

Fractured Families: A Qualitative Study of Deteriorating Kin Support Among Parents in the Child Welfare System

Madeleine Gilson | Princeton University class of 2019 | Department of Sociology

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent decades, poor individuals have experienced winnowing kin support, increased family complexity, and a heightened sense of distrust in their family and social networks. At the same time, child welfare policy has come to embrace parents' relatives and close friends as resources for child protection. These concurrent trends provide several implications for the ways in which parents experience Child Protective Services (CPS). This report documents key observations and policy considerations drawn from 27 in-depth interviews with parents involved in the child welfare system in New Jersey. This research, undertaken as part of an undergraduate senior thesis, seeks to understand the role of kin support in the lives of child welfare-involved parents before, after, and during their CPS case. The study yields the following findings:

Entering the System

- Parents involved with CPS were generally low-income and experienced weak and unreliable systems of family support.
- In various ways, parents' tenuous and often volatile kin relations paved the way for their entrance into the child welfare system.

Meeting CPS Requirements

- CPS reunification requirements required many parents to make changes to their lives that were impossible for them to accomplish without assistance from kin.
- Since most parents had fractured or nonexistent family support, parents in the system found it difficult to comply with CPS requirements to achieve positive case outcomes.

Consequences of CPS involvement

- The stress and stigma arising from having a child welfare case led to heightened distrust and acrimony in parents' kin networks.

- Kinship placement, although regarded as a superior alternative to foster care, tended to exacerbate parents' already tense kin dynamics.

Collectively, these observations expose a disconnect between effective CPS intervention, which rests on parents having positive, reinforcing family relationships, and the fraught reality of kin relations common among child welfare-involved parents. As a result, many parents who entered the child welfare system found themselves more alienated and isolated from their family and social networks than they were prior to CPS involvement. To adjust for this misalignment and to better serve children and parents, child welfare policy should exhibit increased awareness of and sensitivity to parents' kin support when determining appropriate interventions for families.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, poor parents' kin have played a vital role in assisting with childcare and childrearing responsibilities. But recent research shows that these family safety nets have frayed. Poor individuals in urban communities today experience fraught kin relations, characterized by distrust and fragility. Additionally, low-income families have experienced increased family complexity with the rise in multi-partner and non-marital fertility. Given that poverty is the single strongest predictor of having a CPS case, the shifting dynamics of kin support among the poor likely affect most parents in the child welfare system. It is critical, then, to understand how kin support—which once played a pivotal role in assisting parents—operates today in the lives of CPS-involved parents. Furthermore, just as poor parents are experiencing decreased kin support, child welfare policy has come to increasingly value parents' kin as resources for child protection. As part of an extensive reform effort, New Jersey Child Protective Services has turned toward kinship care – which places children with parents' relatives or close friends – over placement in non-relative foster homes. How do parents' fractured kin networks affect their experience of CPS? How does CPS involvement—which increasingly brings kin into the process—affect parents' relationships with

relatives and close friends? To address these questions, my thesis combines an historical analysis of the evolution in child welfare policy and 27 first-person accounts of CPS cases in New Jersey.

I conclude that a disconnect has arisen between CPS policy and the reality of families involved in the child welfare system. By assuming and expecting that parents will rely on kin support, when the availability of such support has declined markedly over time, CPS premises its ability to achieve successful outcomes on something that, for many parents, no longer exists. If child welfare policy seeks to provide successful and informed intervention going forward, it must take into account the degree and quality of parents' kin support.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method employed for this study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviewing allows participants to deliver detailed responses without any word or time limit. As such, researchers are able to learn beyond a mere recounting of what happened and develop an understanding for how participants experience and interpret events. Furthermore, interviewing allows for the development of participants' life histories, backgrounds, beliefs, and behavior. This essential context offers insight into how parents' stories weave into the broader fabric of their lives.

This study is based on interviews with 27 parents with closed CPS cases in Newark and Trenton, NJ. The interviews were conducted between October 2018 and March 2019. I recruited parents by advertising the study at churches, public libraries, soup kitchens, food pantries, laundromats, and other areas that serve low-income populations. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations throughout Trenton and Newark, according to participants' preferences. Many interviews took place in public libraries; however, others took place in participants' homes, homeless shelters, and fast food restaurants. The length of the interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3.5 hours, with most lasting approximately two hours.

I chose to conduct these interviews in New Jersey partly because of my access to the geography and its residents and partly because of the State's unique history of major reform. For the past 15 years, the New Jersey child welfare system has been under federal oversight. In this timespan, the agency has transformed from one of the worst in the nation to one that is today regarded as a model system. As other states look to New Jersey as a model, it is critical to understand the features of the system that do and do not work for parents. In beginning my research, I recognized that studying parents' experience in New Jersey had the potential to reveal underlying problems that had not been addressed by the reforms or that had been overlooked by the federal government. While New Jersey CPS self-assesses its performance as meeting standards established by the federal government, I sought to examine whether reforms were experienced in the same way by the parents on the receiving end – and if not, at what cost?

FINDINGS

The majority of parents interviewed for this study were from low-income communities where they experienced weak and unreliable systems of family support. Parents' fraught kin support played a pivotal role in shaping their experience of the child welfare system, from beginning to end.

Entering CPS

Of the 27 participants in my study, 19 (70%) became involved in CPS when a relative, friend, or neighbor directly or indirectly initiated a report. Kin networks triggered parents' CPS cases in three ways: 1) direct reports from a friend or relative, 2) direct reports from neighbors or building complex supervisors, and 3) parental reliance on kin ties who drew child welfare attention. I found that conflict in parents' intimate relationships was most frequently linked to retaliatory CPS calls. When Serena kicked her boyfriend out of her apartment after an argument, he had very few ways to get back at her: he was homeless and unemployed. Feeling betrayed and with little access to power,

he initiated a CPS report to seek revenge on Serena: “[He was] basically just being a spiteful baby father,” Serena reflected. Other parents entered the child welfare system when their neighbors reported them to CPS. Parents tended to live in neighborhoods marked by distrust, where neighbors were quick to summon state intervention to address potential problems—such as audible fighting in a home—rather than looking for alternative solutions or seeking to understand all of the facts. Finally, even in cases where kin or neighbors did not directly report parents, parents’ kin networks played a role in initiating CPS involvement. When parents relied on family and close friends for childcare or housing assistance, these kin ties often drew CPS involvement for parents. Dani, for instance, had never experienced CPS involvement until she left her daughter in the care of a friend one afternoon. The friend left Dani’s daughter abandoned in a stolen car, “that’s how [CPS] took my daughter...It’s just that one mistake somebody did caused my life to be upside down with my children.” Taken together, these accounts demonstrate the various ways that troubled kin relations in poor communities pave the way for parents to enter the child welfare system.

Meeting CPS Requirements

Once parents had open CPS cases, I found that their fractured and disadvantaged kin networks impeded their ability to maintain custody of, or become reunited with their children. The parents in this study, and in the child welfare system writ large, predominantly live in poverty. They lack the resources necessary to fulfill CPS mandates on their own. CPS reunification plans, which often require parents to quit a years-long drug addiction or obtain suitable housing, therefore depend upon parents’ ability to draw assistance from family and friends. Yet, parents who entered the child welfare system exhibited nonexistent, unreliable, or disadvantaged kin support. Take Serena, who ran away from home at sixteen. Her mother is a drug abuser and her father lives hours away with a new partner and family. When CPS caseworkers told Serena to quit her heroin addiction on a dime, they advised her to rely on her family support for assistance. With no one to turn to, Serena used

again and her daughter was removed from her care. Other parents, tasked with findings suitable housing, were similarly set up to fail. Without resources to afford rent on their own, and with unreliable assistance from friends and family, parents found it impossible to meet the expectations imposed on them by CPS.

Consequences of CPS Involvement

The stress caused by child welfare cases strained parents' relationships with their families and neighbors, leaving them more alienated after CPS involvement than before. As one father put it, having a CPS case, "it's like a stain, you know?" When parents became marked by CPS involvement, they often withdrew from their support networks, feeling embarrassed and stigmatized in their communities and families. At the same time, many parents expressed that the stigma associated with CPS caused their friends and relatives to turn away from them. Carly reflected, "[My family] looked down on me because of my case. Once the kids were taken away it was like I no longer existed...they all turned against me. They didn't come around no more." Tragically, just when parents need support the most, the stigmatizing mark of their CPS involvement leads parents to turn inward and their kin ties to turn away.

Parents whose children were removed and placed with kin similarly experienced heightened friction within their kin support networks. There were clear benefits of kinship care—namely, that parents were often able to maintain relationships with their children and children, in turn, were spared from living with strangers. However, for parents already experiencing fraught and fragile kin relations, I found that losing a child to a relative strained these relationships immensely. Rather than expressing gratitude for kin who assumed custody of their children—thereby preventing foster care placement—parents instead felt violated, often stating their relatives had "taken" their children from them. When these relatives made decisions for their children that parents disagreed with—but were powerless to change—parents grew increasingly angry and hostile toward their kin. Furthermore,

visitation schedules and competitions over children's affection introduced new types of tension into these relationships. Ultimately, I found that kinship placement in families without strong systems of support had the potential to wreak havoc on parents' kin relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The primary function of child welfare is to ensure the safety and well-being of children – not parents. However, CPS intervention that negatively impacts parents likely harms their children as well. Most parents investigated by CPS never have their children removed; of families that do, over half are eventually reunited with their children. As a result, when CPS involvement fractures and frays parents' kin support, it damages the family environment in which our nation's most vulnerable children grow up. With the reform efforts that New Jersey CPS has undertaken, it is poised, consistent with its mission, to deliver meaningful benefits to the well-being of the children it seeks to protect and the families it serves. The agency, however, must undertake a thorough re-examination of the underpinnings of its policies and practices in light of the negative evolution in kin support for poor, CPS-involved parents.

In order for CPS policy to be informed by the reality of parents' experience in their communities, it must invest in understanding parents' support systems so that it can anticipate how some interventions – like kinship care – may be effective for parents with positive support systems, but have tragic consequences for parents without them. If CPS is to avoid uninformed interventions, it will need to develop increased awareness of and sensitivity to parents' kin support. The availability and nature of such support should be examined up front, in a manner that is integral to the determination of individualized solutions. The path forward should be calibrated family by family to ensure essential resources for parents, to protect against child maltreatment, and to reunify families where possible without contributing to further damage of parents' kin support.