programs created by the government in response to empirical evidence connecting student loans to job decisions (Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016). Edwards-

Johnson et al. (2018) found Black students were less likely to have the support of generational wealth and therefore carried disproportionately higher student debt when entering the workforce. Black social workers have higher rates of educational debt, with an average of \$92,000 in loans compared to \$57,000 for their White counterparts (Salsberg et al., 2020). Salsberg et al. (2020) reported Black social workers were more likely to have access to employer financial incentives to support these education costs. The financial incentive programs have been used as a strategy for reducing turnover in child welfare, yet Black social workers have continued to leave their positions at higher rates (Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016).

Fakunmoju and Kersting (2016) studied student loan forgiveness in child welfare. The purpose of their study was to determine whether providing student loan forgiveness to child welfare caseworkers could be implemented as an effective strategy for caseworker retention in the state. Their study participants included social workers and caseworkers who were members of the National Association of Social Workers, Massachusetts Chapter. Their study involved survey data collection on variables such as caseworker demographics, caseworker student loan amount, likelihood of participating in a student loan forgiveness program, caseworker perceptions on loan forgiveness as an effective retention strategy, and individual caseworker turnover intentions. The researchers found student loan forgiveness was often used as a recruitment and retention strategy in child welfare agencies. Fakunmoju and Kersting found loan forgiveness was a successful strategy for recruitment and retention of those employees who benefit from loan forgiveness programs. Social workers with higher intent to leave, when given the option of loan forgiveness, chose not to move forward with the decision to leave their

jobs. Social workers in the study were receptive to student loan forgiveness and identified these programs as a reason to remain employed (Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016).

Stipend programs are another financial incentive used as a strategy for recruitment and retention in the child welfare workforce (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020). Most stipend programs for the child welfare workforce are supported by the U.S. government in partnership with colleges and universities (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020). The Children's Bureau (a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families) funded stipends to improve recruitment and retention in the child welfare workforce (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020). These programs were targeted to child welfare agency employees looking to continue their education.

G. R. Anderson et al. (2020) studied federally funded stipend programs that provided apprenticeships, scholarships, and stipends to the child welfare workforce. The purpose of their study was to understand and evaluate the impact of education and training provided by stipend programs from 2013–2018. Study participants included social work students across 13 university stipend programs. The researchers used the Stipend Student Inventory to understand the effectiveness of such programs, finding 70% of students assessed their intention to remain in the field for 4 years or more at the end of the stipend program. The researchers found a steady decrease in intent to stay over time. Two years after completion of a stipend-based program, over 52% planned to remain in their jobs for 4 years or more. The G. R. Anderson et al. (2020) study highlighted the initial effectiveness of financial incentives. Their study also reflected the vulnerability of child welfare workers in the 1st year of employment. Their findings supported the need for preservice training and support to improve retention.

### *Preservice Training*

Understanding the needs of caseworkers has been a focus of child welfare research (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Bosk et al., 2020; Radey & Wilke, 2021). Much of the research has focused on recruitment and retention of the child welfare workforce with a focus on training and preparation for the work (Radey et al., 2017; Searle & Patent, 2011). Searle and Patent (2011) studied in-service training for new caseworkers. The training included 2 years of developmental programming to support career progression. Their study focused on new caseworkers in child protective services at public child welfare agencies (not controlling for any other demographic factors). Caseworkers in the program were responsible for their own engagement in training. Supervisory support and organizational culture were not examined as a part of the study.

Searle and Patent's (2011) findings supported previous research implications on the impact of turnover. Their findings included the removal of expertise from the workforce, financial consequences for employers, and the domino effect—when workers see others leave, they are more inclined to consider leaving. In addition to the benefits of training on caseworkers' feelings of job competency leading to improved retention, Searle and Patent found the inherent peer support from the cohort members improved caseworker well-being and job satisfaction. These factors were correlated to retention. Retention in the critical roles like child protective services enhanced the agency skill base. Searle and Patent did not measure the long-term impacts of the program but called for future research to understand how caseworker retention from this program improves service quality for children and families.

Caseworker retention has been affected by the early on-the-job experiences of

caseworkers (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2017). These early experiences include preservice and in-service training (Madden et al., 2014) and the availability of organizational support (Radey et al., 2017). The importance of experiential learning, organizational and peer support in child welfare has been frequently demonstrated in research (Radey et al., 2017; Street et al., 2022; Wilke et al., 2019). Understanding the types of support and timeframe for support continues to be an area of developing research.

For example, Radey et al. (2017) examined support for new caseworkers in child welfare with a focus on how to maximize available support considering organizational culture and supports. The purpose of their study was to understand how new caseworkers in child welfare perceived and used available organizational support as they learned their jobs. Their study participants were frontline child welfare caseworkers across six Department of Children and Families regions in Florida. The researchers used purposive sampling to ensure that one child protective services caseworker and one permanency caseworker were included for every region.

Nearly all participants in the Radey et al. (2017) study indicated support, learning, and succeeding at their job were important. Although support might be available, caseworkers often experienced challenges accessing support in a timely manner. The researchers did not find any variation in the ability to access support between new hires with prior child welfare experience and new hires without experience. Also, experienced child welfare caseworkers were not better able than new hires to navigate and use the supports provided by the agency. Their finding demonstrated the need for long-term supports for both new and tenured caseworkers. Caseworkers who perceived agency and



supervisor support to be adequate attributed that support to luck and not a standardized practice by the agency. Increased opportunities for formal and informal knowledge sharing from supervisors or tenured caseworkers were an unmet need for most new hires. Radey et al. called for future research on caseworkers' early frustrations with support that leads to turnover and how caseworkers and renegotiate organizational support throughout their time in the role. Their research supported prior research on the importance of peer support in decreasing turnover in child welfare agencies (Griffiths & Royse, 2016; Sedivy et al., 2019).

### **Literature Review Summary**

Researchers have identified various retention strategies and recommendations to address turnover in the child welfare workforce (G. R. Anderson et al., 2020; Potter et al., 2009; Radey et al., 2017; Renner et al., 2009). Caseworker characteristics and experiences impact the intent to stay and the effectiveness of retention strategies (Griffiths & Royse, 2016; Griffiths et al., 2017; Madden et al., 2014). Child welfare agencies have used a variety of techniques, programs, and strategies to promote retention of child welfare caseworkers (Potter et al., 2009; Radey et al., 2017; Romero & Lassmann, 2016; Trawver et al., 2021). Promising practices identified in research include peer support and mentoring, expanded preservice training, and financial incentives (de Guzman et al., 2020; Fakunmoju & Kersting, 2016; Romero & Lassmann, 2016).

According to researchers, further exploration is needed to understand the experiences of Black child-welfare caseworkers who want to stay in their jobs (Das et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2017). The current body of research has not included an in-depth exploration of retention strategies aimed at retaining Black female child-welfare

caseworkers. Some researchers have studied the experiences of Black child-welfare caseworkers (Francois & Davis, 2021; Lawrence et al., 2019; Obasi, 2022; Perry & Limb, 2004). However, intent to stay among Black child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retaining this population are still being explored by researchers and child welfare agencies. Including the lived experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding effective retention strategies may assist in expanding existing research into more inclusive and racially and culturally responsive retention programs. Further research also may support the development of retention strategies to decrease turnover of Black female child-welfare caseworkers.

### **Research Questions**

Recent preferred practices aimed at retention of child welfare caseworkers have included the implementation of quality supervision (de Guzman et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2014; Renner et al., 2009), extended preservice and on-the-job training (Blakeslee et al., 2014; de Guzman et al., 2020; Potter et al., 2009), peer support and mentoring programs (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Trawver et al., 2021), compensation incentives including tuition reimbursement (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010), organizational support and recognition focused on wellness and inclusivity (Hwang & Hopkins, 2015; Wilke et al., 2019), and ongoing professional development/advancement opportunities (Boraggina-Ballard et al., 2021; Griffiths & Royse, 2016). The research questions addressed perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers on some of the preferred practices for retention. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?

2. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?
3. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?
4. What are the major concerns of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding their retention in the workforce?
5. What are the major recommendations of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding retention initiatives that would specifically address their needs?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retention. The researcher employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore the perspectives and practices of Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The following sections include a description of the qualitative phenomenological research methodology, descriptions of the study population and potential participants, sampling procedures, the data collection tool, procedures, data analysis, ethical considerations, bias, and limitations of the study.

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Research**

Creswell and Guetterman (2018) noted qualitative research involves people or sites to aid the researcher in understanding the study phenomenon. The qualitative phenomenological research design was selected because the intention of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers. A phenomenological study design was chosen to allow for the most comprehensive exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the study participants.

### ***Qualitative Methodology***

Creswell and Guetterman (2018) discussed the components of qualitative research. Qualitative research is unique in its focus on the research process as well as the research outcomes. This type of research takes place in a natural setting and uses multiple data sources. The research design often develops during the research process. The qualitative researcher uses inductive reasoning to make broad generalizations from specific observations. Qualitative research is used to uncover an intricate picture of a

certain phenomenon through interactions with a small number of participants. Study participants are purposely selected based on their ability to provide the best information to understand the problem or phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

Qualitative research is exploratory, interpretative research. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) described the researcher as the key instrument in the research. In qualitative research, the researcher interacts within the study and is part of the research process along with the participants. The researcher gathers data from multiple sources and organizes the data into categories to find patterns and themes. The focus of the researcher in phenomenology is to extract meaning from the participants' lived experience and interpret the meaning in the context of the research. The researcher must recognize how their biases, experiences, personal background, culture, and location may influence the interpretative nature of the research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018) described data collection, analysis, and interpretation in qualitative research. Qualitative research involves multiple data sources, such as observations, interviews, documents and audio or visual materials. The researcher must validate the accuracy of the data and organize the information from various data sources. The data are organized or coded (manually or with computer software) into themes and descriptions. The researcher interprets the themes and descriptions to determine meaning. The findings may support or challenge past research or information. The findings also may generate new questions or calls to action. Qualitative research findings are flexible and may be interpreted into personal, research-based or action meanings (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018) detailed the qualities of a credible qualitative study. A

credible qualitative study interprets the experiences of study participants, so the events are easily recognizable to the people who share that experience. A credible study uses data-gathering techniques considering validity, reliability, and triangulation in the pursuit of high-quality data. A credible qualitative study also considers the commitment, skills, and training of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, credible qualitative researchers conduct the study in natural settings, using inductive analysis and purposeful sampling (Patton, 1999, 2014).

### ***Phenomenological Approach***

In the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, a researcher seeks to understand lived experiences about a certain concept or phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). In the study of lived experiences, the phenomenological approach examines a small number of participants to identify themes and patterns to develop meanings in experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Because the phenomenological approach is used to portray the experiences of a particular group of people, this method of inquiry does not require a large sample of participants to understand the identified phenomenon (Grossoehme, 2014).

Neubauer et al. (2019) described how phenomenological research primarily answers the “what” and “how” of human experience. The researcher uses a variety of data collection methods, including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings, and analysis of personal texts, to gather information about individual experience. Because of the vast variety of data collection methods, a large amount of qualitative data may be generated to organize and identify themes (Lester et al., 2020). The role of the researcher is to examine the data and organize the

information into central themes of the research. Following the data analysis, this phenomenological study concludes with a descriptive section where identified themes are transformed into statements describing the essence of the experience (Grossoehme, 2014).

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were Black female child-welfare caseworkers who currently serve as direct service caseworkers for children and families across the child welfare continuum (prevention/family preservation, child protective services, foster care, adoption, or postpermanency). Participants were selected from the National Organization for Human Services (n.d.-b) membership database. The National Organization for Human Services is a national “nonprofit organization representing human service practitioners, educators, students, and future human service professionals” (National Organization for Human Services, n.d.-a, para. 1).

The initial plan was to have 10 participants for this study, and this number was flexible and dependent upon saturation. Guest et al. (2020) described saturation as the point in data collection when additional data collection (e.g., interviews) ceases to yield new information to answer the research question. The number of participants for this study was determined when the saturation point is reached. The final sample was 10.

### **Data Collection Tool**

#### ***Researcher's Role***

Creswell and Guetterman (2018) explained how in qualitative research, the researcher is the data collection instrument. The researcher interacts with participants over time to analyze and understand the phenomenon of interest. Creswell and

Guetterman further explained qualitative research is interpretive and requires the researcher to explore and understand all biases potentially affecting the interpretation of the information presented in the study. For this study, the researcher explored the individual and common experiences of Black child-welfare caseworkers with preferred practices for retention. The researcher collected data through interviews and provided an in-depth analysis of the participants' views of the phenomenon of interest. Data collection included the selection of participants for the study and the collection of information from participants by interview, as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2018).

### ***Interview Protocol***

The data collection tool was an interview protocol, consisting of open-ended questions to explore the perspectives and practices of Black female child-welfare caseworkers. A thorough literature search of professional and government research, websites, federally funded program databases, and professional databases did not produce an appropriate data collection instrument for this study. Therefore, a tool was created (see Appendix A). The criteria identified from the literature review include the definition of retention; characteristics of Black female child-welfare caseworkers; challenges these caseworkers experience influencing their intent to stay in their jobs, and the preferred practices for retention for Black female child-welfare caseworkers. These elements were used to create the study research questions and aligned interview questions.

Barroga and Matanguihan (2022) noted qualitative research include a central research question or questions. The central questions are used to examine the factors contributing to or impacting the central phenomenon. The goal of the central research



questions in qualitative research is to elevate the varied perspectives of research participants. Barroga and Matanguihan also noted that qualitative research questions are reviewed and revised throughout the course of the study as information regarding the central phenomenon is uncovered. They explained that the central research questions and corresponding participant interview questions are developed from a comprehensive review of the literature and a thorough understanding of the research problem.

For this study, the research questions and corresponding interview questions were developed through a comprehensive review of the literature and the implications from prior studies for future research (see Tables 1-4). Tables 1–4 present the research questions, corresponding interview questions, and rationale from the literature are presented. Table 1 presents information for Research Question 1, Table 2 presents information for Research Question 2, Table 3 presents information for Research Question 3, and Table 4 presents information for Research Questions 4 and 5.

As shown in Appendix A, the first five questions of the protocol ensured the participant met the criteria for the study. Interview Questions 6–9 were introductory questions that could contribute to answering any of the research questions, such as Interview Question 7: “What is your understanding of the challenges facing the child welfare workforce that impact retention?” This interview tool captured qualitative information from Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The interview tool was used in the interviews with all study participants. The purpose of the tool was to explore the perspectives, challenges, and experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers.

An advisory committee (see Appendix B) was composed of three Black female child welfare professionals. All committee members had experience as frontline child

welfare caseworkers or social workers in a public or private child welfare organization.

Members of the advisory committee reviewed and validated this interview protocol.

**Table 1**

*Research Question 1, Corresponding Interview Questions, and Rationale*

Research question	Corresponding interview questions	Rationale
Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?	<p>10. What are your perceptions of mentorship programs for child welfare caseworkers?</p> <p>11. What aspects of a mentorship program would be most important to support the specific needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers?</p> <p>12. How would a mentorship program improve your experience as a caseworker?</p>	<p>Trawver et al. (2021) studied a state’s implementation of a new worker mentoring program. They called for future research to address employee perceptions of the design and implementation of a statewide employee mentoring initiative to maximize desired program outcomes and improve employee support and engagement.</p> <p>Benton et al. (2017) called for future research to explore the role of peers in the enhancement of child welfare practice.</p> <p>Sedivy et al. (2020) studied the impact of different types of organizational support on retention with a focus on peer support. Their findings called for future research on the specific types and aspects of peer support that promote retention.</p>

*Note.* Sources: “Somebody’s Gotta Be There for These Kids”: The Importance of Service Orientation for Sustaining Public Child Welfare Workers, by A. D. Benton, D. Chenot, and I. P. Boutakidis, 2017, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 11(3), 339–359; “Expanding our Understanding of the Role of Peer Support in Child Welfare Workforce Retention,” by J. A. Sedivy, S. Rienks, R. Leake, and A. S. He, 2019, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(1), 80–100; “Learning From the Field: Development of a Statewide Public Child Welfare Workforce Mentoring Program,” by K. Trawver, H. Brocious, T. Silva-Johnson, T. Donahue, and D. Milliron, 2021, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(4), 365–374.

**Table 2***Research Question 2, Corresponding Interview Questions, and Rationale*

Research question	Corresponding interview questions	Rationale
Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?	13. What are your perceptions of child welfare preservice training?	Benton et al. (2017) studied the expansion of child welfare caseworker service orientation and the impact on the experiences and intentions of caseworkers. They called for future research to replicate the findings on service orientation as a predictor of intention to stay.  Wilke et al. (2019) called for future research to focus on orientation and early experiences for new hires in child welfare to promote retention.
	14. What aspects of preservice training do you think are effective at improving retention?	
	15. How would further preservice training improve retention?	
	16. What aspects of preservice training are most important for Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	

*Note.* Sources: “Somebody’s Gotta Be There for These Kids”: The Importance of Service Orientation for Sustaining Public Child Welfare Workers, by A. D. Benton, D. Chenot, and I. P. Boutakidis, 2017, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 11(3), 339–359; “Predictors of Early Departure Among Recently Hired Child Welfare Workers,” by D. J. Wilke, S. Rakes, and K. A. Randolph, 2019, *Social Work*, 64(3), 188–197.

The study participants were purposefully selected by race (self-identified), gender, and confirmation of position as a child welfare caseworker. They were invited to participate in the study via e-mail. The statement of general informed consent was included. Audio-recorded interviews of participants were conducted by the researcher via a Zoom platform or other videoconferencing platform accessible to the participant.

**Table 3***Research Question 3, Corresponding Interview Questions, and Rationale*

Research question	Corresponding interview questions	Rationale
Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?	17. What are your perceptions of financial incentives (e.g., bonuses, student loan forgiveness, etc.) aimed to increase retention of child-welfare caseworkers?	The George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (2019) found Black child welfare caseworkers have approximately 30% more student loan debt than White caseworkers and are more likely to report wage dissatisfaction that influences turnover decisions.
	18. What aspects of financial incentives are most important to support Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	G. R. Anderson et al. (2020) called for future research on the influence of stipend programs on retention. They highlighted the importance of understanding new caseworker vulnerability in the 1st year and the protective factors that reduce vulnerability.
	19. How would financial incentives address the specific needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	Fakunmoju and Kersting (2016) called for future examination of the effects of student loan forgiveness on turnover intention by beneficiaries of the loan forgiveness. They also called for future research to increase the knowledge base on the effects of student loan forgiveness on nonbeneficiaries (i.e., caseworkers who are not eligible for loan forgiveness).

*Note.* Sources: “The Stipend Student Commitment to Child Welfare,” by G. R. Anderson, C. Williams-Hecksel, and A. de Guzman, 2020, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(1), 122–138; “Perceived Effects of Student Loan Forgiveness on Turnover Intention Among Social Workers in Massachusetts,” by S. B. Fakunmoju, and R. C. Kersting, 2016, *Social Work*, 61(4), 331–339; *MSW Graduates by Race and Ethnicity: Findings From the 2018 Survey of Master’s of Social Work Graduates*, by George Washington University Health Workforce Institute, 2019, [https://www.cswe.org/CSWE/media/Workforce-Study/WorkforceStudy\\_Brief-MSW\\_Raceethnicity-pdf.pdf](https://www.cswe.org/CSWE/media/Workforce-Study/WorkforceStudy_Brief-MSW_Raceethnicity-pdf.pdf)

**Table 4***Research Questions 4 and 5, Corresponding Interview Questions, and Rationale*

Research questions	Corresponding interview questions	Rationale
Research Question 4: What are the major concerns of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding their retention in the workforce?	20. What are the preferred practices for retaining child welfare caseworkers?	Griffiths et al. (2017) called for future research to explore what influences child welfare caseworkers of color to consider leaving in greater proportions.
Research Question 5: What are the major recommendations of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding retention initiatives that would specifically address their needs?	21. In what ways have the current preferred practices aimed at retention been effective in meeting the needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	Das et. al (2021) recommended future research exploring caseworker perceptions on the design and implementation of strengths-based organizational programs to improve workforce development and retention.
	22. What ways do you utilize or participate in programs that are seen as preferred practices for retention?	Travis et al. (2016) called for future research to explore current strategies that are improving retention of child welfare caseworkers. They called for research to understand what specific types of support increase employee engagement and thriving.
	23. What additional practices would meet the needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	Renner et al. (2009) studied a workforce retention strategy in a state child welfare agency that focused on supervisory support and engagement. They called for future qualitative research to explore dynamics that influence retention

*Note.* Sources: “Learning From the Field: Dynamics of Coaching Within Family and Children’s Services,” by A. Das, M. Connelly, and B. G. Johnson, 2021, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(1), 79–87; “Who Stays, Who Goes, Who Knows? A State-Wide Survey of Child Welfare Workers,” by A. Griffiths, D. Royse, K. Culver, K. Piescher, and Y. Zhang, 2017, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 110–117; “Improving the Retention of Child Welfare Workers by Strengthening Skills and Increasing Support for Supervisors,” by L. Renner, R. Porter, and S. Priestler, 2009, *Child Welfare*, 88(5), 109–127; “I’m so Stressed!’: A Longitudinal Model of Stress, Burnout and Engagement Among Social Workers in Child Welfare Settings,” by D. J. Travis, E. L. Lizano, and M. E. Mor Barak, 2015, *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(4), 1076–1095.

## Procedures

This phenomenological study followed the procedures below listed in chronological order.

1. The advisory committee was organized. The advisory committee was selected according to their self-identification as Black and female and their experience and expertise in child welfare. Committee members were contacted via email and asked to participate on the committee. Emails were the preferred method of communication throughout the course of the study. Advisory committee members were expected to provide review and feedback on interview questions to ensure the tool captures the necessary information to represent the perspectives of Black female child-welfare caseworkers. The advisory committee also reviewed the final interview protocol, the results, and the final list of preferred practices for retention of Black female child-welfare caseworkers. Members of the advisory committee are described in Appendix B.

2. The list of criteria for preferred practices as gleaned from the literature review, the interview protocol questions, and Tables 1–4 was submitted to the members of the advisory committee. The researcher worked in an iterative fashion with the members of this advisory committee until a consensus was reached that the interview protocol was the best possible data-gathering instrument for this study.

3. The interview protocol was piloted. The interview protocol was reviewed and tested with child welfare professionals who were not participants in the study.

4. A list of potential participants was obtained from the National Organization for Human Services (n.d.-b) membership database. Participants were selected according to their experience as child welfare caseworkers. The potential participant had to identify as

a Black female, currently work in a public or private child welfare agency providing direct service to children and families and have been working in child welfare for at least 1 year. Once participants were selected, they received an email invitation to participate in the study, including the purpose and explanation of the study. Invitees responded to the email invitation. Those who agreed to participate were provided the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time. Upon agreement to participate in the study, the researcher emailed each participant to arrange a date and time to conduct the interview via Zoom video conference or other video conference platform accessible to the participant. Two selected participants opted out of the study during interview scheduling. Therefore, the researcher followed the protocol listed in the procedures to secure two additional participants to replace the participants who decided to not participate. Two additional participants were selected from the original list of potential participants from the National Organization for Human Services membership database. These participants were also selected according to their experience as child welfare caseworkers and met the criteria for participation. Once the two additional participants were selected, the researcher proceeded with the protocol to engage the participants in the study and schedule the interviews via Zoom video conference or other video conference platform accessible to the participants.

5. Participants submitted the signed consent form to the researcher by email prior to the beginning of the interview process. Interview participants were asked for consent to audio-record their interview. If the consent was not obtained, the researcher emailed the interview protocol to the participant to be filled out like a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The final approved interview protocol was conducted. The interviews

were scheduled at a time and date convenient to both the participant and the researcher. Individuals were reminded participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research process at any time. Participants were informed that the interview process would take approximately 60 minutes.

6. To ensure validity, an interview transcript was provided to each participant via email to verify the accuracy of responses. Each participant was asked to provide corrections, if necessary, within 10 days.

7. The results from the interview were coded and analyzed thematically. The findings were compiled and integrated into illustrative tables to provide answers to the research questions.

8. The researcher met with the advisory committee to review the results and the final list of preferred practices.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were organized to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspective of Black female child-welfare caseworkers on workforce retention strategies. Recorded interviews with study participants were transcribed. Once transcribed and reviewed by interviewees for accuracy, the information was entered into the NVivo software system to code data information and data visualizations of the primary themes and concepts from the interviews with the 10 study participants.

Qualitative data analysis depends on the methodology, theoretical perspective, and the field of study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Lester et al. (2020) noted the purpose of qualitative data analysis is to establish findings to inform services or practices, provide a more robust understanding or definition of a problem or phenomenon of



interest, or provide insights about experiences in a certain context. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) explained themes and patterns emerge from qualitative data, and through these themes, a deeper understanding of the subject matter may be reached. All responses to the open-ended interview questions were analyzed by coding and emergent themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The data coding process followed the interpretive phenomenological analysis detailed by Alase (2017): (a) develop significant statements, (b) organize statements into meaning units or themes, (c) generate a written description of “what” and “how” study participants experienced the phenomenon, and (d) write a composite description of the central phenomenon including textural and structural descriptions.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to capture information about the lived experiences of individual study participants who share an experience or phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Through the interpretive phenomenological analysis process, NVivo coding software provided a method to visualize and code emerging themes and patterns (Feng & Behar-Horenstein, 2019). The researcher followed the steps described by Maguire and Delahunt (2017):

1. Become familiar with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts.
2. Generate initial codes by organizing the data into groups of meaning.
3. Search for themes to capture a broad message about the research question.
4. Modify and develop themes considering whether data exist to support the identified theme.
5. Define themes determining the essence of what each theme is about.
6. Report on thematic analysis.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Kang and Hwang (2021) outlined several ethical considerations for qualitative research. They first addressed the relationship between the researcher and study participants. Kang and Hwang highlighted the importance of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with participants. This relationship benefits the researcher by allowing for gathering robust, accurate data. The relationship is beneficial to the study participant by allowing the participant to be part of a larger process often leading to reform or solutions.

Next, Kang and Hwang (2021) highlighted informed consent in qualitative research. They noted the researcher should ensure informed consent with participants by using a document appropriate for the participants' level of understanding and easily accessible to the participants. When working with human subjects, confidentiality is an important consideration. In qualitative research, the researcher must gather and analyze data while protecting the privacy of study participants (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Upholding beneficence is another ethical consideration in qualitative research. Researchers must ensure they minimize harm and maximize benefits for study participants. The last ethical consideration outlined by Kang and Hwang involves upholding honesty and integrity. They stated the researcher must commit to presenting research findings accurately and any implications for future research with the same population or addressing the same challenge.

The participants for this study received an invitation to participate in the study with an introduction and explanation of the study accompanied by an informed consent form. All participants were reminded of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any

time. If a participant had chosen to withdraw, their data would have been appropriately destroyed. This researcher ensured confidentiality by giving all participants a numerical code as a pseudonym. Study participants were asked the same open-ended interview questions. With the consent of each study participant, the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Audio recordings were destroyed as soon as interviewees checked and confirmed the accuracy of the interview transcript. Interview transcripts are stored in a secure location and will be destroyed 3 years after the conclusion of the study (or at other intervals as outlined by the Institutional Review Board). All participants were notified that their data were available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution reviewing the dissertation document. Study participants were informed that their identities or identifying details, such as child welfare agency or city or county of agency locality, would not be disclosed in the dissertation or future publications of the research. This researcher followed all procedures as approved by the Institutional Review Board.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the measure of quality across all methods of qualitative research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Korstjens and Moser (2018) explained trustworthiness in qualitative research answers the question, “Can the findings be trusted?” (p. 4). Trustworthiness is measured in four areas: dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability. Each is described in the following subsections.

#### ***Dependability***

Dependability is the stability and consistency of the study findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted dependability requires in-

depth evaluation of study findings and conclusions ensuring that both are supported by the data gathered from the participants throughout the course of the study. They also identified another component of dependability as the researcher's assumption that the research will be peer reviewed. Stahl and King (2020) stated when peer review is assumed, the researcher is more likely to record data accurately. For this study, the advisory committee conducted an external review of certain components of the study. The advisory committee reviewed the process and data and provided feedback to the researcher. This researcher used the information from the advisory committee to adjust the study as needed.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability is how well the study findings may be verified by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Korstjens and Moser (2018) described confirmability as the process of establishing evidence of neutrality; the findings of the research are supported by data and not the ideas or assumptions of the researcher. Stahl and King (2020) described confirmability as striving for objective reality through precision and accuracy in the research process. An audit trail establishes confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The audit trail includes all the researcher's notes and research materials, information contributing to research findings, and information about data collection and management (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This information may be given to an external auditor to assess the confirmability of the research. For this study, the researcher outlined the process of audits, which included keeping a record of the process, recording researcher impressions, and including quotes from participants.

### ***Credibility***

Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined credibility as confidence in the accuracy and truth of the research findings. Credibility also involves determining whether the research findings result from data collected from the study participants and the data interpretation accurately reflects the views and perceptions of study participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Several strategies may be used to establish credibility, including triangulation and verification of the researcher's interpretations after the conclusion of the study through peer review or member checking (Stahl & King, 2020).

For this study, transcripts from the interviews with the study participants were prepared from the videoconference recordings or, for any participants not consenting to be interviewed, based on responses to the interview protocol as a questionnaire. The researcher read and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. The researcher also provided the transcripts to the study participants to confirm the accuracy of the information. The transcript was emailed to the interviewee requesting review and confirmation of the information. Participants were asked to respond to the email with any changes or confirmation that the transcript accurately reflected the information shared in the interview. This process ensured the transcripts included information reflective of the responses and intentions of the participants. The primary transcript reflected any requested changes from the study participants.

### ***Transferability***

Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined transferability as how well research findings may be applied to other contexts, settings, or populations. Transferability supports a broader understanding of research findings and allows the findings to be applied in

different contexts (Stahl & King, 2020). To ensure transferability, the researcher uses thick descriptions. Thick descriptions are detailed narratives including actions, behaviors, and perspectives as well as the context in which they occur (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). By including the context, the participants' actions, behaviors, and perspectives are more meaningful to the audience. Without the use of thick descriptions, transferability is not possible, because the information is not robust enough to apply to other settings (Stahl & King, 2020). This study used thick description by detailing in depth the phenomenon being studied.

### **Potential Research Bias**

This researcher is a Black female child-welfare professional. This researcher has experience as a child welfare caseworker, supervisor, and director of public and private child welfare agencies. This researcher has engaged in education for child welfare and human services professionals. For the purpose of this study, the researcher did not share her thoughts, beliefs, experience, and comments with the study participants.

Creswell and Miller (2000) described the importance of addressing researcher bias. To address bias, the researcher must identify the beliefs or experience that may impact or influence the method of inquiry. The researcher can address bias through reflexivity. The researcher also may include an epilogue or provide interpretive commentary in the findings detailing the role of the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This researcher used an advisory committee to mitigate the impact of researcher bias on analysis and interpretation.

### **Limitations**

C. Anderson (2010) described limitations of qualitative research. Limitations may

include researcher bias, data collection and data volume and generalizability due to small sample sizes. This study included a limited sample size of Black female child-welfare caseworkers currently working frontline casework positions. Researchers conducting future studies could build upon this study and reduce the limitations in sample size by including Black female child-welfare professionals who are new to the profession or who have left the field.

An overreaching assumption was that all participants were honest in their responses. The participants were selected from the National Organization for Human Services membership database and had shared experiences as Black women and as child welfare caseworkers. The advisory committee was assumed to leverage their child welfare experience and expertise to comprehensively review and support the development of criteria and data-gathering tools for this study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This study explored the perspectives and experiences of Black female case workers employed in child welfare. The phenomenological interviews with participants addressed how they defined retention, what they saw as the challenge facing child welfare caseworkers, what aspects of mentorship may improve retention, what preservice training they received, how preservice training addresses the needs of Black caseworkers, how financial incentives may be used to address retention, and how the current preferred or best practices for retention meet the needs of Black caseworkers employed in child welfare.

Few studies have been conducted specifically interviewing Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare and effective strategies for retention. An additional goal was identifying the specific types of support found to be most effective for retaining Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. This researcher also hoped to promote further awareness of the growing need to address child welfare workforce retention and the unique and specific challenges and opportunities for Black caseworkers employed in child welfare.

Upon completion of the phenomenological interviews, interview transcripts were member checked. Each participant was emailed the transcript of their interview and asked to provide corrections, if necessary. Following the transcription of the interviews, NVivo 14 software was used to code the interview data and develop and map primary themes and concepts. The data coding process involved interpretive phenomenological analysis, which reinforces the exploration of the lived experience of the research participants, the



main objective in phenomenological studies. The interpretive phenomenological analysis process allowed the research findings to be narrated through the lived experiences of participants and included the following steps: (a) reading and interpreting, (b) initial noting, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) identifying connections across emergent themes, (e) examining the next case, and (f) finding patterns across cases (Alase, 2017).

Table 5 shows initial codes.

**Table 5**

*Codes From Qualitative Analysis of Interviews*

Initial structural codes	Pattern codes
Perceptions of mentorship programs aimed to increase retention in child welfare	Culturally responsive mentorship programs are important. Building relationships in the child welfare organization promotes a positive work environment.
Perceptions of extended preservice training aimed to increase retention in child welfare	Realistic and accurate preservice training experiences are essential for retention. Standardized preservice training is important for efficacy in child welfare practice. Race and culture are important to be addressed in preservice training.
Perceptions of financial incentives aimed to increase retention in child welfare	Low pay rates in child welfare are challenging for caseworkers. Financial incentives that help caseworkers support their families are important. Student loan forgiveness is a good financial incentive for caseworkers.
Perceptions of preferred practices for retaining caseworkers in child welfare	Addressing racism is necessary for retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Organizational culture impacts the experiences of Black female caseworkers. Organizational practices that value Black female caseworkers are essential.

All responses to the open-ended interview questions were analyzed and coded by theme. Table 6 shows research questions and themes. Eleven themes were developed.

**Table 6**

*Research Questions and Themes*

Research question	Themes
1. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?	1. Mentorship programs should be culturally responsive for Black female caseworkers in child welfare. 2. A successful mentorship program for Black female caseworkers in child welfare includes opportunities to build relationships within the organization.
2. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?	3. Preservice training activities should include simulations that are realistic and reflective of job duties and responsibilities. 4. Standardized preservice training is important for efficacy in child welfare practice. 5. Preservice training should include components addressing race and racism in child welfare.
3. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?	6. Low pay rates and inequitable salaries present challenges in retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare. 7. Financial incentives focused on meeting the needs of Black female caseworkers and their families are essential for retention. 8. Student loan forgiveness needs to be more accessible to fully benefit Black female caseworkers.
4. What are the preferred practices aimed to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers?	9. Addressing racism is essential for retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare. 10. Organizational culture impacts the experiences of Black female caseworkers. 11. Most caseworkers feel undervalued, which needs to be addressed through organizational strategies that reflect value for the unique experiences of Black female caseworkers.

The saturation point for this study was reached at 10 participants. All participants included in this study had at least 1 year of experience, and all participants were currently employed in public or private child welfare. Participants were in six states: Virginia; Michigan; Ohio; Washington, DC; Pennsylvania; and Rhode Island. One participant, Participant 7 (P7), was employed in federal child welfare, one participant (P9) was employed in the school system, three participants (P1, P5, P6) were employed in public child welfare agencies, and five participants (P2, P3, P4, P8, P10) were employed in private/nonprofit child welfare agencies. The mean years of experience was 13 years; the median was 14 years. All participants in this study were female, and all participants self-identified as Black.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question in this study was, “What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?” Participants were asked about their perceptions of mentorship programs for child welfare caseworkers. Participants were also asked if they ever had a mentor in the workplace and what aspects of mentorship may be most important to meet the specific needs of Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Two themes emerged, as described in the following subsections.

#### ***Theme 1: Mentorship Programs Should Be Culturally Responsive for Black Female Caseworkers in Child Welfare***

Each participant discussed how culturally responsive mentoring programs impact and influence the experience of Black female caseworkers in child welfare. P1 stated,

Having a mentor that is relatable is important. Having another Black worker was

helpful for me because we were comfortable talking about the biases in the field and the things we saw and agency dynamics. I was more comfortable than if I had a White mentor.

Participants considered how formal and informal mentoring might support Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare who are navigating the complexities of the role and organization. P2 stated “We need a safe space, on the clock, where we can have a conversation or peer mentorship.” P3 stated,

Some women of color have been drawn into the dominant culture and will go against their own culture, so how do you trust them mentoring you? Agencies should allow Black women to pick their mentor. If you have walked in my shoes, or walk in my shoes, and made it further than I have, I can trust you.

P5 stated,

I think it would be really important to have some seasoned mentors mentor on professionalism and also speak on how to work with our Black clients. I think that is something that is really important. What I’ve noticed is it can be difficult sometimes when White—or other race—caseworkers work in Black communities. In my experiences, Black families can appreciate a worker that looks like them. So, I think talking about those things and the balance in helping our community while maintaining professionalism.

P10 stated,

There are no Black women in leadership so there is no one to be mentored by. I have found Black mentors outside of the workplace, though. Black female mentors have helped me know when I need to ask for a raise or when I deserve a

promotion and how to ask for it. They have also told me how to address incidents of racism in the workplace based on their own experiences.

***Theme 2: A Successful Mentorship Program for Black Female Caseworkers in Child Welfare Includes Opportunities to Build Relationships Within the Organization***

Each caseworker interviewed discussed how building relationships within the organization is critical for Black female caseworkers to feel connected to their peers, their work, and the organization to support retention. P2 stated,

Having the support of my peers has helped. She has pushed me and motivated me. One person in particular has been there for me when I was burned out and done with this work. Having someone let me know what to expect and how to look at things and consider how far I've come and barriers I've overcome enabled me to be able to have that type of relationship with my clients. Seeing that same cycle of empowerment and motivation to push towards their goals and their dreams. It's a generational cycle, a positive cycle.

P3 stated,

From my experience professionally and on a research basis, Black women are very relational. That's not something that seems to be valued in the way we work sometimes. We may spend 20 minutes talking to each other but still have the best stats in the region. It's like they focus on the 20 minutes we talked and consider us bad workers. We're the ones here late, helping each other do our placements. We need that connection with each other.

P4 stated,

For me, as a Black woman, I'm looking for a coach. Someone to problem-solve

and process situations. A mentor in the sense of someone I can look up to and aspire to become one day. Also, a sponsor, someone I would like to actively seek out and have that relationship with to connect me to others and to more opportunities.

Similarly, P7 stated,

For me, I feel like stress and trauma survive in isolation. I feel like I've noticed my Black managers and those who have mentored me intentionally try to challenge the sense of isolation that can result from this work and, through mentorship and connection, identify and take advantage of strategies aimed at creating sense of cohesion and community. Cohesiveness and community in getting the work done. I feel like there's just a little more support and getting the work done because there's this approach that "I'm only as good as my team."

### ***Summary for Research Question 1***

Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare were asked how they perceived mentorship programs aimed to increase their retention in child welfare. Two themes emerged. Theme 1 is that mentorship programs should be culturally responsive for Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Theme 2 is that a successful mentorship program for Black female caseworkers in child welfare includes opportunities to build relationships within the organization.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question in this study was, "What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?" Caseworkers were asked about the perceptions

of preservice training and what aspects of preservice training are most helpful at improving retention. They also were asked how additional preservice training could improve retention and what aspects of preservice training may be most important to Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. Three themes emerged, Themes 3–5.

***Theme 3: Preservice Training Activities Should Include Simulations That Are Realistic and Reflective of Job Duties and Responsibilities***

The consensus among all participants was that preservice training does not adequately prepare caseworkers for their job duties and responsibilities. P2 stated, “We need realistic expectations of the demands of the job. We also need context of what is going on in the system and training on resources.” P4 stated,

Primarily, as a Black woman, for preservice training I am looking for resources to improve the conditions of youth to prevent them from entering the child welfare system. The ways to really get around the system. I think that kind of expertise and technical knowledge is what is needed.

P5 stated,

I don’t think it’s always accurate. When I got hired here, I was one of the first groups under the new casework model. My training, I felt, went pretty well because the state has certain requirements, but a lot of that was book training, this is what the book says versus real life, the reality. The training is cookie cutter and needs changes to make it more realistic. We’ve had people who left 2 weeks after training because training did not match the job. People need more field experience. It will weed out some but will give other people the chance to see for

themselves before making a decision about the job.

P7 stated,

Preservice training needs to be like going back to school and starting from the basics and working your way up in addition to weaving in on-the-job training and shadowing. Caseworkers need to be prepared and have experience for when abuse doesn't look like abuse.”

Similarly, P8 stated,

Preservice training prepared you for what could happen on the job but did not provide real experiences and expectations for the job. We are trained to provide services one way and supervised in another. There needs to be more awareness of discrimination and more preparation for agency dynamics.

P10 stated, “It's terrible. It does not prepare them for the real world. Caseworkers are training while doing. They should have several months of hands-on training before they get a case.” P10 highlighted the need for caseworkers to receive better training before engaging in child welfare practice.

***Theme 4: Standardized Preservice Training Is Important for Efficacy in Child Welfare Practice***

Participants discussed how to address differences in preservice training experiences as well as discrepancies in preservice training concepts and agency practices. The differences in how and when training is delivered and how training concepts are applied in each agency impact the experience of caseworkers. P1 stated, “My agency is not good with training. We did the state training, but in-house practices are different. There is a disconnect between training and agency practices that needs to be improved by



using something like an onboarding checklist.” P8 also referenced discrepancies in her training versus her agency’s practices, stating,

My preservice training was amazing. The problem was not the training, the problem was the implementation of the training in the agency. Workers and supervisors saying, “We don’t do it that way.” There needs to be better oversight of implementation of training concepts and training supervisors on implementation of those concepts. Also, retraining all staff in a new way when changes happen and training in standard practices like where to go to file grievances and the chain of command.

P10 elaborated on strategies that may be used to standardize training, stating,

I think greater partnership with child welfare stipend programs and more training by agencies during BSW and MSW programs is needed. Also having all child welfare agencies implement something like the Butler Institute training so everyone is learning the same thing.

***Theme 5: Preservice Training Should Include Components Addressing Race and Racism in Child Welfare***

Participants discussed specific strategies to include in preservice training to address race, which they deemed an important aspect of training. P3 stated,

We need training on the equity piece. And when I say the equity piece, I’m talking about recognizing what internalized oppression looks like. Because as Black women we internalize everything: “I did something wrong,” “It’s my fault,” and that cannot continue. They need training around that. Black workers need to understand what internalized oppression looks like, and White workers

need to understand what externalized oppression looks like. And understanding our own biases.

P4 stated,

I did not have any preservice training, but I had lived experience in the child welfare system. Preservice training needs to include racial equity and justice training, resistance strategies, racial battle-fatigue training, and rest strategies. Also, exposure to training on racism and how racist practices have influenced child welfare.

P7 expanded on the needs to address race and racist practices in the preservice training curriculum, stating,

Often in preservice training there is this emphasis on what a typical child welfare case looks like, right? And I get that because you want the workers to start to get a sense of what they are stepping into. But the typical case is usually a Black woman. She's usually impoverished or with little to no means. She lives in a neighborhood that is dangerous with domestic violence, substance abuse, you name it. I think that by setting workers up with that picture of what a typical child welfare case looks like, first of all, it's racist. But also, it's extremely damaging if we ever are to hope to begin to reduce the amount of Black and Brown children that are involved in the child welfare system. I think that by breaking that bias down and breaking that stereotype down, I think workers, when they're on the job, can do a better job and will stay on the job.

P10 referenced the need to address race in preservice training, stating, "Black workers need conversational training about being a caseworker while being Black. It should be led

by a woman of color in child welfare.”

### ***Summary of Research Question 2***

Caseworkers offered challenges they experienced with preservice training and how those challenges impacted their overall job experiences. They discussed areas where preservice training needs to be improved or further developed to retain Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Three themes emerged for Research Question 2: (a) preservice training activities should include simulations that are realistic and reflective of job duties and responsibilities, (b) standardized preservice training is important for efficacy in child welfare practice, and (c) preservice training should include components addressing race and racism in child welfare. Agency practices often conflict with preservice training concepts creating a lack of role clarity for caseworkers. Additionally, preservice training does not always provide an accurate reflection of the job duties and responsibilities and does not address many of the specific needs of Black workers.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question was, “What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?” Participants were asked about their perceptions of financial incentives aimed at increasing caseworker retention. They were also asked what aspects of financial incentives may be most important in addressing the needs of Black caseworkers employed in child welfare and how financial incentives address the specific needs of Black caseworkers employed in child welfare. Three themes emerged, Themes 6–8.

***Theme 6: Low Pay Rates and Inequitable Salaries Present Challenges in Retaining Black Female Caseworkers in Child Welfare***

The consensus among all participants was that the pay rates in child welfare are a challenge and impact the desire to remain on the job. In addition to the low rate of pay, pay equity needs to be a consideration for improving retention. P1 stated, “We need money if agencies want to attract the best of the best.” P2 emphasized the need for better salaries, stating,

I think having a salary that is just above the poverty level is strategic because they know a lot of social workers are women, a lot are Black women. It feels like the pay is low because we’re nurturing, and the money sometimes doesn’t matter as much because a lot of people do this for the passion and because they love kids. It has come to a point where having an overall increase in salary is needed. Something comparable to doctors and lawyers or possibly support from the government to fund salaries would help.

P3 referenced pay equity, stating,

Pay is the number one challenge, hands down. We are underpaid based on credentials and education compared to other fields. The pay is often inequitable. I think it is deplorable to come out with a bachelor’s degree and a social work license and make \$14 an hour. After 11 years and an LSW [social work license] and a master’s degree, I was only making \$22 an hour. My friend, who is a White female with no college experience, not even a year, makes \$120,000. That’s a problem.

P7 offered insights on how to address the need to increase salaries and ensure pay

equity for Black women, stating,

I do think there needs to be transparency about salaries and what exactly is required to get an increase. The tangible benefits potentially of pay increase is there are many direct service case carrying social workers who are very fine with staying in direct service and in the field if, financially, they were moving up. So, I think that would help turnover because, you know, the work is hard. I think that's a given. But when you're having to stand in the same bread lines as your clients, it diminishes your sense of worth. I have to be able to take care of my kids and my family.

Lastly, P10 stated,

I always tell people a \$50,000 salary for a Black woman and a White woman are not the same because we have different costs. We are more likely to not have extended family to support us or we are supporting extended family. There are different considerations when it comes to Black women's salaries. Some of the best things that can be done are salary studies annually to see if we are paying Black women equitably. My company did this and found that White women were being paid 10%–20% more, even when considering years of service and educational background. This was due in part to racism, I think. When they found this out, everyone of color got a raise because we had been underpaid. This is what agencies should be doing to retain Black workers.

***Theme 7: Financial Incentives Focused on Meeting the Needs of Black Female***

***Caseworkers and Their Families Are Essential for Retention***

Financial incentives that support caseworkers' families are essential to improving

retention. Monetary and service incentives help offset some of the challenges caseworkers experience due to low rates of pay. P1 stated, “We need bonuses or incentives when workers perform well. We need that in addition to regular raises or salary increases. We are taking care of families and kids; we need that flexibility.” P6 offered suggestions about the type of financial incentives that may be offered to Black female caseworkers, stating, “Things such as on-site childcare with a decreased rate for the service are helpful. Bonuses and benefits don’t have to be monetary; they can be things that create more liberation in finances.”

P2 highlighted the impact on retention and the need for family support, stating, “We need bonuses because Black women do not have the same support as our White counterparts. We need the money to support our families. Lack of money adds stress which impacts motivation and retention.” Similarly, P3 stated,

Bonuses usually help on the front end. It slightly improves retention, meaning someone may leave after 8 months instead of 3. I think this is a female thing and especially a Black female thing, but because the pay is so low, I think there should be some type of bonus if a worker has kids. Being able to make sure you support their families and recognizing that is a necessity in order to do the job.

P7 stated, “I think bonuses remove barriers for Black women. I have to be able to take care of my kids and my family. The salary in direct service doesn’t lend itself to that. We need more money.”

***Theme 8: Student Loan Forgiveness Needs to Be More Accessible to Fully Benefit Black Female Caseworkers***

Participants discussed their perceptions of student loan forgiveness programs

aimed at retaining caseworkers in child welfare and their experiences with this type of financial incentive. P1 stated, “I don’t know anything about that personally. I just recently found out about federal student loan forgiveness after 10 years of payment, which was encouraging because I have a lot of student loans. I know about incentives in the school setting, and I have heard about interns getting student loans paid if they obtain a position in child welfare.”

P9 stated, “I think financial incentives are beneficial. In my experience, people don’t want to leave because of the loan forgiveness, so it does help retention.” P10 stated,

Ten years is a long time to be in child welfare to get federal loan forgiveness. If someone doesn’t do the child welfare stipend program, there needs to be a specific loan forgiveness program for child welfare that is only 3 or 4 years.

P2 discussed how both government and agency student loan forgiveness programs could be used to address the issue of retention in child welfare, stating,

The government should lower the amount of time for forgiveness given the high turnover rate. Organizations should offer something like a savings account for student loans while working at the agency on top of student loan forgiveness along with bonuses to help pay off some of the loans.

P3 discussed lowering barriers to student loans being an effective retention strategy, stating, “Loan forgiveness is effective if it’s automatic. Right now, it’s too complicated. There needs to be less paperwork and documentation to get the benefit.”

P4 discussed how student loan forgiveness programs may specifically support Black female caseworkers in child welfare, stating,

I think it is great. When we look at the Whiteness of wealth, I see it as modern-

day reparations. Black women are more likely to have income-based payments that are accruing interest at higher rates. Student loan repayment improves equity and attracts Black and Brown women to child welfare. Again, I see it as kind of a modern form of reparations.

P5 expanded on the need to leverage student loan forgiveness to attract and retain Black female caseworkers, stating,

I don't know of any specific loan forgiveness programs at my agency but think it needs to be explored more. Especially because we have a very low percentage of Black caseworkers, period. I think that's across our state and specifically in our county. If there is something they can do financially as an incentive to attract Black workers, I think that needs to be explored.

### ***Summary of Research Question 3***

A combination of financial incentives has been used to retain caseworkers in child welfare. All participants discussed strengths and challenges of current financial incentives offered by child welfare agencies including student loan forgiveness and bonuses. Other initiatives were related to salary increases, educational stipend programs and professional development programs and how these programs impact the experiences of Black female child welfare caseworkers. Three themes emerged, Themes 6–8: (a) low pay rates and inequitable salaries present challenges in retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare, (b) financial incentives focused on meeting the needs of Black female caseworkers and their families are essential for retention, and (c) student loan forgiveness needs to be more accessible to fully benefit Black female caseworkers.



#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question was, “What are the preferred practices aimed to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers?” Participants were asked about the general understanding of preferred practices for child welfare workforce retention and their experience with any of the preferred practices. They were also asked how the current preferred practices meet the needs of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare and any additional practices that may support the retention of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. Three themes emerged, Themes 9–11.

#### ***Theme 9: Addressing Racism Is Essential for Retaining Black Female Caseworkers in Child Welfare***

All participants talked about evidence-based preferred or best practices for caseworker retention in child welfare and other practices to support retention. All participants discussed the importance of agencies addressing racism in organizational culture and practices by demonstrating support for Black workers. P3 stated,

We as Black women hold so much, and the agencies and the powers that be don't care. They either don't care or don't know to care, and so you can't account for that. We have to come in here and deal with White fragility, we have to come in here watching systemic oppression continually be done to our people, and we see it. Just the psychological approach of having to hold that while operating in the system is a lot. You don't want to stay.

P4 discussed the experiences of Black caseworkers that impact retention, stating,

If you're a Black woman, understanding racial battle fatigue is important. The child welfare system is really White, and there aren't a lot of Black and Brown

workers. You typically see Black women as frontline workers, overworked, underpaid, underappreciated, and lot of White individuals at the top serving as directors.

P5 discussed the importance of addressing racism in agency practices to promote retention, stating,

I think we have more respect for other cultures. When there are certain practices for religious purposes, we will waive those. But where there are things that may not be normal outside of a Black family, we're like, "This is a problem." I think having something to help agencies understand cultural differences and how a lot of Black families raise their children is important. It does turn off Black caseworkers because it puts you in a place like "We do this. It's just what we do." If there was a way that Black culture could be addressed across agencies as a training requirement for employees, supervisors, and people that are hiring, that might make a difference.

P8 stated,

It's really hard for us. We are dealing with inequitable pay and promotions based on color. We are overscrutinized about our work and do not receive the same validation for our efforts. We are asked to be far more accountable than other people. Like being asked what you're doing with your time when working remotely when this expectation is not put on our White coworkers. It needs to change.

Similarly, P10 stated,

The current best-practice retention strategies being used work for White women

but not for Black women. Things like supervisory relationships and how the agency addresses racism in the workplace need to be addressed. Black women stay in the work for the Black kids in the system; they leave because of their coworkers. They are being mistreated in the workplace. The people who come into leadership and see the needs of Black workers get quickly pushed out.

***Theme 10: Organizational Culture Impacts the Experiences of Black Female***

***Caseworkers***

All participants expressed strongly that organizational culture is a key factor influencing retention. All participants discussed policies and practices within child welfare organizations as well as leadership structure and supervision affecting the experiences of Black female caseworkers in child welfare. P4 stated,

It goes back to the culture of the child welfare field. A lot of agencies are hierarchical, so if you're a frontline worker, you don't have a voice or any decision-making power. There is usually a White executive at the top, and we're at the bottom. Despite what incentives they give you, it all comes down to, is it a strong and healthy work culture? Is it an inclusive work culture where people feel valued? Are they following a participatory leadership model that is inclusive of the expertise we have as well? There has to be a culture shift. Training people will not change organizational culture.

P5 also discussed inclusivity when referencing strategies needed to change organizational culture, stating, "I think really having something that focuses more on inclusivity would be important when it comes to Black caseworkers and being aware of the culture of the Black community. It gets hard."

P6 discussed additional strategies for improving organizational culture to promote retention, stating “There should be more workplace gatherings. Making time for establishing connections makes it easier to work together and promotes team wellness.” P8 stated, “Providing guidance and support, clear expectations from the agency to offset some of the unknowns in the field is needed. Things like clear performance measures and more data collection around retention are first steps.” P9 discussed the need to focus on organizational change efforts beyond the evidence-based best practices, stating “I think changing organizational culture is ongoing as times change. It’s not just something that you focus on those three things, and you’re done.” P10 stated, “Agencies need to be intentional about having Black leaders on the leadership team. I know it’s harder in rural communities but not impossible.”

***Theme 11: Most Caseworkers Feel Undervalued, Which Needs to be Addressed Through Organizational Strategies That Reflect Value for the Unique Experiences of Black Female Caseworkers***

All participants talked about what is needed from child welfare agencies to make Black women feel valued in their work. All discussed the importance of child welfare organizations uplifting and acknowledging the work of Black female caseworkers. Also, organizations should demonstrate awareness of the value Black female caseworkers bring in terms of relatability to Black children and families who are disproportionately served by the child welfare system. P1 stated,

It really depends on the agency’s mindset about Black workers. My agency has lost Black workers because they felt like they were not welcome. Giving Black workers a stronger voice, given that most of the clientele are Black, and not

seeing our advocacy as defiance. Also, managers need to be more encouraging to Black workers.

P2 discussed the racial and cultural challenges Black women face inside the workplace and outside of the workplace stating, “There needs to be more respect for Black women in child welfare. Agencies need to understand that our experience is different and should show empathy for where we come from.”

P3 discussed some of the challenges in the profession causing workers to feel like they are not valued and may influence their decision to remain on the job. P3 stated,

I understand we are not physical doctors, but give us some respect. As a caseworker I did very well, and I stayed in it. I did intake, ongoing, adoption, and CQI [continuous quality improvement]. Not to mention, we’re first responders. We are going into the same homes without guns or shields. Agencies need to show up for the people who don’t look like them through policy, practice, and accountability.

P4 discussed the need for agencies to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts to show they value Black workers and promote retention. P4 stated, “Agencies should prioritize DEI work. They should work with an equity consultant in the predominantly White spaces and not rely on Black workers to do DEI work for free.” P6 stated, “Bridging the gap in workplaces is so important. If you feel valued by the people on your team, you perform better and you’re more relaxed in those environments. It’s an investment in relationships.” P7 discussed some of the specific challenges organizations should acknowledge about their Black female caseworkers, stating,

What is different for Black women is we carry differences that are visible. It is

mentally and physically exhausting. It is helpful that field is moving towards acceptance, but there needs to be a sense that everyone values Black women. That can't just live with the DEI consultant. We most effectively use ourselves as the tool for interventions, and that can't be appreciated if agencies don't see the value of Black women.

P8 stated, "There needs to be equitable practices and leveling the playing field. Right now, we don't have to just compete, we have to go above and beyond. I want to see us be celebrated, not just tolerated." Lastly, P11 provided a strategy promoting retention, stating, "I think allowing staff to provide ongoing feedback for what is working and what is not working helps. And making sure all staff feel included. It's important for people to know their worth."

#### ***Summary for Research Question 4***

Three themes emerged for Research Question 4: (a) addressing racism is essential for retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare, (b) organizational culture impacts the experiences of Black female caseworkers, and (c) most case workers feel undervalued, which needs to be addressed through organizational strategies that reflect value for the unique experiences of Black female caseworkers. Caseworkers were adamant about the importance of addressing racism in child welfare agencies. All caseworkers had either directly experienced or witnessed racism in their agency. Caseworkers also noted areas to be considered when addressing organizational culture to promote retention: the job demands, unique cultural and racial experience of Black female caseworkers, and how the agency views the caseworker role. Incorporating DEI strategies in child welfare agency practices may be helpful to increase awareness of

Black experiences and demonstrates a commitment to Black workers. Finally, using a combination of strategies to support the workforce is effective. In addition to incorporating DEI strategies into organizational practices, uplifting Black culture in child welfare practice, ensuring equity in supervision practices, and cultivating Black leaders are practices to help Black female caseworkers feel valued and appreciated by the child welfare agency, promoting retention.

### **Summary**

Overall, participants were open and willing to discuss their experiences working in child welfare and their perceptions of effective strategies for retention. This study revealed many perspectives about what is needed to retain Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Consensus among participants was most predominant in the areas of addressing racism in child welfare agencies, the need for culturally responsive mentorship programs, and the impact of organizational culture on the experiences of Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Participants also revealed differences in perceptions of effective retention practices and varied perspectives on what steps child welfare agencies need to take to meet the needs of Black female caseworkers.

Participants agreed on the need for support and connections with Black peers; the need for realistic, standardized preservice training activities and additional practical experience opportunities; and the use of financial incentives such as student loan forgiveness to attract and retain Black female caseworkers. The need to address caseworker pay was an inherent pattern within all the participant interviews.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retention. Data were collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews with 10 Black female caseworkers who work in public or private child welfare agencies. This study explored the challenges Black female caseworkers experience in child welfare as well as their perceptions of mentorship, preservice training, financial incentives, and agency preferred practices for retaining Black women in the child welfare workforce.

The goal of this researcher was to add to the body of research by increasing the understanding and awareness of the needs of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare and identifying the best strategies for retention. The information obtained from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed to develop an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of the participants and what they see as the preferred or best practices and strategies for retaining Black female caseworkers in child welfare agencies. The researcher sought to answer four research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?
2. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?
3. What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?
4. What are the major preferred practices aimed to retain Black female child-



welfare caseworkers?

This chapter presents the interpretation and discussion of the study findings and aligns the findings with existing literature. This chapter also presents discussion of the practical applications of the study findings and recommendations for future research.

## **Interpretation and Context of the Findings**

### ***Research Question 1***

What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare? Participants discussed the importance of culturally responsive mentorship for Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. One participant discussed her experience with mentorship and noted she did not think mentoring would have been effective if her mentor had not been Black. Similarly, another participant discussed how building trust in the mentoring relationship comes from shared experiences. For Black women in child welfare, the shared experience of working in a system where Black families are overrepresented and Black culture is often misunderstood is an essential point of connection. Shillingford et al. (2022) found culturally responsive mentoring (i.e., mentoring by culturally relatable, tenured faculty) and purposeful engagement improved the experiences of Black professionals in helping professions. Additionally, van Zyl (2022) concluded that culturally responsive mentoring supports the careers of Black social workers. The researcher's findings supported the need for shared identity in mentoring relationships. The findings also emphasized that same-ethnicity mentorship creates a sense of belonging and opportunities for authentic empathy about issues of racism in the organization.

The second theme for this research question is the importance of relationship building across organizations as a part of mentorship programs for Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Participants identified successful mentorship programs as providing opportunities for Black female caseworkers to build relationships within the child welfare agency or organization. Harris and Davis (2018) found the development of meaningful relationships within the organization was an important feature of mentorship and an integral feature of a retention system for Black workers. Findings in the present study were consistent with the literature on the importance of organizational relationships and connections to other workers and agency leaders as a key aspect of mentorship programs. Obasi (2022) found Black social workers experienced feelings of isolation in child welfare agencies with few other Black workers. Most participants in the present study emphasized the importance of relationships in the organization to mitigate feeling alone in their work. The benefits of building relationships within the child welfare organization include team cohesion and the ability to collaboratively contribute to the well-being of children and families served by the child welfare system.

### ***Research Question 2***

What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare? All participants discussed the need to improve preservice training to prepare caseworkers more adequately for the realities of their roles in child welfare. Participants noted the importance of preservice training providing realistic or simulation-based activities to allow caseworkers to gain hands-on experience. Participants also discussed perceived strategies to improve preservice training including practice-based internships, extended

training periods for new workers, training during BSW and MSW programs, job shadowing, and simulated casework experiences. This theme focused on the critical need for Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare to receive comprehensive training to ensure adequate preparation to perform direct casework. The importance of preservice training activities accurately reflecting day-to-day responsibilities of child welfare casework is supported by literature and by this study. Radey et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of hands-on training activities for new caseworkers. The researchers noted caseworkers need increased opportunities to practice or shadow the full continuum of service in child welfare cases. They noted this preservice training strategy supports caseworker retention. Searle and Patent (2011) identified comprehensive preservice training as a preferred practice for improving caseworker retention. They concluded extended preservice training improves caseworkers' feelings of job competency, leading to improved retention. Street et al. (2022) found opportunities for realistic or simulation-based training provided caseworkers the opportunity to apply training concepts to actual cases. This type of training activity was highly valued by those caseworkers entering the child welfare workforce.

The second theme from this research question involved standardization of preservice training and alignment of preservice training curriculum with agency practices. Participants discussed their experiences with preservice training and the lack of consistency between preservice training concepts and agency practices. Participants also discussed how this inconsistency impacts performance measurement and role clarity. Participants perceived preservice training concepts supported by agency practice as a key component to improving retention of Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Potter et

al. (2009) studied preservice training experiences and role expectations. The researchers concluded preservice training in child welfare should be standardized in terms of role expectations and responsibilities, on-the-job training, and diversity across all levels of services. In their study, most caseworkers felt their social work education adequately prepared them for work in child welfare, but preservice training needed additional standardization and improved implementation to ensure consistency with agency practice.

### ***Research Question 3***

What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services? All participants discussed the need for child welfare agencies to address low wages to improve retention. They all agreed caseworkers in child welfare are underpaid when compared to other professions. Consensus among the participants was that Black women in child welfare experience pay inequity despite having similar education and experience as their White counterparts. This finding aligned with much of the literature. Salsberg et al. (2020) surveyed MSW graduates employed in child welfare and found almost 40% reported inadequate compensation; Black social workers reported higher rates of dissatisfaction with compensation, which greatly influenced their attrition. Dai et al. (2020) noted the importance of addressing caseworker wages to improve retention. The researchers found starting salaries and wage inequality between caseworkers and those in leadership roles largely influenced the likelihood of caseworker turnover. The researchers concluded addressing wage inequality and improving starting salaries will support retention in the workforce. Lewis (2018) noted the number of Black women in social work exceeds most other occupations. The researcher concluded that despite the large

number of Black women in social work, White men continue to earn more than Black women with comparable qualifications. Lewis noted Black women in social work earn substantially less than other occupations, and the pay disadvantage has continued to grow and persist. Finally, Lewis concluded the social work profession should address pay inequity to support diversity and to strengthen and stabilize the workforce.

The second theme from this research question involved the need for child welfare agencies to offer financial incentives to benefit caseworkers' families. One participant discussed how the stress of being able to provide for children and families may negatively impact job commitment and the desire to remain in casework positions. Other challenges specific to Black women were noted by participants, such as Black women having less support and often being financial providers for their extended family. Participants discussed the need for additional financial assistance such as daycare assistance, bonuses, and higher wages specifically for workers with families as strategies agencies should consider as a part of their retention plans. Hu and Hirsh (2017) concluded workers who are parents want higher salaries to improve their ability to raise their children. When workers with children have higher salaries, their job commitment and performance improve. The researchers found workers who are parenting are less willing to sacrifice income for meaningful work. The researchers noted employers should consider the financial needs of workers with families in their retention strategies. The current study adds to the literature on financial incentives to support caseworkers' ability to care for and provide for their families as an effective retention strategy.

The third theme from this research question involved student loan forgiveness as an effective retention strategy for Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Existing

literature concurs with participant perspectives on student loan forgiveness as an effective retention strategy. All participants discussed the burden of student loan debt and their motivations to stay in child welfare if they receive student loan forgiveness. Fakanmoju and Kersting (2016) found the amount of student loan debt, stress related to student loan debt repayment, and turnover intention were all significantly associated. The researchers also found social workers who were offered student loan forgiveness early in their careers were more likely to remain in their positions in child welfare. The researchers concluded student loan forgiveness programs are necessary for retention of social workers.

Edwards-Johnson et al. (2018) concluded student loan forgiveness as a retention strategy is particularly important for students of color. The researchers found Black students were less likely to have the support of generational wealth and therefore carried disproportionately higher student debt when entering the workforce. The researchers concluded addressing student debt through loan forgiveness programs improves retention of Black workers and improves diversity in the frontline workforce of helping professions.

#### ***Research Question 4***

What are the preferred practices aimed to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers? The consensus among the participants was the need to address racism in child welfare agencies and in child welfare practice to retain Black caseworkers. All participants referenced direct experience with incidents of racism during their time working in child welfare. One participant discussed the struggle of Black caseworkers when witnessing perceived racist practices by the agency regarding Black culture. The participant indicated the lack of understanding of Black culture impacts Black

caseworkers' desire to remain in child welfare. This finding is consistent with literature. Montgomery (2022) studied the culture of anti-Blackness in the child welfare system and how the countertransference of racial trauma impacts Black caseworkers. Montgomery concluded child welfare agencies should establish professional development opportunities on Black cultural beliefs for all workers to promote inclusivity in the workforce. Doede (2017) found improved workplace harassment policies, policies to address discriminatory requests from clients, and task forces to include Black employees in company decision- and policy-making procedures increase job satisfaction and retention among Black workers.

The second theme addressed in this research question is the impact of organizational culture on experiences of Black female caseworkers. Many participants identified organizational culture as a unique challenge for Black female caseworkers in child welfare. Participants discussed the challenges in organizational culture related to how Black workers are perceived by their colleagues and how Black children and families are served by child welfare agencies. One participant discussed the need to address racism by improving hierarchical structure and implementing a participatory leadership model as way to improve organizational culture. Another participant discussed the implementation of feedback loops as a strategy to improve organizational culture and caseworker retention. The findings are consistent with the literature but also highlight the need for race-specific strategies to improve organizational culture. Wilke et al. (2019) studied caseworkers' intent to leave through an organizational psychology framework. The researchers examined how new staff become familiar with their role and engaged in the organizational structure and culture and the effect on retention. They found

organizational influences had a greater impact on early departure than personal influences or agency practice. Radey and Wilke (2021) studied caseworker retention in the first 18 months of hire. They concluded improving organizational culture in the areas of organizational support, peer support, and role characteristics may improve retention, even when workload and work environment remain the same.

Organizational practices that value Black female caseworkers as an essential practice for retention arose as a theme from participant responses to this research question. Participants discussed the importance of feeling valued as individuals and valued in their roles as caseworkers through recognition; emotional support; and the implementation of policies and practices demonstrating a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants cited how work gatherings to promote team cohesion and the prioritization of equity practices demonstrate value for Black caseworkers employed in child welfare.

### **Implications of Findings**

Based on the analysis of participant interview data, several implications emerged to suggest how findings from this study could be important for retaining Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. In terms of recommendations for strategies, child welfare leaders and administrators, casework supervisors, and social work educators should address the themes and practices emerging from this study.

In this study, mentorship programs were found to be most effective for retention when the programs were culturally responsive. This study and the literature strongly support integrating mentorship programs for Black professionals and child welfare professionals to promote peer support and to facilitate ongoing learning and skills



development in a safe environment. This study and the literature strongly support ensuring mentors and mentees have shared experiences through racial and cultural identity. Child welfare leaders, administrators, and casework supervisors may increase the retention of Black female caseworkers by implementing mentorship programs that are culturally responsive and provide a safe space for Black female caseworkers to be supported in their professional development.

Participants discussed the need for mentorship programs to promote a positive work environment through the development of relationships throughout the child welfare organization. This study revealed the need for child welfare agencies to prioritize peer connections and cross-organizational collaboration to support the relational aspects of Black culture. Child welfare leaders and administrators and casework supervisors may incorporate relationship building into mentorship practices and organizational culture to support Black female caseworkers in feeling connected and supported by the organization to promote retention.

Another imperative component for retention of Black female caseworkers, as discussed by the study participants, was the need for realistic and accurate preservice training experiences. This study and the literature strongly support extending preservice training and incorporating more experiential learning into training to promote job readiness and improve retention. Child welfare leaders and administrators may support Black female caseworkers by revising preservice training activities to be more reflective of the types of cases workers may encounter and by allowing caseworkers to experience the full array of services and support they will be providing in their jobs. Social work educators also may become aware of the need for experiential learning opportunities and

work with child welfare agencies to construct and implement comprehensive preservice training programs to promote retention.

Standardizing preservice training also may assist in addressing some of the challenges impacting caseworker retention. Participants discussed challenges such as efficacy in child welfare practice, differences in training concepts and agency practice, and issues with role clarity. Child welfare agencies and leaders may engage casework supervisors and caseworkers in standardized preservice training, so all staff are learning policies and practices at the same time. This strategy could address discrepancies in training concepts and agency practices. Social work educators may support the development of standardized preservice training and incorporate training concepts into BSW and MSW curricula to support skills development prior to entering the child welfare workforce. Increased efforts to educate and train students on casework practices prior to entering the workforce could limit issues of role clarity and thus promote retention once they are in the workforce.

Another critical component of preservice training is the need to address race and culture in training activities. Participants discussed the need to diversify preservice training case scenarios, so these activities do not promote anti-Black perspectives and practices. Participants discussed the need for specific training on Black culture and Black families to ensure equity in case decision-making and acceptance of cultural differences. Child welfare leaders and administrators may promote inclusivity through preservice training practices to honor and uplift Black culture while also addressing how anti-Black bias has impacted child welfare.

In this study, an overarching implication is the need to increase caseworker

wages. Based on the unique needs of Black female caseworkers, participants discussed the need for additional financial incentives to help caseworkers care for their families. This discussion within child welfare agencies and organizations influences the development of financial incentives to promote retention. Continued research and exploration of caseworker wages, pay equity in child welfare agencies, and the types of financial and family-based incentives needed to attract and retain Black female caseworkers are integral to this goal. Child welfare leaders and administrators should consider regular wage and salary audits to ensure equitable compensation for Black female caseworkers and to ensure Black caseworkers are receiving equal pay for equal education and experience.

This study explored the importance of student loan forgiveness as a financial incentive to retain caseworkers. Participants agreed Black female caseworkers should have access to student loan forgiveness while working in child welfare due to disparities in student loan debt between Black and White caseworkers. Child welfare leaders and administrators may utilize federal student loan forgiveness programs to retain caseworkers by ensuring workers are aware of the program early in their tenure and may easily obtain loan forgiveness certification documents from the agency. Child welfare leaders and administrators should also advocate for decreased timeframes for loan forgiveness to improve accessibility of forgiveness for Black caseworkers. Social work educators also may support student loan forgiveness by providing students with information about loan forgiveness programs.

This study and the literature strongly support addressing race and racism in child welfare agencies and child welfare practice. All participants discussed experiences with

racism in the workplace and how these experiences impacted their commitment to their jobs. Child welfare leaders and administrators may support Black female caseworkers by integrating programming addressing racist practices and by developing clear processes for addressing acts of racism in the workplace. Child welfare leaders and administrators also should include diversity, equity and inclusion specialists on their leaderships teams as well as provide additional training to casework supervisors on DEI and antiracist organizational practices. Social work educators may support child welfare agencies by developing and supporting training on the implications of racism in the child welfare workforce.

In this study, organizational culture was found to influence retention. Child welfare leaders and administrators and casework supervisors should develop a comprehensive approach to understand employees' perceptions of organizational culture. The approach should reflect inclusivity through the incorporation of ongoing feedback from key child welfare staff as well as equitable leadership and supervision practices. Participants in this study and the literature indicated preferred practices for retention include organizational practices demonstrating appreciation for the contributions of Black caseworkers. Child welfare leaders and administrators should establish organizational cultures to uplift and acknowledge the work of Black female caseworkers to promote retention. Child welfare leaders and administrators and casework supervisors should demonstrate awareness of the value Black female caseworkers bring in terms of relatability to Black children and families who are disproportionately served by the child welfare system.

The understanding and development of strategies to promote retention of Black

female caseworkers in child welfare agencies continues to evolve as organizations prioritize the needs of the workforce. As understanding expands, the need for ongoing dialogue and engagement with Black caseworkers becomes more important. The perspectives and practices of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare are unique and valuable to retention efforts. This study represents a small sample of perceived effective strategies for retention of Black female caseworkers in child welfare.

### **Recommendations for Research**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Black female child-welfare caseworkers and effective strategies for retention. The study contributed to current research on effective retention strategies for Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. Further research is recommended with participants who are new workers (i.e., less than 2 years of experience). Participants who are new workers in child welfare, with less work experience and less time working in child welfare agencies, may yield different viewpoints about retention and preferred practices. The perspectives about the challenges facing Black women in child welfare, mentorship programs, wages, student loan debt, and racism in child welfare agencies and child welfare practice may differ from the participants in the current study. Expanding the participant perspectives in this way would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare and the effective strategies for retention of Black female caseworkers throughout their careers.

Some researchers could design and conduct a study of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare across the service continuum (i.e., prevention, child protective services, foster care, and adoption). Examining the experiences of Black female

caseworkers employed in child welfare by service area could allow for a more in-depth understanding of the unique retention strategies that may be effective for Black female caseworkers in each of the service areas. Incorporating the experiences and perspectives by service area could uncover effective retention strategies for specific positions, which could allow child welfare agencies to develop targeted retention plans. The literature and the study participants agreed that Black caseworkers experience unique challenges related to race and job satisfaction. Including the experiences of Black female caseworkers employed in each service area in child welfare could improve the experiences of race-related challenges on the job and how Black culture is viewed in child welfare practice.

Future research could include an exploration of how low wages in child welfare impact retention. The current study's findings differed from some of the literature. In this study, all participants discussed challenges with low wages and the need for child welfare agencies to increase pay to promote retention. Hu and Hirsh (2017) found individuals working in helping professions like child welfare are willing to accept significantly lower salaries to do personally meaningful work. However, their work did not consider differences in perceptions about pay and retention based on race. Future research could include a racially diverse sample of caseworkers who may have different perspectives and experiences with impact of low wages on retention child welfare.

Lastly, some researchers could design and conduct a study of Black male and female caseworkers employed in child welfare. Including both male and female participants who may have different experiences working in child welfare agencies may provide different perspectives and recommendations for retention strategies. The perspectives on mentorship programs, organizational culture, financial incentives to

support families, and racism in child welfare agencies and child welfare practice may differ from what was found in the current study. Expanding the perspectives to include all Black caseworkers would promote a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the needs of Black caseworkers to promote retention. Expanding the perspectives also may provide an understanding of retention strategies through the lens of race and gender.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 5, this researcher provided a summary of study findings, incorporated the findings into current literature on the experience of Black female caseworkers in child welfare, and expanded on and interpreted the findings. This researcher also examined the implications of the findings, including recommendations for child welfare agencies and recommendations for future research.

Black female caseworkers are faced with challenges each day serving children and families in the child welfare system and working in child welfare agencies and organizations. These challenges include systemic barriers related to child welfare organizational policy and practice, issues of race and culture within organizations, challenges in the provision of child welfare services, burnout, low wages, and vicarious trauma. Given these challenges, child welfare agencies must be attentive to the needs of Black female caseworkers and how these challenges impact caseworker turnover and retention. Continuing to engage in supportive practices of Black caseworkers is essential for the continuation of efforts to address high rates of turnover in child welfare and to implement effective strategies for retention.

This researcher was able to identify some of the perspectives and practices of Black female caseworkers employed in child welfare. The research offered insight into

the lived experiences of 10 participants who currently work in child welfare in five different U.S. states. The findings from this study could contribute to an understanding of the needs of the child welfare workforce, the impact of racism on Black workers, and organizational and job factors influencing turnover and retention.



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Appendix A

Black Female Child-Welfare Caseworker Interview Protocol

## Black Female Child-Welfare Caseworker Interview Protocol

### **Personal and Professional Qualifying Information**

1. Are you currently a child welfare caseworker?
2. If so, what is your specific role or job title (e.g., child protective services caseworker, foster care caseworker, etc.)?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. What is your gender?
5. Do you identify as Black?

### **Introductory Questions**

6. How do you define retention?
7. What is your understanding of the challenges facing the child welfare workforce that impact retention?
8. In what areas do you experience challenges as a Black female child-welfare caseworker?
9. How do these challenges impact your commitment to your job?

### **Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding a mentorship program aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?**

10. What are your perceptions of mentorship programs for child welfare caseworkers?
11. What aspects of a mentorship program would be most important to support the specific needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers?
12. How would a mentorship program improve your experience as a caseworker?

**Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding extended preservice training aimed to increase their retention in child welfare?**

13. What are your perceptions of child welfare preservice training?
14. What aspects of preservice training do you think are effective at improving retention?
15. How would further preservice training improve retention?
16. What aspects of preservice training are most important for Black female child-welfare caseworkers?

**Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of Black female child-welfare caseworkers regarding financial incentives aimed to increase their retention in child welfare services?**

17. What are your perceptions of financial incentives (e.g., bonuses, student loan forgiveness, etc.) aimed to increase retention of child-welfare caseworkers?
18. What aspects of financial incentives are most important to support Black female child-welfare caseworkers?
19. How would financial incentives address the specific needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers ?

**Research Question 4: What are the major preferred practices aimed to retain Black female child-welfare caseworkers?**

20. What are the preferred practices for retaining child welfare caseworkers?
21. In what ways have the current preferred practices aimed at retention been effective in meeting the needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers ?

22. What ways do you utilize or participate in programs that are seen as preferred practices for retention?

23. What additional practices would meet the needs of Black female child-welfare caseworkers ?

**Summary Question**

25. Please elaborate on any areas that you would like me to know about your experience as a Black female child-welfare caseworker.

Appendix B  
Advisory Committee

### **Advisory Committee**

Advisory Committee Member 1: BSW degree, Child and Family Services and Title IV-E program reviewer and supervisor. Prior casework supervisor for BSW and MSW child-welfare stipend students in Virginia.

Advisory Committee Member 2: Master of Public Administration degree, senior management analyst for child welfare policy and practice. Prior child welfare supervisor of family services specialists and family partnership meeting facilitators.

Advisory Committee Member 3: Bachelor of Science in Business Administration: Accounting. Certified Young Adult Peer Support Specialist in Tennessee. Senior homeless services specialist and expert on child welfare lived experience.