

FRAYING AT THE EDGES:  
QUALITATIVE INSIGHT INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF CPS CASEWORKERS  
AND THE ISSUE OF VOLUNTARY EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

By

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For Linda –

Whose unconditional gift of love and support helped to make  
the seemingly impossible, a reality;

and

For Alice, and others like her –

Who provide a safe harbor for children in need and  
then take the time to love and nurture them back to life.

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## LIST OF COMMON ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS<sup>1</sup>

AFSCME = American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees = Regional labor union representing many state employees, including CPS caseworkers.

ASFA = Adoption and Safe Families Act = 1997 federal legislation that reinforces mandate for CPS services nationwide and requires states to exhaust relative resources options prior to placing a child in a non-relative foster home.

*Brian A.* = Brian A. Settlement = 2001 Class action lawsuit settlement in Tennessee that resulted in stricter federal oversight of the state's CPS units, particularly with respect to locating possible kinship care options and placing foster children in the least restrictive environment.

CAPTA = Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act = 1974 federal legislation that mandates public and professional referrals of child abuse and/or neglect nationwide.

CFS = Child and Family Services = Division of foster care caseworkers responsible for implementing services for children in the State's long-term custody.

CFSIA = Child and Family Services Improvement Act = 2006 federal legislation that funds state foster care personnel recruitment, retention, & training and mandates stricter compliance in regards to monthly caseworker visits.

CFSR = Child and Family Services Review = DHHS requirement wherein each state is mandated to annually report statistics on any number of areas within its foster care system, including specific compliance standards set by Congress in the

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that these definitions are not exhaustive, but include information particularly relevant to CPS and/or the study that serves as the focus of this paper.

area of CPS, and representatives from DHHS perform on-site reviews to determine compliance for themselves.

CFTM = Child and Family Team Meeting = Pre-trial meeting consisting of Tennessee caseworkers, family, attorneys, and service personnel wherein they discuss child's needs and the parties' common goals.

CM1 = Casemanager 1 = Automatic caseworker distinction within CPS study unit's state parent-organization representing all caseworkers with less than 1 year of seniority in state employment.

CM2 = Casemanager 2 = Automatic caseworker distinction within CPS study unit's state parent-organization representing caseworkers with at least 1 year of seniority in state employment.

CM3 = Casemanager 3 = Promotional caseworker status within CPS study unit's state parent-organization representing caseworkers with at least 1 year of seniority in state employment who have been promoted to supervisor caseworker status.

CPS = Child Protective Services = Local units of the State that investigate allegations of child abuse and/or neglect and decide and implement appropriate action.

CWLA = Child Welfare League of America = Private national child advocacy agency that lobbies on behalf of foster children for additional federal oversight and legislation.

DCS = Department of Children's Services = Common name of statewide agency that operates and oversees a state's foster care system (including CPS).

DHHS = United States Department of Health and Human Services = Department of the federal government that reports to Congress on states' compliance with

federal legislation pertaining to child welfare and the need for any additional funding and/or oversight.

FSS = Family Support Services = Local units within the State of Tennessee's DCS that provide in-home services and oversight to those children not at imminent risk of harm and, as such, not yet removed from their caregiver's home.

GAL = Guardian ad Litem = Court-appointed attorney who argues and advocates on behalf of a child's best interest in court.

ICWA = Indian Child Welfare Act = 1978 federal legislation that gives Native American tribes the right of first refusal for Native American children eligible for adoption and lists family preservation as a preference in all cases.

N/D = Neglected/Dependent = Status of foster children who enter state system due to CPS determination of substantial risk of harm of abuse and/or neglect.

PIP = Program Improvement Plan = Federally mandated plan developed by a state at risk of losing federal funding due to a finding within the state's CSFR of non-compliance with national mandates for its foster care system; improvement under the plan is monitored by DHHS in annual reviews.

PSOC = Psychological sense of community = Theoretical basis for understanding the crucial need all individuals have to feel vital and needed within a community.

RA = Regional Administrator = Job title of individual responsible for overseeing all state units, including CPS, that service study unit's community service area.

TC = Team Coordinator = Job title of top-level manager responsible for overseeing CPS study unit.

TL = Team Leader = Job title of mid-level manager within CPS study unit.

## FOREWORD

Once upon a time a group of wayward souls, ostracized by all due to their religious beliefs, lack of financial means, and/or dearth of political power in their homeland, sailed across treacherous waters in search of a New World. They had a chance to start over, to found a country with the natives of that land, and others like them, based on commonality, shared power, and mutual respect.

However, in their ignorance, these new immigrants misused this opportunity by retaining and implementing much of the same laws, prejudices, hypocrisies, and social dictates that they themselves had recently fought to escape. They espoused principles such as freedom to all and equal protection under the law, but life for most of the population fell far short of these ideals. The disenfranchised, those families and children already struggling with issues of poverty, sickness, and disillusionment, were especially vulnerable. The need for laborers was great, and poor or orphaned children were seen as simply another means with which to tame this new landscape.

As time went on descendents of these early settlers began to realize some of the mistakes their forefathers had committed. As an attempted redress for these sins, new laws were enacted that purported to protect all children and families, regardless of their economic or social standing, and structures were put in place to help any child placed in harm's way. However, despite the subsequent generation's new enlightenment and attempts to counteract history, much of the underlying prejudices and hypocrisies of their forefathers remained in place and tragically served to undermine these relatively new

state-sponsored systems of care; hampering those who labored within them as well as those whose lives were supposed to be better because of it.

This dilemma continues to this day, worsening to near critical levels and resulting in widespread societal repercussions within this relatively new nation. In light of this, is it really any wonder that this society faces an ever-increasing problem of finding individuals willing to work within these hampered systems of care? What happens to vulnerable target populations when systems such as these are unable to retain workers and follow through on society's promise of safety and equal protection? What is life really like for those few who attempt to answer society's call and labor within these systems as they now stand? What steps do these workers have to take in order to remain safe, both physically and emotionally, in performing their daily job? This dissertation takes the time to illuminate these issues and others like them, by paying particular attention to the plight of those positioned at the front lines of one such system today, the field of state child protective services.

## PROLOGUE

No matter how much she may wish it to be otherwise, no researcher is ever completely value-neutral or wholly free from bias when preparing and performing fieldwork and analysis. That which makes her unique as a human being, namely her intellect, psyche, and emotions, also makes her vulnerable as a researcher. As such, whether she is aware of it or not, a researcher's values and beliefs play an important underlying role in every step of the research process, from selecting a topic of interest, to interpreting the literature in the field, structuring the project, collecting and analyzing data, and culminating in the decision to focus on specific issues when drawing generalizations and discussing the important insight gleaned from the study.

Moreover, not being aware of her values and predisposed biases does not make their impact disappear, but rather serves to heighten the potential damage caused as she continues to subconsciously promote these values and beliefs in her work (Prilleltensky, 1994). Thus, prior to immersing ourselves in the literature and data included within this study proposal, it is imperative as the principal investigator that I first acknowledge the personal and professional journey that has led me to this point in time as well as the way in which I plan to use the study to aid others in the future.

Prior to returning to the world of academia in 2003 in pursuit of my doctorate degree from Vanderbilt University, I worked as an attorney for children at risk of suffering abuse and/or neglect in their home. For as long as I can remember I have always felt drawn to work with child-victims of abuse and have had a deep passion to fight for justice for those too disenfranchised and vulnerable in society to speak for



themselves. As I attended Vanderbilt University from 1991 to 1995 I studied Human and Organizational Development. Throughout my time in the program, particularly the senior internship in which I participated, this passion grew to include other groups who lacked power as well, primarily due to their lack of financial means and/or other forms of societal discrimination. Thus, after graduating with my undergraduate degree I decided to obtain my law degree from Washington University and later my law license in order to open a future low-cost legal service office in the same geographic area in which I served during my senior internship, Franklin, Tennessee. Fortunately, after a lot of hard work and effort I was able to achieve this goal and the office officially opened in 2001.

While in law school I had thought that directing the legal service office would be the final plateau of my professional life. However, I never forgot my original desire to help child-victims and since the law office was better equipped to aid adults rather than children, I decided to leave the office in 2003 in order to again pursue this passion. In particular, prior to opening the legal service office I came in contact with a remarkable group of children who had suffered abuse and/or neglect, those within the custody of the State and being housed within foster home placements, and while opening and running the law office the memories I had of those remarkable children had never left me. My continued interest in the welfare of these children and others like them would ultimately take my life in a different direction than I had previously anticipated.

In particular, my initial exposure to the system of state-subsidized foster care in this country first began in 1998 and continued through 2001 while working as a Guardian ad Litem (GAL), or legal advocate, for children in abuse and/or neglect situations. As a GAL I served as a court-appointed advocate for children, most of which were being cared

for by the foster care system of the State. I represented children as young as a few days old to those just shy of their eighteenth birthday. As a GAL it was my sole responsibility to investigate and argue for outcomes and services that I deemed to be in the best interest of my child-clients, many of whom had suffered unspeakable hardship and abuse in their lives. In this capacity I participated in judicial hearings and meetings concerning the desired short-term and long-term outcome of the children's cases and monitored the children's progress while in foster care.

Moreover, whereas most GALs confine their in-person contact with the children to the requisite judicial and planning activities, during my last year as a GAL I made a point of traveling and visiting each of my child-clients in their respective foster home placements. In particular, I chose to do so in order to try and better understand the dispirit conditions experienced by children within the system, ultimately in hopes of advocating for the same high-quality foster care placements for all of my clients in the future. In short, this was an eye-opening experience for me. In so doing, I was able to view the cramped and oftentimes less than adequate conditions of the homes themselves, meet and interact with individual foster care providers, too few of whom I found were well-suited for their position, and view the wide spectrum of state-subsidized housing options available to these children. I was also able to spend more individual time with the children I represented, oftentimes in a more relaxed and open atmosphere than that provided within the confines of the courthouse.

After viewing the living environments firsthand and listening to the children speak of their concerns and experiences while in care, I began to grasp the enormity of the problems facing the system and, as such, the need for system-wide reform. At the

time I recall asking questions of others laboring with me in the system, including judges, counselors, caseworkers, and other attorneys and advocates, seeking answers on how the system evolved to this point and what success, if any, other states were having in changing their systems and improving the lives of the children within them. However, I was repeatedly unsatisfied with the answers I received and I soon realized that my colleagues did not seem to have much more knowledge concerning these issues than I had.

Finally, unbeknownst to me at the time, in late 2002 and early 2003 I was able to achieve one final practical insight into the system that solidified my decision to return to school. Specifically, it was during this time that I spent six months filling-in for an attorney employed by the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) while she was absent on maternity leave. Throughout this time I worked exclusively with Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers employed within an urban metropolitan county of the state. The discoveries I made during my stay with DCS revealed the multi-faceted nature of the problems associated with the foster care system. For example, as a GAL I had often wondered why all of the best, most dedicated caseworkers never seemed to stay employed by the state for a very long period of time. Throughout my time as an advocate for foster care children I had assumed emotional burnout was the main culprit. After all, emotional burnout was a common problem, faced by nearly everyone who labored within the system, particularly due to the depravity represented in the cases and the absolute injustice felt by the child-victims and those who cared deeply about their fate.

However, working as the legal representative for the State and its CPS caseworkers during those many months allowed me to see that other factors beyond

emotional burnout were also likely involved. No matter how many cases I had worked, I soon discovered that I did not truly understand the daily life experiences of those first-responders charged with safeguarding children every minute of every day. There may be days, weeks, and sometimes even months of state and caseworker involvement in a child's life before the legal system, and subsequently a GAL, become involved. A length of time in which CPS caseworkers spent visiting homes of alleged abusers, interviewing hospital personnel and/or other service providers, locating relative placement options, drafting paperwork, and ultimately making a decision as to whether or not to remove a child from their home environment.

Thus, as a result of both my work as a GAL and my brief employment with DCS, I knew I needed a more concentrated period of time in order to research these issues and returning to school full-time in order to attain my doctorate degree provided me with the means with which to do so. Thus, I decided to return to my original alma mater, Vanderbilt University, in the fall of 2003 in order to start my pre-doctoral fellowship in Community Research and Action, a program whose mission statement mirrored my own.

Now at the end of this most recent academic journey, this dissertation project serves as a culmination of both my professional and academic experience to date. For example, the literature review included within this proposal, among other things, attempts to answer the question of how the foster care system evolved to its current incarnation as well as what federal mandates continue to define, and sometimes hinder, it. Moreover, even though I have a significant base of practical knowledge in the area, my brief respite spent as legal counsel for DCS reinforced my resolve to try and eliminate as many assumptions on my part as possible. Therefore, the study at the heart of this dissertation

includes an exploratory phase with ethnographic observations and shadowing of caseworkers, in order to increase my understanding of the work requirements of CPS caseworkers as well as to pinpoint what factors deserved greater consideration in subsequent phases of the study. As a result, the bulk of the study followed these observations and consisted of individual interviews of all willing employees within the study unit, but the interview guides were purposefully not drafted until the observation phase was concluded and the notes collected from this period of exploration were reviewed for common themes and issues. In so doing, I was hopefully able to reduce the likelihood that the results of this study would be based on my past experiences or personal expectations, rather than the data themselves.

Finally, my previous experience within the system, among other things, highlights the need for stronger unity and communication between researchers and practitioners in the field. Thus, this study is designed to aid both groups – those studying the issues plaguing the foster system as well as those serving within the trenches today, implementing policies aimed, sometimes imperfectly so, at improving the lives of foster children and their families. As a result, upon its completion the study will be presented and disseminated to as many people as possible, researchers and practitioners alike, and will hopefully be a means with which to foster future collaboration between these two groups. Moreover, following the conclusion of this study and the subsequent achievement of my doctoral degree I plan to continue to use both my experience as a researcher as well as my past professional experience to strengthen the connection between these two groups in order to ultimately accomplish a goal that is at the heart of us all – improving the lives of the children themselves.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On any day in this country there are well over 514,000 American children residing in state-sponsored foster care placements nationwide (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006a). Moreover, every year an estimated 800,000 children are placed in settings outside their caregiver's home for at least some length of time (Government Accounting Office, 2003) as, while some children exit care, on any given week approximately 6,000 children across the country are removed from their caregiver's home and placed into their state's system of care (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The first-responders within each state, those responsible for investigating allegations of abuse and/or neglect and for deciding whether or not to remove a child from her home, work within their respective foster care system, in specific units known as Child Protective Services (CPS), or their state's equivalent.

Nationwide CPS caseworkers play an invaluable role in keeping at-risk children safe. Unfortunately, an in-depth look at these units today reveals a notoriously high rate of voluntary employee turnover, especially within urban CPS units, with a seeming revolving door of new caseworkers every month. This lack of continuity among caseworkers combined with the high rates of CPS referrals within each state puts additional strain on the minority of employees who do remain on the job, and has been shown to negatively affect many facets of the foster care system itself, including the very children it is charged with protecting from harm.

In light of the pervasiveness of the problem, this paper takes an in-depth look at the lives and struggles of CPS caseworkers. First, this paper highlights the relative terminology associated with state foster care systems today as well as the scope of the issues involved. Next, it considers how CPS evolved to where it is today by reviewing the historical and legal evolution of CPS in America. Third, within these historical and legal parameters, the paper includes an outline of the general procedural description of how children today become wards of the State and the vital role CPS caseworkers play within this process. Fourth, the negative consequences associated with voluntary caseworker turnover within state foster care systems are highlighted. Fifth, previous research into the issue of caseworker turnover is reviewed, including the vital ways in which these studies have fallen short. Finally, through the use of qualitative methods, this paper takes an in-depth look at one urban CPS unit by examining, in-depth, the following issues: the physical environments, service community demographics, and common characteristics of the various CPS caseworker-participants; the ecological context, sense of belonging, and social support systems available to a CPS caseworker within the unit; the problems that arise when the priorities of a caseworker's work and family environments collide; and the issue of caseworker safety and how it affects an employee's daily life. This paper concludes with a discussion of the study's findings, limitations, and important implications for both future research and practice.

## CHAPTER II

### DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE OF CPS-RELATED ISSUES

Formal foster care is a fairly recent American concept. However, even within its relatively short existence the term “foster care” in this country has been used to refer to both narrow and broad terminology, a source of potential confusion and frustration for many. Thus, this section seeks to: clarify this issue by noting the difference between foster care and foster care systems; focus on one important aspect of foster care systems, that of Child Protective Services (CPS); provide insight and understanding on how relevant concepts in the field of foster care are defined; serve to narrow this paper’s focus to the specific subgroup of foster children with which CPS caseworkers come in contact, those removed from their homes due to the abuse and/or neglect of others; and conclude with a review of the prevalence of out-of-home placement and CPS involvement, shedding light on the scope of the issues surrounding it as well as why it is important to focus on this particular realm of public policy.

#### *Definitions*

The world of CPS caseworkers is a relatively complicated one, bound by laws and policies and filled with various state and private personnel, confusing legal jargon, and strict timelines. The acronyms themselves are a foreign language to most outside the world of child welfare, as well as those new to it. An attempt is made to reduce this confusion whenever possible, but in this study’s effort to better understand the world of



CPS, especially the challenges new caseworkers face as they try to master the ever-increasing list of acronyms derived from state laws, agencies, and federal legislation, it is important to delve into this area whenever possible, rather than shy away from it. As such, a list of common acronyms and abbreviations is provided at the start of this dissertation should the reader need to refer to them. Rest assured that the guiding purpose throughout this study is to remain focused on those issues that are most pertinent to the daily life of an employee of CPS. As a result, this section starts by differentiating between foster care and foster care systems, two very different concepts in terms of scope and CPS relevance, before delving into the important issues of child protective services, foster child status, kinship care, and familial care.

#### *Foster Care v. Foster Care Systems*

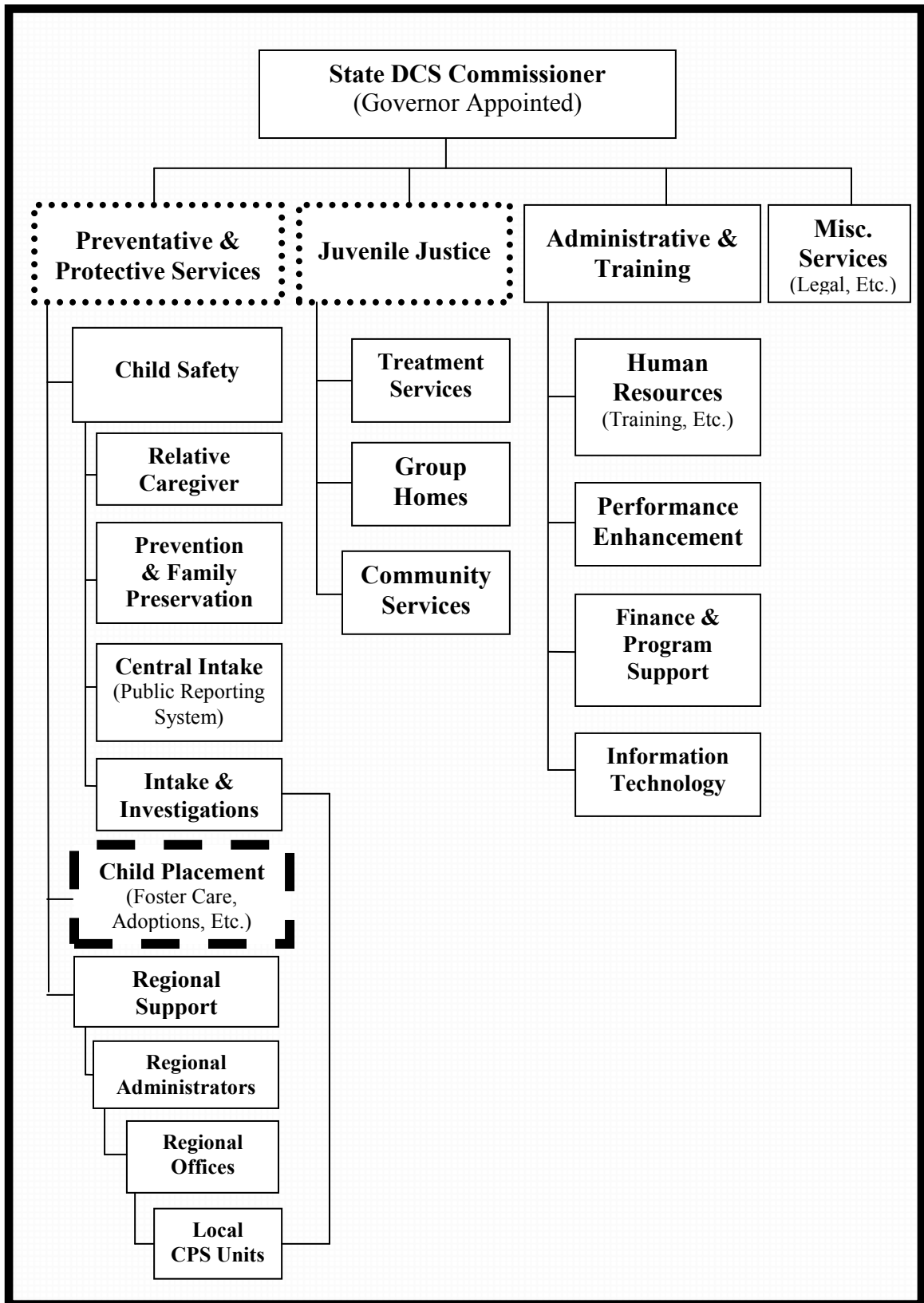
Although sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably with foster care system, “foster care” is narrowly defined as the temporary placement of children within the legal custody of the State into various residential settings; be they the homes of relatives, non-relative residential homes, group homes, institutions, detention centers, and/or mental health facilities (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 36-1-102(22)). In contrast, the term “foster care system” is much broader in scope and refers to the entire overall network of laws, policies, and procedures that govern the field, including, for example, those that seek to prevent a child from being removed from their caregiver’s home in the first place. Thus, foster care systems encapsulate a broad spectrum of services, agencies, and individuals, including, but not limited to those that seek to: preserve a family unit and prevent a child from entering state-run care, investigate allegations of harm posed to a child, house and

serve children for whom preventative services are unsuccessful or not an option, and/or transition children out of state-run care and into the homes of their original caregiver, other family members, and/or new adoptive parent(s).

To aid in the understanding of this issue, Figure 1 below depicts the organizational chart of a typical state's foster care system. In particular, everything within the large, bold, solid-lined boxed area represents the overall foster care system whereas the small dash-lined box on the left-hand side of Figure 1, entitled "Child Placement," represents the office that oversees the individual foster care placements themselves. For purposes of this dissertation and to reduce confusion, a concerted effort is made to delineate between the two terms by using "foster care system" or "system of care" in reference to the entire system itself, and "foster care" or "state-sponsored care" to refer to the individual placement options available for foster children. Since the former, foster care systems, encapsulates all of the services provided by CPS units it served as this paper's main focus and point of discussion.

Except in a few rare cases in which the federal government has assumed responsibility for a state's failing foster care system due to court order, such as in the State of Florida, each state is responsible for managing and maintaining their own respective foster care system. Thus, technically there are 50 foster care systems in America, one for each state; systems run by state departments such as Tennessee's Department of Children's Services (DCS) or Mississippi's Department of Human Services. However, despite their individual oversight, as can be seen in subsequent sections of this paper, the shared history of state-sponsored care in this country as well as the ever-increasing amount of federal regulation that exists within the field itself, applied

**Figure 1 – Organizational Diagram of a Typical State Foster Care System**



equally to all 50 state systems across the country, serve to ensure that these state systems are alike in more ways than not. As such, this paper focuses on one vital component of these systems, found in some form or fashion within each, that of Child Protective Services (CPS).

### *Child Protective Services*

Child Protective Services (CPS) refers to those state employees across the country that follow-up and investigate referrals of alleged child abuse and/or neglect within their respective jurisdiction and locale. As one can see in this paper's subsequent discussion of the evolution of foster care, since the 1970s each state has been federally mandated to provide a means with which the public can report suspected incidents of child abuse and/or neglect (see, e.g., "Central Intake" box in Figure 1 above) as well as a procedure with which the states respond to these reports (see, e.g., "Intake and Investigations" box in Figure 1 above). Most states have chosen to do so by delineating a particular unit of caseworkers in each locale, called Child Protective Services (CPS), whose primary responsibility is to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect and determine appropriate action in order to keep children safe. These workers and the vital services they provide are the main focus of this study. As such, in subsequent sections I examine in greater detail the emergence of CPS in America, the federal parameters placed on those operating within these units, the specific role a CPS caseworker plays within the system today, as well as examining what certain aspects of life is like for these unique individuals.

### *Foster Child Status*

While a state, oftentimes via its CPS representative, has great freedom in choosing where each child resides while in Its care, the realm of choices is narrowed somewhat due to the individual child's status upon entering state's custody and the specific constitutional rights associated with that status. Depending on the circumstances that led to legal custody being transferred to the State, each foster child enters state's custody as either a neglected/dependent or delinquent/unruly child. While it is important to understand what constitutes a delinquent or unruly child, due to their almost exclusive contact with CPS, this paper's focus is on the other subgroup of foster children, those who enter state care due to their neglected/dependent status.

*Neglected/dependent status.* The overwhelming majority of foster children who enter state care every year, or approximately three-fourths, do so based on their neglected/dependent, or "N/D," status (State of Tennessee, 2006). In Tennessee, a neglected/dependent child is broadly defined to include anyone under the age of 18 years old who is at substantial risk of suffering from any form of abuse, including physical, sexual, or psychological, and/or general neglect by a caregiver, either due to the caregiver's own actions and/or their inaction in protecting the child from the harm posed by another (Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 37-1-102(b)(1) and (b)(12), §§ 37-5-103(1) and (4)(A), and § 37-5-103(8)). Children suffer from neglect when: they do not have a caregiver, their caregiver fails or refuses to provide medical care, they are not adequately supervised, their caregiver keeps them from receiving an education, and/or their caregiver is unfit to care for them due to mental incapacity, immorality, or depravity (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-5-103(8)). Moreover, some states like Tennessee hold that when a child

resides informally with a non-relative caregiver for 18 months or longer, without court involvement, that child is also a victim of neglect (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-5-103(8)(H)). Thus, a child is given the status of N/D when she fits within the broad definition of neglected/dependent and is placed, usually involuntarily, into her state's foster care system by a CPS caseworker following an initial investigation into allegations of abuse and/or neglect within the home, and a subsequent ruling by the local judiciary (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-130).

*Delinquent/unruly status.* In contrast, most delinquent/unruly children have themselves caused or at least contributed to their placement in state-sponsored care due to their own negative behaviors and actions. Specifically, delinquent children are those who have been found guilty by a local judicial magistrate of committing the juvenile equivalent of adult criminal charges (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-131). Similarly, unruly children are those who commit acts specifically outlawed for children due solely to their age, such as runaway, smoking or possessing tobacco products, and/or truancy (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-132). Since the Constitutional mandate against unlawful seizure (U.S. Constitution, Fourth Amendment) no longer applies to children who have been found to be delinquent and/or chronically unruly, they are usually placed apart from N/D children, in more secure facilities.

In addition, delinquent and unruly children are commonly placed in the State's custody upon the request of a local district attorney's office and/or the child's own caregiver, rather than as a result of an ongoing investigation by CPS. Thus, when compared to N/D children it is rare for delinquent and/or unruly foster children to come in contact with CPS or ever have a CPS caseworker appointed to their case. Moreover, as

seen in Figure 1 above, most state foster care systems separate juvenile justice services (see the dot-lined boxes within Figure 1 above) from those pertaining to prevention and protection of children, the main job of a CPS caseworker. As such, the focus of this paper is narrowed to include neglected/dependent children, whenever possible, and, unless explicitly stated otherwise, the terms “foster care system” and “foster child(ren)” are used to refer to the State’s system of care as it pertains to this particular subgroup of children only.

### *Kinship Care v. Familial Care*

Kinship care is a specific type of foster care placement that entails placing primarily N/D children within the homes of relatives instead of other state settings (Dubowitz, 1994). Kinship care occurs like all other foster care placements, following the transfer of legal custody to the State. As revealed in this paper’s subsequent review of the foster care system’s evolution, this placement option has grown in popularity with state and federal legislators and, as of 1997 all CPS caseworkers across the country are now required to investigate kinship care placements for each of the children in their care prior to placing them with non-relative caregivers (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997).

This can potentially make the CPS caseworker’s task more difficult in that not only does she need to put in the effort to locate and investigate potential family placements, a task that does not end during the case’s initial phase but continues throughout the course of the caseworker’s involvement, but research has shown that kinship caregivers may not believe the underlying allegations that led to the child’s

removal, they may allow the birth parents or former caregivers to have greater accessibility to the child, even when the child was removed from their care due to severe neglect or abuse, and/or that the relative caregivers themselves may perpetuate the same parenting behaviors as the birth parents, thereby placing the children at greater risk for further abuse or neglect and placing the CPS caseworker in the position of potentially having to remove the child yet another unsafe environment (Gleeson & Craig, 1994; Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001). Thus, this federally mandated preference for kinship care is an important development in the evolution of foster care legislation, greatly affects the roles and responsibilities of CPS caseworkers, and as such is revisited in subsequent sections of this paper.

Informal kinship care, or familial care, occurs when a caregiver voluntarily and informally places their child with relatives or non-relatives, without any change in legal custody (Dubowitz et al., 1994; Leslie, Landsverk, Horton, Ganger, & Newton, 2000). Thus, legal custody remains with the original caregiver but the child resides in the home of another. This informal placement is sometimes done after the inception of a CPS investigation in an attempt to prevent further state intervention, and/or as part of an informal agreement with the State, to protect the child without requiring a transfer of legal custody from the caregiver to the State. However, more often than not familial care arrangements are made without any state knowledge, as a personal arrangement between family members or friends.

Thus, while similar, there are vital distinctions between kinship care and familial care placements. The most important difference between the two types of relative care placements is that one is a form of foster care, preceded by a transfer of legal custody to



the State and followed by judicial involvement and oversight, while the other is not. Kinship care is a placement option for foster children with the State serving as the child's legal custodian and the relative caregiver having the same rights as the average foster parent. In contrast, familial care is not foster care, with usually no court involvement and legal custody still remaining with the child's original parent/caregiver. As such, while both are eligible to receive federal financial aid (Social Security Act, 1979), since kinship care placements are made by state custodians, following a transfer of legal custody to the State, as of 2006 kinship caregivers are also eligible to receive additional financial subsidies and services from the State while the child is within their care (Child and Family Services Improvement Act, 2006), whereas familial caregivers are not.

### *Prevalence*

In order to understand the scope of the issues surrounding CPS it is important to not only review the prevalence of issues most pertinent to CPS employment, but also the specific population of children they are called to serve. As such, I present herein statistics pertinent to CPS investigations and voluntary employee turnover estimates, the overall number of children at risk of suffering abuse and/or neglect in this country, as well as the number of those children placed in state-sponsored care by CPS caseworkers every year.

### *CPS Investigations*

Each year in this country CPS caseworkers investigate an estimated 1.9 million cases, involving various allegations of child abuse and/or neglect, with over 1 million of

them resulting in a judicial finding of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The types of maltreatment that comprise this total number of founded abuse/neglect cases include approximately: 56%, general neglect; 15%, physical abuse; 8%, sexual abuse; 6% psychological abuse; 2%, medical neglect; and 13% other forms of harm not rising to the level of one of the other five categories. Among other things, this last catch-all category includes cases involving a caregiver who may not have personally caused harm to the child, but who failed to protect the child from harm caused by another.

Tragically, those children who are not located and/or removed from harm face a serious risk of fatality, with over 1,460 children dying from abuse and/or neglect every year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). More than three-fourths of these children, or 76.6%, are the most vulnerable due to age, or younger than four years old. The largest cause of child fatalities overall, or 42.2%, is often the hardest to detect, caregiver neglect, followed distantly by multiple maltreatment types, or 27.3%, and physical abuse, 24.1%, third.

### *CPS Turnover*

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), or the federal agency responsible for reporting to Congress on, among other things, the 50 states' compliance with federal mandates pertaining to each state's system of care, reports that each state employs an average of approximately 500 CPS caseworkers every year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Moreover, DHHS reports that each specific state's workforce varies based on its specific needs, including the

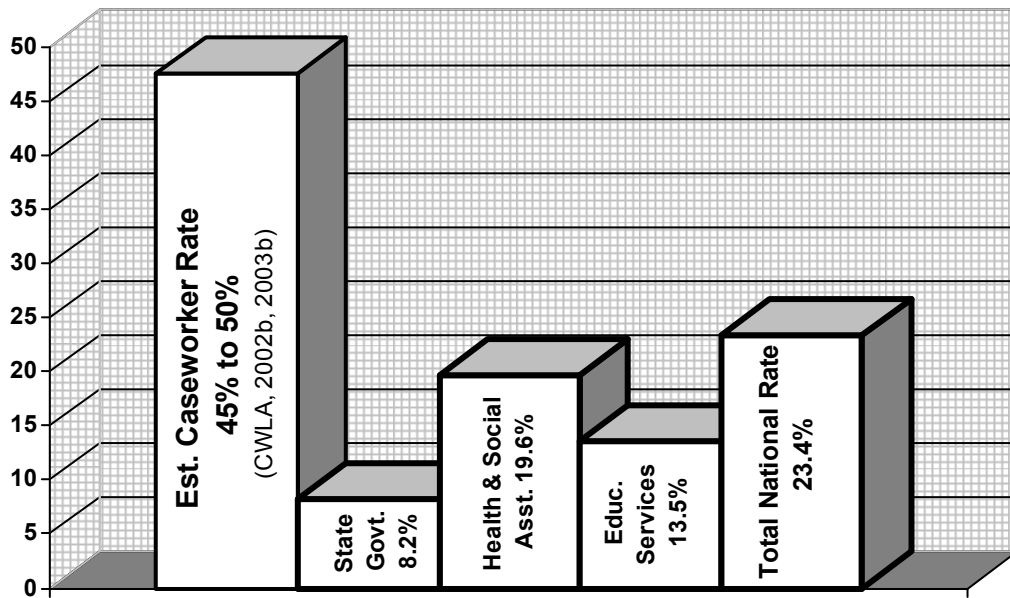
number of investigations conducted each year within that state, the number of job vacancies present, and the effectiveness of each state in recruiting and training new caseworkers.

However, studies conducted and/or reviewed by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) and the leading child advocacy agency in the field, Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), reveal a high amount of employee instability within these units (Child Welfare League of America, 2002a; Child Welfare League of America, 2003b; Government Accounting Office, 2003). In 2003, the GAO estimated the rate of turnover within child welfare units nationwide, in all staff positions, to be between 30% to 40% annually (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Moreover, the CWLA reports the number to be even higher among caseworker positions in particular, with as many as 45% to 50% of caseworkers leaving their positions every year (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Child Welfare League of America, 2003b), resulting in the average tenure of most caseworkers being no more than two years (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Considering that some experts believe caseworker proficiency is not achieved until approximately this same two-year-mark (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007), it appears as if the average caseworker is actually leaving CPS employment around the time in which she is finally reaching a point of proficiency in her job. Thus, costing states considerable time and money and placing them in constant need of new caseworkers if they are to ensure that the vital tasks entrusted to CPS units are in fact being carried out.

This high rate of turnover is even more shocking when compared to other similar service provisions as well as the overall national average. Chart 1 below provides a

graphic illustration of this issue. The estimated rate of turnover for caseworkers as a whole far out distances the voluntary turnover rates of all state government employees, health care and social assistance positions, as well as those employed within the field of education (WorkForce One, 2007). In fact, the estimated turnover rate for caseworkers is more than all of these professions combined, and is almost double the 2006 national turnover rate for all professions. The only professions that reportedly rank higher than caseworkers in the area of turnover are minimum wage jobs; for example, those found within the leisure and hospitality industry, which have a 52.2% annual turnover, or those within the food service industry with 56.4% turnover.

**Chart 1 – Voluntary Employee Turnover within Similar Professions**

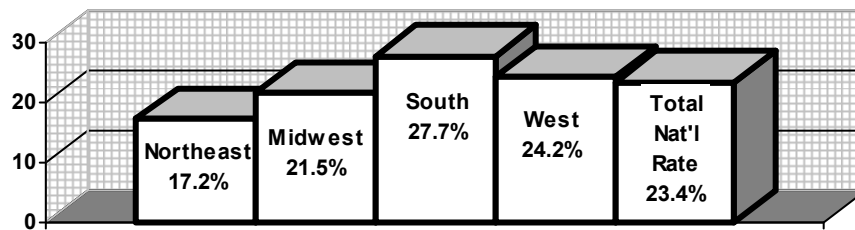


**2006 National Turnover Rates** (WorkForce One, 2007)

Moreover, Chart 2 below indicates that this problem varies across geographical regions in the country. Regional turnover rates reveal that the problem of turnover is

likely to be worse among caseworker units in the South wherein employers across various professions report between 3.5% to 10.5% higher rates of turnover than all other areas of the country (WorkForce One, 2007). If this trend holds true for foster care systems as well, southern state foster care systems may experience an even higher level caseworker turnover, closer to the high end of the CWLA estimate (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Child Welfare League of America, 2003b), or 50%, than their counterparts located in other regions of the country; and anyone seeking to stop the flow of exiting caseworkers within the South, may face additional obstacles in their effort to do so.

**Chart 2 – Voluntary Employee Turnover within Geographical Regions**



**2006 National Turnover Rates by Region** (WorkForce One, 2007)

*Foster Child Population*

The number of children served by state foster care systems in the country is widespread with over 800,000 children residing in foster care placements in the United States at some point every year, plus an untold number of children receiving services that do not result in their removal from their home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007b). For those children placed in out-of-home settings by CPS, in

compliance with new federal laws, every year states are required to report an increasing amount of data on their foster care population, including but not limited to data on race, gender, age, length of stay, exit outcomes, and kinship care placements.

In the area of race, white-non Hispanic children constitute the largest percentage of foster children, or 41%, followed closely by African-American children with 32% and then Hispanic children with 18% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006a). As to gender, there is almost an equal split between males and females in care, with 52% being male and 48% female. Most children who enter foster care each year are on average 8.2 years old, however, the largest percentage of children entering care each year, or 38%, are four years old or younger. The average length of stay for children in foster care is 28.6 months, or approximately two and one-third years, with the overwhelming majority of children who exit care, 54%, reunifying with their family of origin. Finally, although states fluctuate, on average CPS caseworkers are successful in locating kinship care placements for approximately one-fourth of the children they place in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006a), or approximately 124,000 children nationwide, with some states reporting this number to be as large as one-half (Geen & Berrick, 2002).

In contrast, although it is difficult to obtain specific statistics on the number of children in familial care placements, a 2003 U. S. Census report sheds some light on the subject. In particular, the U.S. Census reported that in 2002, 4% of all children in America, or approximately 2.65 million children, resided in homes with relatives, but with no legal parent present, or with non-relatives, excluding non-relative foster care. Since the total number of children in kinship care as of September of 2002 was

approximately 126,000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006b), it can be estimated that approximately 2.5 million children resided in familial care placements nationwide during this time. This amounts to almost 10 times as much as previous estimates which placed the number at 300,000 children (Ehrle & Geen, 2002), and it includes those children who are placed with relatives with or without CPS involvement and/or knowledge. Moreover, although the racial breakdown of children within familial care placements is not known, some researchers believe that due to their unique history and cultural influences the prevalence of familial care may be even higher within the African-American, Latino, and Native American communities (Gebel, 1996).

## CHAPTER III

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LEGAL EVOLUTION OF CPS IN AMERICA

In order to better understand the state of the foster care system today, including the emerging role and specific job tasks performed by CPS caseworkers and society's subsequent appreciation, or lack thereof, it is essential to take a brief look at the evolution of foster care in this country, the emerging rights of children in society, and the legal parameters placed on those called to protect them. The importance private citizens placed on foster care placements over orphanages early on in the country's history is fairly unique to the American experience, served as a marked detour from English common law and societal expectations prior to that time, and was likely influenced by the different cultures present in the country as well as the nation's own history of Civil War and westward expansion. This early societal preference is still ingrained in the national psyche and helped pave the way for the more recent emergence of formal CPS units, signaling a departure from the strict privacy rights previously associated with the parent-child relationship and the emergence of the rights of children to be safe and well-cared for. However, while the nation's creation of CPS appears to be based on pure motives, its current incarnation and societal and legal context place CPS caseworkers today in a nearly impossible no-win scenario.

In an effort to better understand the current state of foster care in America as well as the important role given to CPS caseworkers, this paper first considers how the foster care system took root in America including the important cultural influences involved,



with the bulk of the attention being spent examining the developments that have occurred since the latter half of the twentieth century, including the growing importance of state caseworkers, the expansion of state laws, and the fairly recent introduction of federal legislation and nation-wide mandates. Throughout each of these societal and legal developments this paper also pays particular attention to the changing way in which society as a whole views the role of children.

### *From Child Labor to the Child's Best Interest*

As alluded to earlier, familial care, or the voluntary placement of children by parents or caregivers with relatives or non-relatives, without court or state involvement, is a phenomenon that predates the nation's history (Dubowitz et al., 1994; Leslie et al., 2000). Throughout the human existence it has long been thought "that kinfolk had both the natural inclination and moral obligation to look after dependent family members" (Testa & Slack, 2002, p. 80). This belief system took an especially strong root in early American society due in large part to the various cultural beliefs and practices represented in the country, and was so prevalent in the country from colonial days up to the mid-1960s that it was the general societal assumption that family members would step-in and fulfill this informal obligation whenever a relative's child was in need of a place to stay.

### *Early Cultural Influences*

From its inception the melting pot aspect of American culture served as the backdrop for the creation of formal foster care in this country. First, though their

members were disenfranchised politically and victimized by the Caucasian majority for generations, Native American, African, and African-American cultures all played an important role in encouraging the ultimate emergence of state-run care. As expected, the powerful European, particularly English, majority played a central role as well, in both the implementation of societal practices brought over from the immigrants' homeland as well as the introduction of the English legal system known as common law. This paper briefly considers each of these in turn.

*Native American influence.* First, prior to European settlement, historians have found that many Native American tribes regularly practiced early forms of familial care (Askeland, 2006). For example, de facto tribal practices in many nomadic tribes, dictated that a child's grandparents were required to serve as primary caregivers. This was done not because grandparents were believed to be the best caregivers, but rather in order to free all able-bodied adults to work and labor for the tribe. In other tribes, such as the Pueblo and Iroquois nations, once a boy reached adolescence, maternal uncles were given the sole responsibility of rearing and educating their nephews. Again, this was done for the betterment of the tribe as a whole and not necessarily the child himself. With the hardship of life, the survival of the tribe was considered to be of utmost importance.

Today, in an effort to amend the federal government's history of oppressing Native American nations, and as a reflection of the outcry of Native Americans throughout the country who feel a strong kinship with all members of their tribe regardless of biological relationship, the Indian Child Welfare Act or "ICWA" (1978) requires that a Native American tribe be notified if a child of that tribe is being adopted by a non-tribe member (Hollinger, 2004); thus, giving the tribe what amounts to a right of

first refusal to adopt the child within the tribe first before allowing someone from outside of the tribe to do so.

*African and African-American influence.* Second, traditions brought over and expounded upon by African and African-American slaves also served to influence the inception of foster care in this country. Prior to their removal from Africa, most slaves lived in communities that emphasized voluntary familial care through extended family and childrearing (Franklin & Moss, 1994). African clans consisted of families who could claim a common ancestor, no matter how distant. Moreover, similar to some Native American tribes, many African clans held that children belonged solely to the mother's family with the oldest uncle of the children solely responsible for the children's upbringing. If the uncle died, the next senior maternal male member would take over responsibility of the children.

Once enslaved in America, most Africans and later African-Americans were forced into another form of familial care as children were sold away from their birth parents and housed with non-relatives on separate plantations and/or were rendered orphans as a result of the high mortality rates among adult slaves (Askeland, 2006). The very nature of slavery relegated all within its confines to be treated as chattel, for the lives of slaves to be forcibly used for the betterment of others and never themselves, and slave children were no exception. As such, due to the dictates of the slave master, most slave children were cared for by older slaves throughout the day until it was determined that they were of an age to serve full-time in the house or in the field. Remarkably, many scholars believe that the broad definition of family that was promoted in African

traditions and continued throughout slavery allowed these amazing early Americans to adapt and survive the horrors of slavery and its aftermath more effectively.

*European influence.* Finally, when English Europeans immigrated to America they brought with them the English legal system, known as common law (Friedman, 1985). In general, common law served as the greatest English influence on early American life by providing a set legal system right from the country's inception. However, while common law provided legal structure in most areas of American colonial life, certain concepts were lacking, adoption and foster care being among them. English children were seen as a means with which to continue family lines and with their society's single-minded importance of biology and blood relations, adoption was never accepted as a way in which to fulfill this desire. As a result, the ultimate evolution of adoption provisions and the emergence of foster care in England occurred much later than those in America, with English adoption laws not being formalized until as late as 1926 (Holt, 2006), exactly 75 years after the first such laws in America (Cahn, 2004), and formal foster care in England only gaining popularity over institutions within the past three decades (Matthews, 2000), 30 years after a similar shift in America (Creagh, 2006). Thus, early European influences on the evolution of foster care and adoption in the country center on common English societal practices and customs, rather than explicit laws. As such, America can truly be seen as an early pioneer and inventor of state-run foster care, and the legal codification thereof.

### *Apprenticeships and Orphanages*

The strongest European influences in early America centered on the English societal practice of apprenticeships and the tradition of private orphanages. Similar to the children of Native Americans, Africans, and African-Americans, an English child was considered the property of another, particularly her father, and he was given free reign in choosing how the child lived and was raised. Moreover, when a child of financial means was orphaned the societal assumption held that private arrangements would be made for that orphaned child by the other adult members of the family, depending on the child's particular place within England's caste system (Askeland, 2006). Specifically, if a child was orphaned in England and came from a wealthy family, society assumed that informal familial care arrangements would be made by other biological adult family members, including the use of apprenticeship positions whenever possible. For those without financial means, English practice dictated that those children were viewed as financially dependent upon society and were placed in local almshouses, sometimes alongside adults who were unable to pay their debts, or charity-run orphanages in which children would work in some specific capacity, be it on a farm or in a laundry, in exchange for their daily needs being met.

Prior to European immigration to America, the practice of apprenticeships and indentured servitude for children was widespread and prevalent in Europe, and particularly in England, with families from primarily middle and upper income levels of society engaging in these traditions (Shireman, 2003). The practice dictated that children as young as seven years of age relocate out of their caregiver's home and into the home of the master of the trade they were learning, while still maintaining contact with their

family of origin (Askeland, 2006). These common English practices and societal beliefs were continued and adapted into early Euro-America with Puritans voluntarily placing their biological children into indentured positions or apprenticeships in order not to “spoil” their children and in the hope that the children would learn a trade (Ross, 2004, p.11). Other historical records include accounts of orphan immigrant children being auctioned off the docks in New England to the highest bidder or, if orphaned after immigrating to America, sold into apprenticeships (Mason, 1994). Thus, the English tradition of viewing children, particularly those who did not come from wealthy bloodlines, as a financial drain and/or chattel was practiced and promoted in early America as well.

Although not focused on the child’s best interest, in many ways apprenticeships were a precursor of formal non-relative foster care today. Like modern day foster care these American apprenticeships or indentured contracts were time-bound, lasting at most until the child reached the age of majority, and, when relevant, enabled the biological parental relationship to remain intact and undisturbed (Ross, 2004). In addition, even though these practices were not rooted in the protection of children and the sanctity of childhood, but rather in the society’s need for skilled labor, they still provide an important step towards understanding American society’s acceptance today of at least part of the role that CPS caseworkers play as apprenticed children were relocated into other homes for the greater good of society and the future financial, if not broader overall, welfare of that child.

Although orphanages and almshouses were commonplace in England and throughout Europe prior to early European immigration to America, they only gained in

popularity in America as of 1830, following widespread cholera and yellow fever epidemics (Ross, 2004). Similar to most European orphanages, early American orphanages were not state-run or state-funded (Lowell, 1886), but rather constructed by private aid organizations, such as New York's State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) (Holt, 2006) and Massachusetts' Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Carstens, 1921). Moreover, orphanages did not lessen Americans' preference for apprenticeships as, in the words of SCAA, orphanages were designed to "devote their efforts to the care of those children who are diseased and feeble-minded, serving otherwise only as centers of collection whence healthy children shall be speedily passed on to homes in families" (Ross, 2004, p. 11). Thus, a primary goal of every orphanage in America was to relocate as many able-bodied children as possible into available homes as apprentices wherein the children could contribute to a household while learning how to be productive in a specific trade.

### *Westward Expansion and Orphan Trains*

A turning point in American history as well as the history of foster care occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of the Civil War (Holt, 2006). Westward expansion combined with: increased railroad access to the Mid-West and beyond, high casualty rates and the rise in the number of orphans, and strained resources in the East; worked to change the landscape of foster care and adoption in America. In particular, in order to continue to accomplish their task of finding suitable homes for able-bodied children while addressing this new influx of children, orphanages and aid societies had to develop new innovations and practices. As a result, the practice of orphan trains was

born. Marking an initial divergence in the nation's treatment of children, orphan trains and the resultant increase in child labor throughout the country would ultimately help lead to a vital change in society's view toward children as deserving of special treatment and protection.

Orphan trains, or the process by which children from orphanages in the East were dispersed into homes around the country, particularly those in the Mid-West and beyond (Hart, 1884), started in New York but was soon employed by orphanages throughout New England (Holt, 2006). The practice continued for nearly 80 years, or roughly from 1850 to 1929, and resulted in the relocation of approximately 200,000 children (Holt, 2006), mostly over the age of 10 years old (Ross, 2004), into homes primarily located in the West and Mid-West. The overriding goals of these New England aid societies included reducing juvenile crime in New England, providing the children with homes as they gained skills in agricultural work, and aiding in the effort towards westward expansion and settlement (Holt, 2006). Society's view towards children throughout the majority of this time remained unchanged. Children without financial means continued to be viewed as a necessary contribution to the labor force; they were a means to an end and were not given special consideration or protection. However, eventually the orphan train movement served to inadvertently accelerate the evolution of foster care and the rights of children into their present day incarnation as it highlighted the need for individual states to develop local laws and policies pertaining to the oversight of these children's placements and living circumstances.

The common orphan train procedure, during the majority of the time they were employed, included an organization in New England establishing contact with local



clergy or a civic committee in areas along a train's route who would then in turn locate and endorse prospective families as placements for children (Holt, 2006). However, there were no specific criteria required for their endorsement and no planned follow-up or oversight was provided following the child's placement into the home (Alden, 1885). In addition, although, most churches and aid societies required a verbal commitment from the new caregivers that they would allow the children to attend school and church on a regular basis, with the absence of state laws and formal local oversight, there was no one to officially follow-up and ensure that this was in fact taking place; and no way to address those situations in which it was not being honored (Holt, 2006).

As a result, based on personal accounts and records, the children's experiences in these homes varied greatly; ranging from those akin to biological children in the home (Hart, 1884), to others regarded as servants or apprentices (Alden, 1885), to finally some accounts of orphan train children being abused and/or neglected in their placements (Alden, 1885; Ross, 2004). It was primarily these stories of mistreatment, and the resulting outcry of local citizenry and the private agencies in the East, that led to a change in how the orphan trains operated and eventually resulted in the codification of local state oversight and intervention in order to safeguard children as they were separated out for the first time as a subgroup of society in need of special consideration and protection.

### *State Laws and the Emergence of Child Protective Services*

Orphan trains were vital to the history of foster care, child protection laws, and the emergence of state-run agencies and caseworkers in this country. While in the East private aid societies had long been acknowledged by society to be the guardians of

children within their care, and therefore endowed with the power to decide that child's placement, with the popularity of the orphan train movement states began enacting formal laws not found in common law allowing the State to fulfill this role as early as 1875 (Ross, 2004). Similarly, with the steady influx of children into their region who were in need of new homes, western states began paying attention to their own lack of adoption laws and the increased need to protect children and monitor the placements within their district.

As orphan trains resulted in an ever-increasing number of children being relocated into permanent homes, more and more states followed the example first set by Massachusetts in 1851 and enacted adoption provisions in their own state laws (Cahn, 2004). In addition to endowing adoptive relationships with the same legal rights as biological ones, these statutes included provisions wherein the adoptive parents were legally obligated to "furnish suitable nurture and education" for the child (see, e.g., General Court of Massachusetts, § 5, 1851), thus, codifying some of the previous verbal commitments required in the orphan train movement, changing the legal standing of adopted children from that of other members of the labor force to legally protected children, paving the way for future legislation that would pertain to all children within the nation, and permanently elevating the new adoptive relationship above those formerly seen in apprenticeships.

### *Best Interest Doctrine*

Another important legal development that occurred during this time is similarly reflected in current state laws and greatly affects the role of CPS caseworkers today.

Although reported as early as 1809, it was not until the mid-1800s that states began to focus on and use the “best interests” of the child instead of the needs of society at large as the prevailing doctrine justifying child placement, oversight, and adoption (Askeland, 2006, p. 13). This focus and legal language has continued to this day in what is known as the *best interest doctrine*. Whereas European and English custom and/or early American society endowed the child’s legal parents, private guardians, and/or state custodians with sole discretion in choosing the child’s living conditions (Friedman, 1985), the new American “best interest” doctrine required one to view the needs and best interests of that individual child in deciding the best possible outcome for them (Askeland, 2006). To further aid this movement, the field of social work became a recognized field in the 1890s and with it new and invaluable placement participants, state caseworkers (Shireman, 2003).

#### *Investigative Role of State Caseworkers*

In the early twentieth century new state caseworkers, and specifically those employed by CPS or their state’s equivalent, provided a way for states to ensure that children’s best interests were in fact being upheld and a means with which to protect children whose caregivers failed to do so. These early state caseworkers primarily focused on the safety of children already within the State’s custody as well as those being adopted out of custody (Creagh, 2006). In particular, the caseworkers would oversee foster homes, approve the eligibility of new adoptive ones (Creagh, 2006), and/or enforce a limited amount of child safety laws within the greater public, including laws banning child labor and requiring education for all children (Shireman, 2003). By the latter half

of the twentieth century and the states' enactment of mandatory reporting statutes nationwide, the work of these caseworkers was greatly expanded to include overseeing the safety of all children within the state's geographic territory including the investigation of private referrals of alleged abuse and/or neglect (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b).

While the late 1800s through the first two decades of the 1900s, marked a shift towards state autonomy, as each state was determined to care for their own children by no longer accepting children from other states and/or relocating in-state children elsewhere, the preference for home placements and apprenticeships over orphanages continued (Ross, 2004; Shireman, 2003). As a result, the 1910 official estimate of the number of working children in this country reached an all-time high of nearly two million (Zelizer, 1981). However, that number had fallen to less than 700,000 children just two decades later, due to the new federal laws abolishing child labor and requiring universal education for minors (Shireman, 2003). These new laws marked a significant shift in how society viewed the role of children within its midst. For the first time child labor, particularly within the working classes in America, was regulated and widespread compliance was ensured, primarily through the accomplishment of the new state social workers. Advocates of the sentimentality of childhood considered this shift a major victory (Zelizer, 1981), one that would forever alter not just the rights of children in America but also the field of foster care as a whole.

With the abolishment of child labor, the advent of the Great Depression, and the resulting financial constraints felt by the majority of Americans therein, new state-subsidized foster homes quickly began to replace free foster care placements of the past

(Creagh, 2006). As a result, states expanded the roles of state social workers to include not only monitoring employer and familial compliance with child labor and education laws, but also investigating and overseeing these new state foster care placements (Shireman, 2003). In addition, during this time a growing number of states also began to require an official investigation by one of these social workers into any home interested in adopting a foster child (Creagh, 2006). Thus, even from the inception of their profession the workloads of state caseworkers were vast and perpetually increasing.

Most critical to the history of CPS, as of the mid-1970s the investigative role of state caseworkers grew exponentially to include following-up on the dramatic increase in the number of referrals of child abuse and/or neglect in society at large, while continuing to ensure safe placements for the growing number of children being placed into the State's care (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Creagh, 2006; Shireman, 2003). Coinciding with the medical profession's acknowledgement of child abuse and the obligation physicians and other members of society have to report abuse and protect children from harm (see, e.g., Pfohl, 1977), child protection advocates around the country began lobbying for mandatory child reporting statutes nationwide. While some states in the East and Mid-West heeded this call and passed laws as early as the late 1800s giving private agencies the ability to identify children who were being abused and/or neglected within their homes (Schene, 1998), following Congress's enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 every state across the country that wished to be eligible for federal funding, was required to create broader statutes establishing a universal public mandate to report suspected incidents of child abuse

and/or neglect within their respective jurisdictions (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b).

In an effort to appease the federal government and thereby obtain federal funding, states clamored to do so. Moreover, most of the new state provisions also incorporated, usually verbatim, the federal legislation's specific standards for how caseworkers should respond and investigate reports of child maltreatment (Schene, 1998). As a result, state social workers not only investigated compliance with laws that were external to and readily ascertained outside the home, but when necessary were also permitted to breach the privacy of the home itself. This marked a paramount restriction on the formerly unlimited freedom of parents, particularly fathers, to raise their children in whatever manner they saw fit (Mason, 1994). Advocates of children rejoiced as children's rights expanded to include not only freedom from child labor and access to education but personal well-being and nurturing in their respective homes as well.

### *Creation of CPS*

However, as CAPTA (1974) paved the way for greater child protection, as a practical matter, the implementation of post-CAPTA state laws resulted in the investigative role of state caseworkers as well as the caseload requirement for each increasing dramatically, seemingly overnight (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). As a result, in their efforts to hire more caseworkers to handle these demands, states began to reduce staff qualification requirements from the previous norm of a Master's of Social Work (MSW) degree and to divide caseworker positions into specialized units, including new state CPS offices, nationwide. Thus, although their roots can be traced

back to over a past century of American history, formal CPS units nationwide had their official start in the 1970s, and have since grown to include their present day role and responsibilities as additional acts of federal legislation began to replace state laws in terms of primary importance in the field.

### *Federal Laws and the Expanding Role of CPS*

Although foster care, including the emerging and evolving role of CPS caseworkers, was previously the result of state legislation, falling under the exclusive prevue of each state, since the mid-1970s the federal government has gained in influence as their role shifted from one of relatively unconditional financial support to more incentive-based funding with stricter accountability and oversight (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). Nearly every act of federal legislation has impacted the job of CPS caseworkers nationwide by increasing the job requirements, or workload, performed by the caseworker within each case. Early federal legislation, beginning in 1935 and leading up to the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, aimed at providing financial support to states with little or no conditions attached. However, over time the previously passive federal government became increasingly more proactive in its involvement and oversight of foster care systems nationwide, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, culminating in today's system of federal financial incentives in nearly all areas of foster care, universal requirements in a growing number of areas, mandatory state reporting, and penalties to states that fail to comply with each of these requirements.

During the first four decades of federal legislation in the area of child welfare, the federal government enacted and reauthorized legislation that provided funds to states

while enabling them to retain exclusive power in managing and maintaining their respective foster care systems (Schene, 1998). The most notable developments during this time included: from 1935 to 1967, Title V of the Social Security Act (1935) and its various amendments, later renamed Title IV-B, Child Welfare Services of the Social Security Act (1967) (Child Welfare League of America, 2007); and in 1961, Title IV of the Social Security Act (1961) (Gleeson & Craig, 1994). The Child Welfare Services of the Social Security Act (1967), and its various prior incarnations, expanded funding to states to include matching federal funds to be used for, among other things, payments to non-relative foster caregivers (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). The 1961 Title IV of the Social Security Act gave indigent grandparents, siblings, step-siblings, aunts, and uncles the right to receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments for the care of dependent children in their home (Gleeson & Craig, 1994), not only providing indigent familial caregivers with the means to care for these children, and thus avoid having them placed in state foster care, but also serving as a first formal acknowledgment by the federal government of the important existence of familial care in this country.

#### *Early Federal Involvement: Incentive-Based Support*

During the mid-1970s, with the number of foster children growing exponentially and their lengths of stay in foster care increasing, Congress began to debate about whether the tradition of guaranteed federal funding, with incentives but little to no accountability, actually served to encourage states to place a child in foster care and, once in the system, provided them with little or no incentive to move the child out of state-run



care and into more permanent homes (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). This marked a turning point in the evolution of foster care in America as subsequent legislation would increasingly place restrictions on states and solidify the federal government's role as a major influence on foster care in the future (Schene, 1998). Early acts of federal involvement included: the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974), the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), the 1979 U. S. Supreme Court's decision in *Youakim v. Miller*, and the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980). These developments were generally accepted by states as the need for federal funding increased due to the large influx of new children into the system.

*CAPTA and ICWA.* Early examples of the federal legislature's changing role occurred in the mid to late 1970s. First, in 1974 the federal legislature enacted the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), requiring all states to provide a way in which the public could report allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. This same year Congress held its first hearing that focused exclusively on the states' treatment and apparent mismanagement of Native American foster care children (Hollinger, 2004). These hearings culminated in the federal passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978. ICWA marked an end to federal passivity by establishing firm requirements for states primarily in regards to Native American children (Hollinger, 2004). However, Congress addressed all foster children when it included within this legislation the requirement for states to include the goal of "family preservation" whenever possible as a part of every foster child's permanency planning process (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978). In so doing, the federal government marked the start of their

new more proactive role in overseeing and holding states accountable for the quality of services provided to all foster children, regardless of race, age, or gender.

*Expansion of federal foster care benefits.* The same year that ICWA (1978) was enacted, the federal judiciary also became involved in foster care nationwide by expanding the states' use of federal foster care benefits. In particular, in an unanimous opinion, the United States Supreme Court ruled that states must extend the same federal foster care benefits to kinship care homes as for non-relative foster family homes, provided the kinship care home met the following prerequisites: (1) the home qualified financially to receive funding under AFDC (with the repeal of AFDC, in 2006 Congress changed this requirement to include those eligible under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program), (2) the child was removed due to judicial intervention, (3) a state or county was responsible for placing the child, and (4) the kinship care home met the licensing requirements for foster homes (Testa & Slack, 2002; *Youakim v. Miller*, 1979).

This federal judicial mandate was soon followed by Congress's Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, in 1980, a separate title created under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Title IV-E), wherein Congress allocated additional matching funds to states for use in training their workforce more effectively while also requiring states to place a child removed from his/her home in the "least restrictive" environment (Child Welfare League of America, 2003a; Hardin, 1996). Both of these federal developments, coupled with the "family preservation" requirement of the ICWA (1978), were interpreted by states as the federal government showing a preference for state CPS caseworkers to place children into the homes of their relatives whenever possible (Duerr-

Berrick & Barth, 1994; Gleeson & Craig, 1994). As a result, with the states' increased need for federal funding, states sought to comply with this assumed federal mandate by modifying their policies to place more importance on kinship care placements for foster children, and CPS units across the country adjusted their practices accordingly.

*State response.* As alluded to above, many believe the primary reason behind the states' acquiescence to these early federal acts pertained to the dramatic increase that occurred in the number of foster children during this time, resulting from the public's mandatory reporting requirements of CAPTA (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 1974), and a reduction in the number of available foster homes nationwide (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Dubowitz et al., 1994; Gleeson & Craig, 1994; Lindsey, Martin, & Doh, 2002). For example, following CAPTA's enactment the number of children found to have suffered from abuse and/or neglect from 1976 and 1993 rose by more than 347%, primarily a result of these mandatory reporting laws and CPS caseworkers successfully removing children from harm (Schene, 1998). However, at the same time the system also experienced an overall reduction in the number of children exiting care due to adoption (Schene, 1998), as well as a national reduction in the number of available foster homes nationwide (Berrick et al., 1994; Dubowitz et al., 1994; Gleeson & Craig, 1994; Lindsey et al., 2002). It is unclear what led to this reduction in foster homes, but the increased oversight of these placements by CPS and other state caseworkers as well as the low financial subsidies available to foster parents may have played a part.

As a result of the increase in the foster care population and the decrease in placement alternatives, the system was soon overwhelmed by the number of children needing placements and a lack of resources with which to provide them. Within the

1980s alone the number of foster children in America rose by 49%, from approximately 208,000 at the beginning of the decade to 407,000 at the decade's close (Adoption Institute, 2003). However, the amount of quality foster homes simultaneously experienced a 32% drop during this same period of time, from 147,000, at the start of the decade, to an estimated 100,000 homes by 1989 (Testa & Slack, 2002). Thus, with the increased need for all types of placements, non-relative as well as kinship care, coupled with the promise of federal funding to come, states and CPS units were receptive to the federal government's more proactive role in this area.

*Evolution of Federal Involvement: Increased Oversight and New Mandates*

In contrast, two other pieces of federal legislation, occurring in the mid and late 1990s, were not as well received by states (Lowry, 2004). In particular, Congress's 1994 Amendments to the Social Security Act and what could arguably be the most crucial piece of federal legislation in the area of foster care to date, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, greatly increased both the amount of federal requirements in the area of foster care as well as the conditions placed on states who sought to continue to receive federal funds. To date, these acts of federal legislation alone hold states more strictly accountable for the children they place in foster care and place strict timelines on the amount of time children are to reside in care before being moved towards permanency.

In 1994, Congress amended Title IV of the Social Security Act (SSA) in order to officially authorize the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to perform comprehensive reviews in overseeing state foster care programs. Moreover, the punishments listed within this piece of legislation were so strictly worded at first that any

state DHHS found not to be in compliance with the procedural requirements located within the SSA (1994) and/or the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), were not allowed to remedy the problems before federal funds were withheld (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

Today, DHHS has developed and implemented a comprehensive review system known as Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) wherein states are required to report statistics on any number of areas within foster care, including specific compliance standards set by Congress in the area of CPS, and representatives from DHHS perform on-site reviews to determine compliance for themselves (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007b). For those states found not in compliance, before losing their funding, states are obligated to submit Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), outlining ways in which they plan to comply with these standards in the future. States are given aid through DHHS to meet the goals of their PIPs but failure to do so results in the loss of federal funds. The first review was completed in 2004 with all 50 states failing to comply in one or more areas and having to file PIPs. The second round of reviews began in the spring of 2007, designed, at least in part, for DHHS to determine whether states have succeeded in following through with their respective PIPs.

*ASFA.* One of the most vital pieces of legislation, greatly affecting the role of CPS caseworkers today, occurred in 1997 under the Clinton administration. Specifically, after becoming frustrated with the states' failure to protect some children from harm and/or allowing foster children to languish in state care, in 1997 President Clinton signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). In essence, this law: (1) affirmed the mandate that all states were to ensure that children within their jurisdiction were

protected from harm, thus federally acknowledging the need for CPS units, and/or the services they provide, nationwide, (2) required states to make “reasonable efforts” to locate alternatives to foster care prior to placing a child in state’s custody, a requirement that has primarily fallen to CPS caseworkers, and (3) once in care states were under a mandate to restrict a child’s stay in state’s custody to less than 6 months or actively seek to terminate the legal caregivers’ parental rights and pursue adoption for children who have spent 15 of the last 22 months in foster care (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; Government Accounting Office, 2003). In addition, ASFA created financial incentives for states that moved a greater number of children out of temporary foster homes and into permanent adoptive placements as well as provided post-adoption financial support for adoptive families of special needs children.

*Federal judicial intervention.* In addition to providing strict guidelines to the states, ASFA (1997) has reintroduced another player to the field of foster care, the federal judiciary. In particular, by enacting ASFA and the strict requirements contained therein, the federal government inadvertently helped to facilitate federal class action lawsuits across the country on behalf of current and former foster children who have sought, and/or are still in the process seeking, federal redress for their state custodian’s failure to uphold these mandates. As a result, to date there have been lawsuits in at least 32 states resulting in at least 30 settlement agreements (Bilchik & Davidson, 2005).

For example, in 2001 the State of Tennessee settled a federal class action lawsuit brought on behalf of its foster children, based on the State’s lack of compliance with ASFA, in what is commonly referred to as the *Brian A. Settlement* (State of Tennessee, 2001). Among other things the plaintiff foster children and their advocates were

frustrated with CPS's failure to adhere to the "reasonable efforts" requirement of ASFA and the practice of placing children eligible for foster care or kinship care into more restrictive settings. As a result, due to the ongoing federal oversight of the judiciary into these issues, CPS caseworkers are now under even greater pressure to investigate all adult members of the child's own family as possible placement resources and, in the alternative, to locate foster homes with the appropriate level of supervision and security for each child.

*Most Recent Federal Involvement: CFSIA*

The increase in CPS workloads caused by ASFA (1997) and the problem of turnover within CPS garnered national attention following DHHS's acknowledgement of the scope of the problem after their first comprehensive review in 2002 (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Thus, in an effort to help states expand the number of caseworkers they have serving children under ASFA and to counteract the crisis caused by high turnover rates in CPS units and other caseworker positions nationwide, Congress appropriated additional incentive-based funding for states under the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) (2006). In part, CFSIA provides a total of \$95 million to states by the year 2011, with the majority, or \$40 million, dispersed upfront in 2006, and in conjunction with a required 25% state match; for states to use in recruiting, training, and retaining new caseworkers (Child and Family Services Improvement Act, 2006; Conway & Huston, 2007).

However, CFSIA (2006) explicitly withholds funds from states that fail to meet workforce standards in one vital area, the frequency of caseworker-child visits. While it

is too soon to know what long-term effect, if any, these new funds will have on workforce stability, as of the date of its enactment, or September 28, 2006, those already employed by CPS are under more pressure than ever to maintain regular contact with those children on their caseload. In short, CFSIA dictates that in exchange for providing the states' access to these funds, states are required to use the funds and new caseworker-employees to increase the overall percentage of children who receive monthly caseworker visits (Conway & Hutson, 2007). In particular, according to CFSIA (2006) the goal of every state should be that at least 90% of the children, both those in foster care and those receiving preventative services, receive monthly caseworker visits and that the majority of these visits take place in the child's residence. Moreover, starting in October, 2008, those states that do not make progress toward improving their percentage of visits will face penalties that add between 1 to 5 percentage points to the amount the state is required to match each year.

#### *Overview of CPS-Relevant Federal Mandates in Effect Today*

Thus, the federal legislative and judicial parameters of Child Protective Services (CPS) today and, in particular, the specific tasks given to caseworkers within these units are ever-expanding, established by a constantly increasing field of federal legislation. Table 1 below gives a visual depiction of each of these as well as the time constraints they represent. For example, the federal government dictates that states must ensure that all children within their jurisdiction are protected from harm (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997) and, in doing so, must provide a means in which the public can make referrals of abuse and a procedure with which to investigate these referrals (Child Abuse



**Table 1 – Federal Mandates Pertinent to CPS Today**

<b>Mandate</b>	<b>Source and Date of Mandate</b>	<b>Time Constraints</b>	<b>State’s Interpretation/ Implementation</b>
1. Mandatory public reporting of suspected child abuse and/or neglect	CAPTA (1974)	365 days/year, 24 hr/day	State enactment of CAPTA’s mandatory reporting requirement
2. Statewide system for receiving and investigating allegations of child abuse and/or neglect and removing children from harm’s way	CAPTA (1974)	365 days/year, 24 hr/day	a. Provide toll-free regional or statewide telephone number(s) & formal reporting system and follow-up b. Priority system in CPS response and placing child in state’s custody
3. Importance of family preservation	ICWA (1978)	Prior to removal and throughout child’s stay in state’s custody	a. Implement family preservation services to prevent removal b. Preference for familial or kinship care placements
4. Foster children must be placed and always reside within the “least restrictive” environment possible	Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980)	Prior to removal and throughout child’s stay in state’s custody	Place N/D children in kinship care or non-relative foster care homes whenever possible rather than institutional settings
5. States required to report statistics on compliance with Congress’ standards for CPS tasks, as confirmed via on-site reviews performed by DHHS	Title IV of the Social Security Act (1994)	At least once a year	Greater emphasis and pressure for CPS caseworkers to maintain federal requirements and timeline

**Table 1 – continued**

<b>Mandate</b>	<b>Source and Date of Mandate</b>	<b>Time Constraints</b>	<b>State’s Interpretation/ Implementation</b>
6. “Reasonable efforts” made to locate alternatives to placing and/or keeping child in state’s custody	ASFA (1997)	Prior to removal and throughout child’s stay in state’s custody	Ongoing requirement to locate and investigate possible familial or kinship care placements
7. No citizen shall be deprived of her legal or constitutional rights without due process of law	U. S. Constitution, Fourteenth Amendment	Within days of child leaving caregiver’s home and periodically throughout time in state’s custody	Provide local judicial reviews of child’s removal and on-going state involvement and require CPS testimony as needed at each
8. Reunify child with caregiver or find family alternative that results in child exiting foster care	ASFA (1997)	Within 6 months of child entering state’s custody	Locate and implement any necessary caregiver services while also searching for family alternatives
9. Terminate parental rights and pursue adoption for foster children who have spent 15 of the last 22 months in foster care	ASFA (1997)	15 to 22 months of child entering state’s custody	Begin termination of parental rights proceedings whenever caregiver is in substantial noncompliance of state-provided services and/or after child has been in state’s custody for 12 months
10. Caseworker must attend at least monthly visits with each child on their caseload, preferably within the child’s home setting	CFSIA (2006)	At least once a month	CPS supervisors monitor each caseworker’s compliance with at least once a month visit to each child on her caseload

Prevention and Treatment Act, 1974), as can be seen in the following section, a task which has consistently fallen to state CPS caseworkers. Moreover, while investigating the referral, and in spite of the possible hostility being directed at the caseworker from the caregiver under investigation and/or their family, a CPS caseworker must make every effort to preserve the original family unit whenever possible (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978) and is under time constraints to either reunite that child with their caregiver or seek to find an alternative, permanent placement for the child.

If the CPS caseworker determines that a child cannot safely remain within the home of the caregiver, she must first make “reasonable efforts” to locate, investigate, and establish safe familial or kinship care placement options for the child (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, 1980; *Youakim v. Miller*, 1979), a task that usually requires a great deal of time, patience, and effort to perform; must defend her actions in court; and, from the case’s inception, must work to reunify that child and find alternatives to the child remaining in state’s custody. When familial or kinship care placements are not available, or become unsafe, the caseworker must find the least restrictive placement option available for that child (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997; see also State of Tennessee, 2001).

Under the U. S. Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment due process clause, caregivers who have had their child removed from their custody by a CPS caseworker and placed with the State have the right to a prompt judicial review of that decision. As seen in Table 1 above, most states implement this constitutional mandate by convening a judicial hearing within days of the child’s removal and periodic throughout her stay in state’s custody wherein witnesses, such as the CPS caseworker, testify about the risk of

harm that precipitated the removal and the circumstances that necessitate the child remaining in state-run care (see, e.g., State of Tennessee, 2007a). Caseworkers of children placed in the State's legal custody are also federally mandated to make every effort possible to reunite the child with their caregiver and family within 6 months of being placed in state-sponsored care, while at the same time seeking other alternatives to foster care throughout those 6 months, such as placing the child in a relative's legal custody, and/or seek to terminate the legal parents' rights regarding the child and make the child eligible for adoption (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997).

Moreover, regardless of whether the child remains in their original caregiver's home, is placed with relatives, or resides in non-relative foster care, the best interests of the child and/or specific federal legislation requires caseworkers to ensure that the child is enrolled in and regularly attends school and receives any other necessary services, such as medical and/or counseling (Askeland, 2006); and the caseworkers must have an in-person meeting with each child on their caseload, preferably within the child's actual placement setting, at least once every month (Child and Family Services Improvement Act, 2006).

## CHAPTER IV

### GENERAL PROCEDURAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CPS CASEWORKERS TODAY

Within the broader parameters of the federal legislation mandates relevant to foster care systems in this country, states are individually responsible for developing detailed steps and procedure that enable it to comply with the federal requirements while at the same time maintaining and overseeing their respective foster care systems, systems involving state-created agencies such as Tennessee's Department of Children's Services (DCS or Department), Georgia's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), or Mississippi's Department of Human Services. The world of child welfare and child protection can be difficult to understand, full of confusing jargon, paperwork, and procedural twists and turns that can leave children, novice parents, and caseworkers alike feeling lost and powerless (see, Reich, 2005). One way in which to reduce or eliminate this confusion is to examine the steps and procedure CPS caseworkers follow in investigating each new case. Even though the numerous policies developed by states and their respective agencies may differ somewhat one from another, the federal parameters placed on each cause these systems to be more alike than not (see, e.g., Schene, 1998). As a result, to gain an even greater understanding of the daily work requirements of a Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworker, this section provides a detailed description of the general procedure followed by states whenever allegations of child abuse and/or

neglect are reported, with particular attention given to the role of CPS caseworkers. Whenever helpful, examples are given of one state in particular, the State of Tennessee.<sup>2</sup>

### *Case Inception*

Prior to a child becoming a ward of the State, there are several steps that must first take place. Each of these steps involves the state agency that oversees child welfare within the state's jurisdiction, such as Tennessee's DCS, complies with the federal dictates listed above, and is specifically dictated by state law and resulting policy procedures developed by the agency. These initial phases of the case include at least one anonymous referral from a concerned member of the public, a state agent deciding on the appropriate priority level of the allegation in order to determine the best way to follow-up and respond, and the assignment of a CPS caseworker to proceed as needed in investigating the case.

### *Intake and Anonymous Referrals*

First, falling within the purview of the federal government's mandatory public reporting statutes of the 1970s (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 1974), every state designates a procedure by which public referrals and allegations of child abuse and neglect are received; either through a statewide toll-free telephone number, as is the case in Tennessee, or via local contact information for each region of the state. These state laws require all private citizens within each state to make a referral when they suspect child abuse, with teachers and medical professionals under an even greater obligation to

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<sup>2</sup> The use of Tennessee as a reference here and throughout this paper stems from my personal familiarity with state law and procedure in Tennessee and is not intended to be indicative in any way of where the data in the study were collected.

do so (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-403). The referent's identity is kept strictly confidential, but if volunteered by the referent, it is noted in the state computer file and made known to the caseworkers later assigned on the case so that they can follow-up and personally interview the referent if necessary. Even if it is provided by the referent and included in the file, all caseworkers involved in the case are required to keep the identity of the referent strictly confidential. Each allegation is then screened by a state representative, either within local state offices or at a single centralized location, to determine whether or not an investigation needs to be opened.

For example, in Tennessee the centralized intake office, located in Nashville, receives all of the calls and referrals for the entire state via a toll free telephone number (State of Tennessee, 2007a). A representative of Tennessee's central intake office then screens each referral based on the severity of allegations contained within the referral itself, the State's past history with the family, and the strength of reliability of the referent. Nationally, the terminology used to describe these referrals is "screened-out," "screened-in," and "report" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). If it is determined that an investigation is not warranted, the referral is "screened-out," or it is noted in state computerized files but the case is closed without further involvement. Examples of "screened-out" referrals would be those that include facts that do not amount to child abuse or neglect, instances where not enough information is known on how to contact and follow-up with the child and family, and/or cases involving a history of past unfounded referrals from parties embroiled in a contentious child custody dispute. For those that warrant further investigation the referral is "screened-in," is considered a "report," and proceeds to the next step in the process.

In order to better understand the magnitude of the process nationwide, in 2005, there were approximately 3.3 million referrals for child abuse and neglect, involving over 6.0 million children, made throughout the year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Of those referrals, 38% were “screened-out” leaving approximately 1.35 million referrals to be followed-up on by the respective state agency. Overall, the total number of referrals, both “screened-out” and “screened-in,” has increased with states in 2005 reporting 73,000 more referrals than the year before. Within the State of Tennessee approximately 60,000 referrals were investigated statewide during this time, with the majority occurring in urban counties (State of Tennessee, 2006). This is an increase of approximately 3,000 referrals from the previous year in the state (State of Tennessee, 2005; State of Tennessee, 2006).

### *Prioritizing*

“Screened-in” referrals, also known as reports, are ranked on their level of priority before forwarding them to a local caseworker unit. For example, Tennessee has a three-tiered ranking system, with Priority 1 being the highest (State of Tennessee, 2007a). Each priority ranking requires different response times by the subsequent caseworkers. Priority 1 referrals must be acted upon within 2 hr for urban counties and 3 hr for rural; Priority 2 referrals must be responded to within 48 hr; and Priority 3 referrals must receive attention within 5 calendar days. The clock starts for each of these response times the minute the in-take call is received. After the priority level has been set, the case is transferred to the local office charged with conducting the actual investigation of the referral.



Due to their high level of referrals, most units located within urban counties only service that county, such as Tennessee's Davidson County DCS unit, whereas rural units have lower levels of referrals and are responsible for overseeing a larger region usually comprised of several counties, such as Tennessee's Mid-Cumberland office of DCS that oversees all of Rutherford, Williamson, and Maury Counties, hence the longer response time for rural Priority 1 referrals (State of Tennessee, 2006). While the priority ranking and response times are dictated by policy, within the State of Tennessee, they are derived from state law requiring constant CPS availability, 24 hr and 7 days per week, to investigate incoming reports of abuse and/or neglect (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-406), which are in turn based on the federal government's CAPTA requirements (1974) outlined previously.

#### *Assigning the CPS Caseworker*

Once the referral is given a priority ranking and transferred to the local office, the case is assigned to a specific caseworker within that office for follow-up. Some local state offices have a single large pool of caseworkers that handle both case investigations as well as long-term case work within their area. However, most states separate these functions into different caseworker units, with caseworkers employed within Child Protective Services (CPS) units charged with conducting the initial investigations and along-term caseworkers responsible for handling cases after the initial investigative part of the case has concluded (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b).

In every state and locale in this country, and at any given day and time, CPS caseworkers are on-call and/or in the field conducting investigations. The CPS

caseworker's primary concern in all cases is to be the safety of the children. The pertinent federal requirements that caseworkers must follow to accomplish this task include the dictate that if a child is in "imminent risk of harm" then action must be taken to protect that child (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997). However, as you recall from the previous section, the federal government's Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) also mandates that caseworkers make "reasonable efforts" to keep children with their caregiver and family if possible. Frequently these two mandates are at odds with one another, placing CPS caseworkers in the difficult position of having to balance one against the other. As outlined in the following stage of the procedure, one state policy solution is to provide CPS caseworkers with the means with which to enable a child to stay with their caregiver and/or not enter the foster care system, provided the caseworker successfully implements sufficient safeguards that serve to protect that child outside the system.

### *CPS Investigation*

Once the case has proceeded through the initial stages and a caseworker has been assigned to investigate the case, the job of the CPS caseworker is of paramount importance. It is largely the responsibility of the individual CPS caseworker, with the advice of her supervisor and the state legal representative, to meet the response time dictated by the priority level of the report, initiate the investigation into the allegations, and decide on the best route to protect that child from further harm and/or neglect (State of Tennessee, 2007a). This may include closing the case after deciding that no further action is warranted; keeping the child in the home of his caregiver, but having the

caregiver agree to implement certain guidelines and requirements; allowing the caregiver to voluntarily place the child with a relative or family friend, again while also agreeing to follow certain dictates; or involuntarily removing the child from the home of her caregiver and placing her in state's custody. However, regardless of the priority level of the report or the subsequent action taken, the CPS caseworker is required to actively investigate every case, and make a determination as to her initial assessment of each case within the first 30 days of receiving the referral.

### *Initial Assessment*

After receiving a referral, depending on the specific allegations in the case, CPS investigations require caseworkers to conduct extensive field work at a variety of locations (see, e.g., University of Tennessee, 2004). This may include going to hospitals to meet with doctors, police departments to speak with detectives, schools to interview children and/or teachers, homes to speak with caregivers, and/or other settings to meet with various service providers, such as family counselors or probation officers. Moreover, depending on the priority level of the case, and the amount of time that has elapsed since the referral was first made to the in-take officer, the CPS caseworker may receive a case in the middle of the night or early hours of the morning and have to immediately start her investigation in order to ensure she meets her response time and the child is protected and kept safe.

As a result, in the course of her employment a CPS caseworker is frequently called upon to venture into high crime areas at all hours of the night, face long periods of time while awaiting a police escort, and, throughout the course of her employment, may

be exposed to unhealthy and/or unsafe environments, such as the threat of violence or grossly unsanitary living conditions, such as those found in homes where methamphetamine is being manufactured. In addition, a CPS caseworker who is herself a parent of young children, and who is on-call while her children are in her care, must make private arrangements for her children to be supervised by others, enabling the caseworker/parent to adequately respond to each case. This may be particularly hard on a single parent/caseworker, a caseworker with a spouse or partner that works nights or weekends, and/or someone who lacks strong personal support systems. Moreover, this aspect of employment may disrupt the lives of the caseworker's family on at least a monthly basis and cause the caseworker, her children, and/or other relatives or loved ones to be concerned over the caseworker's personal health and safety.

After conducting interviews, home studies, and site visits CPS investigations end in a variety of ways. If the case is "unfounded," that is the caseworker finds no basis for the allegations or there is not enough information included in the referral in order to locate the family and/or proceed with their investigation and no additional services, such as counseling or help attaining Medicare, are needed, the investigation is noted in the state computer system, the CPS caseworker completes the requisite administrative forms and requests permission from her immediate supervisor to close the case (see State of Tennessee, 2007a). If the caseworker determines that the allegations of abuse and/or neglect are "indicated," or likely to have occurred, and there is enough information with which to proceed, the case remains open and additional action is taken.

### *Safety Plans*

In Tennessee, when a CPS caseworker determines that the allegations are indicated but a child can safely remain with a caregiver or family member without a transfer of legal custody to the State, she executes a “Safety Plan,” also known as an “Immediate Protection Agreement,” with the caregiver (State of Tennessee, 2007a). A Safety Plan is a signed agreement between the caregiver, relatives, and caseworker that delineates safeguards for the child and subsequently is made enforceable as a court order by the judiciary involved in the case. Safety Plans include items such as a caregiver agreeing to keep an alleged abuser away from the child at all times and/or attending weekly parenting classes, to relatives agreeing to keep the child temporarily, as a familial care placement, while a caregiver/legal custodian receives in-patient drug treatment and counseling. In order to comply with the protection afforded legal caregivers under the nation’s Fourteenth Amendment due process clause, Tennessee CPS caseworkers have 5 days after signing a Safety Plan before they are required to submit paperwork to their respective legal department, who then files the necessary paperwork with the local court to make the Safety Plan an enforceable court order.

### *Removals*

If a Safety Plan is not possible, either due to the unwillingness of the caregiver, the unavailability of adequate safeguards, and/or the irrevocable violation of a previous Safety Plan, and the child is still in “imminent risk of harm,” as delineated by the federal government via ASFA (1997), the CPS caseworker removes that child from her caregiver, temporarily transfer legal custody to the State, and uses “reasonable efforts”

(Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-166) to try and locate a responsible relative with which to place the child (State of Tennessee, 2007a). If no relative can be found and the child needs to be placed in a non-relative foster home, the CPS caseworker “removes” that child from her caregiver’s legal and physical custody and drives her to an emergency placement, usually a foster home that houses children for the first 24 to 48 hr of their time in state’s custody, before finding her a more permanent location soon thereafter (University of Tennessee, 2004).

### *Safety Plans v. Removals*

Safety Plans and Removals differ in two very significant ways. First, while the legitimated caregivers in either situation retain parental rights in respect to the child, in the case of Removals legal custody is transferred to the State. Legal custody is broader in scope than mere physical custody of a child, or the exercise of actual physical care and control of the child, in that it entails not only the legal right to decide the child’s specific residential placement but also the best care and treatment for the child in the areas of education, medical treatment, mental health services, and/or any other individualized services the child may require (TCA § 36-1-102(24)(A) and TCA § 37-1-140). Moreover, the requirement of the State assuming legal custody of a child prior to their placement in foster care is true regardless of that child’s subsequent foster placement, despite whether it is with relatives or non-relatives.

After losing legal custody of the child, the child’s caregiver still retains parental rights, provided the caregiver is listed as a legal parent on the child’s birth certificate or has been found to be the child’s legal parent previously by a court of law. In contrast to

legal custody, parental rights pertain to the right to have regular visitation with the child, to be regularly apprised of the child's progress, and the right and responsibility to contribute financially to the child's care (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 36-1-102(38) and Tenn. Code Ann. § 36-2-101 to § 36-2-322). However, once legal custody is transferred to the State, the legal parent/caregiver loses the right to ensure that the child resides with her, someone of her choosing, or even within her immediate vicinity or region, the fundamental ability to direct the child's school placement, and any necessary provision of medical and/or mental health services (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-176).

Thus, while parental rights are important, the rights included within legal custody are paramount in terms of the child's day-to-day life. For example, laws of the State of Tennessee dictate that when the State is the child's legal custodian, the State alone has the right to decide the best, specific residential or treatment placement for the child (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-128(c)(4)). Moreover, this holds true even if everyone else involved in the child's case disagrees with the State's choice. This power differential frequently places the state representative, the CPS caseworker, in an isolated position from the rest of the parties, including most often the child's original caregiver, but unless it can be proven that the State's choice presents harm to the child in some way, this decision is not reviewable by anyone outside of the Department, including the judicial court involved in the case (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-176).

As a result, the discretion given to the State, and their CPS representative, frequently places a CPS caseworker, particularly in the case of Removals, in the unenviable position of being a focus of hostility and blame from the child's previous caregiver and/or family members; as by its very nature the caseworker's job causes her to

sit in a place of judgment; for example, deciding whether a caregiver is providing a home that is sufficiently safe for the child, selecting and approving a new residential setting for the child, and making other service decisions to which the child's caregiver may not agree. Thus, the issue of caseworker safety is brought into play not only at the beginning of a case, when caregivers and their families are informed of the state investigation resulting in a possible removal of the child from the caregiver's home, but also as the case evolves and caregivers realize more and more the lack of power they have over their child's daily life.

Second, while the amount of paperwork required for both Safety Plans and Removals is extensive, the timeframe for submitting paperwork for Removals is narrowed due to the federal mandate to have a court promptly review the decision to transfer legal custody to the State. In Tennessee, as with most of its counterparts, state law dictates that a parent or guardian is entitled to a court hearing within 3 days of having her child removed from her care (Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-128). Thus, whereas a CPS caseworker executing Safety Plans has 5 days to submit their paperwork, once a Removal has occurred, CPS caseworkers in Tennessee have 24 hr in which to draft and submit paperwork to their state's local legal department that, among other things, details the investigation to date, the reasons for the Removal, and includes an affidavit swearing to the caseworker's compliance with ASFA's (1997) requirements, including the "imminent risk" to the child and the "reasonable efforts" that the caseworker made in order to try and avoid having to place the child in foster care and/or with non-relatives (State of Tennessee, 2007a). The state legal department then files the paperwork in court within 48 hr of the removal and the case is heard by the next business day.



### *Judicial Involvement*

By state law, based upon the due process protection provided by the Fourteenth Amendment (U. S. Constitution), each case involving a Safety Plan and/or Removal must be presented to the local judiciary within a certain set period of time. The initial judicial proceeding, or Preliminary Hearing, allows the court to review the actions of the CPS caseworker and formally approve, alter, or reverse the decision to implement a Safety Plan and/or Removal (see, e.g., State of Tennessee, 2007a). However, the work of a CPS caseworker continues up to the time of the hearing, as she proceeds in her investigation of the case and arranges to meet formally with the parties involved. Once the hearing is concluded, the work required of the CPS caseworker depends in large part on the court's decision in the case.

### *Prior to the Preliminary Hearing*

In addition to meeting with many of the parties and service providers individually, before a Preliminary Hearing for a Removal takes place the state caseworker may convene the family and all of the various other participants in the case at a formal meeting. This may occur in cases involving Safety Plans as well, but are more common, and are actually required via some states' policies, in cases where Removals have taken place (see, e.g., State of Tennessee, 2007a). This meeting usually includes the child's caregiver, foster parent/relative caregiver, parent's attorney, Guardian ad Litem (or state-appointed attorney/advocate for the child), CPS caseworker, and private service providers. The points discussed at the meeting center on the needs of the child and the assurance that all of the interested parties have a chance to meet face-to-face with one

another. The actual events that led to the Removal are purposely not the focus of the meeting, due to the ongoing investigation and the rights of the caregiver, especially if the caregiver's attorney is unable to attend the meeting.

In Tennessee this meeting is referred to as a Child and Family Team Meeting (CFTM) (University of Tennessee, 2004). The CFTM usually takes place in a Department of Children Services (DCS) conference room and is facilitated by another DCS employee, referred to as a CFTM Facilitator. The Facilitator starts the meeting and leads it throughout, however the CPS caseworker is responsible for finding a time that is convenient for everyone's schedule, including the Facilitator's, reserving the conference room, and informing all of the participants of the time and location of the meeting. If there are parties who are not able to attend, for example a legal parent that lives out of state, the Facilitator may attempt to include that person via conference call equipment.

#### *Preliminary Hearing and Possible Outcomes*

The first court hearing in a Removal or Safety Plan case is commonly referred to as a Preliminary Hearing. Among other things, the Preliminary Hearing is primarily a chance for caregivers to challenge the decision of the CPS caseworker in removing the child from their home and/or restricting the caregiver's behavior. At this time indigent caregivers are usually given the opportunity to have counsel appointed to represent them, although this tends to occur more often in urban counties than in rural ones (Rauber & Granik, 2000). In addition, the children, regardless of their age, are appointed a Guardian ad Litem (GAL), or an attorney that makes sure the best interests of the child are being presented to the court. Some older children, who either disagree with their GAL or who

may have criminal delinquent or unruly allegations brought against them, may also have an additional attorney appointed to represent them, or someone who does not necessarily argue for the child's best interests but for what the child wants to occur.

Due to state statutory requirements, Preliminary Hearings are fairly routine in both structure and procedure; however, there are a variety of possible outcomes that may occur at the conclusion of the hearing. Many Preliminary Hearings are waived by caregivers in cases involving Safety Plans (Rauber & Granik, 2000), wherein the caregiver foregoes the right to have the CPS caseworker testify and explain her actions and the right to put on her own witnesses to refute either the allegations contained in the initial referral and/or the steps taken by the caseworker to date. Moreover, while the caregiver can ask the court to alter one or more aspects of the Safety Plan, most caregivers consent to having the original Safety Plan made a formal order of the court, enforceable by the court's powers of contempt in the future (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 29-9-103). In so doing, if the caregiver violates the Plan, for example by inviting the alleged perpetrator back into her home, the court can immediately remove the child and/or hold the caregiver in contempt of court, punishable by jail time and/or a monetary fine.

In the case of Preliminary Hearings for Removals, as with Safety Plans, the caregiver can waive their right to challenge the decision of the CPS caseworker in removing the child, wherein the court signs a court order granting the State permanent legal custody of the child (Rauber & Granik, 2000). Other items may also be included in this order such as an agreement on visitation between the parent, child, and/or siblings, particularly whether the visits need to be supervised and if so by whom, how often they

occur, and at what location(s) they take place; an order concerning any possible child support paid by the caregiver to the State; and finally any additional items that may need to be enforceable by court order, such as random drug screens of the parent.

In the alternative, the caregiver can request a hearing in which she challenges the decision of the CPS caseworker; wherein the caseworker and possibly the parent and/or other witnesses testify and are subject to cross-examination. Following the Preliminary Hearing the judge can either affirm the caseworker's decision by denying the parent's request to have the Removal overturned, or disagree with the CPS caseworker's actions and order the children returned to their caregiver's home and custody (Rauber & Granik, 2000). If the decision is overturned by the court, the case alleging abuse and neglect continues against the caregiver but she is allowed to retain legal and physical custody of the child as the investigation and court proceedings continue to run their course. The court usually also orders additional safeguards, such as a stay away order for an allegedly abusive boyfriend and/or random drug screens for the caregiver, thus resulting in what is akin to a court-ordered Safety Plan.

#### *After the Preliminary Hearing and Long-Term Case Outcomes*

For a child who has been removed from her caregiver's custody and placed in state's custody, following the Preliminary Hearing she is appointed a long-term foster care caseworker. In Tennessee this person is known as a Child and Family Services (CFS) caseworker (State of Tennessee, 2007a). The Child Protective Services caseworker transfers the case to the new CFS caseworker, who assumes responsibility for monitoring the child and family. The Child Protective Services caseworker continues to

investigate the allegations as the case proceeds to trial against the caregiver, but the CFS caseworker provides direct services and contact with the family, child, foster parent(s), school, service providers, etc. If the child was not removed and placed in foster care but kept in her caregiver's home with a Safety Plan, the Child Protective Services caseworker may be required to provide direct services to the family themselves while continuing to investigate the case, or state policy may dictate that they transfer the case to a different caseworker unit for non-custodial children who, similar to a long-term foster care/CFS caseworker, will continue to monitor the case and provide family services for up to 6 months, leaving the CPS caseworker primarily responsible for the investigation.

Up until 2007, in Tennessee, cases involving non-custodial children were transferred to a caseworker within the local Family Support Services (FSS) unit. However, in 2007 the State moved to disband FSS units statewide and include their services within Child Protective Services' list of responsibilities under a program known as Multiple Response System (State of Tennessee, 2007b). Thus, in cases involving non-custodial children, Tennessee Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers serve in a similar capacity as CFS caseworkers in providing direct family services, as outlined in the court-ordered Safety Plan, making visual contact with the child at least once a month as required by the federal government (Government Accounting Office, 2003), ensuring that the child's needs are being met either by their placement caregiver, and all the while still continuing to investigate the case for trial.

Child abuse and/or neglect cases can resolve themselves in a number of ways. Following the conclusion of a CPS investigation and a final court adjudication on the allegations, a case involving a child who was never placed in state's custody but was

protected via a court-ordered Safety Plans may be resolved by the court dismissing the Safety Plan due to a change in circumstances, transferring legal custody of the child to the child's relative caregiver, or the continuation of the Safety Plan with future court reviews scheduled. For a child placed in state's custody, the most common long-term outcome is for her to return to the home and legal custody of her caregiver. In order to do so, the CFS caseworker can transition the child home on her own and/or request the court's approval to do so, a mandatory requirement when the caregiver was found guilty of sexual or aggravated child abuse (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-167), via extended home visits. After successful home visits, if the State believes a child can be safely returned to the legal custody of her caregiver, It then seeks a court order relinquishing the State of both legal and physical responsibility of the children (see, e.g., Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-179). Other possible long-term outcomes for a foster child include being placed in the legal custody of a relative, adoption, or remaining in state's custody and foster care.

Unfortunately, regardless of the final outcome placement, a child who experiences child abuse and/or neglect, and who may or may not have been placed in state's custody as a result, is at risk of experiencing further harm in the future. For example, in 2005 only 19 states nationwide reported meeting the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS's) national standard for absence of maltreatment recurrence for those children who had been at least indicated to have suffered abuse and/or neglect within the first 6 months of the year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Moreover, DHHS found that of the 25 states reporting on the issue in 2005, 28.7% of all children found to have suffered from child abuse and/or neglect within these states, or an

estimated 125,000 children, had received family preservation services within the previous 5 years, and 8% of the victims, or approximately 35,000, had been housed in foster care and received reunification services within this same time frame. Thus, many children are being placed in harm's way again once the State's intervention comes to an end and it is common for a CPS caseworker to have subsequent investigations involving the same child and family in the future.

## CHAPTER V

### NEGATIVE OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH CASEWORKER INSTABILITY

With all of the problems facing Child Protective Services (CPS) today it is no surprise that turnover within child welfare units, and specifically CPS, is a major problem in this country. Recent Government Accounting Office (GAO) (2006) reports list the inability of states to recruit and retain quality caseworkers as a primary challenge facing foster care systems today. Similarly, a leader in the field of child welfare, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) holds that there is no greater issue facing the area of child welfare than that of high caseworker turnover, and as such chose to focus on improving child welfare workforce stability and training as a major part of its legislative agenda for 2007.

Studies into the outcomes associated with caseworker turnover have found that, due to current working conditions, turnover out of these positions may actually benefit the individual employee (see, e.g., Wright & Bonett, 1992); however, the consequences to the children left behind can be dire. Specifically, in addition to the financial costs associated with the problem, studies into how the high rate of caseworker turnover may affect children within the foster care systems reveal a number of serious outcomes associated with the problem of caseworker turnover including: (1) delays in CPS investigations and removing children from harm, (2) a reduction in the number of caseworker visits with children (Government Accounting Office, 2003), (3) children receiving fewer services while in state-run care (Unrau & Wells, 2005) and (4) children



possibly remaining in state's custody for longer periods of time (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006) and experiencing a reduced likelihood of being reunified with their family of origin if/when they do exit care (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Ryan et al., 2006). Moreover, there is some evidence to indicate that African-American children may be at an even greater risk than children of other ethnicities in experiencing some or all of these outcomes (Brown, 2005).

### *Increased Financial Costs*

As a preliminary matter, the financial costs associated with caseworker turnover are immense. The seeming revolving door of caseworkers in each state comes with a large financial cost as states are forced to constantly recruit and train new employees. In particular, a study conducted in 2000 attempted to calculate the financial expense associated with CPS caseworker turnover and estimated that *each occurrence of turnover* costs each state a minimum of \$10,000 (Graef & Hill, 2000, emphasis added), amounting to the average CPS turnover rate costing states an estimated 2.25 to 2.5 million dollars every year. This is money that states could be spending on direct services for children and families, including preventive services and those aimed at reducing the amount of recidivism, instead of constantly having to use it to replenish the supply of available caseworkers. However, more important than the financial costs associated with the states' low rate of employee retention, due to the vital role played by CPS caseworkers in overseeing the area of child safety, high rates of turnover in these units in particular can have even more costly results.

### *Child Safety at Risk*

When the CPS workforce is not stable and/or a CPS caseworker is not effective in performing her job and fails to remove a child from harm, the consequences could be dire. Ultimately, a child who is not protected from the harm associated with abuse and/or neglect faces a risk of dying from her injuries. Each year approximately 2 out of every 100,000 children die as a result of abuse and/or neglect in America (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Moreover, a child most at risk of dying as a result of abuse and/or neglect, or 77% of all child fatalities, is under the age of 4 years old; or particularly vulnerable to this risk due to her age and limited social interaction with individuals outside her home.

Tragically, an estimated 12% of child/victims that perish every year, or approximately 4 children in every state, have had prior contact with their state's local CPS unit within the previous 5 years (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). However, the CPS caseworker assigned to in each case chose not to remove the child from her caregiver's home; a decision that unknowingly resulted in tragedy. In 2003, the GAO reported that one-third of the 27 states they reviewed cited instability problems within the workforce as a primary impediment to a caseworker's ability to provide protective services to children remaining in their caregiver's home (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Thus, the stakes are high; the need for discovering more evidence-based ways to stabilize the workforce within CPS could not be stronger, and if fulfilled, will hopefully result in helping to prevent such tragedies in the future.

### *Reduction in Caseworker Visits*

Next, the high rate of caseworker turnover is positively associated with a reduction in the number of caseworker visits performed with respect to each child in state-run care (Government Accounting Office, 2003). In comparing units with high and low caseworker turnover, a 2005 study estimated that an employee of a low turnover agency spent approximately one-half of a day more per week on direct service contact with each child and family on her caseload than those in high turnover systems (Strolin et al., 2005). Moreover, when focusing on caseworker visits with children, the DHHS reports that in 2005 nearly every state required each caseworker, including CPS caseworkers who have allowed children to remain at home with family preservation services, to visit every child on their caseload a minimum of one time per month (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007a), a national requirement as of the federal government's 2006 enactment of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA). However, when requested by DHHS, only 20 states were able to prove whether or not this standard was actually being met. As a result, the failure on the part of 30 states to prove that the minimum amount of caseworker contact was indeed taking place was one of the critical findings cited by Congress in 2006 when they enacted the stricter requirements and penalties included within CFSIA (Child and Family Services Improvement Act, 2006). Also, after an in-depth examination of the issue, the GAO cited excessive caseworker turnover and vacancies, and the resultant increase in caseloads for those who actually remain on the job, as the primary causes of this failure on the part of caseworkers (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Thus, high turnover appears to

affect the ability of even the most loyal of employees in effectively ensuring each child's safety and well-being.

### *Fewer Child and Family Services Provided*

Similarly, the inability of foster care systems to retain caseworkers is positively associated with foster children receiving fewer services while in care (Unrau & Wells, 2005). In a longitudinal study of foster children performed by Unrau and Wells (2005), the researchers followed 44 children throughout 3 years in care and found that those with higher reports of caseworker turnover and reassignment were more likely to receive fewer services from their newly assigned caseworker than those who kept their same caseworker throughout their stay in foster care. The particular services studied included a caseworker participating in the minimum number of service planning meetings each month, keeping monthly or bi-monthly contact with foster parent(s), contacting and/or visiting the child's family of origin each month, providing therapeutic services for the child, and attending requisite judicial hearings.

While this study focused exclusively on long-term foster care caseworkers, similar services are supposed to be provided by many CPS caseworkers nationwide for children who remain with their family of origin, usually with the implementation of a Safety Plan, with the CPS caseworker continuing to monitor and supervise the situation for at least an additional 6 months in each case (see, e.g., State of Tennessee, 2007a). Thus, although more studies need to be performed, ideally with larger samples of children, in order to confirm this outcome in regards to CPS turnover, CPS workforce

instability is likely to pose a similar risk with regard to this negative outcome in the life of a foster child.

### *Longer Stays and Reunification in Jeopardy*

Other possible outcomes associated with high caseworker turnover pertain to a child's length of stay in foster care and the likelihood of her being reunified with her family of origin when/if she is discharged from state's custody. For example, in 2006, Ryan and colleagues reviewed the case files of over 5,700 foster children within a single state's system. The researchers found that, on average, each child experienced 2.5 changes in her assigned caseworker throughout her time in state's custody, with 46% of the children experiencing 3 or more caseworker changes. In analyzing the data, the researchers found that caseworker turnover significantly increased the likelihood of each child remaining in state's custody for a longer period of time and significantly decreased the likelihood of her being reunified with her family of origin upon exiting care.

In looking at each of these results individually, one gains even greater insight into the negative ramifications associated with caseworker turnover. First, the danger posed to a child remaining in state's custody for longer periods of time can be immense. For example, the longer a child remains in foster care, the more likely she is to experience repeated foster care placements and the negative outcomes associated with them (Wilkes, 1992). Research shows that a child who experiences prolonged periods of "limbo," or placement instability marked by repeated moves from one placement to another, is more likely to suffer from more persistent psychological problems including, but not limited to: anxiety disorders, attachment disorders, conduct disorders, and/or a lack of social and

emotional development (Leathers, 2002; Penzerro & Lein, 1995; Rothe, 1985). Moreover, regardless of her placement stability, a child remaining in state's custody for longer periods of time is more likely to experience teenage pregnancy and be in need of public assistance in the future (Cook, Fleishman, & Grimes, 1991).

Second, while at least one study indicates that a child who is reunified with her family of origin is, among other things, at greater risk of engaging in criminal activity than those who remained in care and/or were discharged into different settings (Zimmerman, 1982), other research points to a considerable number of negative outcomes associated with a child's inability to reunify with her family of origin. For example, numerous studies have found that a child who does not reunify with her family of origin and ends-up transitioning out of foster care as an adult is more likely not to have graduated from high school or obtained their GED, be unemployed, and/or experience periods of homelessness within the first 2 to 4 years of her discharge (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1996; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Zlotnick, Kronstadt, & Klee, 1988). Thus, the personal costs facing each child in state's custody as well as the long-term societal costs associated with those who remain in care for longer periods of time and/or fail to be reunified with their family of origin are likely felt long into the future.

### *Enhanced Racial Disparities*

Finally, within the foster child population, some studies reveal an increase in the severity of at least some of these outcomes in regards to African-American youth, when compared with similarly-situated Caucasian children. Although African-Americans 18-

years-old and younger constitute an estimated 15% of the general population of children in the United States (U.S. Census, 2000), they represent approximately 32% of the children currently residing in foster care, 26% of those entering care each year, and 36% of those waiting to be adopted (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006b). Studies into the racial disparities within the foster care population have found that an African-American child, once placed in state's custody, experiences significantly longer stays in state-run care and is less likely to be reunified with her family of origin than her Caucasian counterparts (see, e.g., Ryan et al., 2006).

Moreover, another study, supported by a federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) fellowship grant, found that high levels of caseworker turnover significantly increases the likelihood of a CPS caseworker's decision to place African-American children into state's custody while it actually serves to decrease the likelihood of similar Caucasian children being placed into care (Brown, 2005). Thus, while more follow-up studies need to be performed in order to confirm the disparities reported for these outcomes, as well as examine the possibility of similar disparities with regards to the other negative outcomes included above, studies to date reveal that an African-American foster child is likely to suffer a dispirit level of negative outcomes than her Caucasian counterparts as a result of instability in the State's caseworker workforce.

## CHAPTER VI

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE ISSUE OF CASEWORKER TURNOVER

Due in large part to the high financial and societal costs associated with caseworker turnover, for years researchers have attempted to explore what issues may contribute to the problem. While it is important not to ignore the work of my predecessors it is also important to note two common shortcomings that affect the ability to generalize many of these studies' findings. First, studies performed on the issue of caseworker turnover include one of the following dependent variables: (1) actual turnover/retention rates, or (2) the employee/participant's reported intention to leave. As a result, researchers have either gathered data on actual turnover/retention rates within an organization, either through examining personnel files or by employing longitudinal study methods wherein subsequent phases of data-gathering included compiling statistics on how many participants left their positions since Phase 1 was conducted (see, e.g., Wright & Bonett, 1992), and/or they focused their attention on the employee's intention to leave, which can be measured more simply via cross-sectional design methodology (see, e.g., Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006).

This is an important distinction in that while an employee's intention to leave has been found to be the strongest predictor of actual turnover, with a 2005 study finding that even after controlling for other variables a caseworker who simply contemplates leaving decreases the likelihood of her remaining by over half (Smith), it is not indicative of turnover in every case. The cross-sectional methods commonly employed to measure the



caseworker's intentions can only record her feelings at a certain set period in time and thereby run the risk of failing to capture the larger picture; a caseworker can always change her mind and/or she could fail in her attempt to find other employment and thereby actually solidify her position with Child Protective Services (CPS) over the long-run. Thus, studies that use this as their sole measure of turnover face an important limitation in that while they may be examining a strong predictor of turnover, they are not measuring turnover itself.

A second important limitation is that prior research focusing on CPS caseworkers as a unique group is scarce with the bulk of research to date including samples of all state caseworker-employees, supervisors, and/or additional non-caseworker staff, such as court liaisons, secretaries, receptionists, or other support staff. As was revealed previously in this paper, the role and responsibilities of a CPS caseworker, dictated by strict federal and state legislation, and the oftentimes hazardous and/or heart-rending working conditions she faces combine to make CPS employment unlike any other. Thus, studies that include all state employees or caseworkers within their sample, without further differentiating between these subgroups, fail to take into consideration the varying job descriptions and experiences within this diverse group and are similarly limited in that their findings may not be generalized to CPS units in particular. Each study that focused on CPS caseworkers in particular is noted in this paper's subsequent review.

With these serious caveats in mind, studies into possible contributors to caseworker turnover to date have found a number of employee-based predictors, or those characteristics unique to the individual employee, that are worth noting, as well as

organizational-based contributors, or those within the scope of the agency as a whole; both of which carry important implications for future research and practice.

### *Possible Employee-Based Contributors*

First, employee-based predictors of turnover have been found in the following areas: the employee's personal characteristics, including age, gender, parenthood, race, level of employment, length of tenure, previous experience, and/or level of education (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Nissly, 2004; Strolin et al., 2005); the employee's perceived amount of job stress, job dissatisfaction, and/or emotional exhaustion or burnout (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Wentzy, 1994; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998); and the caseworker's commitment to the job (Munn, Clifton, & Fritz, 1996; Odimba, 2003; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). Each of these is important to the field of research and lends credence to psychological theory's position that personal contributors play an important part in a caseworker's decision to leave.

### *Employee Demographics*

First, studies examining what effect, if any, an caseworker's personal characteristics have on turnover have found a number of demographic predictors, including those salient to the employee (i.e., age, gender, marital status and/or sources of external social support, parenthood, and race) as well as those more invisible in nature, such as her educational and/or professional experience.

*Visible demographics.* In regards to a caseworker's personal demographics, it is unclear whether age is a strong predictor of turnover. For example, in a metaanalysis of 25 articles on turnover within child welfare, social work, and human service positions, Mor Barak and her colleagues (2001) found that younger employees were more likely to leave than older employees, although no specific age ranges were given by the researchers. However, an earlier study focusing on CPS caseworkers in particular found that age was not a statistically significant predictor of actual turnover (Balfour & Neff, 1993). A third study, also focusing on CPS caseworkers, found age to be a significant contributor to turnover when the younger employee also had a low amount of experience in the field (Ryan et al., 2006). Thus, it may be actual length of experience and not age that is predictive of subsequent turnover. The study focused on herein takes this into consideration by focusing on caseworkers of different tenure lengths throughout the study's phases.

Other visible demographic variables, some of which were noted in this paper's own study, had similar effects on turnover but mostly indirectly. For example, although gender did not significantly predict turnover, a caseworker who had children at home was at greater risk of turnover, especially if the caseworker was female (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Marital status, though not directly related to turnover, may be an indirect contributor as well, as the 25 studies reviewed by Mor Barak and her colleagues revealed that married employees were more likely to be less stressed, more satisfied with their job, and feel more socially supported than their unmarried counterparts. Even more specifically, another study found that those caseworkers who were separated, divorced, or widowed reported lower levels of social support and an increased vulnerability to

turnover (Nissly, 2004). The study focused on herein provides greater insight into this area by going further than the demographic data themselves and examining in greater depth the way in which a CPS caseworker's work and home life collide; for example, the child care arrangements required of a CPS caseworker whenever she is on-call and faces leaving her home during nighttime or weekend hours to conduct an investigation.

In addition, other studies on the relationship between visible caseworker demographics and turnover found that those workers who were different from the majority of others employed within their workforce, either due to race, gender, or age, were at higher risk of turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2006). Another study into racial diversity confirmed this finding when the researchers found that agencies with high turnover were significantly less likely to be racially diverse than those with low caseworker turnover (Strolin et al., 2005). Thus, over time one would expect to find homogeneity within the individual caseworker unit and worksite. While this paper's study delves below this surface finding and expectation, a cursory examination of the study's data appears to support this finding in that the majority of the study's participants were of the same gender (female) and race (African-American).

*Invisible demographics.* Other more invisible demographic predictors of turnover pertain to the employee's professional and educational background and include their level of job obtainment, length of tenure, previous experience in the field, and level of education. First, according to the 2001 metaanalysis of Mor Barak and her colleagues, the higher the job level a caseworker has within the organization, the less likely she is to leave. This may be true due to the employee's subsequent increase in pay, prestige, and/or both that comes with higher job positions. Next, as found in the Curry et al.

(2005) study involving age and its indirect effect on turnover via level of experience, Mor Barak and colleagues (2001) point to an apparent inverse relationship between length of tenure and turnover with those with less time on the job being more likely to leave. Moreover, this finding coincides with the GAO's 2003 report that revealed the average CPS caseworker tenure to be less than 2 years (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Another study confirmed this finding in regards to CPS in particular when it found that those with previous experience in the field, even as minimal as an internship, were significantly more likely to stay than those with no experience at all (Balfour & Neff, 1993).

Finally, when comparing those with Bachelor's degrees, particularly Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) degrees, to those with Master's of Social Work (MSW) degrees, many studies revealed that those with an MSW degree were significantly more likely to leave employment than those with a BSW degree (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Curry et al., 2005). This may be the case due to the increase in the number of job alternatives for those with higher degrees, but the possible reasons behind the relationship have not been adequately researched to date. However, the finding itself is especially important in light of the matching funds provided every year to states by the federal government under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (1980) that states have used, at least in part, to help support those caseworkers interested in obtaining their MSW degree while employed for the State (Government Accounting Office, 2003). As such, the study that serves as the primary focus of this paper examines the educational attainment of CPS caseworker-participants, both past and pending, and how many caseworkers have received partial or full compensation from the state employer. In the

future more research needs to be conducted into what effect low pay and/or other variables may have in regards to the job termination decisions of the specific subgroup of caseworkers who have attained their MSW degree, in order for states to employ methods aimed at retaining these individuals once they receive this higher degree.

### *Job Stress, Dissatisfaction, and Burnout*

A second area of employee-based predictors includes the caseworker's personal level of job stress, dissatisfaction, and burnout. Job stress has consistently been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of the strongest correlate to turnover, a caseworker's intention to leave (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Moreover, the level of stress caseworkers experience is significantly affected by their level of education, as caseworkers with Master's degrees report experiencing lower levels of stress (Nissly, 2004). Similarly, the same study found that those caseworkers experiencing conflict with their supervisor and/or about to undergo a change in supervisors were significantly more likely to experience job-related stress than those who were not.

Unlike job stress, which appears to affect an employee's intention to leave but not actual turnover, job dissatisfaction has consistently been found to be a strong predictor of both a worker's intent to leave as well as actual turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Those work conditions that tend to contribute to job dissatisfaction in caseworkers include lack of resources on the job, experiencing less rewarding work conditions with minimal success in achieving case goals for a child and/or family, lack of social as well as supervisor support, and heavy workloads. Other research indicates that job satisfaction, or lack thereof, does not significantly differ between CPS supervisors and caseworkers,

and thus, does not improve once an individual is promoted from caseworker to supervisor (Yang, 2004). Finally, some research suggests that the only strong buffer between job dissatisfaction and turnover is the lack of other available employment alternatives for the employee (see, e.g., Strolin et al., 2005), thus placing urban county CPS units, which tend to have more employment options, at an even higher risk of turnover than their more rural counterparts.

Emotional burnout is another employee-based predictor of turnover. Burnout occurs after prolonged periods of stress, can cause problems both personally and professionally for those suffering from it, and those particularly predisposed to suffer from it include those within the human services field since they tend to be empathetic, idealistic, altruistic, and overly committed to the service of others (Wentzy, 1994). As a result, burnout has received a great deal of attention from researchers in the field and has been consistently found to contribute to both poor workplace morale as well as actual turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001). For example, in order to examine the effect of burnout on actual turnover, a 1-year longitudinal study involving 52 urban social workers employed quantitative measures to survey the participants at Phase 1 and gathered actual turnover data a year later at Phase 2 (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). As a result, researchers found that while emotional exhaustion was unrelated to the caseworker's reported level of job satisfaction, it was significantly associated with both the caseworker's performance and subsequent turnover.

### *Job Commitment*

Finally, studies reveal that a caseworker who does not feel committed to her specific job and/or the children or families she serves is more likely to leave her state's employment than a caseworker who feels invested in her work (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Odimba, 2003; see also Ellett et al., 2007). In particular, researchers have typically measured job commitment by examining three core areas, including whether the employee: had values and beliefs that are akin to those of the organization, possessed a willingness to do more than her fair share in order to aid the organization, and expressed a desire to stay with the organization (Mor Barak et al., 2001). As a result, a number of studies into these areas found that a lack of job commitment was directly related to actual turnover as well as indirectly through its effect on an employee's intention to leave and job dissatisfaction. In particular, a group of researchers found that job commitment's greatest effect on turnover was strongest through its effect on other factors, such as job stress (Munn et al., 1996). For example, Munn and her colleagues found that a lack of job commitment promoted ambiguity in the employee about her role within the organization and was likely to significantly increase the employee's amount of stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnt-out.

As a way to counteract the direct and indirect effect of job commitment, another study focused attention on caseworkers participating in a Title IV-E funded educational program through their agency (Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). As a result, the researchers found that regardless of her individual commitment level, a caseworker who was contractually obligated to work off her educational stipend after obtaining her degree was 52% less likely to leave than before she started the program. Moreover, since length of



tenure may be predictive of retention, this study holds important implications for the expanded use of educational stipends in exchange for mandatory service. One possible way of increasing employee's actual job commitment level may be through the use of financial incentives. For example, another study revealed that overtime pay, an organizational-based contributor mentioned below, may help to increase a caseworker's level of commitment to her organization and, therefore, reduce the likelihood of her voluntarily terminating her state employment (Balfour & Neff, 1993).

#### *Possible Organizational-Based Contributors*

In addition to employee-based contributors, research to date has highlighted a number of organizational-based factors that may contribute to caseworker workforce instability. These possible contributors hold more promise to organizations, since many of them are within the organization's locus of control, and some may also serve to buffer the effects of the employee-based contributors listed above. As such, these contributors have received the most research attention to date and include: high caseloads (Curry et al., 2005); high workloads (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbel, Geen, & Markowitz, 2001); low rate of pay (Government Accounting Office, 2003); ineffective job training (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Curry et al., 2005); and/or lack of supervisor support (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Other job-related factors that may also contribute, but have received less attention to date include: exclusionary and/or unjust organizational practices (Mor Barak et al., 2006), staff shortages, the risk of violence associated with the job, and negative public perception and media coverage (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Government Accounting Office, 2003).

### *High Caseloads*

CPS caseworkers are notorious for having both high caseloads and high workloads, however, though many within the field point to both as strong predictors of turnover, a thought echoed by the State Commissioner of this paper's study unit in a subsequent section herein, prior research into the strength of the association between these problems and caseworker turnover is still unclear. Although similar, caseload refers to the actual number of cases each CPS caseworker is responsible for investigating and/or monitoring, whereas workload is defined as the amount of time needed to perform the tasks on each case (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). As was revealed in previous sections of this paper, large caseloads have long been an issue facing CPS units across the country following the federal government's enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, and the new mandatory reporting laws that went into effect nationwide as a result (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). Moreover, as federal legislation and oversight have grown, so has the caseworker's workload on each case (Government Accounting Office, 2003). As such, both of these issues have received some attention from researchers but due to the conflicting results from studies to date, more research needs to be done into what degree they contribute to the problem of workforce instability within CPS units nationwide.

First, since states are now required to report an increasing amount of information to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in order to maintain federal funding each year, today more is known nationally about the problem of high caseloads than ever before. For example, in 2005 DHHS reported that of the 41 states that had submitted information to the agency in the area of caseworker caseloads, the average

number of “screened-in” cases per CPS caseworker ranged from a low of 32 cases, in the State of Alabama, to a high of 217 cases, in Utah, for the year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The state in which this paper’s study unit is located ranked in the top five highest, with each CPS caseworker in the State’s employ responsible for investigating 124 cases that year, or conducting an estimated 2.5 new investigations every week, while still continuing to perform all other job tasks, including but not limited to: investigating ongoing cases from previous weeks and months, attending mandatory court proceedings, visiting each child on her caseload within each placement setting at least once every month, and monitoring services for 6 to 12 months for those cases where a child remains in her caregiver’s legal custody. Moreover, although each individual county’s average is not reported, since the majority of investigations are conducted within urban counties in each state, where they also tend to have the most job vacancies (see, e.g., State of Tennessee, 2006), the investigation rate for caseworkers within those CPS units is likely even higher.

As a result, following their analysis of the 2002 Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs), or the formal review process conducted by DHHS into each state’s compliance with federal standards in regards to child welfare and safety, in 2003 the GAO reported that “staff shortages, high caseloads, and worker turnover were factors impeding progress toward the achievement of federal safety and permanency outcomes” (Government Accounting Office, 2003, p.19). Unfortunately, there is not yet a federal standard pertaining to the recommended number of cases per caseworker, but the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) suggests a manageable caseload for CPS caseworkers, who only investigate cases and do not also implement family preservation

services, should not exceed 12 cases per caseworker at any given time (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). After interviewing managers in one state, the GAO reported that some caseworkers were required to manage double the number of cases recommended, making it burdensome for them to effectively meet all of their requirements on each case (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

As a result, following the findings of CFSRs in 2002, most states were obligated to submit Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), in part to outline ways in which the states planned to reduce caseloads in the near future (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). However, approximately four years after these PIPs were filed more than half the states continued to list high caseloads as one of the issues most critical to their agency, and 35 state officials maintained that high caseloads were a main impediment to recruiting and retaining caseworkers (Government Accounting Office, 2006).

Unfortunately, research performed by others into the association between high caseloads and turnover within CPS have had mixed results. For example, while two cross-sectional studies, one performed in 1994 (Wentzy) and another in 2007 (Ellett et al.), both of which did not differentiate between CPS and non-CPS caseworkers in their sample, found high caseloads to be a strong predictor of turnover, supporting the GAO findings (2006); another recent study focusing exclusively on CPS caseworkers contradicts these results (Curry et al., 2005). In particular, the 2005 study by Curry and colleagues was longitudinal in design and involved 406 CPS caseworkers employed across 13 county offices, both urban and rural, all within the same state organization. After analyzing the data, the researchers actually found that high caseloads were associated with an increase in employee retention. The study found that those

caseworkers who had left voluntarily, for reasons other than retirement, prior to 7 years, or the last phase of the study, managed an average of 16 cases per day, whereas those still employed by the office after 7 years managed an average of 21 cases on any given day.

In an effort to understand the basis of these findings, the authors suggest the unexpected result may have been caused by the unit's supervisors assigning more cases to those caseworkers with longer experience on the job, supported by the fact that the study found job inexperience to be significantly related to turnover (Curry et al., 2005). It is also possible that the effect of high caseloads is indirect, rather than direct, in nature through its positive association to employee stress and/or job dissatisfaction (Wentzy, 1994), two other possible predictors of turnover mentioned above, and that experience somehow buffers the effect of caseloads as they pertain to these two variables. Regardless, at the very least these contradictory results highlight the danger in making assumptions and/or relying solely on anecdotal evidence when examining turnover in CPS units. Additional research needs to be done to examine the issue of high CPS caseloads, how they relate to turnover rates, and what aspects may serve to ameliorate any negative direct or indirect effects they have on workforce stability.

### *High Workloads*

Although frequently confused with caseloads, a caseworker's workload pertains to the amount of attention that caseworker is required to devote to each case (Child Welfare League of America, 2007), an issue that has grown in importance with the increase in federal oversight and case requirements over the past three decades (Malm et al., 2001). Many caseworkers complain that with each additional act of federal

legislation and/or federal judicial oversight pertaining to the foster care system in this country, the job of CPS becomes more burdensome and increasingly difficult (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

Due in large part to the new reporting and procedural requirements of the federal government, an evolution that was highlighted in greater depth in previous sections of this paper, CPS caseworkers report that currently more of their time is spent performing administrative tasks than in actually meeting with children or investigating cases (Government Accounting Office, 2003). For example, in its study of four state systems, the GAO found that some caseworkers estimate spending between 50% to 80% of their time completing paperwork, including but not limited to extensive case notes, legal documentation for court documents, affidavits attesting to their compliance with the Adoption and Safe Families Act's (ASFA) "reasonable efforts" requirement in attempting to locate alternatives to foster care, and replicating data in the case of multiple siblings. The problem has escalated so much in at least one of the states studied that caseworkers now report having to complete more than 150 forms for each child on their caseload.

Similarly, the 2001 metanalysis conducted by Malm and her colleagues found that caseworkers reported an overwhelming amount of paperwork and administrative tasks, such as attending numerous court hearings, required in each case. This study was fairly unique in the field in that, while it did not focus on CPS caseworkers specifically, it did involve qualitative methodology consisting of case studies in 12 states followed by semi-structured interviews. When asked about the workload requirements for each case, the participants in the study detailed an increase in the amount of time they had to spend in

court as a result of ASFA's (1997) requirements, which included specific mandates regarding earlier and more frequent court involvement.

Caseworkers in other studies echoed those of the Malm et al. (2001) project and reported having insufficient time in which to conduct home visits and other investigative tasks essential to allowing them to make well-informed decisions in removing a child and placing them in foster care or allowing them to stay in the home with services (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Moreover, many caseworkers reported having to work overtime in order to complete many of the additional administrative tasks assigned to them. As a result, some agencies involved in the study provided overtime compensation to these caseworkers, in vacation days rather than added pay, but the caseworkers reported being reluctant to use this time-off due to the mounting paperwork that would be awaiting them when they returned.

As a result, the study conducted by Strolin et al. (2005) examined the strength of the association between turnover and, among other things, the amount of time a caseworker was required to spend participating in direct service, for example visiting children and families, completing paperwork and administrative tasks, and attending court proceedings. In comparing the two cohorts in the study, those systems with low turnover and those with high turnover, the researchers found no significant difference in the percentage of time a caseworker spent doing any of the tasks, with the exception of direct service. A caseworker employed by a low-turnover system was more likely to report spending a larger percentage of her week engaging in direct service tasks, for example, meeting with children, service providers, and/or families, than a caseworker in

systems with high turnover. Thus, a caseworker's ability to spend more time on direct services may increase the likelihood of her deciding to stay employed by that agency.

Moreover, even though this study indicates that other workload tasks may not be a direct contributor of the problem of turnover, similar to escalating caseload levels, high workloads may contribute to individual-based predictors of the problem, such as job stress, employee dissatisfaction, and/or burnout. However, unlike caseloads, studies to date on any possible direct or indirect effect high caseloads may have on high turnover rates are few in number and have not focused on CPS caseworkers individually. As such, more research needs to be conducted before anything can be stated more conclusively.

#### *Provision of Education and/or Training in the Field*

In tandem with the increased caseloads that occurred after the enactment of increased federal legislation in the 1970s, and the resultant demand for new CPS caseworkers, most states desperate to hire new employees reduced their employment qualifications (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b) and in turn implemented in-house training programs in hopes of increasing caseworker competency and employee retention. As a result, whereas before this legislation a Master's in Social Work (MSW) degree was a common requirement for each caseworker across the country, today only Hawaii has maintained this standard, with most states hiring caseworkers with a Bachelor's degree of any kind, and fewer than 15% of child welfare agencies requiring their caseworkers to hold at least a Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) degree (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Thus, to date less than one-third of those employed by child welfare agencies nationwide have had any formal social work



education (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b), and the majority of those who hold social work licenses do not choose to work in child welfare or family service fields (Government Accounting Office, 2003b).

Studies into what effect, if any, social work education has on work performance have found that those with either a BSW and/or MSW degree ranked higher in competency and performance than those with degrees in any other area (see, e.g., Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990). Several studies have reported that those with a BSW were more likely to stay employed at CPS than those with other Bachelor's degrees (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). Thus, in an effort to prepare and equip caseworkers with little to no formal social work education for the difficult job of CPS, states frequently use the matching funds under Title IV-E to implement training for both new caseworkers as well as some requiring ongoing training and/or accreditation for all caseworkers employed within the unit (Government Accounting Office, 2003). As subsequent sections of this paper reveal, the study included herein considers the scope of this issue within a CPS unit by examining each participant's educational attainment, both past and pending, as well as how many caseworkers sought or are currently seeking partial or full state compensation for higher degree programs.

Studies to date focusing exclusively on CPS caseworkers and the effect training may have on turnover report mixed results. For example, while a 2005 study revealed that those new caseworkers who receive adequate levels of training tended to stay with the organization longer (Curry et al.), yet another study found that training was not significantly associated with employee retention (Balfour & Neff, 1993). A possible explanation for this discrepancy may be in the quality of the training itself. For instance,

in their discussions with caseworkers and supervisors throughout four different states, the GAO reported that the majority of new caseworker training was insufficient to adequately prepare new caseworkers for the field and, as such, posed a serious risk for future children's safety (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Similarly, in a 1998 survey of its membership, the American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees (AFSCME), a union organization representing over 13,000 child welfare workers in 10 states, found that at least half of its members felt the training offered by their agency was not adequate. High caseloads and workloads may aggravate the problem as well, as while new recruits face difficult transitions to field work, neither supervisors nor other caseworkers have reported feeling capable of providing on-the-job-training due in large part to their own caseload demands (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Thus, likely contributing to the fact that turnover rates remain the highest for those with less than two years of tenure with the organization (Balfour & Neff, 1993).

Moreover, the news may be just as troubling for on-going training initiatives. For example, researchers report increased rates of turnover associated with more requisite training for those caseworkers with higher amounts of experience (Curry et al., 2005). Thus, training may actually have a negative effect on employee retention possibly due to its effect of adding to a caseworker's already large workload. However, despite this finding, many states have not fully evaluated the effects of their training programs and yet have continued to invest a great deal of funding into implementing more accreditation and/or training initiatives throughout their agencies every year (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Anecdotal reports from state officials report a positive effect on recruitment and retention resulting from state accreditation programs (Government

Accounting Office, 2003), however at least one study's review of an agency's use of training in an effort to counteract turnover fell far short, with no significant effect on the probability of turnover reported (Balfour & Neff, 1993). Thus, more attention needs to be given to the issue, in part, so that states can make better informed decisions about training initiatives in the future.

### *Rate of Pay*

Although it seems logical to assume the existence of a positive relationship between low rate of pay and high turnover within CPS, particularly in light of the large amount of anecdotal evidence, recent quantitative and/or qualitative studies into the issue are limited in number and have produced contradictory results. After meeting with state directors in the four study sites, the Government Accounting Office reports that every participant conveyed the same struggles in recruiting and retaining caseworkers and supervisors (Government Accounting Office, 2003). The state officials believed a primary obstacle to stabilizing their workforce pertained to the low level of pay available for their employees. Moreover, a Texas county official reported entry-level caseworker pay to be approximately 32% below that of a first year teacher. This may be deserving of further examination since a similar look at Tennessee's pay rate reveals that an average starting teacher salary is approximately \$5,000 higher than that of a first year CPS caseworker (American Federation of Teachers, 2005; State of Tennessee, 2006).

However, while a 1994 study found that pay was the strongest predictor of turnover (Wentzy), two more recent studies found that at most pay may be indirectly related to turnover, through its effect on job satisfaction (Brown, 2005; Strolin et al.,

2005). Specifically, a recent study examined the relationship between salary and the intention to leave within the field of child welfare as a whole by comparing state units with high and low rates of turnover (Strolin et al., 2005). As expected the agencies with higher turnover rates had significantly lower salaries and the employees reported significantly lower satisfaction in regards to salary than those agencies with lower turnover. However, surprisingly, the study revealed that salary was not a significant predictor of an employee's intention to leave in either of the two cohorts.

Similarly, two other studies provide some additional evidence of at least a weak association between rate of pay and turnover. First, a study focusing on pay and/or promotion satisfaction found no statistically significant relationship between these variables and subsequent turnover (Smith, 2005). However, although they did not measure the strength of the association between pay and other variables, the authors did note that the direction of the relationship between pay and turnover, while not significant, indicated a trend effect. A 2007 exploratory study of caseworker retention (Ellett et al.) also found rate of pay to be one of a number of factors mentioned by participants as something that could lead them to leave state employment and/or social work altogether.

In contrast, a study into the issue of whether the availability of overtime pay and/or benefits significantly predicted turnover yielded a more direct relationship between them (Balfour & Ness, 1993). After reviewing the personnel files of 171 caseworkers, Balfour and Ness found that caseworkers who were not able to supplement their income and/or other benefits, such as vacation time, by accumulating overtime were more likely to leave their position within a child welfare agency than those who were allowed to do so. Thus, this study's results appear to confirm the association anecdotally

espoused by state officials in the GAO report (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Although more research needs to be performed on this issue, ideally from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, it appears as if rate of pay may play a significant role, either directly and/or indirectly, in staff turnover, especially in those units in which overtime is not allowed and/or discouraged.

### *Level of Social Support*

In contrast to low pay, a possible contributor to CPS turnover that has received a great deal of attention both nationally and internationally (see, e.g., Gibbs, 2001), and subsequently noted in this paper's study findings as well, pertains to what level of social support within the work place, primarily supervisory support, is available to caseworkers. First, studies regarding coworker support find that those who remain employed at child welfare agencies report significantly higher levels of support from work peers than those who leave (see, e.g., Mor Barak et al., 2001). In particular, those most likely to stay in child welfare employment report higher coworker support in terms of listening to work-related problems and being willing to help the employee effectively do their job, than those who decide to leave.

Although peer support is important, next to intention to leave, lack of supervisor support is the most commonly cited variable associated with turnover and retention (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). Supervisors within CPS units are responsible for performing a number of tasks including: assigning cases, monitoring caseworker progress, providing feedback and advice to caseworkers as needed, emotionally supporting the caseworkers, addressing any unforeseen problems that arise,

and helping caseworkers make decisions about cases (Government Accounting Office, 2003), including whether or not to remove a child from their home and place them in foster care. Many studies have examined both the perceived level of effectiveness of the support as well as the amount of available support itself. However, in regards to both of these variables, the results have been mixed.

On one end of the spectrum, a 2005 (Smith) study that examined what effect supervisor support had on employee turnover consisted of two phases of data collection, in-person surveys followed by collecting staff retention data 15 to 17 months later. A total of 296 employees participated, over one-third of which worked for CPS units; employed by 1 of 12 different county child welfare agencies, each with reported high rates of turnover within their overall region. At Phase 2, 76% of non-retiring participants remained employed by their respective agencies, a turnover rate of 24%. Smith found that while the amount of perceived support within the organization as a whole was not significantly related to increased job retention, individual reports of supervisory support were. Moreover, the relationship was so strong that each standard deviation increase in reported supervisor support increased the odds of job retention by 46%. Other studies reveal that this relationship may be even stronger for female employees, with a female caseworker choosing to stay employed by her state employer more likely to report receiving supervisory support than her male counterparts (Mor Barak et al., 2001).

Similarly, a study conducted by Curry et al. (2005) examined the turnover decisions of 400 CPS employees and what role the availability and expertise of supervisors played in those decisions. In particular, Curry and colleagues found that low supervisor support was significantly associated with a caseworker's voluntary decision to

leave, regardless of the employee's own length of experiences. Interestingly, when examining what effect, if any, experience level had on perceived amount of supervisory support the researchers discovered that more experienced workers were significantly more likely to perceive less supervisory support than those with lower levels of experience. Other studies have found similar results, wherein those with Bachelor's degrees report receiving more support than those with Master's degrees or higher (Mor Barak et al., 2006). Thus, studies indicate that those with low levels of experience most likely to stay perceive a high amount of supervisor support. As can be seen in later sections, the study that serves as a focus of this paper considers this important issue of supervisor support while also examining other more under-researched areas of support, both within the workplace, such as colleague support and greater organizational-level support, as well as from sources outside of the workplace, such as social support provided by significant others and/or family members.

#### *Other Possible Organizational-Based Contributors*

Other factors that may affect caseworker turnover, related to the job tasks and organizational practices of CPS units, that are just starting to receive attention from researchers, pertain to: unjust organizational practices, staff shortages, risk of violence, and negative public perception and media coverage. Despite the lack of researcher attention given to these issues to date, at least two of them, caseworker safety hazards and negative media coverage, are of particular relevance to CPS and, as can be seen in later sections herein, were commonly noted in this paper's study as well.

First, a recent study on the relationship between unjust organizational practices and caseworker turnover within the child welfare included a mixed method design, that is both quantitative and qualitative methods, administered over two phases (Mor Barak et al., 2006). Questionnaires in Phase 1 were followed by a limited number of interviews in Phase 2, with only 8% of the participants from the first phase included in the second. The researchers found the strongest direct organizational-based predictor of intention to leave was the organization's practice in excluding caseworkers from the decision-making process. This issue was also found to contribute indirectly to the problem through its relationship with other employee-based predictors of turnover, such as job commitment (Mor Barak et al., 2001). In short, this study indicates that those caseworkers who feel unjustly excluded from the decision-making process may be significantly more likely to lack a strong commitment to the job and plan to leave the organization in the future.

### *Staff Shortages*

Next, research has shown that staff shortages may contribute indirectly to the problem of turnover through their effect on employee workloads, as remaining caseworkers routinely have to assume responsibility for the cases of exiting caseworkers, some of which may have been mishandled and require additional time to correct (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). What is still unclear is whether or not job vacancies are themselves a direct contributor to turnover, as has been indicated in research involving other child service professions, such as child care professionals, where turnover itself appears to beget turnover (see, e.g., Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). This is particularly interesting when each state's DCS Commissioner routinely turns over with each



gubernatorial administration, thus effectively modeling turnover in the organization from the highest level down. However, while staff shortages have been shown to affect turnover indirectly through their effect on caseworker caseload and workload levels, to date more research still needs to be done into what direct relationship they may have with turnover itself.

### *Safety Concerns*

Third, as can be seen in this paper's study findings, an ongoing risk of suffering violence and personal harm is a daily dilemma for many CPS caseworkers. In particular, as a result of their 1998 survey, a labor union representing caseworkers across northern states (AFSCME) reports that throughout its 10-state, 29-agency membership, 70% report caseworkers being threatened and/or actually suffering from violence while attempting to perform the duties of their job. In addition, it appears that the threat of violence as well as the level of violence is increasing, particularly in the South. For example, in October 2006 a caseworker aide and 15-year-veteran with child services in Kentucky died while in the course of conducting a home visit (Smith, 2006). Similarly, in March 2006 a CPS supervisor in Texas was killed after receiving threats of violence as a part of her job (Arnold, 2006). As a result, caseworkers in at least one state view the threat of violence as so high that they believe their job should be eligible to receive hazard pay, similar to law enforcement personnel (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Moreover, AFSCME reports that at least one of their affiliates has even provided its workers with bullet-proof vests (1998).

A study involving professions with similar safety issues allows for valuable insight. In particular, in 1989 researchers investigated the effect physically dangerous work had on participant police officers (Jermier, Gaines, & McIntosh). The study found that the risk of harm posed by the participants' daily work environment was related to a significant increase in emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction with pay, and feelings of bitterness towards their employing organization. However, unlike CPS caseworkers who frequently face feelings of stigmatic alienation from the public-at-large and who do not have the same safety protections given to the police, the participants in Jermier et al.'s study found that their social status as police officers and the feelings of mastery they had over the physical danger posed by their job also led to feelings of job enrichment, significance, and personal dignity. This is likely not the case for CPS caseworkers, but more studies need to be performed before it can be definitively stated one way or the other.

Although only colloquial evidence has been gathered to date, indications of the strength of the association between the risk of violence and turnover can be seen through the GAO's review of a state's peer exit interview program, revealing 90% of all exiting caseworkers had experienced verbal threats of violence, 13% were threatened with weapons, and 30% suffered actual physical attacks (Government Accounting Office, 2003). In addition, officials in all four of the state organizations visited by the GAO reported struggles in recruiting and retaining caseworkers especially when other occupations, such as teaching, offered safer working conditions. These reports indicate a possible positive relationship between risk of violence and a caseworker's decision to leave. The study focused on within this paper provides greater insight into this under-

researched area while also considering the possible effect the concerns of others, such as a caseworker's loved ones, may have on her decision to remain employed by CPS.

### *Public Image and the Media*

A final possible organizational-based predictor of CPS turnover, similarly noted in this paper's study and subsequent sections herein, pertains to the negative public perception and media coverage of child protective service agencies within each state. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) reports that poor public image of CPS, as well as the level of disrespectful treatment caseworkers receive from judges and legal personnel, may affect the agency's ability to recruit and retain caseworkers (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; see also, Malm et al., 2001). With respect to media coverage, CWLA (2002) found that most media coverage involving child welfare agencies is usually poorly researched and imbalanced.

Despite media's frequent inaccuracies, work performed by Malm and colleagues (2001) revealed the effect media coverage, particularly media reports of child fatalities where the agencies were involved with the child prior to her death, had on agency practices, each caseworker's workload, and the level of referrals received. In particular, the researchers report that states frequently responded to negative media coverage and public outcry by quickly implementing widespread changes in how CPS caseworkers conduct their investigations. Many times these changes in policy led to additional paperwork requirements and/or judicial hearings, serving to amplify caseworker workloads. Moreover, states represented in the study also reported that media coverage affected caseload levels by increasing public awareness of child abuse and neglect and

resulting in more referrals for investigations. Thus, media coverage at a minimum appears to amplify the effect of other contributors to caseworker turnover, and may be a direct contributor to the problem as well.

### *Overview of the Limitations of Previous Research*

Before concluding the literature review it is important to note three glaring shortcomings in the field, one of which was mentioned earlier, but bears repeating, and all of which this paper's study was designed to address. These include: (1) the lack of studies that focus on CPS caseworkers and supervisors individually, particularly those employed within urban county units, rather than compiling results on all of those employed across various job positions, units, and/or regions of the state; (2) the repeated use of the same quantitative measurement tools, usually written questionnaires executed outside the presence of the facilitator, that tend to measure the same finite number of variables; and (3) an almost single-minded focus on quantitative methods to the exclusion of qualitative.

### *Lack of Focus on CPS*

First, as was noted earlier, most studies to date on the issue of caseworker turnover included all child welfare workers in their sample, a diverse group with unique roles and responsibilities, rather than focusing on how the contributors may affect specific subgroups of caseworkers, such as those working for CPS units (see, e.g., Ellett et al., 2007). As you recall, CPS caseworkers are the states' front-line responders when children are suffering and/or at risk of suffering abuse and/or neglect while in the homes

of their caregivers. As such, they are forced to face unique challenges and working conditions on a daily basis that most other child welfare staff do not. Thus, it is logical to assume that those within CPS may experience the problem of turnover and its various contributors in a unique way as well. However, most researchers have failed to acknowledge the diversity within the child welfare field and have either failed to conduct studies with samples of only CPS caseworkers and/or supervisors, or differentiate between the various sample subgroups within their study results.

Moreover, of those who have chosen to focus on CPS employees, the studies were frequently limited in that they included no personal contact with caseworkers but rather a second-hand review of the caseworker's personnel files (see, e.g., Balfour & Neff, 1993), CPS caseworker samples that failed to differentiate between rural and urban county employees (see, e.g., Curry et al., 2005), and/or samples of CPS supervisors only to the exclusion of those most vulnerable to turnover, the caseworkers themselves (see, e.g., Odimba, 2003). Finally, informal government studies and those reviews performed by advocacy groups (see, e.g., Government Accounting Office, 2003; see also American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees, 1998), while providing valuable anecdotal evidence, have not served to bridge this gap in the field of research. This paper's study aimed to address this limitation by including study participants who were all employed within the same CPS unit, located within an urban metropolitan county in the southeastern region of the United States.

### *Repeated Use of Same Measurement Tools*

Second, previous studies into the issue of turnover have been greatly limited in the respect that they have tended to be cookie cutters of each other, with the repeated use of the same quantitative measurement tools, usually written questionnaires executed outside the presence of the facilitator. As alluded to earlier, the common practice employed by most researchers into the issue of caseworker turnover to date has been to include studies longitudinal in design that involve administering questionnaires during a first phase of the study, either through mail or at staff training sessions, followed by gathering turnover statistics during subsequent study phase(s) (see, e.g., Curry et al., 2005; Smith, 2005; Strolin et al., 2005; Wright & Bonett, 1992; and Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). In addition to obtaining much of the same data, several of these studies either failed to report their study's response rate in Phase 1 (Wright & Bonett, 1992), were comprised of only those employees who were pre-selected by the state's Commissioner (Strolin et al., 2005), and/or were limited to those employees who attended a specific state training session (see, e.g., Curry et al., 2005). Thus, calling into question the ability to draw wider conclusions from any of the data gathered. In contrast, the study examined herein utilized interviews and not questionnaires as a means with which to gather the bulk of the data, thereby ensuring richer data than what were available in previous studies, and included recruiting all of those employed within the participating CPS unit rather than those who happened to be present on a specific day and time.

### *Dearth of Qualitative Data*

Third, and most importantly, studies to date into this critical issue have been limited in depth with little research involving the use of qualitative methods. In short, the large imbalance between quantitative and qualitative studies is the most glaring problem in the field to date. Moreover, those rare studies that employed qualitative data gathering methods have been primarily limited to the use of ethnographic case studies (see, e.g., Malm et al., 2001), focused in large part on the needs and/or experiences of the children and families served by the State rather than the caseworkers themselves (see, e.g., Devaney, 2008) with rare studies focused on CPS staff, employing other qualitative methods, such as observations (see, e.g., Reich, 2005) and/or qualitative interviews (see, e.g., Ellett et al., 2007). While case studies are an invaluable tool, particularly when exploring new variables and possible contributors to turnover that have not received previous attention, they are limited in their ability to shed light on the field as a whole. Ideally, case studies should be incorporated into a larger study, involving more participants and more structured qualitative methods, grounded in the CPS context, that provide richer data about what contributes to caseworker turnover as well as what helps to prevent it. This paper's study aimed to achieve this goal by examining the life of a CPS caseworker with greater depth, through the lens of relevant theories such as ecological theory, social support theory, and/or the theory regarding psychological sense of community, while gathering data from as many of the unit employees as was possible.

Unfortunately, rather than incorporating qualitative methods into a more well-rounded study design, most studies to date thought to bridge this gap by supposedly employing a mixed-method design that in actuality only gave a passing glance to

qualitative methodology. Unfortunately, these studies continued the trend in the field of preferring quantitative methods over other forms of compiling data, by treating qualitative data gathering as an afterthought. Most studies that have employed mixed-method designs included quantitative data gathering through questionnaires in the first phase(s) of the study followed by qualitative interviews in a subsequent phase (see, e.g., Mor Barak et al., 2006). However, the focus in these studies continued to be on the use of quantitative tools, with the qualitative portion consisting of a very small percentage of those participating in previous study phases. For example, one study's response rate for the qualitative interview portion was 8% that of the quantitative phase (Mor Barak et al., 2006); with another study similarly reporting a 14% response rate for this phase (Nissly, 2004). Moreover, some mixed method studies only included a specific subgroup within the qualitative phases, for example interviewing only supervisor-participants, and not the more vulnerable caseworkers, of a child welfare agency (see, e.g., Wentzy, 1994).

As a result, researchers and practitioners alike have now called for more qualitative research in the field in order provide one and all with a more well-rounded understanding of the problem of caseworker turnover. Specifically, veteran practitioners in the field frustrated by the lack of progress in the area of caseworker retention have called for an "increased use of qualitative tools" (Bednar, 2003, p.11) in order to better understand the problem of caseworker turnover, as well as shed light on why, despite the plethora of quantitative studies to date, the issue has not been more effectively addressed and the flow of voluntary terminations stymied. Other researchers acknowledge this shortcoming as well and view the inclusion of qualitative design in future studies as pivotal to gaining insight into the issue (Odimba, 2003). It is past time for researchers to



answer this call and provide practitioners and researchers alike the qualitative insight needed to address the problem in the future. This study was designed to be one step towards correcting this error. As can be seen in the following sections of this paper, the emphasis on qualitative data gathering methodology and analysis provides greater depth of knowledge into the daily lives of CPS caseworkers as well as what issues may ultimately contribute to a caseworker's decision to voluntarily leave CPS employment.

If only one thing can be gleaned from the lack of change in turnover rates within CPS units across the country despite the amount of attention given to the issue, it is that the problem is likely more complicated than any one, both researchers and practitioners alike, ever realized. Employment as a CPS caseworker involves a combination of issues not found within any other profession. Unfortunately, most researchers to date have not taken the time or effort to understand not only the working conditions and constraints found within the world of CPS, but also the unique environmental, psychological, and/or social aspects of a CPS caseworker's life. Qualitative study techniques allow for just such an inquiry in that researchers are able to spend a great deal of time observing and/or interviewing CPS caseworkers of different tenure lengths, from different social backgrounds, and/or working within different work environments, and, as such, are able to delve below the surface into the issues surrounding a caseworker's decision to leave CPS.

Moreover, qualitative researchers are able to study in-depth not only the possible contributors to caseworker turnover, but the possible employee and/or organizational components that help to ameliorate voluntary job termination. For example, quantitative research performed to date has focused almost exclusively on why caseworkers tend to

leave instead of seeking to answer the equally relevant question of why caseworkers might choose to stay. In other words, what environmental, psychological, and/or social conditions may help to ameliorate caseworker turnover and improve employee retention? This study's closer examination of the caseworker's life helps to answer this question.

## CHAPTER VII

### STUDY'S THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

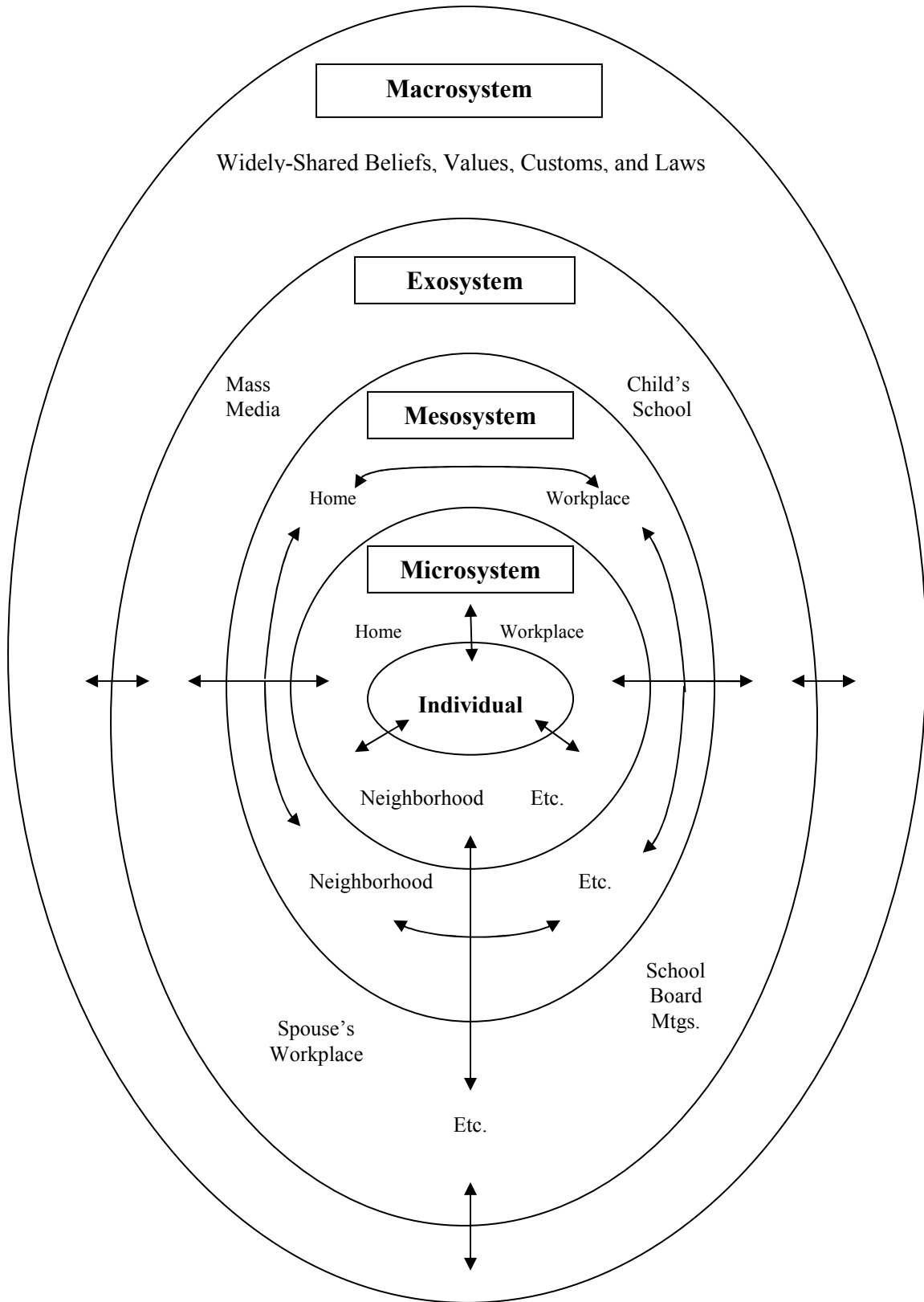
Several theories, primarily found in the world of psychology, pave the way for this paper's unique qualitative study. These schools of thought include: ecological, psychological sense of community, and social support theories. Ecological theory provides the overall theoretical context and primary basis for the study with psychological sense of community and social support theories providing further insight into the interpersonal and cultural components also at work. First, ecological theory allows for a better understanding of the physical settings in which CPS caseworkers live, including the different facets of community in which they reside. Moreover, ecological theory holds that human behaviors are influenced by a combination of factors, including the way in which an individual's physical environments and interpersonal and social relationships interact and influence one another (Sallis & Owen, 1997). Within these parameters, psychological sense of community and social support theories allow one to better understand the need all CPS caseworkers have to be an integral part of community (Sarason, 1974) and how they are able to draw upon the professional and/or personal relationships within their lives to handle job-related issues and thereby remain employed by CPS (Levine & Perkins, 1997).

### *Ecological Theory*

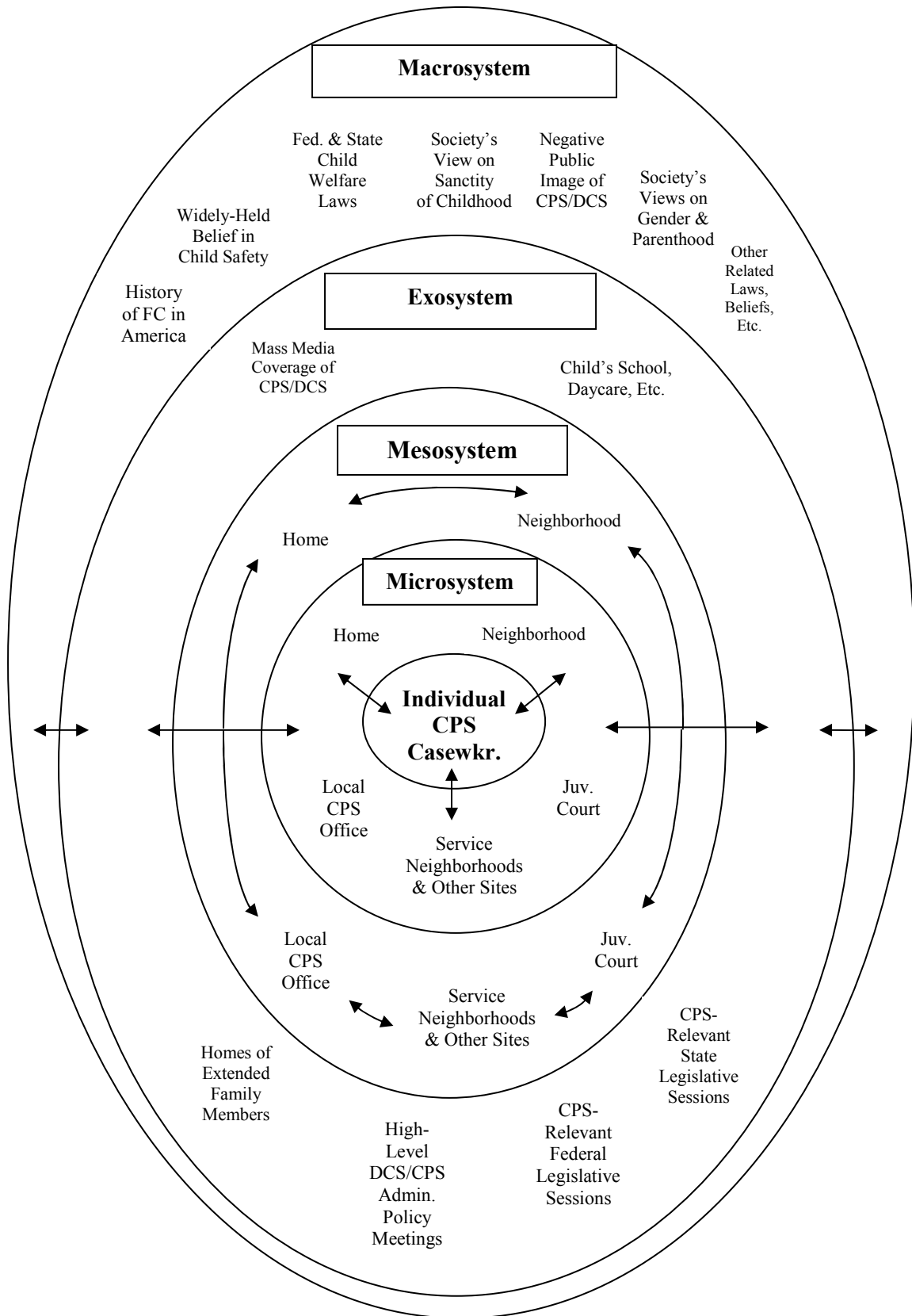
The term ecology refers to the study of the relationships that exist between organisms and their environments (Sallis & Owen, 1997). Ecological theory, as first posited by Bronfenbrenner (1979), holds that the way a person behaves stems directly from how that person interacts with her larger environment. In particular, a person's human development as seen through the ecological lens involves the "progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives" (p. 21). Thus, a visual depiction of ecological theory is best conveyed via a schematic of nested circles (see Figure 2 below), with the individual at the center surrounded by ever-broadening systems that are each contained within the next, while still remaining a part of the whole; these systems are referred to as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

For purposes of this study, ecological theory provides a necessary organizational framework in which to sort and analyze the study data, in light of each of the model's environmental layers, and thereby better understand how the issues contained within them might serve to influence a caseworker's decision to leave or remain employed by CPS. In so doing, one can see that while the caseworker remains the relevant unit of analysis throughout this study, details pertaining to the specific physical environment of the urban CPS unit as a whole, the city in which it is located, and the broader social and political context in which it inhabits are also necessary considerations. In this section, this paper examines the various tenants of ecological theory (see Figure 2 below) and begins to apply them to the life of a CPS caseworker in general (see Figure 3 below). In

**Figure 2 – Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model**



**Figure 3 – Ecological Model of a CPS Caseworker**



the paper's subsequent Findings section, this model is revisited and used to examine the life of a specific CPS caseworker example found in the study's data.

### *Microsystem and Exosystem*

First, as seen in Figure 2 above, an individual's microsystem represents those physical settings in which an individual interacts with others most frequently, including her residence, workplace, and neighborhood (Lemme, 2006). Thus, a CPS caseworker's microsystem includes her home, her local CPS office, her individual residential neighborhood, as well as those neighborhoods and service sites in which she actively engages through her job, such as hospitals, schools, neighborhoods, government housing areas, local police stations, etc. (see Figure 3 above). The broader urban or rural community characteristics in which these physical sites are located are also important and bear consideration as well (see Pickett et al., 2001).

In contrast, an exosystem includes settings that are further removed from the individual, in which the individual is not an active participant, but that serve to influence the individual's microsystem settings (Lemme, 2006). This includes such places as her child's school, spouse's workplace, and school board meetings in which decisions are made that impact the individual's family life (see Figure 2 above). In addition, for CPS caseworkers, higher-level administrative meetings within the State's DCS office that result in a change in employee policy, federal and/or state legislative sessions that enact statutory changes that affect CPS job requirements, and the mass media coverage on CPS-related issues also fall within the purview of this layer (see Figure 3 above).

### *Mesosystem*

Between the microsystem and exosystem lies the mesosystem (Lemme, 2006). Unlike the others, a mesosystem does not consist of physical settings per se, but rather represents the interactions between the settings found in the micro- and exosystems. For example, the ways in which a CPS caseworker's job and home life interact, such as when a caseworker is on-call and must leave her home in order to conduct a CPS investigation, and/or the effect media coverage has on issues related to CPS and the daily work environment of the caseworker constitute part of the caseworker's mesosystem. As can be seen in this paper's subsequent Findings section, both psychological sense of community and social capital theories allow one even greater insight into each of these three system levels and, ultimately, the ways in which factors within them may serve to contribute to or help to ameliorate CPS caseworker turnover.

### *Macrosystem*

Finally, an individual's macrosystem is similar to her mesosystem in that it does not consist of physical environments, but rather represents the larger sociocultural context in which a person lives (Lemme, 2006). This includes the shared cultural values, beliefs, customs, and laws the person holds and abides by within her specific social group in society. An individual's macrosystem is particularly important because the values contained therein direct how social groups are organized and influence members of the same social group to have similar micro-, meso-, and exosystems as well. Thus, macrosystems among CPS caseworkers are likely to differ depending on each individual's personal demographics. This means that caseworkers of the same



race/ethnicity, religion, and/or economic group tend to have similar macrosystems, which in turn influences the other environmental layers of each to closely resemble one another's as well. As you recall from previous sections of this paper, in the review of the literature concerning turnover to date, other more invisible demographics may also influence conformity in macrosystems and subsequent turnover decisions, including length of tenure at CPS, level of education, and level of job attainment.

Moreover, although the macrosystems of CPS caseworkers differ on the basis of demographics, both visible and invisible, ecological theory also posits that the employees' inclusion within the broader social group of CPS may influence similar macrosystems among caseworkers across racial and gender lines (Lemme, 2006). Unlike diverse colleagues in other job sites around the country, society serves to delineate all CPS caseworkers as a distinct social group. This delineation stems from the history and evolution of American foster care systems, societal view towards child safety, and the legal restrictions placed on the work of CPS units nationwide.

For example, as was seen in this paper's review of the history and evolution of CPS in this country, unlike most jobs available in America, CPS caseworkers are bound by both federal and state laws in performing their daily job tasks. They face possible legal liability should they fail to uphold these laws, public embarrassment and ridicule when mass media coverage focuses on them individually and/or their unit as a whole, and court sanctions should they fail to act in accordance with the respective judge's orders. Moreover, similar to combat troops, CPS caseworkers are all equally exposed to heart-breaking circumstances and are called to enter some potentially dangerous and unhealthy environments as a part of their employment. They are all subject to the same media

scrutiny when one of their colleagues fails to perform their job effectively and/or the media reports stories inaccurately, and the complexity of their job is easily misunderstood by those outside the realm of CPS.

Finally, it is important to note that within the macrosystem level (see Figure 3 above) society's views towards gender and parenthood may also influence the lives of CPS employees. As you recall, the work requirements of a CPS caseworker do not always end at the conclusion of each work day. The federal government's mandate for round-the-clock CPS accessibility requires at least one CPS caseworker to be on-call, every minute of the day, in every locale around the country. Therefore, for those caseworkers on-call during the night and/or throughout the weekend the duty of CPS caseworker-parents infringes upon the individual employees' personal family and parenting responsibilities. Moreover, although parenting roles are evolving, today society still places the onus on mothers much more than fathers to manage the home and nurture any children within it. Thus, as can be seen in later sections of this paper, this societal expectation likely plays an important role in shaping the lives of female caseworkers in particular.

#### *Psychological Sense of Community and Social Support Theories*

Within the parameters provided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model above, two other theories provide additional insight into the psychological and social needs of CPS caseworkers within their various community environments. First, psychological sense of community theory posits that like all humans, CPS caseworkers have a universal need to feel connected to those around them (Sarason, 1974). Next, social support theory helps

one to better understand how within their respective community, individuals like CPS caseworkers are able to call upon one another and/or those outside their community to provide emotional support to cope with daily hardship and stress (Levine & Perkins, 1997). Thus, both of these theories provide greater insight into the microsystem level of the ecological model portrayed in Figures 2 and 3 above; the way in which the community bond of caseworkers is strengthened, further delineating them as a social group with similar system levels; and/or the interactions that exist between microsystems within the mesosystem level of caseworkers.

#### *Psychological Sense of Community*

First, psychological sense of community (PSOC) theory holds that membership within a community depends upon the individual feeling a sense of belonging within the group; the degree to which she can exert control and influence on the group and vice versa; whether or not she shares common needs, goals, and values with other members; and the extent to which she is emotional connected to the social group, a connection that has developed over time, based on shared history and group identification (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Moreover, recent research in the field reveals that an additional factor, an individual's ability to choose to be identified as part of a social group, is also significantly associated with her socially identifying with the group and an overall feeling of PSOC (Obst & White, 2007). Thus, an individual is likely to feel less of a sense of community after relocating into a new residential neighborhood, due to a low amount of emotional connection and sense of belonging with other community members, but a stronger sense of community within a self-chosen interest group, such as a religious

group or sports club, due to shared goals and interests with other group members and the high degree of choice involved in joining the group. Finally, it is important to note the possible dark side of an individual's PSOC and inclusion within a community, namely a feeling of alienation for those excluded from group membership (Perkins, Hughey, & Speers, 2002; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006); although the magnitude of this problem can be lessened when in-group and out-group members share common goals and experiences and friendships are formed across groups (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008), networking and bridge-building opportunities are provided (Perkins et al., 2002), and competition between groups is lessened or eliminated (Sherif & Sherif, 1969).

Therefore, in order to understand the level of belonging a CPS caseworker has within the CPS community one must consider: the individual's identification with the group, for example whether she readily proclaims to others outside CPS that she is employed by CPS; whether or not she feels she can exert some control and influence over her work as a CPS caseworker; the degree to which her needs, goals, and values are reflective of the overall organization; whether or not she feels emotionally connected to the group, for example, if she would miss the CPS community and/or feels that others would miss her if she were absent (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); her ability to choose to remain a part of CPS (Obst & White, 2007), as seen in the availability of other alternatives to CPS employment; and whether the possible negative effect associated with her exclusion from subgroup membership within CPS, for example a caseworker who is not invited to socially interact with a group of CPS supervisors, is potentially lessened by other factors, such as shared goals and experiences of all of those employed within CPS, friendship and support provided by one or more of those supervisors to the caseworker,

the provision of networking opportunities for unit employees by CPS and/or its parent organization, and a lack of competition for promotion or other resources between the supervisors and caseworker in the unit.

In better understanding the strength of belonging CPS caseworkers may or may not have within the community of CPS, PSOC theory sheds light on the microsystem level of work for CPS caseworkers, the delineation of CPS as a social group, resulting in similar macrosystems for members with a stronger degree of identification with CPS, and the commitment level of those with strong PSOC within the unit to remain employed by CPS. Due to their unique existence as CPS caseworkers, how difficult it is for the outside world to understand the harsh circumstances of their daily cases, and the confidentiality constraints that limit the amount of information caseworkers can share with those outside CPS, it is understandable that the strongest social connections in the lives of caseworkers, particularly those employed for longer periods of time, may be found within the world of CPS itself, and that all of the employees' shared experiences within CPS likely can serve to lessen the negative effect of subgroup delineation within the larger unit of workers. As can be seen in later sections of this paper, the study examined herein sought to analyze this important issue in-depth.

### *Social Support Theory*

Social support theory posits that individuals draw upon relationships within their various communities, for example those within the CPS community and/or outside of CPS, in order to better manage personal stress and anxiety (Field, 2003; Levine & Perkins, 1997). Studies have shown that a high-stress, high-demanding job requires an

individual to expend more personal resources and places her in a position to need longer periods of recovery if she is going to maintain her general well-being (see, e.g., Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). Social support systems are one means of facilitating this recovery. Moreover, social support theory holds that the source of support may exist on an individual level as well as on a group level (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001) and extend across microsystem community groups. For example, on an individual level, a CPS caseworker may draw upon the support of a certain colleague, supervisor, and/or family member while also feeling supported by the entire local CPS unit, larger state/DCS organization, and/or her family unit as a whole in performing her job. Thus, individual- and group-level social support systems are effective in allowing the individual to manage stress that results from work-related issues, other life events, as well as stress that occurs when work interacts with other settings, such as the caseworker's home.

*Individual-level support.* At the individual level, a metaanalysis of 68 studies on social support indicates that those with strong individual-based social support systems: tend to perceive situations as being less stressful, experience a buffered effect between the stress they do perceive and actual strain felt, and overall report a less worker strain, than those with weaker ones (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). As you recall from the previous review of caseworker turnover research to date, one individual-level means of support, supervisor support, and its impact on caseworker turnover has received a considerable amount of attention, via quantitative research methods, to date. As such, a lack of supervisor support has been directly and positively associated with subsequent caseworker turnover (see, e.g., Smith, 2005) and caseworkers who experience a high degree of conflict with their supervisor are more likely to experience an increase in job-

related stress, a significant predictor of their intention to leave CPS employment (Nissly, 2004). However, supervisor support has received little to no qualitative attention and other forms of CPS support, such as from individual colleagues, have been similarly neglected by researchers. This paper's study is one step in addressing this shortcoming.

*Group-level support.* Both within and outside the world of CPS, the ability of group-level support to provide similar positive effects as individual-level support has not been well researched, but the handful of studies that have been conducted to date outside the field reveal significant benefits resulting from membership within highly supportive groups (see, e.g., Maton, 1989) and may be as effective as individual-level support in counteracting stress in an individual's life. Thus, a caseworker that feels that the whole of CPS and/or the greater state parent-organization, DCS, is supportive of their situation may experience less stress and overall work strain than those with weaker feelings of support from these groups. However, more attention needs to be paid to this issue in the future.

Moreover, research performed to date on how social support relates to caseworker stress has focused on work-related stress only and has failed to consider how stress within a caseworker's other microsystem settings and/or stress that results when these settings interact with one another, as is suggested by the previous findings that female caseworkers with children are less likely to remain employed by CPS (Mor Barak et al, 2001), may also affect the caseworker's decision to leave. Similarly, studies into law enforcement personnel reveal that social support not only helps to buffer work-related stress but also stress associated with life events outside of work (Patterson, 2003). This is particularly relevant for CPS caseworkers who, for example, are single parents; feel

alienated from other social groups due to the stigma associated with CPS employment; and/or live in close proximity to those whom they have previously investigated and are fearful of encountering them outside of work in the future. By shedding light on these and other areas of a caseworker's personal and work life this study broadens the field's understanding of the caseworker's need for social support in addressing these issues.



## CHAPTER VIII

### METHODS

As has been seen, Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers nationwide, or each state's equivalent thereof, play a vital role in ensuring child safety throughout the country. Depending on the rate of public referrals for child abuse and/or neglect within a particular locale, each CPS unit services either all or part of a single metropolitan area or a larger geographical region of the state, consisting of several more rural counties. Located within a metropolitan county, within which the state's capital resides, and situated within a southeastern state in the country, is one such unit. The unit services the entire metropolitan county area in which it is located. The caseworkers and supervisors of this unit graciously shared their lives and experiences in order to provide a deeper understanding of their daily experiences and to gain further insight into the rigors of life as an employee of the often vilified CPS and its state parent organization, referred to in this paper as the Department of Children's Services (DCS)<sup>3</sup>.

The study includes a twelve-month longitudinal examination of an urban CPS unit, employing mixed-methods design, both qualitative and quantitative; with the emphasis, in this study, on the qualitative. In keeping with grounded theory data gathering techniques (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006); the data were collected within four phases of the study using a variety of qualitative methods. The first phase was

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<sup>3</sup> The use of this state department name rather than other possible state nomenclature, such as Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) or Department of Human Services (DHS), should not be considered indicative in any way of the state in which the data were collected.

exploratory in nature and included ethnographic observations of 3 caseworkers representing different lengths of employment at CPS. The second phase consisted of in-depth interviews of all available and consenting employees, both caseworkers and supervisors, within the unit. Finally, Phases 3 and 4 of the study included gathering information 6 and 12 months after the study's inception on which study participants were still employed within the unit. The study's specific research questions, study design and data collection, procedure, sample, measures, and approach to data analysis are reviewed in greater detail within this section.

### *Research Questions*

The research questions suggested by the initial categories, developed after analyzing Phase 1's data, focus on three overlapping issues in particular. First, the environmental settings of a CPS caseworker, that pertain directly to Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) outlined above, were considered, including: the study sites' physical settings and larger context, the caseworkers' sense of belonging to the CPS community as a whole, where the study participants resided in relation to CPS's service county area, and the caseworkers' home structure, that is who else resided full-time or part-time within their homes (see Questions 1, 2, and 3 below). Second, the study examined the ways in which the participant was able to, or impeded from, drawing upon social relationships, both in her personal and professional sphere, in order to handle work-related problems and perform the daily tasks required of her (see Questions 4 and 5 below). Finally, how the caseworker managed interactions between home and work and how she sought to remain safe while performing her job and/or when off-duty, were

considered (see Questions 6 and 7 below). Thus, the seven specific research questions included in this study are as follows:

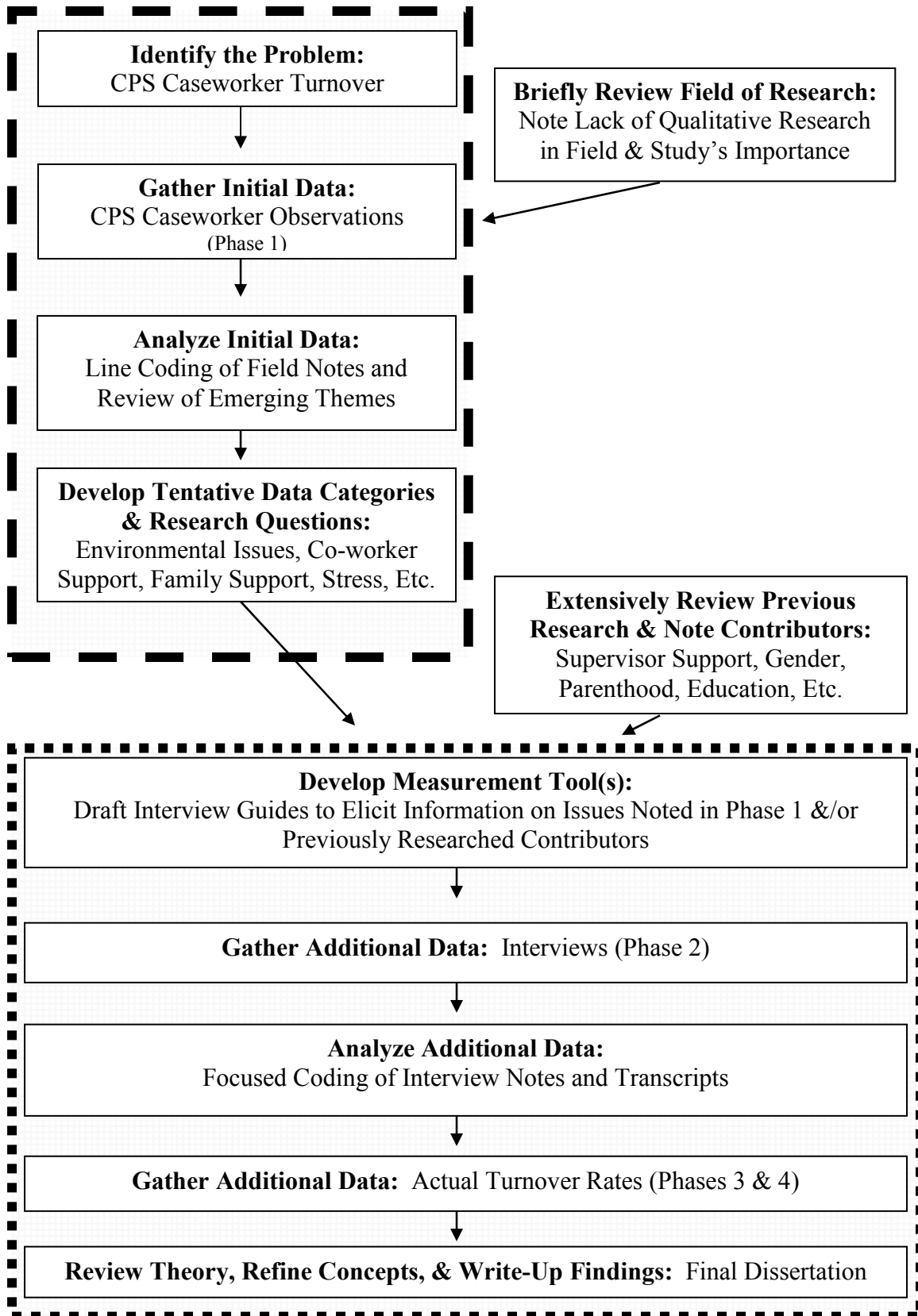
1. What are the specific physical environment and community parameters of an urban CPS unit?
2. Where does a CPS caseworker live in relation to her work environment and who else resides in her home with her, either full-time and/or part-time?
3. What is a caseworker's sense of belonging with regards to her CPS community?
4. What individual- and/or group-level social support systems are available to a CPS caseworker within her profession and how, if ever, does a CPS caseworker draw upon them to accomplish her tasks?
5. What individual- and/or group-level social support systems does a CPS caseworker have outside of work, for example provided by a marital/life partner and/or strong family or non-family support, and how, if ever, does she draw upon these systems in order to perform her work with CPS?
6. How does a CPS caseworker balance the demands of work and family/parenthood?
7. What concerns, if any, does a CPS caseworker and/or her loved ones have about her job-related safety, and what steps has she taken to remain safe both on and off the job as a result?

### *Study Design and Data Collection*

The study design and data collection phases reveal a modified grounded theory framework, with steps reflective of initial inductive followed by subsequent deductive reasoning (see Figure 4 below). Although I as the researcher admittedly have over a decade's worth of experience in the field of study (see the Prologue section of this paper), in an effort to reduce researcher bias this study followed the initial steps of grounded theory process (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006; see also Clarke, 2005) which includes: (1) identifying a general research problem (caseworker turnover); (2) gathering initial data in the field, (observational data in Phase 1); (3) analyzing and coding the data, line-by-line (the computerized field notes); and (4) developing tentative categories and research questions based on the recurrent codes (categories such as co-worker support, safety concerns, and so on) (see the steps included within the dash-lined box, at the top left-hand corner, of Figure 4 below). Within this particular study the only exception to this initial, purely grounded theory process occurred after the problem was identified, wherein I briefly reviewed the field of research in order to note the need for studies with more qualitative and/or mixed-method methodologies before proceeding with the first phase.

After following these initial steps provided by the grounded theory framework the process was then modified in that after analyzing the Phase 1 data, the insight gained from this analysis did not serve as the only basis for gathering and analyzing data in subsequent study phases. Rather, a more extensive review of the field of research was performed following Phase 1 and the knowledge attained from it was used in conjunction with the information gleaned from Phase 1's analysis in designing and later analyzing the interview data gathered in the second phase. This represents a modification of traditional

**Figure 4 – Modified Grounded Theory Process Utilized in Study**



grounded theory in that it involves a review of the field of research before all of the analysis has been conducted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, the change allowed the study to not only utilize grounded theory techniques in its search for unbiased exploratory data and analysis in Phase 1, but also to profit from valuable prior research in subsequent phases of data gathering; thus, strengthening the study overall. After this additional step was conducted the grounded theory techniques of developing measurement tools, gathering data, and reviewing the findings were followed (see the steps included within the dot-lined box at the bottom of Figure 4 above).

A practical example of this modified process at work can be seen with regards to the issue of supervisor support. While not noted with regards to all of the caseworker-participants in Phase 1, questions regarding supervisor support were included in the Phase 2 interview guides due to its importance in previous research. Similarly, some of the themes repeatedly found in the field notes from Phase 1 pertain to issues not commonly found in the field of research, specifically, the caseworker's safety concerns, both for themselves and/or their family as well as issues stemming from work-family conflict, the most frequent of these being statements made by the participant pertaining to arrangements for supervision of her children when on-call with CPS and/or feeling torn between job and family obligations. Thus, relying on previous research alone, the study would have failed to consider the other important, but under-researched issues of safety and family conflicts in the life of a caseworker; whereas, ignoring the previous research in the field would have led to a reduction in the amount of data sought in Phase 2 on, among other things, the issue of supervisor support.

Similar to the initial analysis that was conducted of the computerized field notes resulting from Phase 1's observations, and the compilation of descriptive data provided elsewhere in this dissertation, qualitative techniques were utilized in analyzing Phase 2's data. In particular, the transcripts from each interview session of Phase 2 were coded, using focused coding techniques, or coding larger sections of data into the conceptual categories refined from Phase 1's analysis and applicable to one or more of the study's research questions (Charmaz, 2006). For example, among other things, each transcript was coded into categories wherein the participant's responses pertained to: (1) the physical environment of the CPS unit; (2) a caseworker's home/family setting; (3) her sense of belonging to CPS; (4) social support within CPS, at the (a) group and/or (b) individual level; (5) social support outside of CPS, at the (a) group and/or (b) individual level; (6) family/parenthood issues; and (7) participant safety concerns. Finally, the employee rosters gathered in Phases 3 and 4 were used to note the actual turnover rate within the unit as well as the characteristics of those participants who left CPS employment since the study's inception, but no inferential statistics were used to predict turnover over time. Rather, these final Phases of data collection are primarily relevant in subsequent studies of the data, employing more quantitative methodology.

### *Procedure*

Written consent was obtained from each of the participants, both those participating in Phase 1's exploratory observations (see Appendix A) as well as those in Phase 2 (see Appendix B). Also, prior to the study's inception and again following Phase

1 and the subsequent completion of the interview guides, an Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the protocol for all phases of the study.

### *Phase 1 – Observations*

The first phase of the study included gathering exploratory data via the use of ethnographic observations in order to gain greater understanding of the physical environment a CPS caseworker inhabits, the daily tasks performed by a CPS caseworker, as well as what issues should receive greater attention in subsequent study phases, specifically the Phase 2 interviews. These observations may be used to draft case studies at a later time, but for purposes of this study they serve as a primary basis for addressing the first research question listed above, pertaining to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) and the physical settings of CPS caseworkers. Thus, detailed descriptions of both CPS office locations were collected throughout the Phase 1 and provided as a means with which to better understand the work settings that the caseworker-participants inhabit.

Additionally, the observations were used in conjunction with other data gathering techniques to provide insight into the other six research questions. For example, observations of a participant-caseworker seeking the support of a colleague in order to counteract stress in regards to a high-risk safety concern on a case not only provided insight as to the emotional connection and sense of belonging she may have within CPS (see Research Question 3 above), but may also be indicative of the a way in which she draws upon an individual-level support system at work to accomplish her daily tasks (see Research Question 4 above). Finally, the observations served as an intentional means with which to explore those aspects of a caseworker's daily life that may contribute to or



help ameliorate her decision to leave CPS employment and, as noted above, that may or may not have been previously highlighted in the field.

These Phase 1 exploratory observations were conducted from May 1, 2007, to May 11, 2007, and included shadowing three employees of the unit with diverse personal and professional characteristics. For example, all 3 participants were under the supervision of different Team Leaders and included a Caucasian female with over 20 years of experience working for CPS, a male of Mid-Eastern descent with approximately 6 years experience on the job, and an African-American female about to complete her first year as a CPS caseworker. The 3 participants were chosen by one of the Team Coordinators based on their diverse characteristics, availability within the study period, and willingness to participate.

Each caseworker was shadowed for 2 to 3 consecutive business days and observed as they worked on multiple new and/or ongoing CPS investigations including, but not limited to: an average of 2 home visits per day, frequent interviews of alleged child victims at their schools, court appearances, interviews with parent/caregivers, and joint interactions with police detectives of suspected child sex abusers. Throughout this first phase of the study, during the times of observation, extensive notes were taken and later transcribed into a password- and firewall-protected computer. Each participant was given a participant number and neither the notes nor the computer logs contained any identifying information regarding the participants, the places, or individuals with which they came in contact.

### *Phase 2 – Interviews*

Following Phase 1 of the study the observational notes gathered throughout the phase were reviewed, any additional themes and issues not previously highlighted within the field of research were noted, and interview guides were then drafted to encapsulate both the old and new themes (see Appendices C, D, & E). Following the expedited review and approval of the interview guides by an Institutional Review Board, in-depth, structured and semi-structured interviews of all willing and consented employees within the unit were conducted. The Phase 2 participants were first recruited at a CPS-wide training meeting on May 11, 2007, with individual follow-up contact made as needed to encourage a high rate of employee participation. The interviews themselves occurred from May 14, 2007, through June 12, 2007. All of the interviews took place within private conference rooms at one of the two DCS offices within the county and were audio taped for accuracy and efficiency. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hr in duration with the longest taking approximately 2 hr to complete.

### *Phases 3 and 4 – Turnover Data*

Phases 3 and 4 of the study included gathering information on actual turnover rates within the unit at two separate points in time as well as conducting some informal follow-up contact with one of the study participants. First, an employee roster was obtained 6 months after the start of the study, on or about November 1, 2007, in order to ascertain which of the participants were still employed within the unit at that time. Similarly, on or about May 1, 2008, a second roster was obtained in order to discover who remained employed within the unit 12 months after the study's inception. In so

doing, the data that were compiled in previous study phases, both the Phase 1 observations and the Phase 2 interviews, could be examined in light of the actual turnover that occurred at both the 6 and 12 month mark of the study in order to shed additional light on each of the research questions outlined above.

Also, at the conclusion of the study, or in May 2008, informal inquiries were made with 1 of the study participants, specifically 1 of the 2 unit supervisors/Team Coordinator-participants in the study, as to some of the issues highlighted in the Phase 3 and 4 data. The unit's turnover rates at Phase 3 and 4 as well as the relevant portions of the informal follow-up inquiries are included in the subsequent Findings section of this paper, in the subsection pertaining to actual turnover.

#### *Sample and Caseworker Status*

The participant-CPS unit services a large urban metropolitan county located within a southeastern state in the country. The bulk of the county consists of the state's capital, with the governor's office, state legislature, top Department of Children's Services (DCS or Department) administrative offices for the state, federal and state lower and/or appellate courts, and several news media outlets for the region also located within the same service county. At the time the data were collected, the participant-CPS unit that services this particular area employed a total of 56 people, including: 2 high-level CPS supervisors, or "Team Coordinators;" 8 mid-level supervisors, or "Team Leaders;" and 46 caseworkers, consisting of 42 "Casemanager 1s or 2s" (commonly referred to as CM1s and CM2s) and 4 "Casemanager 3s" (CM3s). The actual percentage of employees who participated in the study amounts to 91% of those employed within the unit at the

study's inception, or 51 out of a possible 56, including both of the unit's supervisors (Team Coordinators), all 8 of the mid-level supervisors (Team Leaders), and a total of 41 out of a total 46 caseworkers.

For purposes of this study, a better distinction than the unit employer's Casemanager 1 (CM1) and Casemanager 2 (CM2) is needed. The reasons behind this decision hinge on the study unit's differentiation between CM1s and CM2s. In particular, unlike CM3s a caseworker's numerical designation as either Casemanager 1 or 2 depends solely upon her length of tenure with the broader state employer and not her promotional status within CPS and/or the Department in particular. Moreover, it is important to note that it is *state employment* that is the measuring stick here, not CPS or even other DCS employment. As such, it is commonplace for a state employee with at least 12 month's worth of employment in non-CPS positions to transfer into CPS for the first time and after 2 to 3 months of training begin her tenure as a new CPS caseworker as a CM2; whereas, others may start both their tenure with the state and CPS at the same point in time, with a CM1 designation, and wait a mandatory 12 months before automatically achieving CM2 status.

In addition, although benefits afforded CM1s and CM2s differ in regards to rate of pay as well as the level of due process rights afforded each, specifically in the case of involuntary job termination proceedings, the actual workload required and performed by CM1s and CM2s does not differ in any way. Thus, at the 12-month-mark, a CM1 automatically achieves CM2 status with no change in her job description or workload, and no additional performance review required. Most note that the only fanfare given the event occurs when they receive their slightly larger paycheck. As a result, whenever it is

helpful to breakdown the subgroup of caseworkers on the basis of tenure this paper does not utilize the State's differentiation of CM1s and CM2s per se, but rather focuses on the individual participant's specific length of employment within CPS; for example, whether it is less than or more than one year in length. Thus, it is important to note that of the total available group of 46 CM1s and CM2s employed within the unit at the time of the study, there was a fairly even split between the number of available caseworkers with less than a year of CPS experience, or 20, and those who had been employed as CPS caseworkers for at least a year in length, or 22.

In contrast to CM1s and CM2s, before a caseworker can gain CM3 status, not only must she be employed by the state for a certain length of time, specifically a minimum of 3 years, but there must also be an opening at this level within the overall CPS unit and she must be interviewed and offered the job by at least 1 of the 2 CPS Team Coordinators. The job description for CM3s differs from that of CM1s and 2s in that they assume more of a leadership and supervisory position, helping to train new caseworkers, managing a reduced number of cases, and having different on-call responsibilities than other caseworkers. At the time of this study there were only 4 CM3s serving in this capacity within the unit. The CM3s were evenly split between the 2 Team Coordinators, with 2 of them assigned to units under Team Coordinator A and the other 2 to teams reporting to Team Coordinator B. One of the CM3s was assigned to a unit that handled only severe abuse cases, or those cases in which sexual abuse or severe physical harm is alleged, and the other 3 were assigned to non-severe abuse teams and split between the unit's locations.

The total 41 caseworker-participants included all 4 of the CM3s, 18 of the 20 caseworkers with less than a year of experience and 19 of the 22 caseworkers with at least a year of CPS tenure. All 3 of the participants from Phase 1 of the study also participated in the Phase 2 interviews. Of the 5 caseworkers who did not participate in the study, 2 were caseworkers within the unit with less than a year of CPS employment and the other 3 had more than a year, but less than 2 years, tenure with the unit. One of the non-participating first year employees became unavailable during the course of the study after being involuntarily terminated prior to being interviewed and 1 of the 3 with more than a year's experience was unavailable due to National Guard obligations. The 3 remaining non-participants declined to participate for unspecified reasons.

Finally, interviews were also conducted of 2 former caseworkers recently employed by the unit, both of whom were temporarily placed with the unit as a result of the Commissioner's January 2007 mandate, in order to gain another perspective on the issue. However, since there are a limited number of these interviews the data compiled from these former caseworkers are not a focus of the study and the qualitative data gathered through them are given only cursory attention.

### *Measures*

In keeping with the modified grounded theory procedure outlined above, the measurement tools utilized in this study vary across the separate study phases. These measurements range greatly in terms of structure and include one of the most unstructured tools available, or blank lined notebook paper, as well as a fairly structured

and complex tool, the Phase 2 interview guides. Below, each measurement tool is detailed and the rationale underlying each choice is described in turn.

### *Phase 1 – Field Notes*

The measurement tools utilized in Phase 1 included 3 blank notepads, 1 for each participant, containing only lined notebook paper. No preprinted forms were utilized in order to encourage a lack of assumptions on the part of the researcher and to allow for greater freedom in exploring new aspects of the caseworker's environment and daily life. Extensive notes were taken concerning the physical layout of the 2 work sites in which the CPS unit was housed within the county as well as the researcher's observations while shadowing each of the 3 caseworkers that participated within the study phase. The unlined notebook paper aided in the modified grounded theory process highlighted above in that it allowed for the free flow of ideas, with no preconceived categories and structure, and also eliminated the need to sort data as they were being gathered.

After each day of observation, the field notes were entered into the project computer. Then each set of computerized field notes were coded, line-by-line, and common themes began to be noted. For example, incidences wherein each of 3 caseworkers either sought help and/or had other caseworkers seek help from them were noted. Interactions between each caseworker and their supervisor were observed and frustrations expressed concerning the policies of CPS and/or DCS as a whole were noted. Similarly, conflicts between colleagues and/or supervisors were either observed first-hand and/or mentioned by the caseworker-participant. Thus, among other things, each of

these incidences was coded in reference to social support issues, at either the group or individual level; sense of belonging issues; and/or emotional connection issues.

As noted above, other repeated themes found in the field notes from Phase 1 pertain to issues not previously found in the field of research; for example, the caseworker's safety concerns, both for themselves and/or their family, and physical environment constraints noted within each office location. Additionally, issues stemming from work-family conflict were noted, the most frequent of these being statements made by the participant pertaining to arrangements for supervision of her children when on-call with CPS and/or feeling torn between job and family obligations.

### *Phase 2 – Interview Guides*

The interview guides utilized in Phase 2 contain 71 structured and semi-structured questions regarding the participants' employment with CPS. The interview guides for caseworkers (Appendix C), Team Leaders (Appendix D), and Team Coordinators (Appendix E) are nearly identical with the exception of minor language and syntax changes. The Likert-scale questions were gathered from other studies conducted on caseworker turnover and served as a launching pad for more open-ended inquiries, in keeping with sound qualitative interview techniques (see, e.g., Weiss, 1994; see also Stake, 1995). For example, Question 55 on the interview guide asked participants to rate their level of agreement to the following question on a 5-point Likert scale: "CPS really cares about my well-being" (see Appendices C, D, & E). After doing so, the interviewee was then asked why they feel that way. Responses given to both inquiries are important, but those given as a result of the open-ended follow-up questions provided most of this



study's most valuable qualitative data. Moreover, while all of the participants' responses to the structured, Likert-scale questions may be utilized at a later time within more quantitative type of analysis, this study concerns itself with any of the participants' responses that helped to shed light on the specific research questions listed above, that is those pertaining to the issues of environmental constraints, sense of belonging/community membership, family/ parenthood, safety concerns, and social support.

Notes were made during the interview sessions on the participant's respective interview guide, especially whenever responses pertained to any of the issues listed above, and each interview session was audio taped as well. The audio tapes were later transcribed and, as noted above, the transcripts provided a means with which to further analyze the data gathered.

#### *Phases 3 and 4 – Employee Rosters*

Finally, the employee rosters received in Phases 3 and 4 of the study revealed the actual turnover that occurred within the unit throughout the 12-month study period. As such, these were used to note which caseworkers left the unit during the study period, the number of new employees added to the unit, and the promotional status of those within the unit, at both 6 and 12 months after the study's inception.

#### *Approach to Data Analysis*

As outlined in the Study Design and Data Collection section above, the computerized field notes generated in Phase 1 of the study were analyzed early on in the

study's timeline, prior to drafting the Phase 2 interview guides. The field notes were analyzed through the use of common qualitative analytic techniques, which included coding each line and then thoroughly exploring emergent themes from the data. The Phase 3 and 4 employee rosters were compared to the list of unit employees during the earlier study phases to obtain an actual turnover rate for the unit at both the 6-month and 12-month mark. In contrast with these three phases, the bulk of the data most pertinent to this project were gleaned from the Phase 2 interview notes and audio file transcripts. As such, the approach to data analysis for these Phase 2 data serves as the primary focus of this section, including a detailed description of which interview questions were designed to elicit the most relevant response to each of the study's seven research questions.

### *Phase 2 Data Analysis*

As with the Phase 1 participants, every interview participant was assigned a number that served as both a means of identifying the source of each piece of data while also safeguarding the identity of each interviewee. The identification number was listed on each participant's respective interview notes, audiotape, and transcript. The interview notes were initially used to compile demographic information quickly and efficiency. Like the field notes in Phase 1, each line of the Phase 2 hardcopy interview notes and transcripts was then coded based on the emergent themes, with each relevant response highlighted by hand and coded based on as many thematic categories as was applicable. The coded hardcopy interview notes were also kept as a reference and utilized whenever a transcript response was unclear.

Using the coded hardcopy transcripts as a reference, the grouped interview responses were compiled using each transcript's corresponding computerized version. The relevant computerized transcript responses were cut and pasted into each of the respective thematic categories, as many as were applicable, with the corresponding interviewee's identification number included with each. As with the Phase 1 interviews, these categories included such items as: the unit's physical environment, social support within CPS, social support outside of CPS, sense of belonging issues, work and family conflict, and safety concerns.

Whenever helpful the responses within each category were combined into table format for ease of reference and depiction. Most of these tables are included in the subsequent Findings section of this paper. Also, after reviewing the responses within each category, at least one representative participant was chosen for each. The entire transcript and interview notes for these participants received further review and consideration before using them as case study examples within the subsequent Findings section of this paper.

#### *Specific Sources of Phase 2 Data Relevant to Each Research Question*

Although a caseworker-participant in Phase 2 may have provided information pertinent to the study's research questions at unexpected points in her interview, below is a breakdown of each of the research questions in this study and the specific interview questions, including those that were precursors to more valuable follow-up questions, designed to elicit the richest data pertaining to each (see Appendices C, D, & E).

*Research Questions 1, 2, and 3.* The majority of data addressing Research Question 1, outlined above, concerning physical environments, was derived via the field notes from Phase 1 of the study. However, the interviews from Phase 2 supplied valuable information concerning a caseworker's other primary setting, her home, as well as indicating her psychological sense of belonging at CPS. In particular, Question #6 on the interview guides inquired as to whether the caseworker resided in or out of the service county area and Questions #4 and #5 reveals who else resided in the participant's home with her. The interviews in Phase 2 also served to show how strong of a sense of belonging the caseworker likely felt with regards to CPS and its state parent-organization, DCS. Specifically, the interviews indicated the degree to which the caseworker identified with CPS, Question #48, and DCS, Question #49; her length of tenure at CPS and/or DCS revealed through Questions #8 through #13; the emotional connection the participant had with the CPS and/or DCS community seen in Questions #47, #53 through #55, #64, and #69; the amount of control the caseworker had over her job, Question #39; and the degree of choice the caseworker exerted over her membership in CPS, Questions #29, #31, and #43.

*Research Questions 4 and 5.* The fourth and fifth research questions included in this study pertain to the caseworker's social support systems. The fourth research question pertains to individual- and/or group-level social support available to the caseworker within CPS. As such, the specific questions most relevant to this issue on the interview guides included Questions #25, #26, #54 through #56, #64, and #68 through #70. Similarly, the fifth research question refers to the caseworker's access to individual- and/or group-level social support outside of the CPS and DCS community. The

particular interview questions most on point for this inquiry included Questions #25 through #27, #33, and #45. As expected, there was some overlap between these two questions as well as others listed above. For example, a participant's statement regarding any safety concerns she might have had and the steps she took to address them not only sheds light on the fourth research question referred to above, but many times it also highlighted aspects of individual- and/or group-level social support both within and/or outside of the CPS community. In this case, the response was coded and included in all relevant categories in order to provide the richest data possible within each.

*Research Questions 6 and 7.* The last two research questions listed above pertain to the steps a CPS caseworker makes in an effort to balance work and family life and the concerns she and/or her family has over her safety. In addition to relevant observations recorded throughout Phase 1 that pertain to these two issues, the interviews of Phase 2 gathered data on them as well. In particular, Questions #4, #5, #41, and #42 of the interview guides pertained to the participant's family make-up and the steps she had to take in order to meet both her family and CPS obligations. Each caseworker that had young children or elderly parent/dependents in their home, as revealed in Question #5, was asked about the arrangements she had to make each month in preparation for being on-call after work hours.

Moreover, Question #71 resulted in a large amount of information gathered on the issue of safety, acts and/or threats of violence experienced by the caseworker-participant in the past, and the steps she took to try and reduce her risk of harm in the future. Also, each caseworker was asked follow-up questions to Questions #4 and #5 pertaining to any safety concerns she and/or those family members that resided with her may have had

concerning her employment with CPS. Finally, each caseworker who indicated that their residence was out of the service county, Question #6, was asked the reasons behind this decision in order to ascertain whether her out-of-county residence was intended as a way in provide for her increased safety by intentionally distancing herself from the service community.

## CHAPTER IX

### STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ultimately, the study's findings and subsequent discussion of them are the end result of having nearly unprecedented access into the lives of an entire unit of CPS caseworkers. In order to take full advantage of this unique opportunity, a plethora of data were collected. These data were meticulously organized for ease of reference and sorted in such a way as to make analyzing and discussing them in light of the study's research questions as efficiently as possible. This section details the organized findings most relevant to each of the seven research questions outlined in the paper's previous section (see pp.125-126 above). In particular, the first six subsections in this section of the paper, outlined below, relate to the study's research questions, with all but one of the subsections corresponding to individual research questions while the findings relevant to the study's fourth and fifth research, both of which pertain to social support issues, are presented together. The seventh subsection details the actual turnover rates derived from the study's Phase 3 and 4 data, and the final subsection pertains to the study's limitations.

In addition, due to the large amount of data provided by the study and for ease of reading and the sake of efficiency, within six of the first seven subsections herein you find: a topical discussion of the various findings and how they relate to the previous research in the field; a more general discussion pertaining to the usefulness of the study's modified grounded theory process, methodology, theoretical underpinnings, and any general insight gained into each research question is included in a subsequent section of

this paper. While unconventional, combining the study's findings and discussion sections no doubt makes it easier for the reader to refer to the study's relevant tables and figures while also reducing the amount of repetition and confusion that could occur if they were kept separate.

Thus, in keeping with the study's first research question, this section begins by examining a detailed overview of the participants' CPS unit, including: the internal hierarchical structure of both the overall state organization and the individual CPS unit, a description of the physical office environments the participant-employees inhabit, and a consideration of the unit's broader service area. As previously outlined in the Methods section of this paper, all of the data presented in this first subsection are drawn from the Phase 1 observations, with the exception of the data on the broader service area which were found from well-respected on-line sources that also lend themselves to protecting the anonymity of the study unit. In contrast, unless specifically stated otherwise, all of the data for the other subsections herein are a result of the study's Phase 2 interviews.

In the second subsection, this paper delves into the lives of the caseworker-participants themselves, including demographical data on all of the unit's employees, where they live in relation to the service area, and who resides with them. Third, the specific ecological framework of a CPS caseworker's life is reviewed and the important issues found therein are discussed in greater detail. In the fourth subsection, this paper looks into and discusses the employee-participant's sense of belonging within the CPS community, paying particular attention to her level of identification with CPS and its parent organization, the Department of Children's Services (DCS). Then, in keeping with both the study's fifth and sixth research questions, a consideration of the possible



individual- and/or group-level social support systems available to a CPS caseworker both within and/or outside of her profession is included as well as a discussion of how, if ever, a caseworker seeks to draw upon them to accomplish her work responsibilities. Sixth, the number of safety issues facing a CPS caseworker today are examined and discussed, particularly in the area of what steps, if any, she takes to remain safe both on and off the job. Seventh, the actual turnover rates derived from the data in Phases 3 and 4 of the study are outlined. Finally, this paper concludes its examination of the data by highlighting the inherent limitations of the study. With the exception of the first, seventh, and final subsection detailing the study's limitations, each subsection begins with a specific participant case study example, drawn from the Phase 2 interview data, goes on to include informative tables and figures depicting larger amounts of study data, and concludes with a discussion of how these findings relate to the previous research in the field.

#### *Access Granted – A Unit in Crisis*

In late December of 2006, approximately 5 months before the start of this study, the situation in the CPS study unit was dire. Reportedly due to mounting frustrations stemming from large caseloads and long work hours, CPS caseworkers were leaving the unit at a faster rate than normal, with as many as 5 or 6 caseworkers, or roughly 10% of the unit's workforce, quitting within a single work week alone. Those who remained experienced even larger workloads and caseloads as they found themselves responsible for the departing caseworkers' cases, as well as receiving as many as 30 new cases every month. Some caseworkers reported a total caseload of 150 cases at any given time; cases

which all required them to investigate, make vital safety decisions, testify in court, and/or arrange multiple services for the children and families involved.

With dwindling employee numbers and rumors of growing unrest within the unit, the state's governor-appointed, DCS Commissioner visited the unit at the end of 2006 and decided to implement two unilateral decisions that went into effect starting January 2007. First, she decreed that no caseworker would be assigned more than 11 new cases every month. This mandate was interpreted by the supervisors of the unit to include only those cases received and assigned during weekday hours only and not those cases received when a caseworker was on-call during the night or weekend shifts. However, the weekday referrals constituted the majority of those received and once all caseworkers in the unit had received 11 new cases for the month, the higher-level CPS supervisors in the unit would then be responsible for any and all cases left over, in addition to performing their other job tasks.

Second, the Commissioner decreed that any employee of DCS that was then working within other DCS units within the service county and who had any prior CPS experience, no matter how long ago that took place, would immediately be reassigned to work as a CPS caseworker within the study unit for the first 4 months of 2007. The reassigned employees had less than a week between receiving this directive and having to report to CPS for work. Some of the older reassigned employees handled this decision by using their accumulated vacation time for any or all of the 4 months. Others attempted to follow the directive but experienced serious health problems likely at least in part due to the added stress of the job, including at least 2 individuals suffering heart attacks during this 4-month period of time. Finally, most of the temporary caseworkers tried to perform

the work required of them as best they could, but required daily help and advice of the long-term CPS caseworkers and supervisors of the unit, while anxiously awaiting the April 31, 2007, deadline that would ultimately signal the end of their time spent in CPS.

Within this same timeframe, when presented with this study's proposal to examine the experiences of caseworkers within this unit in light of the turnover problem, the Commissioner was quick to respond and grant me this unprecedented access.<sup>4</sup>

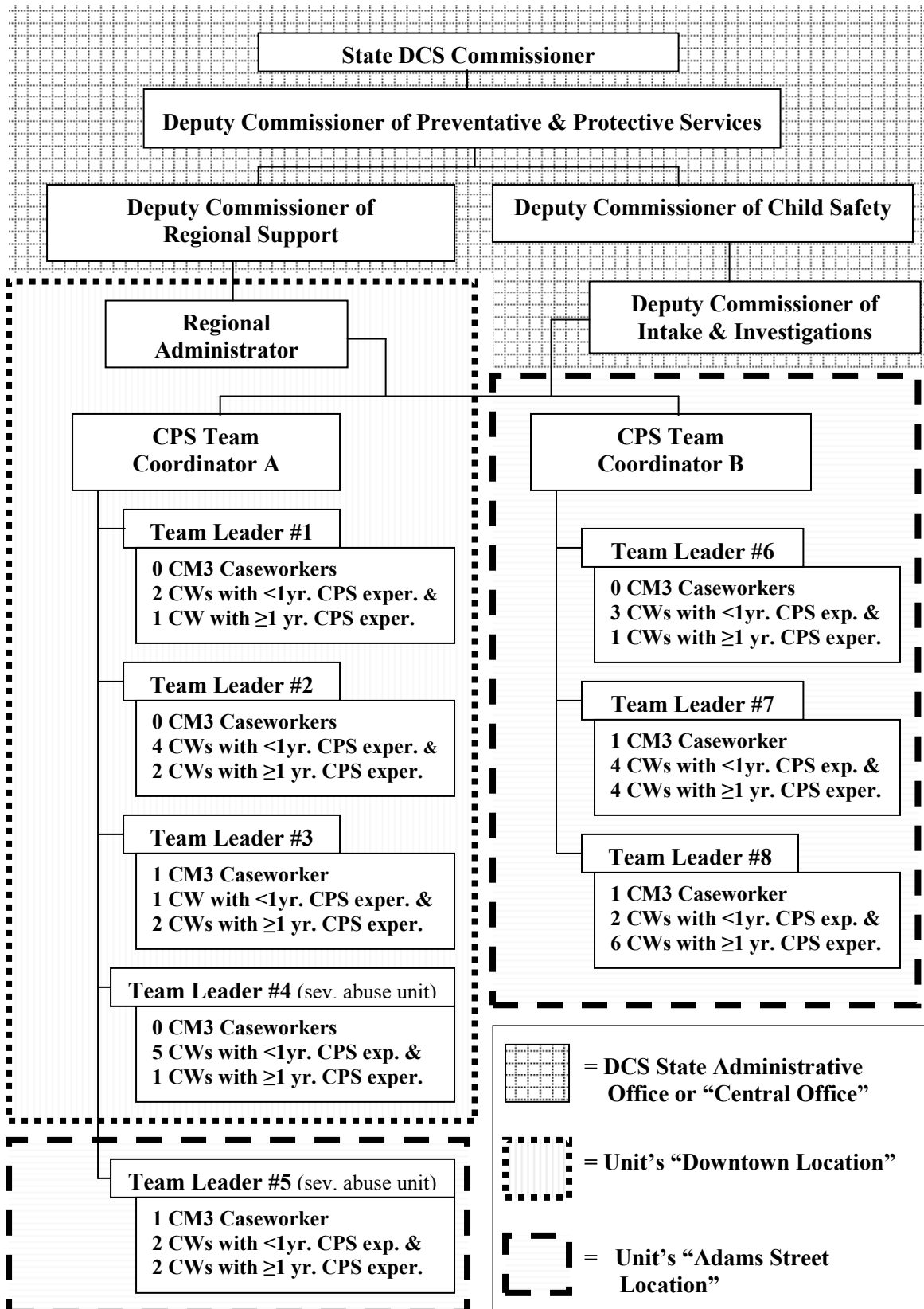
### *Unit Hierarchy*

Figure 5 below depicts the hierarchical structure of the study unit, including the breakdown of caseworkers and supervisors, the unit's place within the overall DCS hierarchy, and how the unit is split between two primary physical locations. First, similar to the structure that was reviewed earlier, the DCS Commissioner and her appointed deputy commissioners sit at the top level of the organization's hierarchy. Then, below these highest-level DCS administrative positions sits the area's Regional Administrator. The Regional Administrator supervises all of the foster care system's service personnel in the particular service county area, including the area's respective CPS unit. Technically both the Regional Administrator and Deputy Commissioner of Intake and Investigations oversee the individual CPS unit, but since the Deputy Commissioner is not only responsible for supervising the study unit but all of the CPS units within the state and does not office out of the CPS unit's worksite but rather within the same high-level

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Commissioner's rationale behind her granting the study's access is unknown, it was likely given for a number of reasons, including but not limited to: the dire circumstances found within the study unit at the end of 2006, my long history of working within the field of child advocacy, and the strong reputation of research performed and sponsored by my college, Vanderbilt University, in the past.

**Figure 5 – Hierarchical Structure of Participant-CPS Unit & Location Delineation**



administrative building that houses the Commissioner's office, the local Regional Administrator is the more active and visible of the two.

Below the Regional Administrator and Deputy Commissioner of Intake and Investigations are the 2 Team Coordinators for the unit. Although the teams themselves are not equally split between the 2 Team Coordinators (see Figure 5 above), with Team Coordinator A overseeing 5 teams and Team Coordinator B responsible for 3, the number of caseworkers are almost evenly split between the two. For example, Team Coordinator A oversees a total of 29 individuals, including: 5 Team Leaders, 2 CM3s, and 22 caseworkers, 14 with less than a year of experience and 8 caseworkers with at least a year of CPS experience. Team Coordinator B is responsible for a total of 25 employees, including: 3 Team Leaders, 2 CM3s, and 20 caseworkers, 9 with less than a year's worth of experience, and 11 caseworkers with a year or more of CPS experience. As depicted in Figure 5 above, the number of caseworkers assigned to each of the team varies, likely due to the constant ebb and flow of voluntary caseworker turnover. Thus, at any certain point in time the number of caseworkers may or may not be evenly distributed between teams, with each Team Leader at the time of this study responsible for supervising 3 to 9 caseworkers.

#### *Description of Unit's Office Locations*

Figure 5 above also depicts how the unit's teams are split between two physical office locations. In particular, the unit itself is housed at two separate locations, with the State's administrative office constituting a separate DCS location, situated within the state capital, within the unit's same service county. In regards to the unit itself, its two

sites include a location near the county’s downtown area and the relevant juvenile court facility, which this paper refers to as the “Downtown Location,” and another located on the grounds of a former boarding school approximately 5 miles away from the first, which is referred to as the “Adams Street Location.”<sup>5</sup>

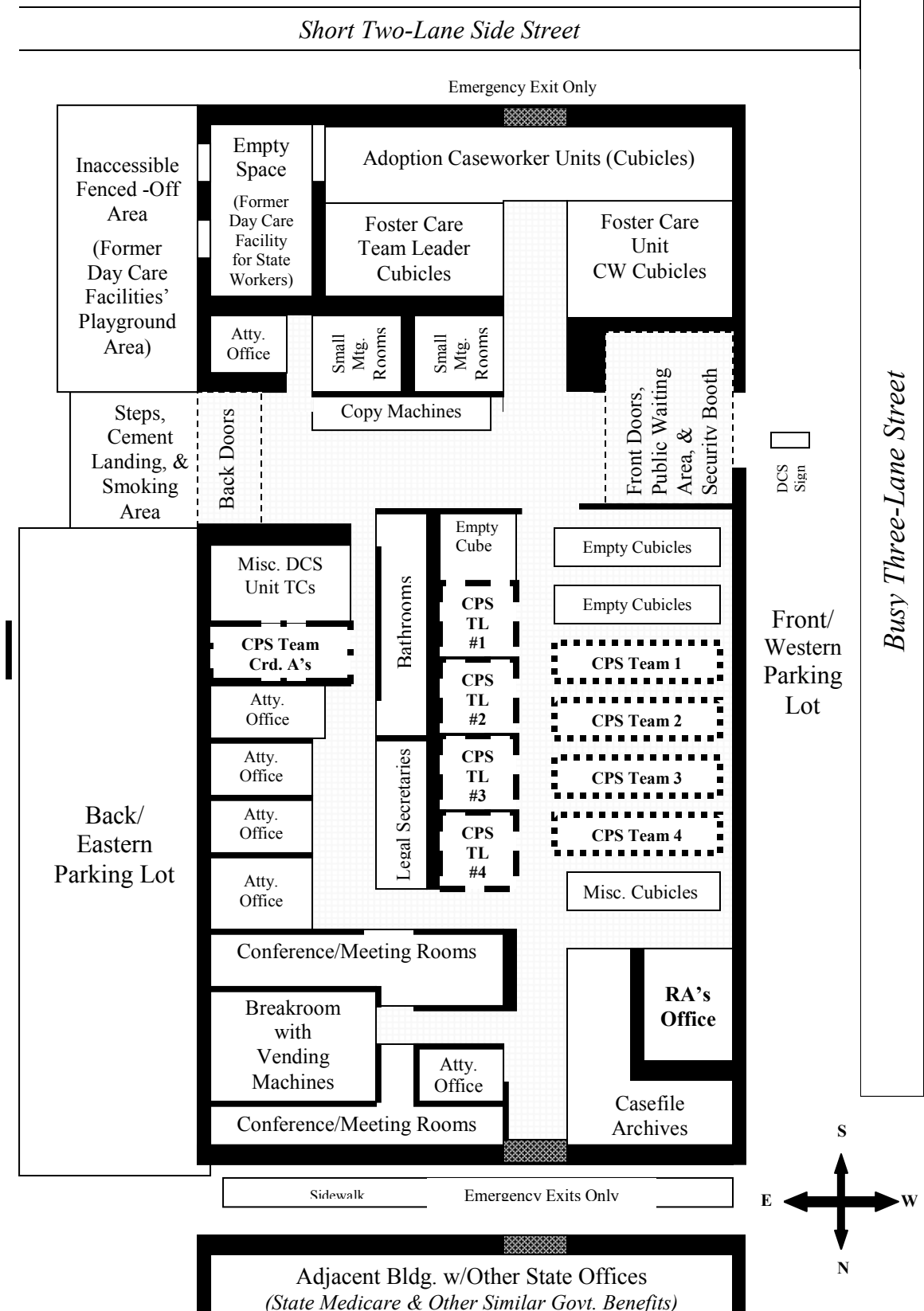
The Downtown Location is represented within the dot-lined box on the left-hand side of Figure 5 above. The Adams Street Location includes a large building, where the majority of the location’s offices reside, shown within the dash-lined boxes at the bottom of the left-hand side and all of the right-hand side of Figure 5 above. The Adams Street Location formerly housed an elementary school; a smaller bungalow location, where Team #5 is located, is within 100 yards of walking distance of the former elementary school building and was originally used as one of many small residential housing units for the school’s boarding students. The boxes within the unlined checkerboard area at the top of Figure 5 above delineate those high-ranking DCS individuals with offices within the Department’s administration building, located within the downtown state capital area of the service county and commonly referred to by those within the unit as “Central Office.”

*Downtown Location.* The unit’s Downtown Location is situated within a large DCS building that also houses long-term foster care caseworker units, an adoption caseworker unit, the county’s legal department, the Regional Administrator’s office, and the archived case files for the county. Figure 6 below depicts a general overview of this building and the various units located within it. This figure as well as Figure 7 are not drawn to scale, but are fair depictions of the unit’s internal office locations. The only

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<sup>5</sup> Please, note that this is an invented street name and does not refer to the unit’s actual office location in any way.

**Figure 6 – Unit’s Downtown Location**



sign outside the building is one for the Department of Children's Services (DCS) and there are no signs inside indicating where the various units, including CPS, are located. The building itself is a fairly wide open space, with a warehouse feel inside. High ceilings, tinted windows, fluorescent lighting, and the 4-foot cubicle walls that constitute the majority of office delineation all serve to convey this warehouse-like impression.

The larger cubicles where the Team Leaders and Team Coordinator A are located (see the dash-lined boxes in the middle of Figure 6 above) have higher walls that extend approximately 10 feet high. Thus, unlike the caseworker cubicles, these larger ones have more privacy, with no one able to look down into them from the aisles, and only accessible through their entry ways. Regardless of height, all of the cubicle walls are fabric covered and can hold lightweight pieces of paper with stick pins, or with tape attached to the surrounding metal frames. At the end of each of the rows of cubicles where the CPS team caseworkers are located (see the dot-lined boxes on the right-hand side of Figure 6 above) there is an attached piece of paper that lists which cubicle in the row belongs to which caseworker. There are no signs that delineate between the 4 CPS teams located inside the building, but most of the Team Leaders and caseworkers have their names attached to the entry of their cubicle.

The inside of the building is fairly dark, in spite of the fact that windows line the entire front, or western, side of the building. This is likely due to the shaded panes of glass in all of the building's windows; the building's high, warehouse-like ceiling; and the dim fluorescent lighting fixtures throughout. Team Coordinator A is the only employee of the CPS unit at this location with a window located in her personal office. All of the Team Leaders are located in the central part of the building and none of the



caseworkers' cubicles abut the western wall of windows. Conference rooms, attorneys' offices, and the Regional Administrator are located in the building's only walled-off areas and most have windows.

At the time of the study the interior of the building was in the process of being painted. The painters worked during the evenings and/or weekends but the paint fumes were very noticeable throughout the workday. None of the building's windows opened to the outside and the doors had to stay close due to security concerns. Most of the employees seemed excited about the new paint because they believed new carpet and cubicle walls would soon follow. The employees believed that the new cubicles would resemble those at the unit's Adams Street Location in that they would be brand new and offer greater privacy by being high enough to keep others from being able to see down into each space.

The building has several conference and meeting rooms. These are used by any of the employees in the building, both CPS and non-CPS, and are monitored via a series of sign-up sheets, located outside the Regional Administrator's office in the building. It is common for CPS caseworkers from the unit's Adams Street Location to use these conference rooms as well. This is reportedly due in part to the lack of conference room space in the Adams Street building and/or due to the arrangements made by others assigned to the case, such as a foster care caseworker or conference facilitator. However, statements of Adams Street participants indicate their desire to keep their office location separate and more unknown to their clientele, possibly due to safety concerns.

The Downtown Location's bathrooms had a maintenance problem during the study requiring the water to be shut off. When repeatedly asked if the employees could

take the day off as a result, the Regional Administrator replied in the negative. If necessary, she encouraged the employees to use the bathroom facilities at a nearby gas station until the problem was fixed. The problem was resolved approximately 6 hr later, at the close of the business day. When asked about the problems at the facility, employees gave a mixed response. Some continued to prefer it to the Adams Street Location due to the insect problem they believed to be found there while others felt the building did not afford them enough privacy to get their work done. However, most of the employees reported being out in the field so much of the time that their actual office location was unimportant to them.

The building itself has two secured entrances, one located in the front, or western side, of the building with a small public waiting room and security booth manned by 1 or 2 guards during working hours, and the other monitored via security cameras in the back, or east-facing side, and used by the majority of the employees. The back, eastern door has wide concrete stairs leading up to the glass doors. At any given time a few caseworkers can usually be found enjoying a smoking break while chatting with one another or talking on their cell phones. The employees enter these back doors either by someone on the inside opening a door for them or by showing the guards in the front booth, via a video camera, their employee badges and waiting to be buzzed inside. All employees of DCS are required to wear employee identification badges which include the individual's photograph, "DCS" listed in bold lettering, but no reference to the specific division of CPS where they are employed.

The building is located in a fairly busy downtown area. Directly to the south of the building is one identical in appearance that houses the State's Medicare and other

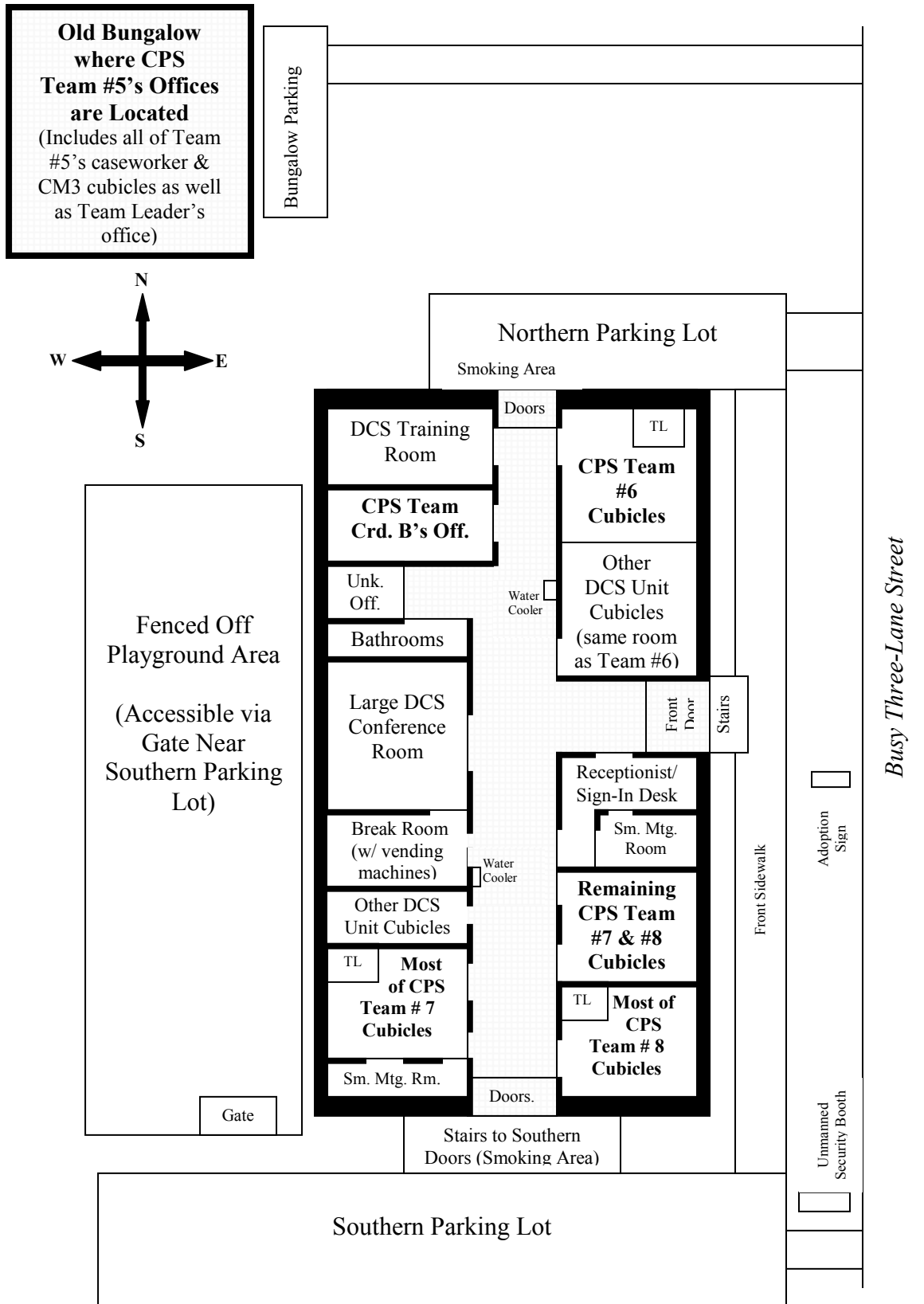
government subsidy offices, such as the agency that administers the State's welfare and food stamp benefits. That building has an exterior sign similar to its neighbor's, DCS, with the same sign colors and lettering scale, but with "Department of Human Services" displayed across it instead. The parking lots are shared between the two buildings, with reserved spots for security and the Regional Administrator located near the back, or eastern, entrance. With the shared lots and lack of available street parking, parking problems are frequently a problem.

Approximately 3 blocks to the south of the building are the county jail and courthouse complex for non-juvenile issues. Less than a mile to the southeast is where the juvenile court for the area is located, where the unit's caseworkers go to attend most of the court hearings for their cases. Other than the small landing areas near the front and back doors there are no outside places to congregate, no accessible playground or park space, and only a limited number of urban sidewalks throughout the area.

*Adams Street Location.* In contrast to the unit's Downtown Location, the Adams Street Location primarily houses CPS personnel only (see Figure 7 below). Within the large, former elementary school building, each of the CPS teams is fairly self-contained within separate former classrooms. Each classroom is partitioned into cubicles, each approximately 6 feet in height, with the Team Leaders located in the same type of cubicle as the remainder of the team. Teams #7 and #8 have half of their cubicles arranged along the exterior wall of the building with the other half adjacent to the interior classroom doors. As such those with exterior-wall cubicles have windows in their office space.

Unlike the Downtown Location, the Adams Street Location feels brighter, likely due to the clear glass in the windows, the smaller building space, and the lower ceilings

**Figure 7 – Unit’s Adams Street Location**



that allow the florescent lights to appear brighter. Unlike CPS Teams #7 and #8, Team #6 is a smaller team and is located in one of the largest rooms of the building (see top right-hand corner of larger building depicted in Figure 7 above). As such, this team shares space with another non-CPS unit. All of the cubicles in this room are located in the middle of the room, with none of them abutting the building's exterior wall of windows, and there is no differentiation between which cubicles belong to CPS and which belong to the other unit division of DCS.

Moreover, unlike the Downtown Location, there are no signs on any of the cubicles at the Adams Street Location that mark which cubicle belongs to which employee. There are also no signs inside or outside the various classrooms indicating the names and locations of the teams. Most of the bulletin boards throughout the building's hallways have pictures drawn by children, advertising adoption (likely leftover from the old adoption division of DCS that used to be located in the building), and/or display flyers of various state and private agencies. None of these contain information specifically pertinent to CPS. Also, there are no signs on the premises of the Adams Street Location that convey either the name of DCS or any current division thereof, but rather a large sign, located outside near the street, that displays the name of the old adoption division of DCS that used to be located in the building, and that now no longer exists. The CPS unit moved into the building after the adoption division was disbanded, in late 2005 or early 2006.

The large conference room located in the building is used on almost a daily basis by various state government employees unrelated to CPS, in order to provide ongoing employee training. As such, while the conference room must be reserved beforehand via

DCS' Central Office, it can be used by any state-run agency. Approximately once a month the CPS unit itself holds training and/or informal gatherings in the room, but even they must schedule that time beforehand via Central Office, typically at least a month in advance of the meeting date. The smaller meeting rooms in the building are primarily utilized by employees of the CPS unit in the building, such as for monthly team meetings, but still must be reserved beforehand, via a sign-up book in the receptionist's area. However, these smaller conference rooms do not provide much privacy from the nearby office space, are not large enough to hold more than 5 or 6 people comfortably, and are generally considered undesirable due to the building's insect problem. This coupled with many of the caseworkers' desire to keep the building's location unknown to clientele, result in most client meetings being held at the unit's Downtown Location.

The receptionist's area is located by the building's front, or eastern, door and main entryway and is staffed by a full-time receptionist, an employee of DCS in general and not specifically CPS. When the receptionist is not on the premises, the 2 CM3s in the building take turns filling-in for her at her desk, a job task not required of those CM3s located within the unit's Downtown Location. The northern and southern doors into the building both have signs taped to their glass directing visitors around the building to the front doors. The northern and southern doors both lock automatically from the inside, but the majority of employees knock on the doors to get someone to let them inside rather than going around to the front doors. In addition, the entryways of both of these doors serve as a break and smoking area for the employees and when being used as such, employees usually keep the doors from locking by propping them open with a folded magazine.

Unlike the unit's Downtown Location, there are no video cameras or security personnel on site at the Adams Street Location. However, there is an unmanned security booth located at the entrance to the building's south parking lot that does lend some feeling of security to the premises. In addition, within the main entryway, outside the door to the receptionist's office, there is a sign directing all visitors to stop and sign-in at the receptionist's desk and requiring an employee's escort if they wish to go further into the building. However, since there are no security personnel in the building, there are no real repercussions should someone choose not to sign-in with the receptionist and/or wait for an escort.

Signs located near the sinks in the building's bathrooms and break room warn against drinking the water, but do not state why the water is considered unsafe. There are at least 2 water coolers in the building that are frequently empty of water and/or paper cups. The building is serviced by insect exterminators on a regular basis and the remains of large dead cockroaches can be found in some of the buildings small meeting rooms. When asked about the facilities, employees are usually very positive about the building and its surroundings, citing the insect problem as the only drawback of operating out of the Adams Street Location.

The building itself, as well as the nearby building that houses all of CPS Team #5, is located on a large piece of property that at one time was used as a private and later state-run boarding school. The extensive grounds include paved walking trails, accessible playgrounds, and numerous park-like benches. Parking is widely available at this location and rarely a problem. Other state agencies that office out of other former school buildings and share the grounds with CPS include a state criminal investigative

unit, a magnet high school for the performing arts, and various state child service agencies, such as one for interviewing and counseling victims of rape or child sexual abuse. The Adams Street Location is approximately 5 miles northeast of the unit's Downtown Location, with the juvenile court lying between them, but closer in proximity to the Downtown Location.

*Central Office.* Since the CPS unit is located in the state capital, it also shares its county location with the head offices of DCS, or commonly referred to by DCS employees as "Central Office." Central Office is located approximately a mile northwest from the unit's Downtown Location and is found on 3 adjacent floors of a small state-owned skyscraper in the heart of the urban city. All new state employees visit the building at least once at the start of their employment with the state, including all new CPS caseworkers, albeit on a different floor of the building from where the top-level DCS offices are located, in order to obtain their state identification badges. Most of these employees are unaware that the Central Office of DCS is located within the same building and most have never visited those floors. As such, while it is important to note the presence of Central Office, and the top-level DCS personnel that inhabit it, in the area, this paper does not spend time detailing the location's specifics, beyond those pertaining to the building's security issues.

Overall, security within the building where Central Office is located is fairly strict. There is only minimal metered parking around the building with the exception of the Commissioner and other high-level state employees who have reserved spots nearby. All other employees with offices in the building park in a lot approximately a mile away, and take shuttles into and out of the area each day. Visitors must either find paid parking



in lots a block or more away from the building, or at one of the often-occupied metered spot nearby. A security desk is located inside the building, at the base of the only publicly-accessible elevators and is staffed by at least one guard every weekday. Each visitor is photographed at the security desk and then escorted by a building employee up to the floor they are visiting. They must pass the same security area on their way out of the building, and sign-out as well.

### *Broader Service Community*

One characteristic common to all CPS caseworkers in the unit is a shared responsibility to serve the county in which the unit is located. As revealed later on in this paper, each employee of the unit either resides within the service county area or in an area immediately adjacent to it, but regardless of where her home is, each caseworker must become familiar with the unit's service area in order to effectively travel the county in the course of investigating a case. As such, it is important to note at least basic information with regards to the county itself, including its overall population, demographics, local media and courts, educational services, and crime rate.

First, the entire metro service area has a population of approximately 614,000 people (U. S. Census, 2006) and consists of an area equal to 526.1 square miles (U. S. Geological Survey, 2001). At least 22%, or approximately 135,080, of the city's population are under the age of 18 years old (U. S. Census, 2000). The median income of its residents is just under \$40,000 per year but the per capita income for the city falls at \$23,069, with 10% of the families in the area, 13% of the overall population, and 19% of those under 18 years of age, living below the poverty line. This amounts to roughly

26,000 children in all. As in most cities in the country, there are numerous private childcare options available, but none that offer the public childcare arrangements for parent/caregivers who have to work during the night and/or weekend. The city's foreign-born population more than tripled between the years 1990 and 2000, going from approximately 13,000 to 40,000 people with numerous refugee enclaves found within the city, including a large Kurdish community as well as Hispanic, Vietnamese, Pakistani, Somali, among others (U. S. Census, 2006).

Although the city itself dates back to the late 1770s, the city and county in which it is located merged in the 1960s in hopes of combating problems associated with urban sprawl (Wikipedia, 2008). Throughout the city's history the majority of its residents have remained fairly consistent in their loyalty to the Democratic Party, with most elections resulting in Democratic victories. The local school board is elected and all 3 branches of state government, including the legislative, executive, and state Supreme Court, are located within the city's downtown area. At the time of the study, the state had a Democratic governor, a man very familiar with and well-known in the service area due to his previous position as the city's mayor.

Moreover, within the city are at least four major television news organizations that broadcast to the entire middle section of the state, one state-wide newspaper with high circulation, and numerous city-wide newspapers. The television stations as well as state-wide newspaper frequently publish stories related to DCS and CPS, most often cases that originate out of the study-unit, with the newspaper publishing at least a story every other week and periodically devoting a series of daily publications to the issues

involved. Most, if not all, of these stories are critical of CPS, the larger DCS organization, and its various employees.

The city also includes numerous prestigious area hospitals, in particular a nationally ranked Trauma 1 teaching hospital and a leading children's hospital which employs several experts on the issue of child physical and sexual abuse diagnosis and treatment (Wikipedia, 2008). The city is home to at least 24 post-secondary educational institutions including a large number of technical trade schools, 2-year colleges, and rigorous 4-year universities. In addition to a high-ranking, ivy league university, there are numerous faith-based colleges, well-known historically black universities, and a large state university. At least two universities within the service county area and two within nearby county areas offer Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) degrees. At the time of the study one state university located outside the service area, the same university that develops and teaches much of the training materials given new caseworker recruits in the study unit, offered a distance, on-line degree program for those interested in obtaining a Master's in Social Work (MSW) and starting in the Fall of 2009 at least three other area universities plan to offer a similar MSW program.

Finally, the study area has a high rate of both violent and non-violent crime when compared to the national average. In regards to violent crime, the city experiences 2.51 times the national average of incidences of violent crime including 1.74 times the national rate of murders and 2.85 times the national rate of aggravated assaults (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004). In the area of non-violent crime, or those crimes that primarily pertain to property offenses, including vandalism and destruction of property, the area reports 1.58 times the national average.

These service area demographics, coupled with the earlier detailed outlines of the study unit's hierarchy and location descriptions, provide the backdrop for the rest of this Findings and Discussion section. As such, although this paper does not discuss them separately at this time, the issues are revisited in several other subsections below, such as those pertaining to social support, work-home conflicts, and workplace safety issues.

### *Participant Demographics*

Within these broader parameters this paper goes on to examine the lives of the participants themselves. In order to do so, one must first take a look at the participants' various demographic characteristics. These include the CPS employee's gender, race, age, educational status, marital and parenthood status, and residential information, or who resides in the participant's home with her on a part-time and/or full-time basis. In so doing, the stage is set for a later in-depth analysis of issues pertaining to each of these areas, for example the availability of a social support system found within a caseworker's home and how her gender and parenting status may affect the importance of this system within the caseworker's life.

#### *Gender, Race, and Age*

As seen in Table 2 below, of the 51 total participants in the study, the overwhelming majority, or 82%, are female and 63% are African-American. Moreover, both of these percentages are even higher within the subset of Team Leaders, with all but 1 of them, or 87.5%, female and all but 2, or 75%, African-American. Finally, the mean age of all those employed within the unit at the time of the study is 36.6 years, with

the average caseworker and Team Leader closer in age, in their early to mid-thirties, and approximately 12 years younger than the average age of the 2 Team Coordinators.

**Table 2 – Participants’ Gender, Race, & Age**

	<b>Caseworkers (41)</b>	<b>Team Leaders (8)</b>	<b>Team Coordinators (2)</b>	<b>Unit Total (51)</b>
<b>Female</b>	33	7	2	<b>42 (82%)</b>
<b>Male</b>	8	1	0	<b>9 (18%)</b>
<b>African-American</b>	25	6	1	<b>32 (63%)</b>
<b>Caucasian</b>	14	2	1	<b>17 (33%)</b>
<b>Other</b>	2	0	0	<b>2 (4%)</b>
<b>Mean Age (Years)</b>	35.4	39.25	51	<b>36.6</b>
<b>Median Age (Years)</b>	32	36.5	51	<b>34</b>

*Discussion.* While age, race, and gender have not been found to be direct predictors of turnover per se, gender when combined with parenthood has been found to increase the risk of turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001). In particular, female caseworkers who have children at home are more at risk of voluntarily leaving their employment than females with no children or any of their male counterparts. Thus, the high percentage of females in the unit may heighten the potential risk of turnover and, as such, this issue is revisited in subsequent areas of this subsection below, particularly when considering the caseworker-participants’ dependent/child care concerns and social support issues.

### *Educational Status*

Tables 3 and 4 below depict the past educational status of the unit's employees as well as the degree areas to which Master's degrees are currently being sought. As seen in Table 3, the majority of those employed by the Department, or 25%, have a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice with 18% holding a Bachelor's degree in the related field of psychology. A reported 6 out of the total 51 participants, or 12%, have a Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) degree, including 5 out of the 41 caseworker-participants, 1 of the 8 Team Leader-participants, but neither of the 2 Team Coordinators.

Also seen in Tables 3 and 4 below, at the time of the study, only 5 of the participants hold a Master's degree of any kind with 11 participants currently enrolled in a Master's degree program. In either case, none of the participants hold a Master's in Social Work (MSW) degree and none are seeking to obtain one. Of those who currently hold a Master's degree, the most popular degree area, held by 3 of the 5 participants, is in the area of Social Service Administration. Of the 11 participants seeking to obtain a Master's degree at the time of the study, the most popular programs include criminal justice as well as counseling, with 4 participants enrolled in each of these program areas.

In addition, Tables 3 and 4 below show the number of degrees in which the employee received/is receiving either partial or full compensation from the State for her educational expenses. Of the 5 current holders of Master's degrees and the 11 participants seeking to obtain a Master's degree, none received full compensation for the costs of the program from their state employer. Almost an equal percentage of current and future Master's degree holders received partial compensation from the State, including 2 of the 5 current degree holders and 4 of the 11 future degree holders.

**Table 3 – Participants’ Educational Status**

		<b>Caseworkers (41)</b>	<b>Team Leaders (8)</b>	<b>Team Crdtrs. (2)</b>	<b>Unit Total (51)</b>
<b>Bachelor’s Degree</b>	Social Work (BSW)	5	1	0	<b>6</b>
	Criminal Justice/ Criminology	8	4	1	<b>13</b>
	Management/ Business Admin.	1	0	1	<b>1</b>
	Related/Other:	21	2	0	<b>23</b>
	Psychology	8	1	0	<b>9</b>
	Sociology	3	1	0	<b>4</b>
	Psych. & Sociology	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
	Child Development	4	0	0	<b>4</b>
	Education	3	0	0	<b>3</b>
	Special Education	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
Unrelated/ Other:	6	1	0	<b>7</b>	
Communications	2	0	0	<b>2</b>	
Interdisc./General	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	
Computer Science	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	
Hum. & Org. Dev.	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	
History	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	
Political Science	0	1	0	<b>1</b>	
<b>Bachelor’s Degree Subtotal</b>		<b>41</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Master’s Degree</b>	Social Work (MSW)	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
	Criminal Justice/Criminal Justice Admin.	1 (0P, 0F)	0	0	<b>1 (0P,0F)</b>
	Public Services Mgmt./Social Services Administration	0	2 (1P, 0F)	1 (1P, 0F)	<b>3 (2P,0F)</b>
	Related/Other	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
	Unrelated/Other: (Home Econ.)	1 (0P, 0F)	0	0	<b>1 (0P,0F)</b>
	<b>Master’s Degree Subtotal</b>	<b>2 (0P, 0F)</b>	<b>2 (1P, 0F)</b>	<b>1 (1P, 0F)</b>	<b>5 (2P,0F)</b>

(State-Compensated; Partial = P, Full = F)

**Table 4 – Master’s Degree in Progress**

	<b>Caseworkers (41)</b>	<b>Team Leaders (8)</b>	<b>Team Coordinators (2)</b>	<b>Unit Total (51)</b>
Social Work (MSW)	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
Criminal Justice/Criminal Justice Admin.	2 (2P, 0F)	2 (0P, 0F)	0	<b>4 (2P, 0F)</b>
Public Services Mgmt/Social Services Admin.	0	1 (1P, 0F)	0	<b>1 (1P, 0F)</b>
Related/Other:	6 (1P, 0F)	0	0	<b>6 (1P, 0F)</b>
Counseling	4 (1P, 0F)	0	0	<b>4 (1P, 0F)</b>
Education/Curriculum & Instruction	2 (0P, 0F)	0	0	<b>2 (0P, 0F)</b>
Unrelated/Other	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Master’s Degree In Progress Subtotal</b>	<b>8 (3P, 0F)</b>	<b>3 (1P, 0F)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11 (4P, 0F)</b>

(State-Compensated; Partial = P, Full = F)

When asked about state compensation, the 3 current degree holders who did not receive any state compensation state that the compensation program was either not in effect, unknown to them at the time they received their degree, or did not apply to them since they received their Master’s prior to their state employment. Most of those currently seeking their Master’s degree state that they did not want full compensation (or the maximum 80% compensation offered by the State) because they believed that they would be required and/or feel morally obligated to stay employed by the State after graduation and they did not want to place this limitation on their future employment.



*Discussion.* The low number of participants in the unit with either a BSW or MSW degree is troubling in light of prior studies that found that those with one or both of these degrees ranked higher in competency and performance than those with degrees in any other area (see, e.g., Dhooper et al., 1990). In addition, with only 3 out of 51 participants holding a BSW, the potential threat of turnover grows. This stems from previous studies reporting that those with a BSW were more likely to stay employed at CPS than those with other Bachelor's degrees (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b).

Paradoxically prior research reveals that the fact that none of the study participants holds, nor is currently seeking to obtain, a MSW may be a positive issue. In particular, several previous studies reveal that those with an MSW degree are significantly more likely to leave employment than those with a BSW (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Child Welfare League of America, 2002b; Curry et al., 2005). Thus, even though the State's compensation program, under the federal government's Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (1980), was designed to support those caseworkers interested in obtaining higher education in the field of social work (Government Accounting Office, 2003), it may be a positive indicator of the unit's future workforce stability that participants are seeking degrees in other related fields, such as counseling, rather than social work. However, one's optimism is dimmed by the lack of full compensation participants in the unit and the fears expressed by many of the Master's degree-in-progress participants of future employment obligation if they were to seek full compensation under the program.

In addition, the high number of participants that hold a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice, 13 of the 51 study participants or 25% of the study group, is unexpected and interesting in light of the possible future evolution of the field of CPS. While the role of CPS caseworkers today evolved from an earlier focus social work and social service professions, the investigative role served by CPS caseworkers has existed in one form or another since the inception of state-run care in the early twentieth century. Although it has not been examined to date, a state foster care system's separation of caseworker roles into different unit divisions, for example child protection as opposed to those of other caseworker units such as long-term foster care or adoptive services, may necessitate the recruitment of individuals more well-versed in investigative rather than social service work. While CPS caseworkers fulfill both an investigative and social work role, many of the study participants report spending more time on the former while others report conducting an equal number of both types of job tasks throughout their day.

It is also important to note that 2 of the participants that hold a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice admit to accepting CPS employment as a means of later transferring to a different state position in a more purely criminal justice-oriented division. For example, one of these participants has already applied for and been interviewed for a position within the state's juvenile justice branch of DCS, a position she admits to coveting and awaiting since the beginning of her employment with CPS, and the other is awaiting a possible future opening in the state's nearby adult criminal forensics laboratory. Both of these participants view their employment with CPS as a "stepping stone" to their more ideal state position and began their employment with the CPS study unit as simply a means to get their foot in the door of the state system, with plans of later

transferring out of the unit once their ideal position became available and was offered to them.

Finally, it is important to note that the small number of participants with a BSW degree is likely not a result of the lack of available university programs in the area. At least one large state university and one private religious university offer BSW degree programs, both of which are located within the service county area. In addition, three other large state universities located within driving distance to the service county offer BSW degrees. Moreover, many of the participants graduated with degrees from these schools, but primarily in other degree areas. In addition, most of the participants during their interview sessions report being at least aware of the extended, on-line MSW program currently being offered by a state university outside the area, the same university that develops and implements much of the caseworkers' training materials upon their entrance to CPS work. However, most report no interest in pursuing an MSW degree with this school. It is unclear whether this reluctance is a result of this particular school's program itself or a lack of interest in social work in general. Starting in the Fall of 2009 at least three other area universities will offer a similar MSW program, thus it would be worthwhile to follow-up and examine whether the number of MSW candidates changes at that time.

Thus, it may be possible that the recruitment of individuals with a background in criminal justice and/or those not interested in higher social work degrees does not indicate a possible evolution in the field, but rather the tentative employment of these individuals while they await more criminal justice-oriented employment elsewhere within the state and/or a disinterest in the particular limited availability of MSW degree

programs at the time of the study. Regardless, more follow-up attention is needed in order to determine which is more likely. While it is a difficult area to pinpoint, particularly due to the reluctance of individuals to be open about future employment searches and the fear of possible negative reprisals from the individuals' supervisors and/or colleagues, longitudinal studies that investigate the turnover habits over time of those with a background in criminal justice and the higher educational decisions of all caseworkers once the availability of MSW programs increases would effectively shed more light on the area.

#### *Marital, Parenthood, and Residential Status*

Finally, Table 5 below depicts the marital status of those employed within the unit as well as the number of participants who have minor children, adult children, extended family, and/or unrelated others residing within their home. The majority of participants, or 49%, are married and living with their spouse or not married but living with a life partner. At least 8 other participants reside either full- or part-time with other adults, such as an unrelated roommate or adult member of the participant's extended family, and not including adult children or other dependent.

The majority of participants who reside with others, or 37% of the overall group of participants, have at least one minor child under the age of 12 years old, and/or another dependent that requires full-time supervision, residing full-time within their care. Another 4 participants have at least one minor child under the age of 12 years old, and/or other dependent that requires full-time supervision, residing part-time within their home. In keeping with this paper's earlier findings and discussion on gender, Table 5 below also

**Table 5 – Participants’ Marital, Parenthood, & Residential Status**

		Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. (8)	Team Cdtrs. (2)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
		<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)			
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married/Living with Partner FT	7 (4F)	9 (6F)	2 (2F)	<b>18</b> (12F)	5 (4F)	2 (2F)	<b>25</b> (18F)
	Divorced or Separated & Living Apart	2 (2F)	1 (1F)	2 (2F)	<b>5</b> (5F)	0	0	<b>5</b> (5F)
	Single/Never Married	8 (6F)	9 (9F)	0	<b>17</b> (15F)	3 (3F)	0	<b>20</b> (18F)
	Widowed	1 (1F)	0	0	<b>1</b> (1F)	0	0	<b>1</b> (1F)
<b>Parenthood/Dependency Status</b>	Part. w/ at least 1 Child Under 12 y.o. (or other dependent needing FT sprvsn.) Residing FT	4 (4F)	11 (8F)	1 (1F)	<b>16</b> (13F)	3 (3F)	0	<b>19</b> (16F)
	Part. w/ Child(ren) all 12 y.o. or Older Residing FT	2 (2F)	3 (3F)	2 (2F)	<b>7</b> (7F)	3 (2F)	1 (1F)	<b>11</b> (10F)
	Part. w/ at least 1 Child Under 12 y.o. (or other dpndnt. needing FT sprvsn.) Residing PT	2 (1F)	1 (1F)	0	<b>3</b> (2F)	1 (1F)	0	<b>4</b> (3F)
	Part. Resides PT w/ Child(ren) all 12 y.o. or Over Residing PT	0	1 (0F)	1 (1F)	<b>2</b> (1F)	0	0	<b>2</b> (1F)
<b>Other Residential Statuses of Part.</b>	Part. Resides FT w/ Extended Family (not child/depdnts.)	1 (1F)	0	0	<b>1</b> (1F)	1 (1F)	0	<b>2</b> (2F)
	Part. Resides PT w/ Extended Family (not child/depdnts.)	0	1 (1F)	1 (1F)	<b>2</b> (2F)	0	0	<b>2</b> (2F)
	Part. Resides FT w/Unrelated Roommate(s)	2 (1F)	2 (2F)	0	<b>4</b> (3F)	0	0	<b>4</b> (3F)
	Part. Resides FT or PT w/No Other Peer- Adult (i.e., not including adult child(ren)/dpdnts.)	10 (9F)	7 (7F)	1 (1F)	<b>17</b> (17F)	2 (2F)	0	<b>19</b> (19F)

(Participants’ Gender, F=Female)

reveals how many of the participants with children at home are female. In particular, female caseworker-participants with at least one child under the age of 12 years old, or other dependent, residing full-time in their home constitute 13 of the 16 caseworker-participants with children.

*Discussion.* As mentioned previously, the large percentage of caseworkers with dependent children raises a concern in light of previous research in the field, particularly in the case of female caseworkers. In particular, prior studies have found an increased risk of turnover for caseworkers with children at home, especially if the caseworker was female (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Although previous research has not yet delved below the surface of this finding to discover some of the possible reasons behind this relationship between dependent children, gender, and turnover, one can hypothesize at least one possible explanation. As can be seen in subsequent subsections herein, the work requirements of a CPS caseworker are guaranteed to conflict with the individual's home life at least several times every month, or whenever that caseworker is on-call. These conflicts necessitate extra effort on the part of the caseworker and/or others in her life in order to resolve them. Thus, the issue of a caseworker's parenthood status as well as her residential status and available support from other peer-adults are revisited again in greater detail in later subsections of this paper.

Moreover, other interesting demographics not represented in Table 5 above but addressed in later subsections, include the number of single-parent participants and those with live-in partners who work nights and/or weekends. Both of these issues are particularly relevant to later discussions of available social support systems and the collision of work and family priorities in the life of a caseworker, as magnified by the

larger societal view towards gender and parenthood in America. As such, while this table helps to introduce the employees of the participant-CPS unit, it is revisited and expounded upon as needed in subsequent subsections of this paper as well.

*Daniel – Ecological Examination of a CPS Caseworker’s Daily Life*

Daniel<sup>6</sup> is a 35-year-old caseworker who has worked for the CPS study unit for the past 4 years. He has both his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in a field pertaining to children but unrelated to social work. He obtained both degrees at a well-respected, expensive, ivy-league university. For a year prior to working for CPS he was employed by another division of the State’s Department of Children’s Services (DCS), within the same county as the study unit, and in which he provided preventative services to families with children at risk of coming into state’s custody in the future. Daniel has been assigned to two different CPS teams throughout his time with the unit, one located at the unit’s Downtown Location and the other at the larger Adams Street Location. He prefers the Adams Street Location, where he is now, not only due to the office setting itself, but also due to the fact that he feels he has a better working relationship with his current Team Leader than he had with his previous one.

Throughout his employment with the State, Daniel has resided with his wife and four young children outside the CPS service county area, in an adjacent county. His children are between the ages of 2 and 10 years old; the youngest two attend preschool part-time each week, and the other two children are school-aged and enrolled in a local public school. The children’s paternal grandparents live only a few miles away from

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<sup>6</sup> In this and all other caseworker examples, names and non-critical information have been altered as needed in order to protect the identity of the participant.

Daniel's home, within the same county. Daniel's wife works the nightshift at her job, full-time, within their county of residence, and during his time-off from CPS Daniel supplements their family income by working part-time as a fast food delivery person in his county of residence as well.

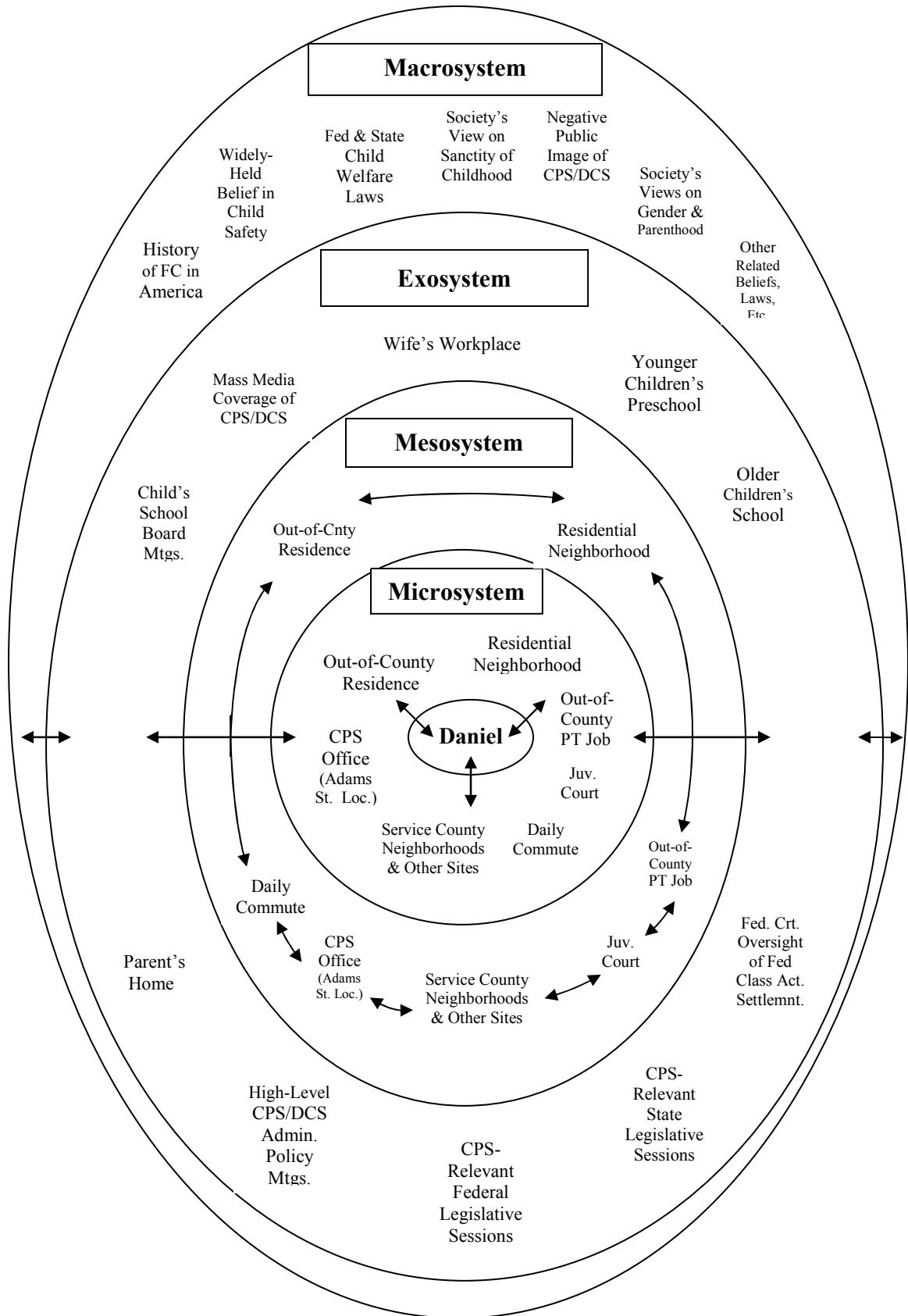
Like most adults in America, Daniel's life is a constant juggling act of various work and home issues. By applying the ecological model outlined previously in this paper, one gains a better understanding of this balancing act as well as the day-to-day struggles of a CPS caseworker. Although individual details of life differ from person-to-person, by analyzing in-depth each ecological layer found within the life of Daniel, the groundwork is laid for a subsequent consideration of how factors, such as the availability of social support outside of CPS, may affect many facets of a caseworker's life. As each component of the ecological model is applied below, insight is given into the life of the representative CPS caseworker, Daniel, and others like him, within the world of CPS, as well.

#### *Analysis and Discussion of a Caseworker's Microsystem Components*

You recall from the theoretical underpinnings section of this paper, an individual's microsystems represent those physical settings in which she interacts with others most frequently, including her residence, workplace, and neighborhood (Lemme, 2006). Thus, as depicted in Figure 8 below, Daniel's microsystems include his home, his individual residential neighborhood, his CPS jobsite at the unit's Adams Street Location, as well as those neighborhoods and service sites in which he actively engages throughout his job, such as the service area's hospitals, schools, neighborhoods, government housing



**Figure 8 – Ecological Model of a Caseworker Example: Daniel**



areas, local police stations, etc. Moreover, Daniel's microsystem also includes his part-time job as well as his commute to and from the unit's service area and his residence in an adjacent county area.

In addition to being the environments in which a person inhabits most frequently, microsystems also represent those contexts in which a caseworker is able to exert the most control or influence in her life. For example, Daniel may choose to change his daily commute by seeking a transfer to the CPS office located within his specific residential area, choosing to relocate his residence closer to the participant unit's location, but as one can see in the examination of the safety issues surrounding CPS, this option may not be considered feasible by some of those employed within the unit.

Thus, a caseworker such as Daniel may seek to shorten his commute by voluntarily terminating his employment for the State and/or CPS in order to find a job closer to home. Moreover, in light of the particular social and legal constraints in place with regards to CPS, job termination may be the only real source of power available to a CPS caseworker who wants to improve or change the microsystem level of her life. Thus, while microsystems represent the areas of a caseworker's life in which she is most in control, the amount of power she wields is determined in large part by the broader environmental contexts that she inhabits.

### *Analysis and Discussion of a Caseworker's Exosystem Settings*

In contrast to Daniel's microsystem level, his exosystem includes settings that are further removed from him, in which he is not an active participant, but that serve to influence the his microsystem settings. As seen in Figure 8 above, for Daniel this layer

includes: his children's schools, wife's workplace, parents' home, and the school board meetings in which decisions are made that impact the his family's life. In addition, the higher-level administrative meetings within the State's DCS office that result in a change in employee policy, federal and/or state legislative sessions that enact statutory changes that affect his CPS job requirements or other areas of his caseworker life, the federal court's oversight of the class action settlement, executive decisions by his wife's employer that change her employment, and the mass media coverage on CPS- and DCS-related issues also fall within the prevue of this layer. For example, the DCS policy, constrained by the state legislature's budgetary decisions, both of which are outside of Daniel's prevue, that set caseworker salaries at a certain level serve to influence Daniel's decision to seek part-time employment in an effort to supplement his CPS income.

#### *Analysis and Discussion of a Caseworker's Mesosystem Interactions*

Between the microsystem and exosystem lies Daniel's mesosystem (Lemme, 2006). As you recall, unlike these other layers, a mesosystem does not consist of physical settings per se, but rather represents the interactions between the settings found in the individual's micro- and exosystems. For example, the ways in which Daniel's job and home life interact, such as when he is on-call and must leave his home in order to conduct a CPS investigation, and/or the effect media coverage has on issues related to CPS and Daniel's daily work environment all constitute part of his mesosystem.

It is important to note that the interaction between microsystems and exosystems in Daniel's life has greatly influenced his choice of microsystem environments. For example, Daniel's choice to live outside the CPS service county area is influenced by his

desire to live close to his parents, particularly in light of the need for familial support from outside the home to take care of his dependent children whenever Daniel is on-call and his wife is working the night shift at her job. In particular, the CPS policy requirement that Daniel be on-call at least one weeknight and one weekend each month, coupled with his wife's employer's decision to schedule her nightshift hours, influence his decision to live close to his parent's house and the arrangements he makes for his children to sleepover at their house each month. Moreover, Daniel reports feeling safer living outside the service county, where he and his family have less of a chance of encountering those parents he has investigated throughout his CPS tenure.

Also, with Daniel's need for extra income he reports spending years working part-time as a fast food delivery person, within his county of residence, outside the unit's service area. This position reportedly earns him more money per hour than his CPS income and he reports feeling more comfortable performing this work in his county of residence, outside the service area, for a couple of reasons. Daniel states that living and working outside the service area makes it less likely that he would embarrassingly encounter his colleagues while performing his delivery work. Also living and doing delivery work outside the service area also lessens the risk of violence posed by encountering former clients within the scope of his part-time job.

This ecological examination of the life of Daniel allows for a deeper understanding of the possible precariousness of CPS employment and the personal sacrifices someone who wishes to remain with CPS must make. For example, if Daniel's part-time income were to lessen, if his parents were no longer a childcare option, if his commute became unbearable or unfeasible, if his wife lost her job and they needed

Daniel to earn a larger income, if living a county away no longer afforded him the same level of protection from former clients due to urban sprawl, etc., then Daniel's decision to remain employed by CPS could be in jeopardy. He may decide to transfer to a different division of state employment, perhaps a non-CPS unit within his home county that allows him anonymity and did not involve the same level of safety risk, or he could choose to leave state employment altogether. If Daniel's life is any indication, the uniqueness of CPS employment requires such a careful balancing act that it is, frankly, not surprising that so many choose to seek employment elsewhere. This interaction between work and home is pertinent to several of the study's other research questions as well and, as such, is revisited in greater depth in later sections of this paper.

#### *Analysis and Discussion of a Caseworker's Broader Macrosystem Parameters*

Finally, an individual's macrosystem is similar to her mesosystem in that it does not consist of physical environments, but rather represents the larger socio-cultural context in which she lives (Lemme, 2006). As was discussed previously, this includes the shared cultural values, beliefs, customs, and laws the person holds and abides by within her specific social group in society. An individual's macrosystem is particularly important because the values contained therein direct how social groups are organized and influence members of the same social group to have similar micro-, meso-, and exosystems as well.

Thus, macrosystems among CPS caseworkers are likely to differ depending on each individual's personal demographics. This means that caseworkers of the same race/ethnicity, religion, and/or economic group tend to have similar macrosystems, which

in turn influences the other environmental layers of each to closely resemble one another's as well. As you recall in this paper's earlier review of the literature concerning turnover to date, other more invisible demographics may also influence conformity in macrosystems and subsequent turnover decisions, including length of tenure at CPS, level of education, and level of job attainment. However, two important similarities work to draw all of the participants together, including their common calling to serve the particular service community, wherein or close to which they also reside, and their unique delineation as CPS employees.

Although the macrosystems of CPS caseworkers differ on the basis of demographics, both visible and invisible, ecological theory posits that the employees' inclusion within the local working and residential area as well as their involvement within the broader social group of CPS may serve to influence similar macrosystems among caseworkers across racial and gender lines (Lemme, 2006). Unlike diverse colleagues in other job sites around the country, society serves to delineate all CPS caseworkers, such as Daniel, as a distinct social group. For example, as was revealed in this paper's earlier outline of the history and evolution of CPS in this country, unlike most other jobs available in this country, CPS caseworkers are bound by the lengthy history of foster care in the country, the public's widely-held belief in the sanctity of childhood and the need for child safety, the negative societal perception of the work performed by CPS and/or DCS today, and by both federal and state laws in performing their daily job tasks. As such, they face possible public censure when the media reports their actions in a negative light, legal liability when they fail to do their job and/or uphold

the legal mandates pertinent to CPS, and/or court sanctions when they fail to act in accordance with a respective judge's orders in a case.

Moreover, similar to combat troops, CPS caseworkers are all equally exposed to heart-wrenching circumstances and are called upon to enter into some potentially dangerous and unhealthy environments as a part of their employment. For example, Daniel regularly ventures into high-crime areas, sometimes during riskier late night hours, in order to meet his response time obligations. His office is also located within the large Adams Street Location, a building with an undrinkable water supply and an ongoing bug infestation problem. In addition, Daniel, like all other caseworkers in his unit, is subject to the same media scrutiny when he and/or another of his colleagues is perceived to have failed to perform his job effectively and/or the media reports stories inaccurately.

Finally, the complexity of Daniel's job is easily misunderstood by those outside the realm of CPS. This misunderstanding coupled with the confidentiality requirements Daniel and his colleagues are under further serve to isolate him, and others like him, into a separate and unique subgroup of society. This isolation may help explain the strong need a caseworker has to feel supported by others within her profession, such as the previous studies conducted to date that highlight the need for supervisor support within CPS units. The interactions between a caseworker's work, home, and broader socio-cultural contexts are pertinent to several of the study's research questions and, as such, are revisited in greater depth in later sections of this paper.

### *Downtown Supervisors – Creating a Sense of Community*

There are 4 CPS Team Leaders and 1 Team Coordinator located within the unit's Downtown Location. All of these supervisors are female but they differ on the basis of race, with 3 being African-American and 2 Caucasian. By choice these women have formed an unofficial support group of sorts. In addition to casually visiting with each other throughout the day within their respective cubicles, they have all made a point of meeting with each other everyday for lunch. Their lunches take place in plain sight of other building employees, within the building's break room. The lunch is almost always purchased, provided by one of the women, and if someone is unable to join them for lunch, another member of the group locates her and makes sure her food is delivered to her.

No one else is invited to join the group for lunch, but because of its visual location, almost all of the caseworkers in the building are aware of the daily meeting. It is unknown what is discussed during this meeting, but the group appears very comfortable and friendly with each other, looking forward to their time together each day.

### *Study Findings Pertinent to CPS Employees' Sense of Belonging*

As seen in the daily experiences and social connections of the Downtown Location supervisors, and as portrayed in Table 6 below, almost all of the employees of the CPS unit feel that their job can only be understood by someone who has had CPS experience. This includes other divisions of DCS as well as those at Central Office, or those within the top administrative level of the Department. Not only do the employees



believe that Central Office officials misunderstand their job, but most of those employed with the unit for more than a year, including all but 1 of the unit’s supervisors, hold that those at Central Office doubt the caseworker’s ability to perform their job effectively.

**Table 6 – Participants’ Sense of Alienation & Lack of Pride in CPS Employment**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. & Team Crdtrs. (10)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)		
DCS w/No CPS Exp. Do Not Understand CPS Job	17	19	3	39	9	48
Central Office Does Not Understand CPS Job	18	19	4	41	9	50
Media Does Not Understand CPS Job	18	19	4	41	10	51
General Public Does Not Understands CPS Job	18	19	4	41	10	51
Central Office Does Not Trust CPS to Do Good Job	18	15	3	36	9	45
Part. Does Not Enjoy Talking about Job w/ Others	6	11	3	20	5	25
Media Negatively Affects Part.’s Job Enjoyment	2	3	1	6	6	12
Part. Is Not Proud to Tell Others about CPS Employment	5	13	2	20	5	25

When asked why they feel this way, most caseworkers and supervisors state they feel Central Office believes the media's negative, and frequently inaccurate, news coverage of CPS. Thus, even though only a minority of caseworkers report that their job enjoyment is directly, negatively affected by the negative media coverage of CPS and/or DCS, their perception of Central Office's belief in and response to those stories is a source of frustration for many of those within the unit. One caseworker describes this as feeling "presumed guilty" by those in Central Office. Several others express a desire for Central Office to be more proactive in "setting the record straight" and, within the bounds of confidentiality, providing more positive examples to the media, including follow-up coverage of negative stories, or of other examples of the hard work done by those in the unit.

Most of the study participants, including the close-knit supervisors located within the unit's Downtown Location, state that the confidentiality issues associated with their profession, coupled with the heartrending issues the CPS caseworkers face on a daily basis, lends a "boot camp" mentality to those in the trenches of CPS and increases the need many have for social support within the confines of CPS. The fact that most do not feel their work is understood by those outside of CPS, including those employed within other non-CPS units, the Central Office of DCS, and their own families, points to a level of social alienation and isolation for the majority of the study's participants.

Moreover, the confidentiality constraints the employees are under keep them from being able to discuss the specifics of their work with those outside CPS, and many report that even if they could discuss it with others, it takes firsthand experience to fully understand. As one participant says, "It really does take seeing to believe." Like the

supervisors in the Downtown Location, the result is that most participants feel a strong kinship towards and sense of belonging with the other CPS employees in their unit, colleagues and supervisors alike, particularly those they interact with on a daily basis, or those with offices in the same CPS building location. Thus, this sense of belonging and avenue of social support is important to many facets of a caseworker's life and, as such, is revisited in subsequent sections of this paper as well.

### *Discussion*

Within the parameters provided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the experiences of the unit's Downtown Location supervisors highlight a way in which one subgroup of CPS employees seeks to fulfill their psychological need for connection and support within the CPS environment. As you recall, psychological sense of community (PSOC) theory posits that like all humans, CPS caseworkers have a universal need to feel connected to those around them (Sarason, 1974). In better understanding the strength of belonging these supervisors and the unit's CPS caseworkers may or may not have within the community of CPS, PSOC theory sheds light on the microsystem level of work for all of these employees, the delineation of CPS as a social group, resulting in similar macrosystems for members with a stronger degree of identification with CPS, and the likelihood of those with strong PSOC within the unit to remain employed by CPS.

Membership within the CPS community depends upon the individual feeling a sense of belonging within the group; the degree to which she can exert control and influence on the group and vice versa; whether or not she shares common needs, goals, and values with other members; the extent to which she is emotionally connected to the

group, a connection that has developed over time, based on shared history and group identification (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); and her ability to choose to be identified as part of a social group (Obst & White, 2007). Therefore, in order to understand the level of belonging a CPS employee, such as a supervisor at the unit's Downtown Location, has within the CPS community one must consider: the employee's identification with the group, for example whether she readily proclaims to others outside CPS that she is employed by CPS; whether or not she feels she can exert some control and influence over her work as a CPS caseworker; the degree to which her needs, goals, and values are reflective of the overall organization; whether or not she feels emotionally connected to the group, for example, if she would miss the CPS community and/or feels that others would miss her if she were absent; and her ability to choose to remain a part of CPS, as seen in the availability of other alternatives to CPS employment.

Due to their unique existence as CPS employees, how difficult it is for the outside world to understand the harsh circumstances of their daily cases, and the confidentiality constraints that limit the amount of information caseworkers can share with those outside CPS, it is understandable that the strongest social connections in the lives of caseworkers, particularly those employed for longer periods of time, are found within the world of CPS itself. This appears to be the case for those supervisors portrayed above. All members of the group report feeling supported by the other supervisors at the Downtown Location and even though 4 of the 5 state that they do not like talking about their job to others, all of them cite their fellow downtown supervisors as who they would likely turn to if they needed help with any work-related problem.

Finally, while psychological sense of community has been found to increase as the individual's level of choice to belong to particular group increase (Obst & White, 2007), it is also important to note the possible dark side of belonging, particularly within subgroups of CPS employees. For example, the community created by the downtown supervisor subgroup, as witnessed by those outside this subgroup as the supervisors visibly and informally collect throughout the day in the various members' cubicles as well as during the group's daily lunches within the public break room in the building, can potentially have a negative effect on those in the unit who are excluded from the subgroup.

To counteract this effect, CPS and/or DCS administrators could provide networking opportunities for all of the unit employees (see, e.g., Perkins et al., 2002); a task that is made more difficult due to the larger number of employees within the CPS study unit, the limited amount of meeting space available within the two unit office locations, the large workloads shouldered by those within the unit, and the constant need for one or more of the unit employees to be responding to incoming, high priority referrals. Thus, at present the organization limits almost all of its unit-wide meetings to only mandatory training sessions, most of which are implemented lecture-style and, as such, allow for little or no interaction between the attendees. Fortunately, even with the lack of networking opportunities currently available within the unit, it is possible that all of the employees' shared experiences within CPS, particularly their joint isolation and perceived lack of understanding by those outside the world of CPS, can serve to lessen the negative effect of any subgroup delineation within the larger unit of workers (Riek et al., 2006; Sherif & Sherif, 1969).

*Amelia – Depicting the Importance of Social Support Systems*

Amelia is a 29-year-old CPS caseworker who at the time of the study has worked with the study unit for 6 months. She is the single parent of a 4-year-old child that resides with her full-time, in a residence outside the service county area. This is Amelia's second tenure with CPS following a period of time in which she was hospitalized for 4 months due to mental illness and depression. Her first tenure spent as a CPS caseworker lasted for a total of 11 continuous months. At the end of which time Amelia reports experiencing what she calls a "mental breakdown" which resulted in her leaving CPS employment in order to receive full-time mental health treatment. Amelia believes that the breakdown was in equal parts a result of the stress associated with CPS as well as the stress from her personal life.

In comparing Amelia's first and second tenures with CPS one can see marked changes in the social systems available to her. For example, Amelia now reports feeling close to her CPS team members, especially other caseworker-members, and regularly updates them and seeks advice from them about not only work-related issues but also issues pertaining to her personal life. Whereas before she was primarily close to those DCS employees she knew through employee training, none of which ended-up being employed at CPS and therefore frequently failed to understand her CPS-related work.

Also, even though she considers CPS caseworkers "unappreciated heroes" by those outside of CPS, including the larger DCS organization, Amelia reports feeling cared for by not only her CPS Team Leader and other team colleagues, but all of those with offices at her same Adams Street Location. As such, she says that she is now better able to handle the stress and isolation she feels from being a CPS caseworker, as her co-

workers’ serve to remind her of the positive ways that she is able to safeguard children from harm. Finally, unlike before when she was estranged from her child’s birth father, Amelia is now in a committed relationship and resides with a live-in boyfriend, one who works a daytime shift with his job and is able to watch Amelia’s child whenever she has to be on-call at night and/or on the weekend.

*Available Sources of Social Support*

Including Amelia, and as seen in Table 7 below, 15 caseworkers with less than a year’s experience report feeling supported by at least some other caseworker(s) within the unit. All of the first year caseworkers, CM3s, Team Leaders and Team Coordinators, here listed together to safeguard confidentiality, and all but 3 of those caseworkers with more than a year’s tenure with CPS report feeling supported by their supervisor(s) at CPS.

**Table 7 – Individual-Level Support within CPS Unit**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. & Team Cdtrs. (10)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)		
Part. Feels Supported by her CPS Supervsr.	18	16	4	28	10	38
Part. Feels Supported by CPS Colleagues	15	10	1	26	7	33

In addition, Amelia reports that it is not only her team and various members who support her, but also the other teams located within her Adams Street Location. In contrast, Amelia does not feel cared for by the teams at the unit’s other Downtown

Location. This is a theme that was repeated by many employees of the unit. As seen in Table 8 below, some feel there is a rift between the teams located within the two office locations. This is potentially problematic when caseworkers are paired with other Team Leaders during their on-call night and weekend shifts.

**Table 8 – Group-Level Support within CPS & DCS**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. & Team Cdtrs. (10)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)		
There is a Rift Between 2 CPS Unit Locations	6	3	0	9	5	14
Part. Does Not Feel Supported by Other CPS Location	12	17	4	33	4	37
Part. Does Not Feel Supported by CPS as a Whole	9	19	4	32	3	35
Part. Does Not Feel Supported by DCS as a Whole	13	19	4	36	3	39

At least one possible cause for the rift, beyond the physical separation, is readily acknowledged by both of the unit’s Team Coordinators in their respective Phase 2 interviews, and pertains to how drug-exposed infant cases are handled. Team Coordinator A does not automatically recommend removals of young children living with drug-addicted parents and no other sober adult, whereas Team Coordinator B does. As such, the two differ on their views towards Safety Plans that result in keeping drug-exposed infants in the home with an addicted caregiver. As a result, depending on which



Team Coordinator the on-call Team Leader reports to on a daily basis, she requires the on-call caseworker assigned to them to follow vastly different protocol in drug-exposed infant cases. This policy difference alone serves to separate the two halves of the unit, a fact that is only compounded by the different physical locations and lack of daily contact and communication with one another.

Moreover, the fact that Amelia no longer lives alone, or with only her minor child in her residence with her, but now resides with a significant other reportedly provides her with the added peace of mind she needs in order to perform her job as a CPS caseworker more effectively. As seen in Table 9 below, a total of 19 employees within the unit, 18 of which are caseworkers, find themselves in the same situation as Amelia during her first

**Table 9 – Individual-Level Support Outside of CPS (Residential Status)**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. (8)	Team Cdtrs. (2)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)			
Part. Lives FT w/ at least 1 Related Adult (not including adult children/dependents)	7	9	2	18	6	2	26
Part. Lives PT w/ at least 1 Related Adult (not including adult children/dependents)	0	1	1	2	0	0	2
Part. Lives FT w/ no Related but at least 1 Unrelated Adult	2	2	0	4	0	0	4
Part. Lives w/ no Other Adults (not including adult children/dependents)	10	7	1	17	2	0	19

tenure with CPS, namely living alone with no other adults in their home. While residing with another adult-peer is not dispositive of whether or not an individual has an outside individual-level support system, living alone is at least an indication that one avenue of support is not available for these individuals. Thus, their need for connection and support within the confines of CPS is that much more critical.

### *Discussion*

As you recall, social support theory helps one to better understand how, within their respective community, individuals like CPS caseworkers are able to call upon one another to provide the emotional support necessary to cope with daily hardship and stress (Levine & Perkins, 1997). In particular, social support theory posits that individuals draw upon relationships within their various communities, for example those within the CPS community, in order to better manage personal stress and anxiety. Moreover, social support theorists hold that the source of support may exist on an individual level as well as on a group level (Dalton et al., 2001) and extends across microsystem community groups. For example, on an individual level, a CPS caseworker, like Amelia, may draw upon the support of a certain colleague, supervisor, and/or family member while also feeling supported by the entire local CPS unit, Central Office, and/or larger state/DCS organization in performing her job.

The example of Amelia helps to convey how those with strong individual-based social support systems: tend to perceive situations as being less stressful, experience a buffered effect between the stress they do perceive and actual strain felt, and overall report a less worker strain, than those with weaker ones (Viswesvaran et al., 1999).

Unlike her first tenure, Amelia now has a social support network both at work and at home, that she credits with giving her the peace of mind and support she needs to maintain good mental health while also functioning effectively in her job. During her first tenure she failed to connect with her various CPS team members and only felt close with those DCS employees with which she went through general caseworker training. The inability, or perceived inability, of those outside of CPS to understand the job of those within CPS weakened this avenue of social support for Amelia once she exited training and had to work for CPS full-time. Thus, she needed to find a system within CPS in order to obtain the emotional support she needed. Now Amelia touches base at least once a day with other caseworkers on her team, as well as her supervisor whenever necessary, and as a result she feels supported through both work and personal struggles.

Similarly, the data conveyed in Table 7 above, pertaining to the caseworkers' feelings of being supported by at least some other caseworker(s) or supervisor(s) within the unit, are especially important since previous research points to a lack of supervisor support as directly and positively associated with subsequent caseworker turnover (see, e.g., Smith, 2005), and caseworkers who experience a high degree of conflict with their supervisor to be more likely to experience an increase in job-related stress, a significant predictor of their intention to leave CPS employment (Nissly, 2004). Thus, leading researchers and practitioners alike, both nationally and internationally, to call for greater emphasis on and development of individual support systems within the CPS workplace, in an effort to stymie the flow of exiting caseworkers (see, e.g., Gibbs, 2001).

In the same vein, individual-level support from outside of CPS is also an important consideration. For example, while marital status has not been found to be

directly related to turnover, studies have found that employees who reside with a spouse or life partner are more likely to be less stressed, more satisfied with their job, and feel more socially supported than their unmarried, or residentially isolated, counterparts (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Even more specifically, another study found that those who were separated, divorced, or widowed, those most likely to be residing alone, reported lower levels of social support and an increased vulnerability to turnover (Nissly, 2004). Thus, Amelia's live-in boyfriend not only provides a ready childcare arrangement on her on-call nights and weekends, but is also likely to serve as a buffer to job-related stress and isolation.

On a group-level, noted within Table 8 above, is the issue of whether or not the employees of the unit feel supported by CPS or the larger parent-organization, DCS, as a whole. Both within and outside the world of CPS, the ability of group-level support to provide similar positive effects as individual-level support has not been well-researched, but the handful of studies that have been conducted to date outside the field reveal significant benefits resulting from membership within highly supportive groups (see, e.g., Maton, 1989) and may be as effective as individual-level support in counteracting stress in an individual's life. Thus, a caseworker that feels that the whole of CPS and/or the greater state organization, DCS, is supportive of their situation may experience less stress and overall work strain than those with weaker feelings of support from these groups. With this in mind it is interesting to note that of the 41 caseworker-participants in the study only those with less than a year of experience reported feeling in any way supported by CPS or DCS as a whole. Similar to Amelia's view of CPS caseworkers as "unappreciated heroes" by those both inside and outside of DCS, other caseworkers

report that on a group-level CPS and/or DCS is only interested in the bottom line. Unfortunately, most feel that if DCS could hire someone to do their job for less pay, it would not hesitate to do so, and as long as the cases get investigated and closed, regardless of the expense to the individual employee, CPS as a whole is happy.

It is also important to note the findings regarding a possible division and weakening of the group-level support system found within the unit. The physical separation of the two unit halves, and to a lesser extent the policy differences in the Team Coordinators, appears to be undermining the strength of the unit's internal support system. For example, as seen in Table 8 above, even though only 9 caseworkers feel there is a rift between the two locations, 33 of them state that they do not feel supported by those who office out of the other unit location. This is an important finding particularly in light of this paper's earlier discussion pertaining to the problems that can arise when group affiliation and sense of belonging leads to feelings of exclusion and alienation for those not granted membership in the group. The physical separation can exacerbate an "us" versus "them" mentality, thereby undermining what is potentially the most important support system available to CPS employees, the support of colleagues and CPS supervisors.

Based on prior research, to overcome this problem the unit may need to promote stronger friendships between employees and teams across the two locations (see, e.g., Page-Gould et al., 2008); perhaps through informal gatherings and friendship building exercises. Also, resolving the policy differences between the two Team Coordinators and making the two office spaces resemble each other as much as possible may be helpful as well; thus, the new cubicle walls that are identical to those already found in the unit's

Adams Street Location and that are reportedly going to be placed in the Downtown Location soon, may give at least a minimum of congruence between the two locations. Finally, replacing the old adoption signs at the Adams Street Location with those more pertinent to CPS, and delineating the unit's office space within the buildings they inhabit, for example with signage that delineates the space as belonging to CPS and/or lists the common goals of the unit's employees (see, e.g., Riek et al., 2006), may help to provide necessary boundaries around the unit's CPS community and help to foster a sense of belonging for all of those within it.

Finally, as revealed in this paper's earlier examination of Amelia's childcare needs, and as expounded upon in the following section, not only are social support systems effective in allowing the individual to potentially manage stress that results from work-related issues and/or other life events, but also the problems that frequently occur when work responsibilities interact with other setting priorities, such as those within a caseworker's home.

### *Sherita – Examining the Collision of Work and Home*

Sherita is a 26-year-old caseworker who has worked with CPS for the past year and a half. She is married and resides with her husband within the service county area. Her husband is employed full-time and works the nightshift at his job. Sherita's 7-year-old stepson lives with the couple part-time. At the beginning of every month they arrange the child's visits, with her husband's ex-wife, around Sherita's on-call schedule. Sherita is currently pregnant with the couple's first child together and she is very concerned about how the presence of the baby will affect her ability to perform her job.

Sherita and her husband do not have any familial resources in town and so far they have been unable to solve their childcare situation in regards to the baby, especially during Sherita's on-call nightshift each month.

Also, the safety issues surrounding her job have become more of a concern the further she progresses in her pregnancy. Even if she does find a childcare solution, Sherita is fearful of the potential danger her child could face when he/she comes in contact with individuals Sherita has investigated throughout her time with CPS. Sherita herself has regularly encountered former suspects while shopping or performing other everyday tasks in and around her home in the service county area, several of which resulted in very tense moments. Sherita states that she enjoys her job with CPS but, primarily due to the nighttime on-call issue, has resigned herself to seeking other employment before the end of her maternity leave. She does not foresee returning to CPS employment anytime in the future.

### *Resolving Conflicts between Work and Home*

When a caseworker's work and home priorities collide her need for social support grows in importance and becomes most evident. As in the case of Sherita, the collision between work and home in the life of the study's participants primarily stem from their on-call responsibilities and the safety risks associated with their job. This section focuses on the former and subsequent subsection of this paper addresses the latter.

In accordance with the unit's policy and general practice, CPS caseworker-participants in the study are each assigned between one to two on-call nightshifts every month, with the caseworker's entire team responsible for at least one weekend, on-call

shift per month as well. The participants receive the on-call schedule at the start of each month and must then make child-care arrangements accordingly. Those participants with children and/or dependents part-time in their care, such as Sherita and her stepson, report scheduling those visits around each month's on-call schedule. For example, one caseworker-participant who alternates supervision with her adult sister of their elderly dependent-mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's, does so at the start of each month after the on-call schedule has been distributed. She makes sure her mother is with her sister on each on-call assignment. As seen in the latter half of Table 10 below, a total of 5 caseworkers find themselves in this situation every month, 3 with at least one child under the age of 12 years old and 2 with children at least 12 years of age, or the age in which a child can legally be left home alone, all residing part-time with the respective participant. Due to the part-time nature of their dependent responsibility, most report that this is sometimes a hassle, but not a considerable hardship.

In contrast, those with children full-time in their care, such as will be the case for Sherita after she gives birth, must have stronger support systems in place to resolve this conflict (see the top two rows of Table 10 below). This is particularly relevant for CPS caseworkers who, for example, are single-parents, whose husband or life partner works nights and/or weekends, and/or who do not have the level of social support needed to arrange childcare when the caseworker is on-call outside of normal office hours. Unlike some limited locales in this country that have 24-hr paid childcare available, for example those with a large around-the-clock leisure and entertainment industry such as Las Vegas, Nevada, public paid childcare during nighttime hours is not available within the study unit's service community or surrounding areas.



**Table 10 – Participants’ Parenthood Status**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. (8)	Team Cdtrs. (2)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)			
Part. w/ at least 1 Child Under 12 y.o. (or other dependent needing FT sprvsn.) <b>Residing FT</b>	4	11	1	16	3	0	19
Part. is <b>Single-Parent/ Dependent Caretaker</b>	2	4	0	6	0	0	6
Part.’s Spouse or Live-in Partner <b>Works Nights &amp;/or Wkends.</b>	0	3	0	3	0	0	3
Part. w/ Child(ren) all 12 y.o. or Over <b>Residing FT</b>	2	3	2	7	3	1	11
Part. is <b>Single-Parent/ Dependent Caretaker</b>	0	3	2	5	0	0	5
Part.’s Spouse or Live-in Partner <b>Works Nights &amp;/or Wkends.</b>	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Part. w/ at least 1 Child Under 12 y.o. (or other dependent needing FT sprvsn.) <b>Residing PT</b>	2	1	0	3	1	0	4
Part. is <b>Single-Parent/ Dependent Caretaker</b>	1	0	0	1	1	0	2
Part.’s Spouse or Live-in Partner <b>Works Nights &amp;/or Wkends.</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Part. w/ Child(ren) all 12 y.o. or Over <b>Residing PT</b>	0	1	1	2	0	0	2
Part. is <b>Single-Parent/ Dependent Caretaker</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Part.’s Spouse or Live-in Partner <b>Works Nights &amp;/or Wkends.</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Thus, these full-time caregiver-participants report relying upon their spouse or life partner; divorced spouse; other nearby familial resources such as the caseworker’s

parents, as is the case in the earlier example of Daniel; and/or other non-relative alternatives such as a neighbor or other caseworker within the unit. As seen in Table 10 above, 16 caseworker-participants, or 39%, are full-time parents, 9 of which are either single-parents or have a spouse who works nights and/or weekends, and face this issue every month. If something were to happen to their childcare arrangements, they potentially face the same decision Sherita faces, searching for employment alternatives outside of CPS that do not have the same monthly nightshift and/or weekend-shift requirement.

### *Discussion*

As you recall, this paper's section regarding of the field research on caseworker turnover to date revealed that although gender alone has not been found to be a significant predictor of turnover, caseworkers who have children at home are at a greater risk of voluntarily leaving their job, especially when the caseworkers are female (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Unfortunately, studies delving further into the reasons behind this increased risk for CPS caseworker-parents, especially female ones, are notably absent in the field. However, one recent exploratory study, including a sample of 369 child welfare professionals, both CPS and non-CPS, drawn from both urban and rural units within a state's organization, found that the consistent intrusion of the participant's job into her home life, including on-call responsibilities, was perceived by many of the participants as contributing to an employee's decision to leave her job (Ellett et al., 2007). While this study's findings did not differentiate between CPS and non-CPS participants, male and female respondents, or those with or without children, it echoes

many of the frustrations expressed by most of the participants within my own study sample as well.

Although more research needs to be conducted into the issue, some of the most groundbreaking work found within the study pertains to the information that was gathered on the caseworkers' resolution of work/home conflicts. For example, while some participants, like Sherita, apparently dismiss the regular contact and arrangements they make each month in order to coordinate the care of dependents who reside part-time in their home, others report this to be a hardship due to the strain it puts on the already fragile relationships some of them have with a former spouse and/or other family member. Moreover, full-time caregivers report spending considerable time and attention each month in making childcare arrangements and deciding the best way in which to implement them.

As a preliminary matter, as noted previously, it is important to address the problem of work-family conflicts, particularly for full-time caregiver-caseworkers, in light of the larger society's view on gender and parenthood. Although evolving, American society continues to place females in the more traditional, central parenting role than males. Female caregivers tend to shoulder a greater burden in managing their home as well as in nurturing and raising their children than their male counterparts (see, e.g., Behson, 2002; Glass & Estes, 1997). This is particularly relevant given the large percentage of females found within CPS and other similar social work professions. Whereas a primarily male workforce of on-call firefighters may not face a similar conflict between their work and home lives, the overwhelmingly female CPS workforce does. For example, once she gives birth and concludes her maternity leave, many within

society would expect Sherita, rather than her husband, to be available and take care of her child, at a minimum during normal off-work hours (i.e., each night and weekend). Thus, even if she had family support and other childcare options Sherita's on-call schedule is contrary to this societal expectation; and with or without outside support, it is more widely expected that Sherita's employment situation would need to change, freeing her to fulfill at least this minimal societal expectation of mothers, rather than her husband's.

Moreover, apart from society's view toward gender and parenthood, those with children full-time in their care report that even the most ideal childcare arrangements can themselves cause stress in the caseworker's life. For example, a caregiver-participant, like Daniel, may make arrangements and actually have their children spend the night and/or weekend with other family members, friends, or neighbors each month, regardless of whether or not the caseworker actually receives a case during the time she is on-call and has to leave the home in order to respond to it. Similar to the part-time caregiver-participants, some dismiss these plans as insignificant while others regret the disturbance it affords their children, especially the weeknight on-call shift since it tends to affect the child's subsequent school day, and the weekday responsibilities of the childcare provider(s) as well.

Other caseworker-participants of children full-time in their care report arranging childcare each month, but state that they only put these plans into effect if and when they actually receive a high-priority call that requires them to leave their residence in order to respond to it. In contrast to those who automatically follow through with childcare arrangements, all of these caseworker-participants report high levels of stress and sleepless nights throughout their on-call times as they fear having to wake their children,

potentially interrupt the childcare provider's plans, and transport children to the provider's home, oftentimes in the middle of the night. While these experiences allow one greater insight into the struggles of CPS caseworkers, follow-up studies, particularly longitudinal qualitative studies of caseworker-parents, would be helpful in studying the experiences of both part-time and full-time caregiver-caseworkers, any gender differences that may be present within the group, how the relationships caseworkers have with their childcare providers tend to vary over time, and the ways in which state organizations can seek to reduce these conflicts and/or increase facilitation between the caseworkers' work and family roles (see, e.g., Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007).

In the following subsection, this paper examines another concern many have with respect to the caseworker's on-call responsibilities, the issue of job safety. In particular, this paper examines the possible ways in which safety issues facing CPS caseworkers take on a whole new dimension when an employee, like Sherita, feels that her job with CPS places not only her own, but also her family's safety at potential risk. For example, some like Daniel may address this issue by choosing to stay employed by CPS while relocating their residence out of the service area; whereas others, such as the single-parent caseworker portrayed below, Olivia, may decide that CPS employment is too demanding and risky, and that leaving CPS is the only real way to keep her loved ones safe and thereby provide them with the peace of mind they need.

*Olivia – Highlighting the Issue of CPS Caseworker Safety*

Olivia is a 48-year-old caseworker who has worked with DCS for over 20 years. She does not currently have a Master's degree, nor does she plan on obtaining one anytime in the near future, but she is one of the few in the unit with a BSW degree. Olivia is a single parent with twin 13-year-old daughters full-time in her home. She resides with her daughters in the far northern region of the service county area. Throughout her long tenure with the Department Olivia has worked in almost all available divisions open to her, including adoptions, long-term foster care, and both severe and non-severe CPS case units. However, most of her tenure has been spent working for the CPS study unit, where she actually prefers the more time-intense, severe abuse cases, particularly those that involve allegations of child sexual abuse.

Olivia states that even though she prefers CPS work she purposefully spent 2 years away from CPS when her daughters were between the ages of 9 and 11 years old because the youngest twin did not like her mother leaving their home to respond to night, on-call cases. Even with a good family support system in place, Olivia's youngest daughter would get agitated and increasingly restless every time her mother was on-call and would potentially have to leave the house during the night. As a result, during this time Olivia decided to take a promotion and went to work as a Team Leader within a foster care unit of DCS, but she reports having missed CPS and the personal contact with clients that caseworkers have.

After those 2 years away Olivia moved back to CPS as a CM2, technically a demotion. However, the decision to come back to CPS was a relatively easy one for Olivia because even though it entailed a reduction in pay and employment status, when

she returned to CPS she requested and was assigned only sex abuse cases for the first 2 months. After that time she agreed to fill a much needed position within a non-severe abuse team, but due to her high level of experience, she still regularly gets assigned sex abuse cases. In addition, at least twice a month Olivia conducts training sessions for the Department. These training sessions take place in the evenings at local area day care centers and schools seeking to renew their state license and/or better understand the signs of child abuse.

### *Delving into the Issue of Caseworker Safety*

Olivia has many of the traits most sought after in a CPS caseworker. She is incredibly dedicated to her job and even excels in some of the most technical and heart-wrenching cases that a CPS caseworker encounters, or those involving allegations of child sexual abuse. Throughout her 20 plus years with the Department she has taken a demotion in order to continue to personally carry a caseload and she has such a well-respected employment history with DCS that the organization regularly has her conduct training sessions for area day care facilities and schools where she teaches professionals how to detect child abuse. However, even with her love of and excellence in CPS casework, she voluntarily left CPS for years due to the safety concerns of her youngest daughter. Fortunately, she returned to CPS casework once her child was older, but she easily could have invested her talents elsewhere.

Throughout the study, caseworker safety has been a recurring and persistent theme. This is particularly understandable considering the high rate of crime in the service area; for example, 2.51 times the national average of violent crime (Federal

Bureau of Investigation, 2004). Almost every caseworker addressed the issue in a different way, with some reporting that they always seek and await police accompaniment before conducting a night call, with wait times varying between 20 min to well over an hour in length, thereby potentially jeopardizing responding in a timely manner depending on the case's priority level and response time limit. On lower priority cases with longer response times, some caseworkers wait until one of their colleagues can accompany them on a home visit while others report going by themselves, but only during daylight hours. One caseworker married to a police officer used to have her husband accompany her on night calls, but was reprimanded for this action due to confidentiality issues.

As seen in Table 11 below, at the time of the study 10 caseworker-participants, or 24%, report living outside the service county area. As in the earlier example of Daniel, all of these caseworkers have worked for CPS for at least a year and many state that although they resided within the county at the start of their employment, they have since relocated out of the county area, specifically in order to distance themselves from the client population. This move potentially makes the caseworker's job more difficult. The longer commute times added onto their daily schedule not only lengthens their workday, for some by as much as an additional hour or more of travel time each day, but may also jeopardize their case response times during on-call hours, particularly for high priority cases.

As an explanation for this decision, most point to safety concerns for both themselves and their family, particularly after encountering subjects of their former investigations during nonworking hours. For example, one caseworker recalls a time



when she was at a convenience store with her young niece and ended-up ducking behind a product display in an effort to avoid a possible confrontation with a mother she had investigated. Another caseworker-participant states that she made the decision to move out of county after she encountered a hostile father she had investigated while attending her child’s school recital.

**Table 11 – Participants’ County of Residence**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs. (8)	Team Cdtrs. (2)	UNIT TOTAL (51)
	<1yr. (18)	≥1 yr. (19)	CM3s (4)	CW Total (41)			
<b>In-County Resident</b>	18	11	2	<b>31 (76%)</b>	7	2	<b>40 (78%)</b>
<b>Out-of-County Resident</b>	0	8	2	<b>10 (24%)</b>	1	0	<b>11 (22%)</b>

While many participants report feeling frightened or threatened while out on an investigation, one former caseworker interviewed actually recalled being a victim of a crime as a result of her CPS employment. Specifically, a former CPS caseworker who participated in Phase 2 of the study, one of those temporarily reassigned to work again for CPS during the Commissioner’s mandated first 4 months of 2007, had previously worked full-time for the CPS unit until transferring to another DCS unit in mid-2006. She reports transferring units after an incidence of vandalism was perpetrated against her in the course of her CPS employment. Specifically, one of her car tires was punctured with a large hunting knife while it was parked in the front, western parking lot (the lot closest to the building’s security personnel) at the unit’s Downtown Location. The knife was left in the tire and the related property damage were discovered when the caseworker attempted

to leave work for the day. The caseworker reports being “rattled” by the incident, so much so that she reported starting the on-line search for other state employment that very night from her home.

Finally, as highlighted in this paper’s earlier review of the unit’s physical locations, is the issue of environmental safety within each of the unit’s office locations. With the exception of the insect problem at the Adams Street Location, none of the participants point-out environmental hazards within their own location, but many complained of the problems in the opposite unit location; thus, giving further credence to the possible rift that exists between the unit’s two locations. For example, when asked directly about the conditions in their own building, most of the Downtown Location participants brush-off concerns about the paint fumes, low lighting, bathroom problems, and/or lack of outdoor space in which to walk and de-stress at their own location, but readily point to the insect infestation and unsafe water problems at the unit’s Adams Street Location as hazards that they would not want to encounter on a daily basis. Similarly, while most of the Adams Street participants express displeasure about the insect problem in their building they cite the paint fumes, low lighting, bathroom problems, and/or lack of outdoor space at the unit’s Downtown Location as reasons why they would not want to work there. Thus, participants in each location use the other building’s problems as further evidence as to why they preferred their specific location.

### *Discussion*

As was discussed previously in this paper, an ongoing risk of suffering violence and personal harm is a daily dilemma for most CPS caseworkers in this country. Thus,

the fears of caseworkers and/or their loved ones are, unfortunately, based in reality. As you recall from this paper's review of previous research in the field, a labor union for caseworkers in the northern area of the country states that 70% of its caseworker membership report being threatened and/or actually suffering from violence while attempting to perform the duties of their job. This finding was echoed in this paper's own study as well, as many caseworker-participants give firsthand accounts of being threatened and/or facing violent situations in the course of their employment with the CPS study unit. Moreover, the incidence of vandalism presented by one study participant, involving the former caseworker's car, while parked at the unit's Downtown Location, is a strong depiction of the dangers these caseworkers face. If an individual is violent and irrational enough to use a weapon to vandalize a car, in a busy parking lot and within yards of security personnel, it is easy to believe that he/she poses a credible risk of physically harming the caseworker as well.

Even if the caseworker-participant has not herself been the direct recipient of threats or actual violence, she is well-aware of others who have. For example, when asked about the issue of caseworker safety during the Phase 2 interviews, most participants point to then recent October 2006 caseworker fatality in Kentucky (see Smith, 2006) as a broad basis for their concerns. Similarly, several of the supervisors in the unit mention the 2006 murder of a foster care supervisor in Texas, who was killed after receiving threats of violence as a part of her job (Arnold, 2006), as a source of their fears as well.

Another groundbreaking and unexpected finding from the study pertains to the effect job safety may have on an employee's family, and how the fears of others may lead

the caseworker to leave CPS employment. Even for those who make it a point to never discuss their job with anyone outside of the CPS unit, most of the participants' loved ones have access and are exposed to the media's coverage of the incidents of violence against CPS employees across the country. In addition, urban areas, like the one in which the study unit is located, tend to have higher crime rates and the risk and fear of violence is heightened accordingly.

The study also highlights the magnitude to which the fears of others closest to the CPS employee can actually affect the employee's decision to remain in the employ of CPS. For example, while Olivia herself acknowledges but readily dismisses her own safety concerns as a reason why she would ever choose to leave CPS employment, her daughter's fears, and the corresponding rise in her level of stress, are reportedly the sole reasons behind Olivia's decision to transfer out of the study unit for a lengthy period of time. Moreover, Olivia states that even though her job as a CPS caseworker is an ideal profession for her, if her daughter's fears had not lessened over time, Olivia doubts she would have returned to CPS employment any time in the near future, if ever. Thus, studies in the future into the issue of caseworker safety and CPS turnover should also consider including an inquiry into the effect the fears of others may have on a caseworker's decision to leave CPS employment.

#### *Actual Employee Turnover within the Study Unit*

While this study is more interested in the experiences of CPS caseworkers themselves and not predicting turnover per se, it is still important to note the actual turnover that occurred within the CPS unit over the final phases of the study. Tables 12

and 13 below show the actual turnover at Phase 3, or 6 months after the start of study, and Phase 4, or 12 months after the study's inception, respectively, as well as what the exiting participant's new job entailed (i.e., whether the participant remained in state employment and transferred to another CPS unit servicing a different county area, a non-CPS unit within DCS servicing the same area as the study unit, a state position outside of DCS, or whether she left state employment altogether), the number of new hires within this period of time, and the promotional status of those who remained with the unit throughout these periods of time.

#### *Unit Turnover between Phase 2 and Phase 3*

Between Phases 2 and 3, or sometime between May 1, 2007, and November 1, 2007, a total of 8 caseworker-participants, 5 with less than a year's worth of experience with CPS and 3 with a year or more CPS tenure, voluntarily left the study unit (see Table 12 below). Half of these exiting caseworkers left state employment altogether, 2 remained employed by the State but transferred to non-CPS units, with the same pay level, and within the same service county; 1 transferred to a non-CPS unit in the same service area while also receiving a promotion and pay raise from CM2 to Team Leader; and 1 transferred to a different CPS unit outside the service county area. All but 1 of these exiting caseworker-participants are female. The Bachelor's degree areas held by the 8 exiting employees vary across the board, with no 2 holding the same degree. One of the exiting participants has a BSW degree, and only 1 other has obtained a Master's degree (in Criminal Justice Administration) with no Master's degrees currently in progress. Half of the exiting participants, all female, have at least 1 child under the age

of 12 years old residing full-time in their care, 3 of these are married; the other caseworker is a single-parent, was pregnant at the time of Phase 2, and living with no other adult peer. The other 4 caseworkers include 2 single, living alone; 1 single, living with an unrelated roommate; and 1 divorced, living alone.

**Table 12 – Actual Turnover, Promotion, & New Employees as of Phase 3 (6-Month Mark)**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs.	Team Cdtrs	UNIT TOTAL
	<1yr.	≥1 yr.	CM3s	CW Total			
Study Participants who Left Unit b/n Phases 2 & 3	5	3	0	<b>8</b>	0	0	<b>8</b>
- transferred to non-CPS unit w/n DCS & same service county area	1	2	0	3	0	0	3
- transferred to CPS unit in different service county	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
- transferred to non-DCS state unit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- left state employment	4	0	0	4	0	0	4
Study Participants Promoted b/n Phases 2 & 3	8 (CM2)	1 (TL)	0	<b>9</b>	0	0	<b>9</b>
New Unit Employees Hired b/n Phases 2 & 3	19	0	1	<b>20</b>	0	0	<b>20</b>

(Participants' New Promotional Status)

Finally, all of the 4 exiting caseworkers with dependent children at home disclosed in their Phase 2 interviews their plans to leave the unit. Of these 4 caseworker-parents, 3 reported making other employment arrangements beginning in December 2006, or when turnover in the unit was at its most critical point. Each of these 3 caseworkers admitted that their original rationale for leaving no longer applied due to the Commissioner's new 11-referral cap. However, at least 1 of these caseworkers doubted

that the cap would last and all 3 stated that they felt their new jobs would be a better fit long-term. All of these caseworkers commented on their need for greater job stability, especially in light of their family responsibilities and priorities. As stated in their respective interview, all 4 of the parent-caseworkers left the unit within a month of their interview, or by mid-June 2007.

Within this same period of time, as per the State's policy, 8 of the caseworkers remaining with the unit were automatically promoted from CM1 to CM2 and 1 of the caseworkers was interviewed, offered, and accepted a promotion from CM2 to Team Leader. Finally, within this same 6-month period of time the State hired a total of 20 new caseworkers for the unit, including 19 new CM1 caseworkers and 1 transferee from another county into a new CM3 position. This is a considerable amount of new hires for such a relatively short period of time, equivalent to roughly 43% of the unit's previous workforce of 46 caseworkers. Even with the 8 exiting caseworkers and 1 newly promoted to the supervisor/Team Leader level, the unit's number of caseworkers grew by 11 by the end of Phase 3 for a total of 57 caseworkers.

#### *Unit Turnover between Phase 3 and Phase 4*

In contrast, as seen in Table 13 below, between Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the study, or from November 2, 2007, to May 1, 2008, none of the study participants still employed by the unit at Phase 3 left the unit's employ during this time. This is a surprising turnabout from the previous year when the DCS Commissioner had issued her 11-case-mandate for the unit and transferred former CPS employees into it temporarily, due to the unit's critical shortage of caseworkers and high walk-out rate. Between these final

phases of the study, 3 of the study’s participants were automatically promoted to CM2 status; 1 of the 2 Team Coordinators (Team Coordinator B from the unit’s Adams Street Location) was promoted to Regional Administrator, wherein she became responsible for not only overseeing the CPS study unit but all of the service area’s DCS units; and a new Team Coordinator, with prior tenure with the study unit, transferred back from a CPS unit in an adjacent county to take over the study unit’s vacant Team Coordinator position.

**Table 13 – Actual Turnover, Promotion, & New Employees as of Phase 4 (12-Month Mark)**

	Caseworkers				Team Ldrs.	Team Cdtrs	UNIT TOTAL
	<1yr.	≥1 yr.	CM3s	CW Total			
Study Participants who Left Unit b/n Phases 3 & 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- transferred to non-CPS unit w/n DCS & same service county area	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- transferred to CPS unit in different service county	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- transferred to non-DCS state unit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- left state employment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Participants Promoted b/n Phases 3 & 4	3 (CM2)	0	0	3	0	1 (RA)	4
New Unit Employees Hired b/n Phases 3 & 4	4	0	0	4	0	1	5
New Unit Employees Hired b/n Phases 2 & 3, Who Left Unit by Phase 4	2	0	0	2	0	0	2
- transferred to non-CPS unit w/n DCS & same service county area	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- transferred to CPS unit in different service county	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- transferred to non-DCS state unit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
- left state employment	2	0	0	2	0	0	2

(Participants’ New Promotional Status)



It should be noted that although none of the study's participants left the unit during this period of time, 2 of the 19 new CM1 caseworkers hired between Phase 2 and Phase 3 voluntarily chose to do so, as well as to leave state employment altogether (see Table 13 above). Also, the influx of new hires within this time slowed down considerably, with only 4 new CM1 caseworkers entering the unit throughout this second 6-month period of time. Thus, with the 2 exiting caseworkers and 4 new hires, as of Phase 4 of the study there were a total of 59 caseworkers employed within the unit, an increase of 13 caseworkers from the study's inception.

#### *Informal Follow-Up Contact at Phase 4*

The startling Phase 4 findings prompted an informal meeting with the unit's former Team Coordinator B, and new unit Regional Administrator, Peyton in May of 2008. Peyton has almost 30 years of tenure with DCS, all of which, prior to her recent promotion to Regional Administrator, was spent as either a caseworker or supervisor within the CPS study unit. When asked her opinion about the amazing improvement in the unit's turnover rate, Peyton points to the Commissioner's January 2007, 11-referral cap as the primary reason. In addition to the formal mandate itself, Peyton states that she appreciated the special attention given the unit by the Commissioner; in her words it was "refreshing" in that it was "protective in nature" and not the more "negative criticism" employees in the unit were used to receiving from those in Central Office, usually following unfavorable media coverage of a caseworker's actions in a case. In addition to the new mandate, she also notes the recent influx of new caseworkers in the unit as a

lesser reason for the new high employee retention rate, but she is adamant that the 11-referral mandate is by far the more important of the two.

Throughout her 3 decades of experience in the unit, Peyton has seen many caseworkers leave and large groups of new recruits brought in to replace them. Peyton admits that the group of 20 new caseworkers within a 6 month period of time is a larger group than she can ever remember seeing in the unit at any one time; however, she does not believe that the Department's recruiting efforts alone, without the new referral cap, would have done much to improve the turnover rate in the unit. In Peyton's opinion, much of reason for this lies with Central Office's past response to the unit caseworkers' complaints about high workload and caseloads. Up until the new mandate, the Department would promise relief by increasing its recruitment efforts alone. While benchmarks, or informal referral caps, set within the unit have existed in the past, they were very seldom honored. According to Peyton, for decades the long-standing promise from Central Office had been that with the addition of new caseworkers, the cap would one day become a reality. Unfortunately, with the constant flow of exiting caseworkers, this hope was never realized. Thus, by issuing her formal mandate, the Commissioner appears to have finally succeeded in stabilizing the unit's workforce for the first time in as long as Peyton can recall.

As a secondary issue, at this same time, informal inquiries were made of Peyton in regards to the change in the unit's leadership, particularly who was replacing her as Team Coordinator B, and how she would address the differences between herself and Team Coordinator A that resulted in different caseworker responses in drug-exposed infant cases; any new policy and procedures enacted within the previous 6 months; and

any changes in the unit's physical locations. First, Peyton was very positive about her replacement as Team Coordinator B. According to Peyton, her replacement was the most eligible of the candidates available, due to her replacement's work as a former Team Leader in the unit, prior to transferring to a CPS unit in an adjacent service area prior the start of the study; and was well-known and seemingly liked by most if not all of the unit's employees, a fact that is supported by the positive comments made about the former Team Leader by several of the study participants during their Phase 2 interviews.

Although Peyton does not yet know exactly how she is going to introduce the change with her previous counterpart, and now subordinate, Team Coordinator A, she states that she does plan on addressing the different approaches to drug-exposed infant cases within the unit. Her long-term goal is to omit drug-addicted caregivers, unless and until they have successfully completed treatment and can remain drug free, as sole physical caregivers of children.

Finally, Peyton reported that as of January 2008, the unit is split between not 2 but now 3 physical locations. According to Peyton, this additional location is a result of adding another team to the unit, as one of the unit's former CM2 caseworker-participants was promoted to Team Leader and given his own team, and moving Team #6 from the unit's Adams Street Location (see top right-hand corner of Figure 7 on p.159 above) into a separate state-owned office building located in yet another part of town. The actual location and building structure are unknown, but the additional split in the unit is revisited in the subsequent Implications section of this paper.

## *Discussion*

As you recall, job dissatisfaction has consistently been found to be a strong predictor of both a worker's intent to leave as well as actual turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Among other things, those work conditions that tend to contribute to job dissatisfaction in caseworkers include heavy caseloads. Unfortunately, as was detailed previously in this paper, large caseloads have long been an issue facing CPS units across the country following the federal government's enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, and the new mandatory reporting laws that went into effect nationwide as a result (Child Welfare League of America, 2002b). For example, in 2005 DHHS reported that of the 41 states that had submitted information to the agency in the area of caseworker caseloads, the average number of "screened-in" cases per CPS caseworker ranged from a low of 32 cases, in the State of Alabama, to a high of 217 cases, in Utah, for the year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

As seen at the beginning of this section, prior to the Commissioner's referral cap, the unit's caseworker-participants in their Phase 2 interviews reported receiving as many as 30 new cases every month, with some caseworkers managing a total caseload of 150 cases at any given time; all of which required them to travel anywhere within the 526.1 square mile service area (U. S. Geological Survey, 2001) to investigate cases and visit child and family clients, make vital safety decisions, testify in court, and/or arrange multiple services for the children and families on their caseload. Although nothing can be stated conclusively, the interviews of 3 of the 4 exiting caseworker-parents who admitted the original rationale behind their plans to leave the unit in their Phase 2 interview, as well as the informal interview conducted with Peyton in May of 2008,

highlight the possible effect the mandatory referral cap has on reducing the problem of caseworker turnover, due not only to its effect in reducing the caseworker's caseload, and thereby promoting job satisfaction, but also by conveying the importance the Commissioner places on improving the work life of the employee herself.

As you recall from this paper's earlier in-depth examination of the psychological need an individual has to feel valued and needed as well as her need to rely on social support to effectively perform her job, not only does the mandate help the caseworkers maintain a more reasonable caseload, but being the focus of the Commissioner's special attention, specifically protective attention rather than the more commonplace criticism that occurs after a caseworker's case is negatively reported in the media, may have served to fulfill these needs by giving caseworkers rare validation by the highest echelon in Central Office. Similarly and to a lesser extent, the new large influx of caseworkers in the unit may have not only helped the unit supervisors uphold the Commissioner's mandate, but serve as a visual reminder that Central Office cares about and is still trying to support the caseworkers.

Finally, it is important to note that the unit's reduced turnover rate could be related to outside forces as well. For example, some research suggests that the only strong buffer between job dissatisfaction and turnover is the lack of other available employment alternatives for the employee (see, e.g., Strolin et al., 2005). Thus, it is possible that some or all of the unit participants did not leave due to failed attempts to find other employment, rather than the improved working conditions themselves. Again, a follow-up study is needed, preferably including formal unit-wide interviews across

multiple study phases, to exam among other things, a caseworker's decision to remain employed by the CPS unit in spite of available job alternatives.

### *Study Limitations*

Finally, while the study provides valuable insight into the experiences of CPS caseworkers in this country and points to several interesting avenues for follow-up in the future, this paper needs to address the study's limitations. First and most notable is the fact that the study involved an in-depth examination of a single CPS unit. As such, it is important to replicate this study and include other CPS units, in different locales, such as rural areas and/or urban counties that do not include the state's capital, as well as different geographical regions in the country before any generalizations can be made to CPS units in general.

While individual CPS units differ by unit administration, geographic and service area, and state administration and level of oversight, this paper's examination of these issues within the lives of the study participants helps one to better understand the internal and external context of a working CPS office, thereby allowing for a greater grasp of some of the constraints likely felt by many of those within the profession. For example, while it may or may not be commonplace for the workforce of other CPS units to be split between different physical locations, state budgetary constraints and/or lack of available office space is likely a struggle experienced by other state units in the country as well, particularly larger CPS units located within urban areas. Likewise, at least 49 other CPS units are located within their state's capital, and thereby their worksites reside close in proximity to their state's legislature, state and federal court system, media entities, and

top DCS administrative office. An even greater number of units are similarly called to serve large metropolitan areas, resulting in higher referral levels and caseloads and a greater risk of job-related safety issues. The study's subsequent examination of the caseworker's feelings of social support in light of court mandates, media coverage, and the complexities of her job is relevant across regional demographics and pertinent to CPS caseworkers everywhere.

It is also worthwhile to remember that the primary purpose of the study was exploratory in nature and to include qualitative insight into possible predictors that may or may not have been previously noted in the field. Thus, follow-up studies, both quantitative and qualitative, particularly those focusing on the newly discovered issues highlighted above, are even more imperative before more definitive conclusions can be drawn.

In addition, the majority of the data including in the study were gathered during the Phase 2 interviews. The quality of data collected in any interview hinges upon the candor and openness of the interview participants. While almost all of the interview subjects appeared at ease and comfortable throughout their interview session, likely an unexpected benefit of becoming familiar with the project and the interviewer's presence in their unit during the Phase 1 observation timeframe, it is possible that some were not completely open in answering all of the questions posed to them. This is most noteworthy in the reluctance of some of the study participants to disclose possible on-going job searches within other state positions. However, interview subjects may have been reluctant to share information on any number of issues, or even worse could have provided misleading information instead. This is a common risk facing all interview data

and, unfortunately, it can never be eliminated completely. Thus, it is important to note the possibility that the interview subjects were not completely open and honest in their response to any or all of the interview questions, thereby potentially limiting the reliability of the data from Phase 2.

Finally, while the participation rate in the study was a high 91%, it did not amount to 100% of the unit. As such, while unlikely, it is possible that the 2 unavailable and 3 missing caseworker-participants may have provided invaluable insight not represented by the remaining sample. However, even with these caveats in mind, this study stands as a significant addition to the field of research in general.



## CHAPTER X

### GENERAL DISCUSSION AND STUDY IMPLICATIONS

As was seen previously, this study provides invaluable insight into the lives and experiences of Child Protective Services (CPS) employees in an urban service area. This section includes a reflection on the broader issues and implications found within the study itself. First, a discussion of the modified grounded theory process and methodology utilized within the study is included; particularly, the usefulness of each in allowing me to meet the study objectives. Second, this section reflects on the study's theoretical underpinnings and the insight provided by each. Third, the study's seven research questions are revisited and the important conclusions summarized as they related to each. Next, while many of the issues raised by the study serve to confirm research previously performed in the field, others represent new avenues of inquiry and as such, several of the issues that bear additional attention from researchers in the future are highlighted. Finally, based on the study's findings, this section outlines into the many areas of practice that can be improved upon in order to strengthen workforce stability within CPS units both now and in the future.

#### *General Discussion*

While the previous section included a topical discussion on those issues most pertinent to the study's specific research questions, it is important to revisit some of the more general issues represented within the study. Thus, below is a reflection of the

study's use of a modified grounded theory procedure, the qualitative methodology utilized within the first two study phases, the theoretical basis of the study, and the possible conclusions that can be drawn from the study's data.

### *Modified Grounded Theory Procedure and Methodology Reflection*

As intended, the study's use of a modified grounded theory procedure allowed the study to be effective in gathering exploratory data on the lives of CPS caseworkers while also taking advantage of the large number of previous research in the field to date. As outlined previously, in an effort to reduce researcher bias the study followed the initial steps of grounded theory process (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006) which included: (1) identifying a general research problem (caseworker turnover); (2) gathering initial data in the field, (observational data in Phase 1); (3) analyzing and coding the data, line-by-line (the computerized field notes); and (4) developing tentative categories and research questions based on the recurrent codes (categories such as co-worker support, safety concerns, and so on) (see Figure 4 on p. 128 above). Within this particular study the only exception to this initial, purely grounded theory process occurred after the problem was identified, wherein a brief review of the field of research was conducted in order to note the need for studies with more qualitative and/or mixed-method methodologies before proceeding with the first phase. Thus, qualitative observations were included within Phase 1 of the study, but no parameters were placed on what data would be collected within this phase. In so doing, the study was successful in being able to note many issues that have received little to no attention from researchers to date, for example concerns regarding caseworker safety.

After following these initial steps provided by the grounded theory framework the process was then modified in that after analyzing the Phase 1 data, the insight gained from this analysis did not serve as the only basis for gathering and analyzing data in subsequent study phases. Rather, a more extensive review of the field of research was performed following Phase 1 and the knowledge attained from it was used in conjunction with the information gleaned from Phase 1's analysis in designing and later analyzing the interview data gathered in the second phase. This represented a modification of traditional grounded theory in that it involves a review of the field of research before all of the analysis has been conducted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, the change allowed the study to not only utilize grounded theory techniques in its search for unbiased exploratory data and analysis in Phase 1, but also to profit from valuable prior research in subsequent phases of data gathering; thus, strengthening the study overall. Thus, by utilizing this modified grounded theory process the study was able to successfully delve into previously unexamined issues, such as caseworker safety, while probing other more commonly studied factors from a qualitative point of view, such as the issue of supervisor support.

It is also important to note the usefulness of the study's qualitative methods as well. First, the Phase 1 observations allowed me, a principal investigator already very familiar with the role and responsibilities of CPS employees, to gain previously unknown insight into the daily experiences of these individuals. If the study's initial phases had been limited to the Phase 2 interviews only, not only would I have risked losing the valuable exploratory data gathered during Phase 1, but my depth of understanding in regards to the issues plaguing CPS would likely have been limited as well. Moreover,

another unexpected benefit associated with Phase 1 pertained to the participants' familiarity with the study and their willingness to be more open during their Phase 2 interviews. By the time Phase 2 started, most of the interview participants had already met or at the very least observed me as I shadowed one or all of the Phase 1 participants, a fact that was often commented upon at the start of each interview session. This familiarity likely led to greater candor within many if not most of the interview sessions and a richer set of data collected overall.

Moreover, even though a large portion of the interview guides was structured in nature (see Appendices C, D, & E), a structure that itself appeared to put many of the participants at ease, likely from the provision of statements that were not initiated by them, it was the follow-up discussions to many of the Likert-scale questions that tended to provide the most interesting data in the study. For example, while asking a participant about her level of agreement with the statement "CPS really cares about my well-being" (see question #55 on Appendices C, D, & E) was useful, asking her *why* she felt this way allowed for insight into the participant's sense of belonging as well as the individual- and/or group-level support in her life. Many of the downtown supervisors who agreed with this statement mentioned their co-supervisors and daily lunches as one of the ways they felt cared for by CPS. Others who did not agree with this statement pointed to more individual-level support issues, such as not feeling supported by their team colleagues or supervisor. Without these unstructured follow-up questions these data would likely have never been collected.

### *Theoretical Reflection*

As outlined previously, the three theoretical underpinnings to the study included ecological, psychological sense of community, and social support. While each of these allowed for valuable insight, ecological theory was the most useful of the three. First, as you recall, ecological theory provided an important organizational format for examining the lives of the caseworker-participants in particular. Without this theoretical structure, it would have been incredibly difficult to organize and sort the data in a useful analytical manner. The ecological framework, particularly the first three layers represented within it (i.e., micro-, exo-, and mesosystems) (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), allowed me to successfully dissect and study not only the importance of the physical environments in a CPS caseworker's life, but also focus on the way these environments interact to impact an employee's daily experience. Moreover, the model's outermost layer, or the macrosystem, contextualized in a visible manner the way in which the organization's history, legal mandates, society's view towards CPS and its parent organization, and the media's coverage of the work done by CPS and other DCS units provided the overall context in which today's CPS caseworkers live and operate.

Within this larger ecological context and each of the individual ecological level systems, both psychological sense of community and social support theories allowed for a better understanding of many of the important underlying issues this study was most interested in and that exist within a caseworker's life. For example, as mentioned above, the school of thought pertinent to the participants' psychological need to feel invested in community provided insight into the underlying need that led the downtown supervisors to connect on a daily basis with one another, in both a very tangible and visible way.

Likewise, social support theory was useful in allowing for a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional needs of the participants to feel supported by those within CPS as well as outside of their workplace context. This can be seen most clearly in this paper's earlier example of Amelia (see pp. 193-194 above). Without a strong social support system at work or at home, Amelia's first tenure with CPS was marked by serious mental health issues, severe enough to result in a period of hospitalization; whereas her second tenure, in which both social support systems were considerably stronger, was marked by an inner peace of mind and a feeling of control and efficiency in her job. Without the additional insight provided by these two schools of thought we would not have been as well-equipped to understand and analyze the importance of these issues in the participants' lives.

### *Broader Study Conclusions*

The study was designed to provide insight into the life of a CPS employee, particularly seven key areas (see the Research Questions listed on pp. 125-126 above). As was discussed in the previous section, the ability to generalize the study's findings to CPS units across the country is limited due to the study sample's size and location parameters; however, important commonalities and differences across the study's data have been noted, and some broader study implications have been drawn. These broader conclusions include:

- The physical environments in the life of a CPS employee may work in a negative way to limit the possible support systems available to her. (For example, by splitting the unit into two separate physical locations, the

study unit's parent organization appears to have unknowingly limited the social support systems of most of its unit employees to only those located within the employee's specific worksite while also allowing for internal division and disunity within the larger unit.)

- The location of a CPS employee's house in relation to her service area community may be indicative of the strength of her and/or her family's safety concerns.
- The caseworker's sense of belonging with regards to her workplace community is vitally important, possibly even more so than most others outside of CPS, and may be due to the confidential nature of the work performed by CPS and the lack of understanding and negative perception of those outside of these units.
- The group-level social support available to CPS employees, particularly from the higher echelon of their state organization, may help caseworkers better manage their caseloads and workloads and thereby perform their jobs more effectively.
- As seen in the previous research findings regarding the vulnerability of unmarried caseworkers to turnover, social support systems outside of CPS are likely important for the long-term mental health of caseworkers and may help to buffer the effect of job stress.
- Particularly due to the on-call requirements of the CPS experience, it is critical for caseworkers with children to have at least a minimal amount of

social support outside of their workplace if they are going to be able to meet their work responsibilities.

- Finally, the issue of CPS workplace safety may be broader in scope than previously thought. For example, the safety concerns of not only CPS employees but also their loved ones appear to be a factor in at least some caseworkers' decisions to leave CPS employment. Also, CPS employees appear to be concerned about not only their own safety during work hours, but also the safety of themselves, their children, and/or loved ones while off-duty.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

It should be a priority for all of us in society to see that the valuable work performed by CPS units nationwide is done with as little additional difficulty as possible. Researchers, policymakers, caseworkers, and the public at large need to combine their efforts as they seek to help improve the services of CPS units nationwide. First, in order to help policymakers and practitioners alike more research needs to be done into the issue of caseworker turnover and the ways in which states can better recruit, train, and retain CPS caseworkers nationwide. Several areas of research should be used to aid those in positions of power as they seek to further the states' goals of maintaining a stable workforce of caseworkers within their respective foster care system.

While researchers should not neglect quantitative methodology completely, this study is a testament to the important insight that can be gleaned through qualitative methods and, thus, far more studies into the CPS phenomena, specifically employing



these methodological tools, need to be performed in the future. First, as a preliminary matter and as outlined previously, more studies are needed to examine the possible widespread recruitment of criminal justice versus social work degree-holders for CPS employment across the country, the future turnover habits of each of these groups, and the possible implications behind this potential shift in the workforce's demographics. It is also worthwhile to note the higher education pursuits of those within the field of CPS when multiple Master's in Social Work degree programs are available within a particular area.

Also, additional studies are needed to follow-up and examine one or more of the seven study conclusions listed above. In particular, at least three areas of research that deserve follow-up attention from this study include inquiries into social support issues, parenthood in light of work/family conflicts, and issues pertaining to caseworker safety. For example, additional research should be done into the plight of single-parent caseworkers and the social support systems available in their lives. Similarly, inquiries should be made into the experiences of both part-time and full-time caregiver-caseworkers and how the relationships they have with their childcare providers vary over time. Finally, the issue of caseworker safety and CPS turnover deserves greater attention, particularly inquiries into what effect, if any, the fears of others have on a caseworker's decision to leave CPS employment. However, regardless of the specific issues focused upon in these future studies, ideally future qualitative research will continue to examine, in-depth, the lives of CPS caseworkers, within various units across the country, and preferably through longitudinal study design.

While, admittedly, qualitative research tends to be much more time-consuming and involves fewer sample participants than their quantitative counterpart, in the end they yield much richer data that will ultimately aid in deepening the field's understanding of the problem. By replicating this study in CPS units of varying sizes, for example in units that service areas with different population densities and which are located in a variety of geographic regions, the field can gain an even greater understanding of not only the scope of the problem but recommend ways in which practitioners and policymakers can better address it. Finally, to aid in this effort, federal policymakers need to make funding available in order to encourage more widespread, high-quality research in the area.

#### *Implications for Current and Future Practice*

This paper's earlier review of the history of foster care systems in the country serves as a stark reminder as to the original purpose behind the creation of CPS, that being to ensure the ongoing welfare of every child in the country. However, examining the current situation in the field of state child protection revealed the almost untenable position in which caseworkers find themselves when seeking to fulfill this purpose. It is important to note that foster care systems are often filled with caring caseworkers and state employees at every level of the organization, each with a strong desire to help children succeed. Unfortunately, as seen in this paper's examination of the problem of CPS caseworker turnover and its resulting negative consequences, to date these systems get a failing grade when it comes to helping to enable CPS caseworkers to actually perform their job. In the future, steps states can take to promote caseworker stability include: (1) housing an entire CPS unit within the same building location; (2) investing

more time in fostering a supportive environment within the workplace, both within the individual unit itself and between the unit employees and the upper echelon of the state parent-organization; (3) developing a more flexible and caseworker-sensitive on-call schedule; (4) promoting positive media coverage of the work of CPS; (5) reimbursing full or partial gas mileage expenses for those caseworkers who choose to live outside of the service county area; (6) collaborating with law enforcement personnel to have an available on-call officer accompany caseworkers at night and/or whenever they feel fearful of venturing into a high risk area; (7) holding informative meetings with employees and their families in an effort to allay the fears of those closest to caseworkers; and, finally, (8) issue and enforce a strict mandatory limit on the number of case referrals each caseworker can receive in any given month.

First, the earlier examination of the issue of social support, as portrayed in the life of Amelia, highlights the importance of not only supervisor support but that of colleagues as well. Both of these avenues of support can be enhanced by housing the unit at one centralized location. The work of CPS is complex and confusing to most of those outside the profession. As you recall in this paper's earlier example of Daniel, the shared experiences and confidentiality requirements of CPS caseworkers places them in a unique social group. Dividing a pool of caseworkers in a large CPS unit, such as the one included in this study, into smaller "teams" may help caseworkers to more readily form bonds with others within the organization by giving them a ready peer group and supervisor relationship. Moreover, placing these teams in individual rooms within a building, such as has been done at the study unit's Adams Street Location, and using signage to reinforce CPS membership and common goals will likely help to delineate

smaller groups while still fostering a sense of belonging within the group as a whole. However, splitting the unit between different locations counteracts the sense of community within the larger CPS community, likely fosters isolation, and may cause a rift to occur, as is seen in the study herein, between the various unit locations. The risk of this occurring is unnecessary and easily eliminated by housing the unit within the same worksite.

Second, states need to invest more time in fostering a supportive environment within the workplace, both within the individual unit itself and between the unit and the upper echelon of the state organization. The first can be done in a variety of ways. For example, possible ways to encourage closer ties between an individual caseworker and the larger organization include providing: informal social gatherings, monthly paid lunches with supervisors and/or colleagues, and/or small birthday parties for unit employees. By doing so, states can better accomplish the goal of increasing individual-level support between a CPS caseworker and others in her unit and group-level support between an individual caseworker and her CPS unit as a whole.

In addition, states should seek to foster greater group-level support between individual caseworkers and the large state organization, DCS. One way to accomplish this is to arrange periodic unit-wide meetings between CPS staff and high-level officials in the state organization. Within these meetings those in the higher administrative levels of the State should readily acknowledge the complexity of the work performed by CPS caseworkers and should not spend time correcting and directing caseworker actions. One of the most disheartening aspects of this study pertains to the disconnect caseworkers feel between themselves and those empowered to represent them in the highest level of their

organization. It is not enough for the caseworkers to have a visit from the Commissioner when a crisis hits, such as when a mass exodus of workers are leaving their unit, or even once a year at a mandatory training meeting. Lines of communication and support needed to be forged deeper between these two groups. It is not enough for a caseworker to know where Central Office is located, she should feel supported and trusted by those who work there, and not view her organization's high level officials as chastising parents just waiting in expectation for her to step out of line. By opening the lines of communication between unit employees and the larger state organization, states can help to increase group-level support between an individual caseworker and the DCS organization as a whole as well as allow for the free-flow of ideas for addressing some of the more pressing matters facing CPS today, such as those included in the next suggestion, regarding the possible resolution of work-home conflicts, particularly those pertaining to the caseworkers' on-call schedule.

Third, states should consider developing a more flexible, caseworker-sensitive on-call schedule. For example, some of the study's participants actually reported preferring to work odd hours at night and/or on the weekend in exchange for having more overtime pay and/or flex-time during the weekday. Thus, as suggested by several of the study participants, it may be possible to establish a group of volunteer caseworkers within each urban CPS unit who chooses to devote all or most of their work hours to investigating new weeknight and weekend referrals, thus eliminating much of the work-home conflicts faced by others in the unit. Other study participants believed that another option would be for states to allow individual caseworkers who desire more overtime pay or flex-hours to accept additional on-call time from those who find these responsibilities too

burdensome. In addition, if the on-call caseworker received a case during the particular night and/or weekend in question, the caseworker who was supposed to serve during that time could agree to take one of the on-call caseworker's day referrals in exchange; thus, resolving the potential problem faced by on-call conflicts while simultaneously facilitating social support between caseworkers in the unit.

Fourth, DCS needs to be more proactive in countering negative media with some positive media stories on the good CPS caseworkers are able to do. Although this is a difficult task due to the confidentiality constraints involved, right or wrong society takes its cue from the opinions of news editors and the stories they publish. Thus, it would be worthwhile for those in higher levels of state office to encourage the media to publish stories about some of the organization's unsung heroes, the caseworkers themselves. In so doing, the confidentiality issues would be lessened and society would be afforded a glimpse of the daily struggles these workers face.

Fifth, states should consider reimbursing full or partial gas mileage expenses for those caseworkers who choose to live outside of the service county area. As revealed in this paper's example of Daniel as well as the previous examination of caseworker safety issues, many caseworkers choose to relocate outside the service county area due to the risk of violence they face when encountering former clients in public. By reimbursing gas mileage for these caseworkers states acknowledge this risk to those on the front lines, and show by their actions that they are willing to help keep these caseworkers safe. Thus, not only does this allow states to retain employees who choose to relocate but then have to suffer with longer commutes, but it may also help foster greater feelings of support and validation between the CPS caseworker and her larger DCS employer.

Sixth, individual CPS units within larger urban settings should collaborate with law enforcement personnel to have an available on-call officer accompany caseworkers at night and/or whenever they feel fearful of venturing into a high risk area. As you recall in this paper's previous review of caseworker safety, many of the participants in the study related a reluctance to contact law enforcement whenever they were venturing into an unsafe environment due to the long wait times they encountered in the past. By the time a CPS caseworker receives a high priority referral, usually the ones involving the most risk of violence, she may have, at most, 2 hr to respond and still meet her response time. However, some caseworkers relate wait times for law enforcement personnel to be anywhere from 20 min to 2 hr in length. Collaborating with law enforcement personnel to provide a ready contact person within each work shift, or at least every night shift, could help eliminate this problem and thereby increase caseworker safety.

Seventh, as was seen in the example of Olivia, caseworker fears are not the only important consideration when it comes to safety concerns, the fears of her loved ones are critical as well. Thus, states need to do more to help alleviate or diminish the concerns of others in the caseworker's life. One possible step towards doing so would be for states to hold informative meetings with employees and their families in order to allow loved ones to ask questions and better understand the safety precautions in place for caseworkers. Also, by convening informal social gatherings between CPS employees and their families, loved ones can gain valuable peer support opportunities by connecting with the family members of others. Apart from the safety issues, these informal get-togethers of CPS employees and their families can have the added benefit of helping to foster greater community support as well.

Next, to counteract the problem of high caseloads states should issue and strictly enforce a mandatory limit on the number of case referrals each caseworker can receive in any given month. As you recall, in this study's participant-CPS unit the Commissioner's mandatory referral limit not only helped caseworkers to manage more reasonable caseloads but it also conveyed a feeling of protectiveness from the higher levels of the organization, both of which likely helped to stymie the flow of exiting employees from the unit. Although more research needs to be done on the effectiveness of this intervention in other units, it is an important consideration for state units suffering from critical turnover problems.

Fortunately, it should be noted that many of these recommendations will work in concert with one another to aid the overall goal of improving CPS workforce stability. For example, improving the relationship between top DCS officials and CPS caseworkers is likely to lead those in the top-level administration to be more proactive in counteracting the negative stereotype promoted in the media as well as seek to create ways in which to improve caseworker safety. Moreover, promoting more positive media attention will likely lead to an improvement in the public's perception of CPS and thereby result in caseworker safety being less of a concern. However, the overall lives of those who serve in CPS will not improve unless society as a whole decides to stop tearing down the very ones it raises up to serve in this area.

Finally, although a subsection entitled "implications for future society" is not included in this paper, the general public's role in shaping foster care systems, and the role CPS plays within them, into what they are today has been paramount. Thus, a large part of the blame for why these systems are so broken and ineffectual, and the



responsibility for improving the situation, invariably lies at our own feet. As members of society we all play a role, however unwittingly, in creating and maintaining that state of CPS today; for example by electing federal and state legislative officials and judges that continue shape the laws and policies that oversee these individuals, while also helping to perpetuate the negative and sometimes hostile view of the outside world towards those within CPS and DCS employment. Moreover, some would even argue that we as a society have done so while simultaneously exacerbating the underlying conditions in families that require CPS attention in the first place. However, absent a noticeable shift in the general public's views in the future, this paradox is not likely to change. Fortunately, as outlined above, in the meantime there are steps that both researchers and practitioners can take to better insulate CPS caseworkers and thereby increase the retention rates of those on the front lines of child welfare.

## CHAPTER XI

### CONCLUSION

For a society no longer content with turning a blind eye to the suffering of its children, there will always be a need for the work performed by Child Protective Services (CPS). However, the high rate of CPS caseworker turnover has reached crisis levels within the field of child welfare. When combined with the high rates of CPS referrals in each state, turnover puts additional strain on the minority of employees who do remain on the job, and has been shown to negatively affect many facets of the foster care system itself, including the very children it is charged with protecting from harm. This study provides a unique qualitative perspective into the field by examining the lives of the employees of a CPS unit in-depth. By employing qualitative techniques through the process of grounded theory to gather and examine rich observational and interview data gathered from a single CPS unit, this study has been able to shed light on issues previously given only quantitative attention. In addition, qualitative data gathering techniques allowed the study to pursue inquiries all but absent from the field of study, such as the potential conflict that exists between a caseworker's work and family priorities and concerns over caseworker safety. In doing so, the study pinpoints new avenues of research in the field and better equips states nationwide to effectively improve employee stability within these vital units both now and in the future.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR PHASE 1 OBSERVATIONS

**Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board  
Informed Consent Document for Observational Research**

Principal Investigator: D. J. Davis, MS, JD  
Study Title: *A Qualitative View of the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers & the Issue of Employee Turnover*  
Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University

Revision Date: April 25, 2007

This informed consent document applies to healthy volunteers who are or have recently been employed by a Child Protective Services (CPS) unit of Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS).

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this study and the information given below. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

**Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.**

**Purpose of the study:**

I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University and I am conducting a research study involving the Child Protective Services (CPS) unit of Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) in Davidson County. The purpose of the study is to look into the employment experiences of caseworkers within a CPS unit in order to better understand the possible causes of employee turnover within the unit. You are being asked to participate in this research study because of your current employment with Davidson County CPS.

**Procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:**

The caseworker-participants in this portion of the study, such as yourself, include current caseworkers with the Davidson County CPS office. This portion of the study involves you being observed in the normal course of your business by me, Ms. D. J. Davis. The entire study is expected to last between 6 to 8 weeks, or approximately from April 30, 2007, to June 18, 2007. The observation portion of the study is expected to take place from April 30, 2007, to May 11, 2007. Your observations will take place over 2 to 3 business days, from the start to close of business each day, or from approximately 8:30AM to 4:30PM. Depending on what your job entails for the days that you are being observed, these observations will take place at the CPS office in Davidson County and/or schools, hospitals, law enforcement offices, private residences, and/or other off-site locations that you have to travel to as a part of conducting your business during those days. I will make notes of what I observe while I am with you. These notes will be marked with your invented codename only. As such, there is no way anyone can identify you from my notes.

**Expected costs:**

There is no cost to you to be included in this study. All materials for the study will be provided by me.

**Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study:**

Every effort will be made to reduce any possible inconvenience to you in this study. There are no foreseeable risks to being included in this study and the only foreseeable discomforts are minor and involve having me shadow you for up to 2 to 3 days while you regularly perform your job. In order to reduce and/or eliminate any possible inconveniences or discomforts to you during this study I will not record any names or identifying information during the observations and will use an invented codename for you on all study related materials, including the final study document. Finally, if on a day you are being observed you feel as if you need to speak with a child or third party about a sensitive matter without me in attendance, you are free to express that to me and I will make every effort to immediately honor that request. Likewise, should you need to speak with a DCS attorney during the days you are being observed, I will step away and allow you to do so privately, in order to continue to safeguard the attorney-client privilege that current exists. In both of these situations I will move out of earshot in order to grant you the privacy you need. As in all other parts of the study, your decision to ask me to absent myself from the sensitive situation will be kept confidential and not reported to anyone.

**Anticipated benefits from this study:**

- a) The potential benefits to science and humankind that may result from this study are: greater understanding of the experiences of caseworkers within CPS, enhanced job stability for CPS caseworkers, enhanced employee retention by DCS, positive benefits to the children that DCS serves and the citizens of the State of Tennessee as a whole as DCS is able to provide a happier and more stable workforce within its CPS units, and the advancement of scientific and human knowledge by providing more qualitative research into the experiences of CPS caseworkers. Other possible benefits to you include: being able to provide insight into your employment with CPS while still remaining anonymous and the positive feelings that come from potentially contributing to the future stability of CPS employment, for both yourself and future caseworkers.
- b) The potential benefits to you for your participation in this study are listed in section 5(a) above.

**Compensation for participation:**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation:**

I will withdraw you from study participation should you inform me at any time during the study that you no longer wish to participate. I may also withdraw you from study participation if the observation time I spend with you is not completed, for whatever reason, and/or the written materials are compromised in some way.

**What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation:**

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. Participation in this study or withdrawing from it is kept confidential with me, and neither action will affect your employment with DCS, positively or negatively. Should you wish to withdraw from the study please contact me, Ms. D. J. Davis, MS, JD, at [dj.davis@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:dj.davis@vanderbilt.edu). If you choose to withdraw after observation data have already been collected, the data will be discarded, the notes destroyed, and none of the information gathered during that time will be used in the study.

**Contact Information:**

If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact me, Ms. D. J. Davis, MS, JD, or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Paul R. Dokecki, PhD.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

**Confidentiality:**

All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The steps that have been taken to protect your identity include the following: (1) you and all other participants will each receive an invented codename for the purpose of protecting your confidentiality in this study; (2) the codename will be invented by me and information connecting the codename with your identity will be stored in my password and firewall protected computer located within my home office; (3) all of my observation notes created as a result of observing you will contain only your codename; (4) the narrative and dissertation later drafted by me will include only your codename and/or generic descriptive information that is non-identifying in nature (gender, age range, etc.); (5) my hardcopy notes themselves will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office at home; (6) my transcribed notes will be stored in a password and firewall protected computer within the same home office; (7) the office itself is protected by deadbolt doors a security system; (8) no one other than myself will have access to these materials; and, finally, (9) DCS will only have access to a copy of the final dissertation product, which shields your identity, and not any of the other materials included in this study. I will not share any of the notes or the observations I make with your supervisor and/or anyone else at DCS.

Although unlikely, circumstances that may increase the risk of a breach of confidentiality include other caseworkers or third parties witnessing me observing you and reporting on it and/or someone breaking into my house and gaining access to the written and stored material located there.

Following the completion of my dissertation and the approval of my dissertation committee, approximately in Spring, 2008, I will store the hardcopy and computer data for one year. This will provide me with a point of reference during the time in which I seek to have my dissertation published. However, after the year is over, approximately Spring, 2009, I will destroy the data by shredding all hardcopy forms and deleting all computer files.

**Privacy:**

Your information may be shared with Vanderbilt or the government, such as the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, *if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.*

**STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

**I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. All my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate.**

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of volunteer

Consent obtained by:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Donna Jo (D. J.) Davis, MS, JD; Principal Investigator

Printed Name and Title

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM FOR PHASE 2 INTERVIEWS

**Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board  
Informed Consent Document for Interview Research**

Principal Investigator: D. J. Davis, MS, JD  
Study Title: *A Qualitative View of the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers & the Issue of Employee Turnover*  
Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University

Revision Date: April 25, 2007

This informed consent document applies to healthy volunteers who are or have recently been employed by a Child Protective Services (CPS) unit of Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS).

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this study and the information given below. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

**Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.**

**Purpose of the study:**

I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University and I am conducting a research study involving the Child Protective Services (CPS) unit of Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) in Davidson County. The purpose of the study is to look into the employment experiences of caseworkers within a CPS unit in order to better understand the possible causes of employee turnover within the unit. You are being asked to participate in this research study because of your current or recent employment with Davidson County CPS.

**Procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:**

The caseworker-participants in this study, such as yourself, include current and recently employed caseworkers with the Davidson County CPS office. This portion of the study involves these participants being interviewed by me, Ms. D. J. Davis. The entire study is expected to last between 6 to 8 weeks, or approximately from April 30, 2007, to June 18, 2007. The interview portion of the study is expected to take place from May 14, 2007, to June 18, 2007. Your individual interview is expected to last approximately 1 hour. If you are currently employed by CPS, the interview will take place during a time previously scheduled by you and me, sometime during a working day, and, unless you specify a different location, will be conducted in a private

conference room at Davidson County CPS. If you are a former employee of CPS, the interview will take place on a day and time previously arranged between you and me; in a public place that also allows for private conversation, such as a public park or small coffee shop, or may take place in a reserved conference room on the second or third floor of Mayborn Hall on the Vanderbilt University campus.

The interview will consist of questions regarding your employment as a CPS caseworker. These questions will range from general inquiries, such as “What is a CPS caseworker?” to more specific questions, such as “What is the most difficult part of your job?” The majority of questions will focus on your long-term employment with CPS, such as “How, if at all, do you think your job with CPS will get easier over time?” and how DCS could improve CPS in the future, such as “What could DCS do to improve your work experience at CPS?”

The interview session will be audio taped by me in order to keep the interview time to a minimum and to allow for accuracy in my data gathering. These audiotapes will be marked with your invented codename only. I will later transcribe these audiotapes into my computer located in my home office. Like all other data gathered in this study, I will not share any of the information provided by you with your past or present supervisors and/or anyone else at DCS.

**Expected costs:**

There are no costs to you to be included in this study. All materials for the study will be provided by me.

**Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study:**

Every effort will be made to reduce any possible inconvenience to you in this study. There are no foreseeable risks to being included in this study and the only foreseeable discomforts are minor and involve participating in approximately a 1 hour long interview with me about your experiences working for DCS. In order to reduce and/or eliminate any possible inconveniences or discomforts to you during this study I will not record any names or identifying information during the interview and will use an invented codename for you on all study related materials, including the final study document.

**Anticipated benefits from this study:**

- a) The potential benefits to science and humankind that may result from this study are: greater understanding of the experiences of caseworkers within CPS, enhanced job stability for CPS caseworkers, enhanced employee retention by DCS, positive benefits to the children that DCS serves and the citizens of the State of Tennessee as a whole as DCS is able to provide a happier and more stable workforce within its CPS units, and the advancement of scientific and human knowledge by providing more qualitative research into the experiences of CPS caseworkers. Other possible benefits to you include: being able to provide insight into your employment with CPS while still remaining anonymous and the positive feelings that come from potentially contributing to the future stability of CPS employment, for both yourself and future caseworkers.
- b) The potential benefits to you for your participation in this study are listed in section 5(a) above.

**Compensation for participation:**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.



**Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation:**

I will withdraw you from study participation should you inform me at any time during the study that you no longer wish to participate. I may also withdraw you from study participation if the interview time I spend with you is not completed, for whatever reason, and/or the audio or written materials are compromised in some way.

**What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation:**

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. Participation in this study or withdrawing from it is kept confidential with me, and neither action will affect your employment with DCS, positively or negatively. Should you wish to withdraw from the study please contact me, Ms. D. J. Davis, MS, JD, at [dj.davis@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:dj.davis@vanderbilt.edu). If you choose to withdraw after interview data have already been collected, the data will be discarded, the notes and audiotape destroyed, and none of the information gathered during that time will be used in the study.

**Contact Information:**

If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact me, Ms. D. J. Davis or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Paul R. Dokecki, PhD.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

**Confidentiality:**

All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The steps that have been taken to protect your identity include the following: (1) you and all other participants will each receive an invented codename for the purpose of protecting your confidentiality in this study; (2) the codename will be invented by me and information connecting the codename with your identity will be stored in my password and firewall protected computer located within my home office; (3) all of the interview notes and audiotapes created in the course of interviewing you will contain only your codename; (4) the narrative and dissertation later drafted by me will include only your codename and/or generic descriptive information that is non-identifying in nature (gender, age range, etc.); (5) my hardcopy notes and the audiotapes themselves will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office at home; (6) my transcribed notes will be stored in a password and firewall protected computer within the same home office; (7) the office itself is protected by deadbolt doors a security system; (8) no one other than myself will have access to these materials; and, finally, (9) DCS will only have access to a copy of the final dissertation product, which shields your identity, and not any of the other materials included in this study. Following the completion of the study the audiotapes will be destroyed and the recording rendered inaccessible.

Although unlikely, circumstances that may increase the risk of a breach of confidentiality include other caseworkers or third parties witnessing me interviewing you and reporting on it and/or someone breaking into my house and gaining access to the written and stored material.

Following the completion of my dissertation and the approval of my dissertation committee, approximately in Spring, 2008, I will store the hardcopy and computer data for one year. This will provide me with a point of reference during the time in which I seek to have my dissertation

published. However, after the year is over, approximately Spring, 2009, I will destroy the data by shredding all hardcopy forms and deleting all computer files.

**Privacy:**

Your information may be shared with Vanderbilt or the government, such as the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, *if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.*

**STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

**I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. All my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of volunteer

Consent obtained by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Donna Jo (D. J.) Davis, MS, JD; Principal Investigator  
Printed Name and Title

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASEWORKERS

Principal Investigator: D. J. Davis, MS, JD Approval Date: April 27, 2007; Am. Date: May 7, 2007
Study Title: A Qualitative View of the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers & the Issue of Employee Turnover
Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University

[This form is to be filled-in by Principal Investigator after items read to and verbal responses given by interviewee. For efficiency and accuracy, the audiotape will record the responses to the open-ended questions.]

Structured and Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Current Caseworkers

Interview Number: Interviewee Codename:

Consent Form reviewed & signed: Interviewee given copy of form:

Read the following to the interviewee: Thank you again for agreeing to meet with me today. During the next 45 minutes I am going to read you a series of questions. If any of the questions are unclear or confusing, please let me know and I will try and restate them. Some of the questions are open in nature, allowing you to answer in your own words. Others have a range of answers for you to choose from. However, if at anytime you want to add more to your answer, please let me know. The goal of this interview is to capture your unique perspective as an employee in this division. I want to do everything I can to make sure that happens.

Background: In this first section, I am going to ask you some questions about your background.

1. What is your educational background?

A. A. (Associates Degree) in

B.A./B.S. in

R.N. (Registered Nurse) Some Graduate Work in

M.A./M.S./M.S.W./MBA Ph.D./Psy.D./MD

Other:

2. Gender Female Male

3. How would you describe your ethnicity/race?

\_\_\_\_\_ African-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian

\_\_\_\_\_ Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your marital status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Married/Living with Partner

\_\_\_\_\_ Separated/Living apart

\_\_\_\_\_ Divorced

\_\_\_\_\_ Single

\_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

5. Who is living in your home?

\_\_\_\_\_ Partner/Spouse

\_\_\_\_\_ Extended Family: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children under the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children over the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What county do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ 18 to 21

\_\_\_\_\_ 40 to 44

\_\_\_\_\_ 22 to 25

\_\_\_\_\_ 45 to 49

\_\_\_\_\_ 26 to 29

\_\_\_\_\_ 50 to 54

\_\_\_\_\_ 30 to 34

\_\_\_\_\_ 55 to 59

\_\_\_\_\_ 35 to 39

\_\_\_\_\_ 60 and older

**Employment Background:** I am now going to ask you some questions about your employment background as well as your position here with the department.

8. Prior to working for the State of Tennessee, what jobs did you hold?

Type of Job	Employer	Dates There:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

*[if necessary, add more on back]*

9. When did you first start working for the State of Tennessee? \_\_\_\_\_ (mo. & year)

10. What is your current position here at DCS?

- |                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM1 | _____ CPS Team Leader, CM4 |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM2 | _____ CPS Supervisor       |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM3 | _____ Other: _____         |

11. How long have you held this position? \_\_\_\_\_ Year(s), \_\_\_\_\_ Month(s)

12. Prior to your current position, have you worked for the state in different positions?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Yes (continue to question 13)      \_\_\_\_\_ No (go to question 15)

13. Starting with your first position with the State of Tennessee, please give me a description of your employment history for the State:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Out of all the positions that you have held with the State, which was your favorite, and why?

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**Job Perception:** For the next few questions, I am going to ask you open-ended questions about your job. In order to finish on time and for accuracy, I will not write down your explanations now, but will review the audiotape later and record them at that time.

15. In your own words, what is a CPS caseworker?
16. What is your favorite part of working for CPS?
17. Would you like to be a team leader instead of a caseworker? Why or why not?
18. Would you like to be a CPS supervisor someday? Why or why not?
19. What is the most difficult part of your job?
20. How do you think your job will get easier over time?
21. What could DCS do to improve your job?
22. When will Multiple Response Services (MRS) be added to your job?
23. When MRS is added to your job, will your job be harder or easier? Why?
24. Do you think MRS will be implemented before you are adequately trained?
25. If you have a problem at your job, who do you talk to about it?
26. Do you think that people outside of CPS understand the job you do? Others working for DCS but not CPS? General public?

**Organizational Commitment, Job Transcendence, & Specific CPS Questions:** For the next questions I am going to read you a series of statements and I want you to tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statements. *[Show page 9 of this Interview Guide with possible responses and place before the interviewee for easy reference]*. You have four choices for responses, they are: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. For some of the questions, I will also give you an opportunity to further explain your response. Again, in order to finish on time, I will not write down your explanations, but will review the audiotape later and take note of them at that time. *[(R = reverse coded)]*.

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
27. I enjoy talking about my work to others.	1	2	3	4	5
28. a. My work is one of the most important things in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
29. My main reason for working is to financially support my family and lifestyle. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
30. a. I am eager to retire. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
31. If I was financially secure, I would continue working for CPS, even if I stopped getting paid.	1	2	3	4	5
32. My work makes the world a better place.	1	2	3	4	5
33. a. Negative news coverage about DCS causes me to not enjoy my job as much as I could. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
34. a. I find my work rewarding.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
35. I am very conscious of what day of the work week it is, and I greatly anticipate the weekends. I say, "Thank goodness it's Friday!" (R)	1	2	3	4	5
36. I tend to miss my work when I am on vacation.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I would choose my current work life again if I had the opportunity.	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
38. I view my job as a stepping stone to other jobs.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I feel in control of my work life.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I would not encourage young people to pursue my line of work. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
41. When I am not at work, I think about my work.	1	2	3	4	5
42. a. At least once a week, I have to take my work home with me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
43. a. I expect to be doing the same work, in the same position, in five years. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
44. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort, beyond what is normally expected, to help CPS be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
45. a. I talk up DCS to my friends as a great organization to work for.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
46. I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
47. I find that my values and DCS's values are very similar.	1	2	3	4	5
48. a. I am proud to tell others that I work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
49. If I couldn't work for CPS, I wouldn't work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
50. DCS really inspires me to perform at my best.	1	2	3	4	5
51. a. I really care about the fate of DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					



	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
52. I feel like DCS values the contributions of CPS caseworkers.	1	2	3	4	5
53. If DCS could hire someone to replace me at a lower salary, it would do so. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
54. a. DCS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
55. a. CPS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
56. a. When I do a good job, it frequently goes unnoticed by my supervisors. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
57. I view my job as just a necessity of life, much like breathing or sleeping.	1	2	3	4	5
<i>[Job Transcendence Questions]</i>					
58. a. I often think about quitting my job. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
59. I often think about transferring to another department within DCS. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
60. At least once a month, I think about transferring out of DCS to another position with the State. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
61. At least once a month, I wonder if social work is the right job for me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
62. a. I will probably look for a new job in the near future. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
63. I am extremely glad that I chose to work for DCS instead of other organizations that I was considering at the time that I joined.	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
<i>[Additional Questions (specific to CPS)]</i>					
64. I feel connected to those who work in the DCS Central Office.	1	2	3	4	5
65. a. I feel that it is unrealistic for every DCS county office, both large and small, to have to operate under the same requirements. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee agrees or strongly agrees]</i> What requirements should not be applied to larger counties, like Davidson County?					
66. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Removal is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
67. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Safety Plan is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
68. I feel supported by my supervisors in CPS.	1	2	3	4	5
69. I feel like the main office of DCS trusts CPS caseworkers in our office to do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5
70. If I didn't have supervisory support, I wouldn't work for CPS.	1	2	3	4	5

**Safety Concerns:**

71. Please, describe any safety concerns you have in doing the work of a CPS caseworker. When are you most concerned? What, if any, steps to you take to protect yourself while doing your job? Have you considered leaving CPS because of your concerns over your personal safety?

**Additional Comments:**

72. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Closing:**

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me here today. Your participation is invaluable to this study. I know that the job of a CPS caseworker is extremely busy and I am grateful that you took this precious time to help me understand your perspective better.

**Strongly**  
**Disagree**

**Disagree**

**Neutral**

**Agree**

**Strongly**  
**Agree**

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR TEAM LEADERS

Principal Investigator: D. J. Davis, MS, JD Approval Date: April 27, 2007; Am. Date: May 7, 2007
Study Title: A Qualitative View of the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers & the Issue of Employee Turnover
Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University

[This form is to be filled-in by Principal Investigator after items read to and verbal responses given by interviewee. For efficiency and accuracy, the audiotape will record the responses to the open-ended questions.]

Structured and Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Team Leaders

Interview Number: Interviewee Codename:

Consent Form reviewed & signed: Interviewee given copy of form:

Read the following to the interviewee: Thank you again for agreeing to meet with me today. During the next 45 minutes I am going to read you a series of questions. If any of the questions are unclear or confusing, please let me know and I will try and restate them. Some of the questions are open in nature, allowing you to answer in your own words. Others have a range of answers for you to choose from. However, if at anytime you want to add more to your answer, please let me know. The goal of this interview is to capture your unique perspective as an employee in this division. I want to do everything I can to make sure that happens.

Background: In this first section, I am going to ask you some questions about your background.

1. What is your educational background?

- A. A. (Associates Degree) in
B.A./B.S. in
R.N. (Registered Nurse) Some Graduate Work in
M.A./M.S./M.S.W./MBA Ph.D./Psy.D./MD
Other:

2. Gender Female Male

3. How would you describe your ethnicity/race?

\_\_\_\_\_ African-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian

\_\_\_\_\_ Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your marital status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Married/Living with Partner

\_\_\_\_\_ Separated/Living apart

\_\_\_\_\_ Divorced

\_\_\_\_\_ Single

\_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

5. Who is living in your home?

\_\_\_\_\_ Partner/Spouse

\_\_\_\_\_ Extended Family: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children under the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children over the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What county do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ 18 to 21

\_\_\_\_\_ 40 to 44

\_\_\_\_\_ 22 to 25

\_\_\_\_\_ 45 to 49

\_\_\_\_\_ 26 to 29

\_\_\_\_\_ 50 to 54

\_\_\_\_\_ 30 to 34

\_\_\_\_\_ 55 to 59

\_\_\_\_\_ 35 to 39

\_\_\_\_\_ 60 and older

**Employment Background:** I am now going to ask you some questions about your employment background and your position here with the department.

8. Prior to working for the State of Tennessee, what jobs did you hold?

Type of Job	Employer	Dates There:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

*[if necessary, add more on back]*

9. When did you first start working for the State of Tennessee? \_\_\_\_\_ (mo. & year)

10. What is your current position here at DCS?

- |                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM1 | _____ CPS Team Leader, CM4 |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM2 | _____ CPS Supervisor       |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM3 | _____ Other: _____         |

11. How long have you held this position? \_\_\_\_\_ Year(s), \_\_\_\_\_ Month(s)

12. Prior to your current position, have you worked for the state in different positions?

- |                                     |                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| _____ Yes (continue to question 13) | _____ No (go to question 15) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|

13. Starting with your first position with the State of Tennessee, please give me a description of your employment history for the State:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Out of all the positions that you have held with the State, which was your favorite, and why?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Job Perception:** For the next few questions, I am going to ask you open-ended questions about your job. In order to finish on time and for accuracy, I will not write down your explanations now, but will review the audiotape later and record them at that time.

15. In your own words, what is a CPS caseworker?
16. What is your favorite part of working for CPS?
17. Would you like to be a caseworker instead of a team leader? Why or why not?
18. Would you like to be a CPS supervisor someday? Why or why not?
19. What is the most difficult part of your job?
20. How do you think your job will get easier over time?
21. What could DCS do to improve your job?
22. When will Multiple Response Services (MRS) be added to your job?
23. When MRS is added to your job, will your job be harder or easier? Why?
24. Do you think MRS will be implemented before you are adequately trained?
25. If you have a problem at your job, who do you talk to about it?
26. Do you think that people outside of CPS understand the job you do?

**Organizational Commitment, Job Transcendence, & Specific CPS Questions:** For the next questions I am going to read you a series of statements and I want you to tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statements. *[Show page 9 of this Interview Guide with possible responses and place before the interviewee for easy reference]*. You have four choices for responses, they are: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. For some of the questions, I will also give you an opportunity to further explain your response. Again, in order to finish on time, I will not write down your explanations, but will review the audiotape later and take note of them at that time. *[(R = reverse coded)]*.

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
27. I enjoy talking about my work to others.	1	2	3	4	5
28. a. My work is one of the most important things in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
29. My main reason for working is to financially support my family and lifestyle. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
30. a. I am eager to retire. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
31. If I was financially secure, I would continue working for CPS, even if I stopped getting paid.	1	2	3	4	5
32. My work makes the world a better place.	1	2	3	4	5
33. a. Negative news coverage about DCS causes me to not enjoy my job as much as I could. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
34. a. I find my work rewarding.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
35. I am very conscious of what day of the work week it is, and I greatly anticipate the weekends. I say, "Thank goodness it's Friday!" (R)	1	2	3	4	5
36. I tend to miss my work when I am on vacation.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I would choose my current work life again if I had the opportunity.	1	2	3	4	5



	<u>Strongly</u> <u>Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly</u> <u>Agree</u>
38. I view my job as a stepping stone to other jobs.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I feel in control of my work life.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I would not encourage young people to pursue my line of work. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
41. When I am not at work, I think about my work.	1	2	3	4	5
42. a. At least once a week, I have to take my work home with me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
43. a. I expect to be doing the same work, in the same position, in five years. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
44. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort, beyond what is normally expected, to help CPS be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
45. a. I talk up DCS to my friends as a great organization to work for.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
46. I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
47. I find that my values and DCS's values are very similar.	1	2	3	4	5
48. a. I am proud to tell others that I work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
49. If I couldn't work for CPS, I wouldn't work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
50. DCS really inspires me to perform at my best.	1	2	3	4	5
51. a. I really care about the fate of DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
52. I feel like DCS values the contributions of CPS caseworkers.	1	2	3	4	5
53. If DCS could hire someone to replace me at a lower salary, it would do so. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
54. a. DCS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
55. a. CPS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
56. a. When I do a good job, it frequently goes unnoticed by my supervisors. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
57. I view my job as just a necessity of life, much like breathing or sleeping.	1	2	3	4	5
<i>[Job Transcendence Questions]</i>					
58. a. I often think about quitting my job. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
59. I often think about transferring to another department within DCS. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
60. At least once a month, I think about transferring out of DCS to another position with the State. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
61. At least once a month, I wonder if social work is the right job for me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
62. a. I will probably look for a new job in the near future. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
63. I am extremely glad that I chose to work for DCS instead of other organizations that I was considering at the time that I joined.	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
<i>[Additional Questions (specific to CPS)]</i>					
64. I feel connected to those who work in the DCS main office.	1	2	3	4	5
65. a. I feel that it is unrealistic for every DCS county office, both large and small, to have to operate under the same requirements. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee agrees or strongly agrees]</i> What requirements should not be applied to larger counties, like Davidson County?					
66. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Removal is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
67. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Safety Plan is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
68. I feel supported by my supervisors in CPS.	1	2	3	4	5
69. I feel like the main office of DCS trusts CPS caseworkers in our office to do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5
70. If I didn't have supervisory support, I wouldn't work for CPS.	1	2	3	4	5

**Safety Concerns:**

71. Please, describe any safety concerns you have in doing the work of a CPS caseworker. When are you most concerned? What, if any, steps to you take to protect yourself while doing your job? Have you considered leaving CPS because of your concerns over your personal safety?

**Additional Comments:**

72. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Closing:**

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me here today. Your participation is invaluable to this study. I know that the job of a CPS team leader is extremely busy and I am grateful that you took this precious time to help me understand your perspective better.

**Strongly**  
**Disagree**

**Disagree**

**Neutral**

**Agree**

**Strongly**  
**Agree**

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR TEAM COORDINATORS

Principal Investigator: D. J. Davis, MS, JD Approval Date: April 27, 2007; Am. Date: May 7, 2007
Study Title: A Qualitative View of the Experiences of CPS Caseworkers & the Issue of Employee Turnover
Institution/Hospital: Vanderbilt University

[This form is to be filled-in by Principal Investigator after items read to and verbal responses given by interviewee. For efficiency and accuracy, the audiotape will record the responses to the open-ended questions.]

Structured and Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Team Coordinators

Interview Number: Interviewee Codename:

Consent Form reviewed & signed: Interviewee given copy of form:

Read the following to the interviewee: Thank you again for agreeing to meet with me today. During the next 45 minutes I am going to read you a series of questions. If any of the questions are unclear or confusing, please let me know and I will try and restate them. Some of the questions are open in nature, allowing you to answer in your own words. Others have a range of answers for you to choose from. However, if at anytime you want to add more to your answer, please let me know. The goal of this interview is to capture your unique perspective as an employee in this division. I want to do everything I can to make sure that happens.

Background: In this first section, I am going to ask you some questions about your background.

1. What is your educational background?

A. A. (Associates Degree) in

B.A./B.S. in

R.N. (Registered Nurse) Some Graduate Work in

M.A./M.S./M.S.W./MBA Ph.D./Psy.D./MD

Other:

2. Gender Female Male

3. How would you describe your ethnicity/race?

\_\_\_\_\_ African-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian

\_\_\_\_\_ Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your marital status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Married/Living with Partner

\_\_\_\_\_ Separated/Living apart

\_\_\_\_\_ Divorced

\_\_\_\_\_ Single

\_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

5. Who is living in your home?

\_\_\_\_\_ Partner/Spouse

\_\_\_\_\_ Extended Family: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children under the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Children over the age of 12

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What county do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ 18 to 21

\_\_\_\_\_ 40 to 44

\_\_\_\_\_ 22 to 25

\_\_\_\_\_ 45 to 49

\_\_\_\_\_ 26 to 29

\_\_\_\_\_ 50 to 54

\_\_\_\_\_ 30 to 34

\_\_\_\_\_ 55 to 59

\_\_\_\_\_ 35 to 39

\_\_\_\_\_ 60 and older

**Employment Background:** I am now going to ask you some questions about your employment background as well as your position here with the department.

8. Prior to working for the State of Tennessee, what jobs did you hold?

Type of Job	Employer	Dates There:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

*[if necessary, add more on back]*

9. When did you first start working for the State of Tennessee? \_\_\_\_\_ (mo. & year)

10. What is your current position here at DCS?

- |                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM1 | _____ CPS Team Leader, CM4 |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM2 | _____ CPS Team Coordinator |
| _____ CPS Caseworker, CM3 | _____ Other: _____         |

11. How long have you held this position? \_\_\_\_\_ Year(s), \_\_\_\_\_ Month(s)

12. Prior to your current position, have you worked for the state in different positions?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes (continue to question 13)      \_\_\_\_\_ No (go to question 15)

13. Starting with your first position with the State of Tennessee, please give me a description of your employment history for the State:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. Out of all the positions that you have held with the State, which was your favorite, and why?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Job Perception:** For the next few questions, I am going to ask you open-ended questions about your job. In order to finish on time and for accuracy, I will not write down your explanations now, but will review the audiotape later and record them at that time.

15. In your own words, what is a CPS caseworker?
16. What is your favorite part of working for CPS?
17. Would you like to be a caseworker again instead of a supervisor? Why or why not?
18. Would you like to be a team leader instead of a supervisor? Why or why not?
19. What is the most difficult part of your job?
20. How do you think your job will get easier over time?
21. What could DCS do to improve your job?
22. When will Multiple Response Services (MRS) be added to your job?
23. When MRS is added to your job, will your job be harder or easier? Why?
24. Do you think MRS will be implemented before you are adequately trained?
25. If you have a problem at your job, who do you talk to about it?
26. Do you think that people outside of CPS understand the job you do?



**Organizational Commitment, Job Transcendence, & Specific CPS Questions:** For the next questions I am going to read you a series of statements and I want you to tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statements. *[Show page 9 of this Interview Guide with possible responses and place before the interviewee for easy reference]*. You have four choices for responses, they are: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. For some of the questions, I will also give you an opportunity to further explain your response. Again, in order to finish on time, I will not write down your explanations, but will review the audiotape later and take note of them at that time. *[(R = reverse coded)]*.

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
27. I enjoy talking about my work to others.	1	2	3	4	5
28. a. My work is one of the most important things in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
29. My main reason for working is to financially support my family and lifestyle. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
30. a. I am eager to retire. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
31. If I was financially secure, I would continue working for CPS, even if I stopped getting paid.	1	2	3	4	5
32. My work makes the world a better place.	1	2	3	4	5
33. a. Negative news coverage about DCS causes me to not enjoy my job as much as I could. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
34. a. I find my work rewarding.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
35. I am very conscious of what day of the work week it is, and I greatly anticipate the weekends. I say, "Thank goodness it's Friday!" (R)	1	2	3	4	5
36. I tend to miss my work when I am on vacation.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I would choose my current work life again if I had the opportunity.	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
38. I view my job as a stepping stone to other jobs.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I feel in control of my work life.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I would not encourage young people to pursue my line of work. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
41. When I am not at work, I think about my work.	1	2	3	4	5
42. a. At least once a week, I have to take my work home with me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
43. a. I expect to be doing the same work, in the same position, in five years. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
44. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort, beyond what is normally expected, to help CPS be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
45. a. I talk up DCS to my friends as a great organization to work for.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
46. I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
47. I find that my values and DCS's values are very similar.	1	2	3	4	5
48. a. I am proud to tell others that I work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
49. If I couldn't work for CPS, I wouldn't work for DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
50. DCS really inspires me to perform at my best.	1	2	3	4	5
51. a. I really care about the fate of DCS.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
52. I feel like DCS values the contributions of CPS caseworkers.	1	2	3	4	5
53. If DCS could hire someone to replace me at a lower salary, it would do so. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
54. a. DCS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
55. a. CPS really cares about my well-being.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
56. a. When I do a good job, it frequently goes unnoticed by my supervisors at main office. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
57. I view my job as just a necessity of life, much like breathing or sleeping.	1	2	3	4	5
<i>[Job Transcendence Questions]</i>					
58. a. I often think about quitting my job. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
59. I often think about transferring to another department within DCS. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
60. At least once a month, I think about transferring out of DCS to another position with the State. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
61. At least once a month, I wonder if social work is the right job for me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
62. a. I will probably look for a new job in the near future. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Why or why not?					
63. I am extremely glad that I chose to work for DCS instead of other organizations that I was considering at the time that I joined.	1	2	3	4	5

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
<i>[Additional Questions (specific to CPS)]</i>					
64. I feel connected to those who work in the DCS main office.	1	2	3	4	5
65. a. I feel that it is unrealistic for every DCS county office, both large and small, to have to operate under the same requirements. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee agrees or strongly agrees]</i> What requirements should not be applied to larger counties, like Davidson County?					
66. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Removal is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
67. a. The amount of paperwork required for a CPS Safety Plan is not too much.	1	2	3	4	5
b. <i>[If interviewee disagrees or strongly disagrees]</i> How do you think that it could be streamlined?					
68. I feel supported by those in DCS's main office.	1	2	3	4	5
69. I feel like the main office of DCS trusts CPS caseworkers in our office to do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5
70. If I didn't have supervisory support, I wouldn't work for CPS.	1	2	3	4	5

**Safety Concerns:**

71. Please, describe any safety concerns you have in doing the work of a CPS caseworker. When are you most concerned? What, if any, steps to you take to protect yourself while doing your job? Have you considered leaving CPS because of your concerns over your personal safety?

**Additional Comments:**

72. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Closing:**

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me here today. Your participation is invaluable to this study. I know that the job of a CPS supervisor is extremely busy and I am grateful that you took this precious time to help me understand your perspective better.

**Strongly**  
**Disagree**

**Disagree**

**Neutral**

**Agree**

**Strongly**  
**Agree**

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