

# Navigating CPS

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**How to cite this paper:** Wisdom, D. (2024). Navigating CPS. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 279-289.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.127019>

**Received:** May 7, 2024

**Accepted:** July 15, 2024

**Published:** July 18, 2024

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## Abstract

This study delves into the dynamic relationship between parents and Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies using a Qualitative Inquiry Methodology Study (QIMS). Although CPS interventions aim to protect children and provide support to families, parents who have dealt with such interventions often go through significant changes in perspective. Despite the abundance of academic research on CPS interventions, there is still a significant gap in exploring the actual experiences of parents within these systems. To fill this gap, this QIMS uses in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to highlight parental voices and lived experiences. Through this research, the researcher aims to unearth the social inequalities that shape perceptions of child welfare systems. The findings of this study seek to improve the equity and efficacy of CPS interventions, ultimately fostering better outcomes for families and children.

## Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry Methodology Study (QIMS), Child Protective Services (CPS), Parents, Themes

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between parental experiences and Child Protective Services (CPS) system is a complex matter that plays a crucial role in child welfare and family dynamics. The interactions between parents and CPS agencies can have both positive and negative outcomes, and they are often accompanied by emotions that are deep and multifaceted (Bernard et al., 2015). These interactions can lead to power struggles, and they are often influenced by systemic factors that can make it difficult for both parents and CPS agencies to work together effectively (Lind et al., 2014).

To ensure that children are taken care of in a holistic manner, and that families are supported in times of crisis, it is essential that we understand the complexities of this relationship. By doing so, we can create structures that will help

to maximize the resources of child welfare systems and ensure that families receive the support they need.

Despite the goal of CPS interventions being to protect children from harm and provide necessary support during times of crisis, parents who go through such processes often experience significant changes in their perspectives and behaviors (Heath et al., 2020).

These changes can range from feeling empowered to feeling frustrated, mistrustful, and traumatized. The experiences that parents have are shaped by a variety of factors, including their socio-economic status, ethnicity and race, cultural background, and previous interactions with social service systems (Lind et al., 2014). Understanding these factors is essential for creating effective interventions that can help families in need.

Academic research has devoted significant attention to CPS (Child Protective Services) interventions, but there is still a dearth of research exploring the actual experiences of parents who have had to deal with these systems. Qualitative data analysis can provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of these interactions between parents and CPS. By focusing on the voices of the parents themselves and their lived experiences, we can gain valuable insights into the social inequalities that shape their perceptions of the child welfare system. A thorough investigation of these issues can help improve the effectiveness and fairness of CPS interventions, leading to better outcomes for both parents and children involved in the system.

For the purpose of this research, the researcher opted for a Qualitative Inquiry Methodology Study to gain insight into the experiences of parents who have interacted with Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies. My approach involved analyzing in-depth interviews with participants who have dealt with CPS. This was followed by a thorough thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns, themes, and trends in the data. The aim is to explore a wide range of parental perspectives and gain an understanding of the emotions that are felt by parents throughout the process of interacting with CPS agencies. By delving deeper into the subtle differences and similarities in these responses, we hope to contribute to the overall effectiveness, equity, and responsiveness of child welfare services. Ultimately, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of parents who interact with CPS agencies and to identify ways in which the child welfare system can be improved to better serve the needs of families and their children.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The research methodology of a QIMS involves a systematic and structured approach to reviewing and analyzing findings from multiple qualitative studies. The initial step in conducting this research method is to clearly define the research question or objective. In this research, the primary question posed was: "What are parents' thoughts when having to navigate Child Protective Services?"

The second step is conducting the literature search and selection. This step includes doing a literature search across a number of databases to identify relevant qualitative studies. This step also includes developing inclusion and exclusion criteria that directly relate to the research question. These articles are then screened based on titles, abstracts, and full texts to make sure they adequately meet the inclusion criteria. The first author conducted the initial search on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. The database search was done by the university's library home page utilizing the advanced search option. The following Boolean operators were utilized: cps OR child protective services or child welfare or child protection. Then in the next box the first author put parents AND mental health. After the results were pulled up the results were limited to Academic Journals. The databases used were PsycINFO and Academic Search Complete. The final inclusion for this study were that the selected articles met specific criteria, which were that the articles used qualitative research methods, the articles had been peer-reviewed, featured direct quotes from parents, involved direct contact with child protective services, and the articles had been published in the last ten years.

After entering these specific search terms, 1694 articles were generated. Upon reviewing the titles of these articles, 1169 were found to be irrelevant. This left 525 articles that were related to child protective services, mental health, and parents. After reviewing the abstracts, I further eliminated 483 articles that did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study and 42 were excluded due to not having direct quotes. After reviewing these 42 articles, 5 articles were chosen due to the inclusion criteria. These articles together best served the goal of showing the feedback mothers had when interacting with CPS.

The selected studies provided valuable insights into the perspectives of mothers who had dealt with child protective services. The feedback included discussions on their experiences, opinions on the effectiveness of the services provided, and the overall impact on their families. The studies also provided a range of different viewpoints and experiences, allowing for a gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Overall, these studies played a critical role in informing my analysis of the impact of child protective services on families and parents. By including the perspectives of mothers who had firsthand experience with these services, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the implications for policy and practice (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019, Merritt, 2020, Campbell et al., 2017, Palmer et al., 2006, Dumbrill, 2006).

In the third step of the process, data extraction is carried out, which includes retrieving pertinent data from the chosen studies as well as identifying key findings. The specifics of the data extraction for this study are outlined in **Table 1**.

With the fourth step of the process, it is essential to thoroughly analyze the gathered data in order to identify any recurring themes across the various studies. This valuable information can be specifically located in the Theme Analysis section.

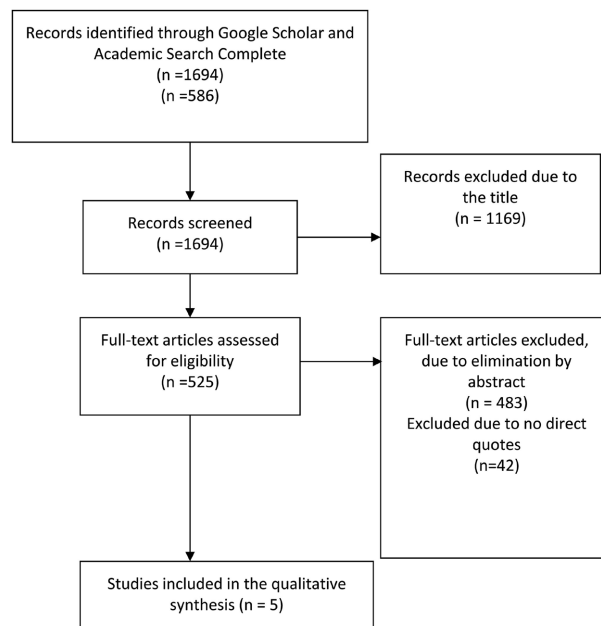
The final stages of the QIMS research process involve showcasing the out-

comes and examining the potential implications of the findings for practical application, policy development, and future research endeavors. Additionally, this phase encompasses the interpretation of the data, ensuring that it aligns with the original data, addressing the limitations of the study, and thoroughly considering all ethical considerations, all of which have been addressed in this article.

### Role of Author

I hold a deeply personal connection to the topic of parents dealing with child protective services and the impact on their mental well-being. This connection stems from my own experiences as a former foster youth. Having witnessed the emotional turmoil faced by myself, as well as other foster children, I have developed a compelling interest in the field of foster care and child protective services. My ultimate goal is to conduct research that can provide valuable assistance to parents in navigating the system and, in turn, prevent children from entering foster care.

### Quorum Chart



## 3. Results

**Table 1.** Parent demographics.

Authors Publication year	Type of Manuscript	N	Age, race/ethnicity and gender as indicated by original authors	Country
Campbell	Peer-reviewed	24	24 female	United States
Olson	article		21 White (Non-Hispanic)	
Keenan and Morrow			2 Latina	
			1 Filipina	

**Continued**

Dumbrill	Peer-reviewed article	18	19 - 60 11 male, 7 female 15 White 2 Black 1 Aboriginal	British Columbia  Canada
Merritt	Peer-reviewed article	17	33 17 female 64% Black 30% Latinx	United States
Palmer Maiter and Manji	Peer-reviewed article	61	16 - 47 58 female, 3 male	Canada
Syrstad Slettebø	Peer-reviewed article	6	27 - 49 5 female, 1 male	Norway

The findings from the research articles unveiled significant qualitative data, identifying five prominent themes. These themes encompassed struggles related to authority and systemic injustice, feelings of parental betrayal and guilt, the profound impact of abuse and domestic violence, challenges in parenting while seeking support, and the paramount importance of support and connection.

The research was based on a total sample of 126 participants, with diverse socio-demographic characteristics. Notably, the majority of the participants belonged to lower socioeconomic status or faced poverty. However, it's worth mentioning that there were two outliers within the sample—one being a mother working as an accounting professional and the other being a father successful in the business realm (Dumbrill, 2006).

In terms of age, the participants ranged from 19 to 60 years. The gender distribution was skewed, with 111 female participants and 15 male participants. The ethnic diversity of the sample was notable, with 36 participants identifying as White, 9 as Latinx, 1 as Filipina, 1 as Aboriginal, and 12 as Black. It's important to note that two of the articles did not provide information on the ethnicity of their participants (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019; Palmer et al., 2006). The data was taken from the following countries, the United States, British Columbia, Canada, and Norway (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019; Merritt, 2020; Campbell et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2006; Dumbrill, 2006). These socio-demographic details provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants in the study.

### **Theme 1: Authority and Systemic Injustice**

Participants were dissatisfied with the lack of transparency, biased opinions of workers, and feelings of marginalization within the system. One participant expressed skepticism, stating, "There is no point in trying to do something against this system" (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019).

Another participant shared similar thoughts, remarking, “You’re not allowed to see your file—you don’t know what other people have said about you or what’s written down about you” (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019). These quotes demonstrate the impact of systemic issues on parents’ perceptions and experiences when dealing with child protection services.

### **Theme 2: Betrayal and Guilt**

The experiences of parents involved with child protection services are complex and multifaceted. While some expressed feelings of betrayal and regret, others demonstrated resilience and a commitment to growth despite their circumstances. Many parents spoke of the emotional struggles and reflective thoughts they had regarding their situation, expressing a deep desire to better themselves and redeem their past mistakes. For instance, one participant remarked, “I have betrayed my children” (Syrstad & Slettebø, 2019), reflecting on the weight that their decisions had on the lives of their children. This statement highlights the guilt and remorse that some parents may feel as a result of their actions.

In addition, parents also shared their frustrations with the legal system, particularly with having to go to court. Many felt that their choices were constantly scrutinized and turned into something negative, adding to the stress of their already difficult situation. Despite these challenges, some parents demonstrated resilience and a commitment to growth by seeking out therapy as a way to work on themselves. One parent shared, “I used the therapist to work on myself” (Dumbrill, 2006), which highlights the importance of self-reflection and personal growth in difficult circumstances. Again, while many struggle with feelings of guilt and betrayal, others demonstrate resilience and a strong desire for personal growth and redemption.

### **Theme 3: Abuse and Domestic Violence**

During discussions with parents involved in child protection cases, another recurring theme that emerged was the prevalence of domestic violence and the profound impact it has on families. Participants shared their experiences of living with fear, trauma, and the devastating cycle of abuse within their homes. One parent expressed their urgent need to protect their children by saying, “I’ve got to get these kids out of this situation” (Campbell et al., 2017). Amidst the pervasive sense of fear, parents also shared their insights into the patterns of abuse that they observed in their families. One participant noted, “His dad was abusive... it’s trickling down the line” (Campbell et al., 2017). These observations indicate that parents not only experience the immediate effects of abuse but also recognize how it can have a long-lasting impact on their families.

### **Theme 4: Navigating Parenting while Seeking Support**

The experiences that parents had with child protection services had a profound impact on their children and the overall family dynamics. Parents shared how the emotional turmoil that their children faced as a result of CPS intervention was not limited to the immediate aftermath but had long-lasting effects. Some parents mentioned how the interview process and investigations caused significant distress to their children, with one participant sharing, “My oldest

daughter just broke down into tears when she told me the CPS had come to the school and interviewed her and her younger sister” (Merritt, 2020). The strained relationships that resulted from the interactions with child protection services, were also highlighted by parents. They described how the entire experience, put a significant strain on the relationship between family members, including the spouses.

Despite the hardships, some parents showed resilience and grit. They were determined to learn from their experiences and move on from the traumatic events. They acknowledged that the experience had been tough, but they also recognized the need to heal and support each other as a family, saying, “We are taking the approach of, we need to learn from it and move forward” (Campbell et al., 2017). They were willing to work hard to rebuild their relationships and make sure that their children felt safe and secure.

#### **Theme 5: Support and Connection**

The theme that emerged was the need for parents to seek support and connection when dealing with various challenges. Many parents spoke about the importance of having access to compassionate social workers, supportive networks, and easily accessible resources. One participant even shared a personal experience, stating, “Knowing somebody, especially a professional, believed in me helped me believe in myself” (Dumbrill, 2006). This highlights the significance of seeking out support and connection, especially during difficult times. It can make a huge difference in one’s ability to cope with challenges and overcome them.

### **4. Discussion**

The primary objective of conducting the Quality Improvement Management System (QIMS) was to explore the experiences of parents who have had interactions with Child Protective Services (CPS) and to identify any gaps in the existing literature. Unfortunately, there was a lack of literature that specifically addressed the experiences of such parents. As a result, the researcher had to limit the study to only five relevant research studies that met the predetermined criteria.

The researcher examined studies that delved into the experiences of women from a range of suburban and urban settings with diverse backgrounds. Several studies focused on women from Ontario, Canada, while another delved into the experiences of mothers in Utah who were coping with the initial discovery of maltreatment of their children. Additionally, one study concentrated on the experiences of African American and LatinX women in New York, while the final study involved women residing in Norway. It’s important to note that the way CPS is implemented varies significantly across these countries. The practice of CPS being different across the United States and other countries, can lead to varied experiences for parents when interacting with CPS workers. In the United States, there are notable differences in CPS practices between states (Ahn et al., 2021).



Each state has its own unique investigation procedures, with some states employing a centralized intake system, while others grant more autonomy to local offices. Furthermore, the types of support services offered, such as counseling, in-home support, and parental education programs, also differ from state to state. Similarly, in Canada, the approach to CPS, especially concerning Indigenous children and families, varies across different regions (Filippelli et al., 2021).

In Europe, countries like the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic and Slovakia CPS have predominantly decentralized systems, giving substantial control to local authorities. This is in contrast to France, which has a more centralized approach. While some countries focus on providing comprehensive support for reuniting families, others prioritize alternative care placements. In Australia, there are similarities in protocols with Canada concerning services for Indigenous children, emphasizing cultural sensitivity and community involvement.

The research findings underscore the significance of considering the diverse experiences of parents based on their country, region, or state. The study revealed that parents who felt well-supported and prioritized keeping their children with their families reported more positive experiences. On the other hand, parents who lacked this support expressed more negative feelings. This suggests that the variation in child protective services (CPS) practices may contribute to these negative sentiments. Implementing a more support-centered approach across CPS practices could potentially lead to more positive interactions between parents and child protective services.

### **Theme Analysis**

The study conducted on the experiences of parents involved with the Child Protective Services (CPS) produced five overarching themes. These themes were derived from a total of 43 themes found in the collective data of five studies that were used in the Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis (QIMS). The first theme, struggles with authority and systemic injustice, emerged as a result of the negative experiences that some parents had with authority figures throughout their lives. These experiences left them with little patience for authority figures and a general mistrust of systems that claimed to have their best interests at heart. The second theme, parental betrayal and guilt, dealt with the complex emotions that parents felt when they found themselves in situations where they had made bad choices involving their children. These parents were often overwhelmed with guilt and felt that they were betraying their children by not being able to meet the requirements set by CPS to regain custody. The third theme, the impact of abuse and domestic violence, focused on the mothers' experiences of both experiencing domestic violence from abusive partners and trying to define what constituted child abuse. These mothers had to navigate through the complex emotions of trying to protect their children while dealing with their own trauma. The fourth theme, navigating parenting while seeking support, explored the challenges parents faced in fulfilling their parental duties while not having access to the necessary resources to support their children's needs. These parents



had to find creative ways to provide for their children while dealing with the demands of CPS. The final theme, the importance of support and connection, highlighted the critical role that social workers played in helping parents navigate the complex CPS system. Parents spoke about the immense gratitude they felt towards social workers who believed in them and provided them with words of encouragement. They also appreciated the social workers' ability to connect them to resources that could actually help them meet the requirements set by CPS.

## 5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study faced limitations due to the scarcity of qualitative data available for analysis. A reliable QIMS typically requires a minimum of 5 articles, and this research was only able to obtain that number. While the findings demonstrated validity, including more qualitative data could significantly enhance the robustness of the research, leading to more solid conclusions. Another limitation arose from the data being collected from different countries without any single country being adequately represented. As a result, it couldn't conclusively show that parents have consistent feelings about child protective services, regardless of where they live.

Despite the small sample size, one of the study's strengths lies in the presence of strong quotes within the qualitative data. These quotes offer insights into how parents perceive interactions with child protective service workers. This adds a valuable dimension to the research, providing a contrasting perspective to the quantitative data on children in the foster care system, children removed from their homes, and child welfare workers. Ultimately, this approach can help drive changes aimed at keeping families together and supporting parents in being better caregivers, thus benefiting both children and parents alike.

In future research, it is important to recognize the untapped potential of exploring the diverse perspectives of both mothers and fathers involved with child protective services. Currently, the majority of available data is based solely on the perspectives of mothers, which limits our understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by both parents. By incorporating qualitative data from fathers as well, researchers can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how both parents interact with child protective services. Additionally, conducting qualitative research in different countries and comparing the findings could help identify gaps in the existing knowledge. This approach has the potential to make a significant impact on the development of policies and procedures within child protective services. If the research reveals insufficient support for keeping families together, it could also pave the way for systemic changes to better support families in need.

## Implications

The research has revealed a significant gap in knowledge regarding the expe-

periences of parents dealing with CPS. Despite conducting a thorough search, I found limited research on this subject matter, which emphasizes the critical need for more investigation. To develop a better understanding of the needs and experiences of these parents, researchers and policymakers must work together to fill this gap.

The study has highlighted the importance of tailored support services for parents navigating the CPS system. It has shown that interventions must encompass a holistic approach that acknowledges the diverse needs and experiences of parents, addressing parental guilt, and providing resources for coping with domestic violence. Social workers play a crucial role in offering support and connection to parents, and our research has emphasized the need for adequate training and resources to facilitate positive interactions and outcomes.

The implications of the research extend to policy and practice within CPS. Our findings have shown the challenges faced by parents, highlighting the need for policy reforms that are both family-centered and trauma-informed. The study has also emphasized the importance of cultural competence and being sensitive to diverse populations, shedding light on the need for inclusive policies and practices that address the unique needs of minority and marginalized communities.

Lastly, the research has shown the need for continued interdisciplinary collaborations and sharing of best practices. This way, we can collectively work towards improving outcomes for families and promoting child welfare in a manner that is compassionate, equitable, and effective. Overall, the study calls for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to CPS that takes into account the needs and experiences of all parents and children, regardless of their background or circumstances.

## **6. Conclusion**

The process of dealing with child protective services can be an extremely challenging and stressful experience for parents. Despite the extensive literature on the relationship between parents and child protective services, this study offers a unique perspective by directly capturing the experiences and perspectives of parents themselves. The parents involved in this study expressed a strong need for support and understanding, highlighting their struggles in understanding how to navigate the system and seek help for themselves. The findings from this qualitative inquiry into the experiences of parents suggest a pressing need for a comprehensive overhaul in the way child protective services interact with parents in order to prioritize keeping families together and promoting their overall well-being.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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