THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE NEXUS OF POVERTY, PLACE, RACE, AND BUREAUCRACY: A MULTI-METHOD, MULTI-LEVEL EXAMINATION OF CHILD WELFARE INVESTIGATIONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE CROWN FAMILY SCHOOL
OF SOCIAL WORK, POLICY, AND PRACTICE
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2024

For Patrick Leonard Burke, an inspiration for the empathy, generosity, and attentiveness I hope will define my work and my life.

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Acknowledgements

Dissertations don't happen in a day, and they truly take a village, especially during the global pandemic and political climate that have overshadowed my time as a doctoral student. I have so very many people to thank!

First, I have one of the most unbelievably present dissertation committees ever. At every moment in which I needed rapid response to anything, someone was willing to pick up their personal phone and/or send near immediate email responses. I have at many times felt guilty, because compared to many of my colleagues, I think I won the committee lottery. I am immensely thankful for Aaron Gottlieb for his amazingly prompt feedback and his incredible generosity with his time and expertise. It seems impossible Aaron has only been on this journey with me for 10 months; he is so engaged, available, supportive, and thoughtful that I feel like he's simply always been on my team. The quantitative chapter of this study came together primarily because of Aaron, and I can't thank him enough! I am also so grateful to Gina Samuels for her thoughtful insights on positionality and the role of lived experience in research, her qualitative methods expertise, and for her persistent engagement with me (and so many of her students!) in the qualitative seminar. I wish every doctoral student everywhere had access to such a warm and thought-provoking space at the dissertation phase. I am further appreciative of Marci Ybarra. In addition to phenomenal mixed methods expertise and safety net policy knowledge, Marci has been vulnerable, honest, and kind in our exchanges. She has always felt safe for me to be real with, no matter what is going on in my life and the world – which has been *too much* for the entire time I have been in this program. I am confident that this is an exhausting role to play for as many mentees as she has, but Marci does it with apparent ease.

One particular committee member, Scott W. Allard, has been on this journey with me since 2015 now. Scott's presence as I have navigated academia has been a profound gift. Scott is the kind of mentor that students can only dare to hope for. Even when I was no longer formally institutionally connected to Scott, having graduated from UW, he invested in my success, allowing me to nervously follow him around at conferences, emailing to ask how my nonprofit job was going, and calling me after I did not-very-well on the math portion of the GRE and was convinced I'd never get into a PhD program... I knew no matter what direction my dissertation took, I needed him to remain on my team. Fortunately for me, my dissertation entered a realm adjacent to Scott's work, and having him as a committee member was the best idea ever. Scott has been committed, dependable, kind, earnest, and humble in all of his work with me for 9 years now. He offers warm and considerate advice, and he has always made me feel as if I belong in academia despite having a life that does not always fit neatly into this space. I have no idea how I would have ever even thought it was *possible* to pursue a PhD without him, never mind successfully navigated a PhD program. I am endlessly thankful for his care.

I am also infinitely grateful for my extraordinary chair, Jennifer E. Mosley. Jennifer has been the most responsive, available, and organized advisor any student could ask for. At every pivotal moment in this program, she has been transparent, informed, and clear about academic norms and the "hidden curriculum" and about her own expectations. She has never once missed an email from me – a real feat because I send a lot of them! – and she has responded with urgency and thoughtfulness during every apparent crisis I have had in this program. Moreover, she is the *very best* proposal, abstract, application, and paper editor around. Full stop. To the extent to which this dissertation is well-written, clear, and compelling, I have Jennifer to thank for that. Yet, more than her responsiveness, organization, and amazing editorial support, Jennifer

has been wholly human with me in moments when it was sorely needed. Throughout this program, I have experienced personal challenges and professional hurdles beyond that of many of my colleagues. Jennifer showed up with flowers after the qualifying exams that I thought might break me, with snacks and tea after devastating job rejections, and with her sweet dog for walking meetings when I just needed to get out of my house and out of my head. There are not enough ways to say thank you for her humanity, her thoroughness, and her presence, and there was no better chair for this dissertation committee.

Beyond my wonderful committee, there are so many other faculty mentors in the department, across this campus, and at other institutions to whom I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for their support and mentorship during many moments leading up to and during my time as a PhD student. To Susan Lambert, Heather D. Hill, Mark C. Courtney, Julia Henly, Linda Waite, Ethan Park, Nathanael Okpych, Justin Harty, Jenna Powers, Bridgette Davis, Judy Havlicek, Stefanie DeLuca, Dan Meyer, Anna Haley, Marieka Klawitter, and Robert Plotnick: thank you. Each of these individuals played some role in getting me into this program, through this program, and/or through this dissertation and I would not be at this finishing point without any of them. I also want to thank several of our PhD program leaders, administrators, and staff at the Crown School. Ashley Brown has been the very best advocate for students in this program, and I have been so grateful to work for her this year. Thank you also to Kristen Reid Salomon, Renee Sibley, Carrie Humphrey, Lara Poeppelmeier, and Kari Walsh, who have all made it possible for doctoral students to do the work they do here.

Outside of faculty and staff, this dissertation would not have been possible without the generous funding support of the Russell Sage Foundation, the Institute for Research on Poverty, and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture. Thank you very much to Rebecca

Schwei, Judith Siers-Poisson, Katherine Magnuson, Stephen Glauser, and Marilyn Willis for making the processing of these grants possible and smooth. Because of the generous funding I received, I was able to write this dissertation with the support of two great research assistants, Olivia Daprile and Chinasa Imo. Thank you to both of them for coding the majority of the qualitative data used in this study!!

In addition to support from faculty, administrators, and staff, dissertations also require friends if you want to get through them with your sanity intact. I have two amazing friends without whom I would never have made it through this program: Samantha Guz and Durrell Washington. Sam has showed up at every appropriate moment with flowers, ice cream, baked goods, a hug, and/or baby pics and snuggles. She has seen in me everything I needed to succeed and fueled those pieces of me for five years. Through a global pandemic, an insurrection, and unprecedented economic and political uncertainty, Sam has been there to banish fear and loneliness. We trudged through snow to our isolated little offices every single morning at 8am sharp when everything shut down during the pandemic, we wrote in each other's kitchens, we watched each other's cats and proofread each other's work, we shared book and music and ambient background recommendations, and we went for so, so many walks. I have never loved a friend the way I love Sam, and I am confident that I was supposed to be in this program at least in part because I was meant to meet her. It is a true honor and joy to graduate with her this year!

Durrell has been a wealth of knowledge and support during this PhD program; I honestly think every cohort needs a Durrell. But he is one of a kind and we are so lucky we got him in ours. Durrell has known the answer for every confusing rule, every weird interaction, and every uncertain norm in academia. He entered academia with lived experience that fuels him, and his presence in this program has always made me feel like I belong here too. I have loved our

brunches and Café 53 check ins so much, and he is the friend I know will answer his phone when I just need someone to listen to me about something outrageous that has happened. Durrell showed up steadfastly to every practice job talk for me, waiting patiently for every piece of job and grant news, and was always ready to rally for a win or a loss. He has been an invaluable friend and advocate, and I have loved getting to be auntie to his sweet son, DJ. I am so grateful that Durrell and I will get to stay in Chicago together next year!

There are so very many people who made this PhD journey possible in various ways and at various times. In no particular order, I want to thank and acknowledge a long list of additional treasured friends, mentors, and colleagues for their investment, support, and friendship: Christina Mason Potter, Anica Stieve, Natalie Holland, Johnathan & Samantha Heinicke, Stephan Mizeri, Phil Nimmo, Kimberly Ong, Juliette Dhennin, Melinda Cruz, Shelley Maddox, Sarah Foster, Rose Osborne, the Ruiz Family, Thomas & Brittany Allison, Reese Wold, Tiff Wilk, Jena Coppolo Kerr, Melissa Leffingwell, Hyojin Cho, Eunseok Jeong, Lauren Peterson, Jade Wong, Ariel Maschke, Bethany Elston, James Green, Andrew Frangos, Anne Ruelle, Emily Ellis, Carlos Angeles, Sarah Charnes, and my dear neighbors Farzana & Sana. I also want to specifically name and thank my debate community, which has carried me into and through higher education. Thank you especially to Erik Pielstick, Rob Ruiz, and Emily Ravenscroft Stuckenbruck for supporting me in honing my voice and molding me into this analytical policy person. I am grateful as well to the folks at Chicago Debates and to all of my debate colleagues and friends for grounding me throughout this PhD process.

I am also appreciative for my family, especially my aunt and uncle, Jennifer and Casey, for their constant affection, supply of hobby yarn and cat pictures, and consistent contact with me during this process. My aunt Jennifer has been a source of daily comfort and human

connection since I moved to Chicago, and I could not have gotten through this without her listening, even when I rambled about things which make zero sense to anyone outside of a PhD program. I also want to thank my grandparents, Cheryl and David, for their pride in all my academic endeavors.

Of all my family, I owe the biggest thanks to my Canadian Mom, Karen Mizeri. Somehow Karen saw in a 13-year-old version of me, a person who could grow into the kind of adult who is strong enough to want to change the world, to go to college, and to overcome a whole lot of interpersonal obstacles to get there. She supported this vision of me with a steady supply of books, blankets, tea, Canadian candy, comfy pajamas, memes, cat photos, tough love, and sensible advice. I am who I am because of her. Karen chose to love me without the obligation of blood, and it is one of the greatest gifts I could have been given in this life.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge Patrick Burke, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, and his wife and kids, YThanh Nguyen, Clarissa Burke, and Theo Burke. Patrick passed away in March of 2022. He was a relentless supporter of my education from the time I was 15 years old and began babysitting his kids. He watched my high school debate tournaments with a baby Clarissa, and him and YThanh brought hand-arranged flowers for my high school graduation. When I decided that it was imperative that I move out of the home I was raised in, Patrick asked no questions, but sat down with me to write a budget. When my stability was shaken by being suddenly laid off as an undergrad who was fully supporting herself, he secured a job for me working in YThanh's medical office. These are the kinds of moments in a precarious life which can force someone off the path to success and into failure. Patrick and his family served as a safety net for me to prevent that failure, and I would not have made it through higher education without them. He and YThanh attended my college graduation, visited me in Seattle with the

kids, and celebrated when I decided to pursue a PhD. Patrick was the most present person in my life, despite many miles between us in recent years. He texted me most weeks with updates about the kids, questions about what I was working on, and news stories which made him think of me. Being witness to the beautiful home life of Patrick, YThanh, Clarissa, and Theo was a privilege and an inspiration. Patrick was the kind of family member and community member I aspire to be every day. I wish he could have seen the end of this academic journey.

Abstract

The U.S. child welfare system investigates roughly 4 million families each year for alleged child maltreatment. Despite its expansive reach, this policy system has been the subject of widely publicized critiques, with charges of bureaucratic failures, inefficacy and mismanagement, and systemic biases overshadowing child welfare policy, practice, and research in recent years. In the face of such criticism, practical pathways to address concerns have been insufficient or ineffective. This mixed methods dissertation critically explores early stages of the child welfare system with the goal of identifying areas to intervene with policy or practice to improve system outcomes. The study comprises three papers which examine child welfare from diverse perspectives, focusing on varying and intersecting dimensions of four broad factors: poverty, place, race, and bureaucracy.

Paper 1 examines how county-level poverty rates, racial composition, urbanicity types, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions are associated with rates of child welfare investigations and substantiations, and how these associations vary by urbanicity. To explore these questions, I analyze 15 years of administrative child welfare data merged with American Community Survey data. Results indicate that place plays a significant moderating role in the influence of aggregate demographic and policy variables on investigation and substantiation rates, with significantly different effects of these predictors across urban, suburban, and rural counties. These contrasting findings across place illuminate regions where targeting specific reforms or practices may be useful in addressing child welfare disparities and insufficiencies.

Paper 2 explores how parents who are investigated for child maltreatment also experience financial hardships associated with poverty governance. I analyze qualitative data from 21 interviews with child welfare-impacted parents in a Midwestern state to describe how parents

experienced income loss tied to compliance with child welfare system requirements through three poverty governance-related mechanisms: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility. These mechanisms posed substantial barriers to family well-being and reunification, creating distinct harms for low-income families.

Paper 3 examines how place functions as a component of the human service organizational environment, and thus shapes street-level bureaucrat decision-making in the context of child welfare. I analyze qualitative interview data from child welfare investigators and supervisors (n=24) embedded in a comparative case study of four public child welfare offices in one Midwestern State. I find that place influences decision-making of street-level workers in child welfare through its effect on regional service arrays, geographic distance and time, and local politics. I conclude that street-level theory should further incorporate the notion of place, particularly given how it affects decision-making differentially in urban, suburban, and rural regions.

While much of the existing child welfare literature treats disparate outcomes and systemic challenges in child welfare as homogenous and universal, this study makes clear that the intersections of place, bureaucratic structures and policies, bureaucratic decision-making, income, and race create unique child welfare policy experiences and outcomes for families. Policy implications such as place-specific reforms and revisions of public benefit and child support regulations are discussed, along with implications for social work research and practice.

I. CHAPTER 1. Introduction

The American child welfare system is tasked with ensuring children are safe from abuse and neglect. While this objective is seemingly benevolent, the system is also infamous for being defective, mismanaged, and rife with inequities (e.g., Clifford & Silver-Greenberg, 2017; Joslin, 2023; Hixenbaugh, 2019; Winton & Knoll, 2018; Cover, 2023). In recent years, prominent criticisms have mounted against the child welfare system, with charges of systemic income, geographic, and racial biases, bureaucratic inefficacy and negligence, and paternalistic and punitive decision-making pervading policy, practice, and research focused on the child welfare system (e.g., Burton & Montauban, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Drake, 2019; Fong, 2019a; Pryce, 2024; Roberts, 2024 & 2008). In line with these prevalent criticisms, involvement with the child welfare system at any level, from an investigation to "aging out" of foster care, is known to be traumatic and associated with negative outcomes for families and individuals (Berkman et al., 2022; Leve et al., 2015; Roberts, 2002; Trivedi, 2019). Substantial evidence indicates that successfully navigating the child welfare system, for both parents and children, is known to be burdensome, complex, and extended, with bureaucratic barriers, systemic insufficiencies, and structural biases posing challenges for families who come into contact with the child welfare system (e.g., Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Lalayants & Merkel-Holguin, 2023; Merritt, 2021; Roberts, 2011; Roberts et al., 2014). Even families who are falsely accused or have unsubstantiated allegations made against them, about three-quarters of families who become system-involved, must contend with such systemic challenges (Joslin, 2023; Redleaf, 2019; U.S. DHHS, 2021).

This widely criticized arm of the government has a large reach in the United States, with approximately 3.5 million families being the subject of a maltreatment investigation annually

(U.S. DHHS, 2021). In light of such extensive system contact and censures of this policy system, some scholars have called for abolition of the child welfare system as a whole, while policymakers and advocates have worked towards laws and practices to prevent and reduce system contact, such as the major federal Family First Prevention and Services Act of 2018 (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Lindell et al., 2020; Roberts, 2024; U.S. Senate, 2018). Despite these movements, the needle has largely not moved in child welfare. Rates of child welfare system contact have been largely steady for the past 15 years, income and race inequities persist across the system, and families continue to endure structural challenges while attempting to navigate the system (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Landers et al., 2019; U.S. DHHS, 2016; U.S. DHHS, 2023). These outcomes are consistent and clear, but practical and effective pathways to improve family outcomes and reduce system contact have remained hazy and out of reach in spite of the efforts of scholars and advocates.

This mixed methods dissertation study aims to provide new information about why child welfare policy outcomes have remained stagnant, and what kinds of policy and practice interventions may be best suited to improve family outcomes more effectively and reduce system contact overall. I achieve this aim by using diverse data sources and methods to explore how four factors central to child welfare's controversies may work in concert with one another: poverty, place, race, and bureaucracy. Importantly, the focus of this study is mainly, though not solely, on the "front end" of the child welfare system – largely, investigations, substantiations, and child and family services. The child welfare system is cumulative; while there is vast, critical evidence on disparities in later stages of the child welfare system, like parental rights termination and outcomes of older youth in foster care, for example, we know that these kinds of challenges present later in the system can accumulate over the life of a case, starting with an investigation or

the services available to parents when their children first enter foster care (Wildeman et al., 2020; Watt & Kim, 2019). As such, this dissertation focuses on the earlier stages of child welfare policy and practice to provide explicit insights on where systemic barriers and disparities may begin in the system and where system contact could be prevented overall.

This study of front-end child welfare processes is broadly motivated by three bodies of existing research in or adjacent to child welfare: literatures on place, federalized and frontline policymaking, and poverty. Importantly, across these three bodies of literature and throughout this study, race is a recurring and prevalent theme. Though race is not the *explicit* focus of every chapter of this study, race is a central sociodemographic piece of how poverty, place, and bureaucracy function (e.g., Fording et al., 2008; Lacy, 2016; Roberts, 2008; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Moreover, the American child welfare system has a problematic, racialized history which cannot be omitted from the systemic processes which this study investigates (Dettlaff, 2024; Roberts, 2024; Roberts, 2002). As such, race is discussed throughout the descriptions of the contributions which this study makes to the literatures on place, federalized and frontline policymaking, and poverty.

First, this study provides novel evidence on the overarching role of place in child welfare. Countless studies assess the unequal impact of both race and income in child welfare (e.g., Hogan & Siu, 1988; Pelton, 1989; Pac et al, 2023; Dettlaff et al., 2023; Maguire-Jack et. al., 2016; Roberts, 2009; Fluke, 2003). Yet, these studies mask substantial regional variations in demographics which may matter in how race and income come into play in child welfare. As such, an emerging area of research has focused on how place – or the features of where a family lives – may also influence child welfare system involvement. Place is directly correlated with service access and proximity to systems adjacent to the child welfare system, such as the safety

net system and hospitals, which frequently make referrals (Allard, 2009; U.S. DHHS, 2021). Place can also be an indicator of need and risk in the context of regional poverty levels and service access, and we know that factors perceived to be relevant in child welfare, like poverty and race, are changing across geographic regions, especially in the American suburbs (Allard, 2017; Lacy, 2016; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Whitehead, 2000). Some research has responded to this growing evidence by explicitly studying the role of place in child welfare, finding significant disparities in substantiations and foster care placements by urbanicity (e.g., Wulczyn, 2021 & 2023). This study expands our knowledge of place to child welfare investigations and offers qualitative evidence about why place may matter. Across the study, I find place to be a prevailing element of child welfare policy processes and outcomes, illustrating areas where interventions may be most useful in addressing systemic concerns in child welfare.

Second, this study draws on extensive literature on the impact of federalized and frontline policymaking. Many studies in policy fields adjacent to child welfare, like the safety net and healthcare, have explored how regional variations in policymaking and individual worker decision-making shape policy processes and outcomes (e.g., Allard, 2008; Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Fording et al., 2008; Michener, 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Literature on state, local, and street-level policymaking has made clear that human services workers and agencies are responsible for impactful decisions about clients and policies, and these decisions have significant influence on the effectiveness, quality, and equity of human services received by constituents (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Michener, 2019; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). While child welfare is structured much the same as these other human service areas, with significant authority and discretion given to states and counties in child welfare policy implementation, less research has focused on what the structure of these policies means for children and parents who

are impacted by the child welfare system (e.g., Hagedorn, 1995; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Though the importance of frontline policy and worker decision-making has been implied in child welfare research which assesses worker biases about race and income (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008), the lack of emphasis in child welfare on federalized and frontline policymaking has left points for policy intervention in this field unclear. This study is in conversation with the existing literature on frontline policymaking; I explore how federalized and street-level policy structures may be present and operate in child welfare and how these structures impact families involved in the child welfare system. In studying regional and frontline child welfare policies, this dissertation provides new evidence on specific bureaucratic and policy processes where policy and practice reforms may be useful to address child welfare system critiques, like mismanagement and worker bias.

Third, this dissertation underscores the intersecting nature of child welfare and poverty, engaging with decades of literature on both the influence of poverty in child welfare (e.g., Kim et al., 2023; Landers et al., 2019; Martin, 1985; Pelton, 1989) and the insufficiencies and inequities of poverty policy provisions such as public benefits (e.g., Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Ojeda et al., 2019; Soss et al., 2008; Soss et al., 2011). We know that child welfare-impacted families are typically, though not always, impoverished (Hagedorn, 1995; Roberts, 2002) and many studies have explored how this reality creates disparities for low-income families as well as for families of color (e.g., Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Fong, 2019a; Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2024). I build on this extensive existing literature in the present study by exploring poverty in child welfare from multiple perspectives, including individual family poverty, aggregate regional poverty, and structural responses to poverty in the form of frontline worker interventions and regional policymaking. In doing so, this study yields new evidence on how and why poverty may matter

in child welfare, and what kinds of policy and practice actions – including those outside of child welfare – may be useful in addressing the diverse needs of low-income families in the child welfare system.

I contribute to these three broad bodies of research in this study across three empirical papers, which individually answer the following sets of questions:

1. How are county-level poverty rates, racial demographics, urbanicity types, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions associated with the rate of child welfare investigations and substantiations? How do the associations between poverty rates, racial composition, policy provisions, and investigation/substantiation rates vary by urbanicity?;
2. What are parents' lived experiences with income loss and financial sanctions in the child welfare system? How do parents understand the relationship between child welfare system involvement and financial well-being?; and
3. How does place influence the decisions that street-level child welfare investigators and supervisors make about families?

Conceptual Foundations

To answer the research questions above, this study is informed by two conceptual areas of research: poverty governance and street-level theory. Each of these concepts arises across the three papers in distinct ways, with these theoretical ideas also overlapping within some papers as well. Below, I overview each concept, how the papers in this study engage these concepts, and what theoretical contributions this study makes to these conceptual ideas.

Poverty Governance

This study is generally informed by existing conceptions of "poverty governance" in the U.S., and I explore these existing ideas in the context of the child welfare system's functioning.

The guiding ideology governing American poverty policy is motivated by what Soss and colleagues (2011) refer to as "New Paternalism", driven by racist and classist rhetoric which describes a lack of "competence" and "discipline" of the poor (Mead, 1997). Embedded in the governance that emerges from this rhetoric is paternalism – the idea that the poor do not know how to care for themselves and must be guided into making "good decisions" (Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). In practice, we see paternalism carried out through control and regulations of social services and public benefits, such as work requirements embedded in welfare receipt (Freeman, 2019; Page & Soss, 2017; Soss et al., 2011; de Souza, 2021). Also inherent in poverty governance is neoliberalism. Poverty governance reforms associated with New Paternalism were designed to support private capital markets through reduced spending on social benefits and encouragement of the private, unregulated labor market (Page & Soss, 2017; Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). Taken together, neoliberalism and paternalism jointly operate to reduce public benefits usage, reliance, and spending (Soss et al., 2011). Notably, minoritized families are impacted by the New Paternalism embedded within poverty governance most severely; states with more Black and Hispanic individuals have the lowest benefit rates, the least regulated labor markets, the strictest rules and sanctions, and the lowest rates of benefit use (e.g., Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Ojeda et al., 2019; Soss et al., 2008).

I employ the concept of poverty governance in the present study as a theoretical lens through which to empirically assess the ways that the American child welfare system functions. The majority of families impacted by the child welfare system are impoverished and governed by both poverty policy and child welfare policy, and scholars have made the theoretical case that these two systems operate in ideologically adjacent lanes (e.g., Hagedorn, 1995; Woodward, 2021). Across this dissertation, I make the empirical case that poverty governance plays a central

role in how families encounter the child welfare system, and how they are able to navigate this system. In paper 1, I explore these governing intersections through analyzing the effect of regional variations in poverty governing institutions' benefits, such as Medicaid expansion and TANF benefit amounts, on child welfare investigation and substantiation rates. In paper 2, I qualitatively analyze parents' experiences with the co-occurrence of poverty governance and child welfare governance, describing the economic hardships this joint operation of child welfare and poverty policy has for lower income families. In paper 3, though not explicitly a paper about poverty, the impact of poverty governance is also apparent throughout the analysis, such as through the impact of social service eligibility and availability on caseworker decision-making. In assessing the impact of poverty governance in child welfare, I offer key conceptual insights on the child welfare system's functioning and illustrate that child welfare policy does not operate in a silo, even when it is treated as if it does.

Street-Level Theory

The second conceptual lens utilized in this study is Street-Level Bureaucracy, a phrase coined by Lipsky (1969) to describe the circumstances faced by individual frontline workers like police officers, teachers, and social workers. These frontline workers directly provide public services, benefits, and penalties to constituents, and in these exchanges, street-level bureaucrats are the primary point of government interaction for most people (Lipsky, 1969; Lipsky, 2010). Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) have substantial autonomy and discretion in how they conduct their work, which allows them to shape what policies look like and ultimately how policies reach constituents and clients (Lipsky, 2010). Brodkin (1990) builds on Lipsky's earlier work, making the case that SLBs are a product of the organizations in which they work, a reality that has become increasingly essential as authority in social policies and services is passed more

commonly and significantly to state and local agencies. This shift is plainly seen in child welfare as well as other social policy areas like education and criminal justice (e.g., Brodkin, 1990; Hagedorn, 1995). Consequently, state and local agencies and organizations are responsible for significant policy choices, like defining and imposing eligibility and renewal requirements for public benefits (Brodkin & Marston, 2013, p. 146). The decision-making of SLBs has been identified as a key explanatory factor in policy implementation and policy outcomes because of SLBs' individual authority to define human service distribution and quality (e.g., Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009).

This dissertation study applies street-level theory broadly to the child welfare system – a system structured similarly to other social policy and human service areas, but one largely undertheorized with a street-level lens. In exploring the operation of street-level theory in child welfare, this study offers new insights on how policy outcomes in child welfare come to be and are perpetuated. Paper 1 is informed by a street-level perspective and explores regional variations in policy environments, such as state-level differences in child welfare and safety net policy provisions, and how these environments influence child welfare system contact in the aggregate. Paper 2, though not explicitly a street-level study, offers compelling street-level insights through individual parent perceptions of interactions with workers and frontline policies. Paper 3, on the other hand, explicitly employs street-level theory to study how place intersects with the operation of street-level theory in child welfare investigations. Across all three papers, street-level theory emerges as a valuable lens with which to examine child welfare system processes.

Methods Overview

To answer the research questions I pose here, and to engage the conceptual foundations of interest most meaningfully in this study, I employ an explanatory sequential design in this

mixed methods dissertation. First, I began by analyzing quantitative administrative child welfare investigations data, using this data to inform the qualitative sampling and interview questions. Then, I proceeded to collect and analyze qualitative data from investigation supervisors and investigators, and system-impacted parents, to support explanations of the quantitative findings in addition to providing their own novel qualitative insights (Cresswell & Clark, 2017). To illustrate, with the quantitative analysis completed, I was able to probe and ask both workers and parents questions about some of the quantitative results. For example, in my quantitative results, I found that across the board, Hispanic families experience significantly lower rates of investigations and substantiations. In my qualitative data collection, I was able to ask parents and workers about their perspectives on this result which informed the discussion of the quantitative conclusions.

Moreover, the data collection for the study as a whole engaged a multi-level strategy. I collected and analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data at three levels of the hierarchy of child welfare investigative casework; examining qualitative data from child welfare supervisors and frontline investigators, quantitative data on county-level policy and demographic factors and aggregate child welfare involvement rates, and qualitative data from individual parents who experienced a child welfare investigation (Fetters, 2019). This multi-level, mixed methods design allowed for both a broad and deep examination into the child welfare investigation process, which provided novel, nuanced insights into the process of child welfare investigations, and how poverty, place, and race may shape this process (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019).

In addition to this study's mixed methods design, the study was also designed to be deliberately community-engaged and publicly engaged. This community and public engagement occurred in two ways. First, the study was advised on and reviewed by a group of eight parents

whose children had been the subjects of a maltreatment investigation in a Midwestern State. These parents were paid as consultants on the study, and they provided advice and feedback on all three empirical chapters of the study. Parents who participated as consultants were recruited from a local parent support group, "Parents Helping Parents (PHP)"[1]. I contacted a public child welfare caseworker who was engaged in the PHP program and requested this individual's support in recruiting parents to consult on the study. The worker emailed a recruitment flyer to parents on their caseload and invited me to attend a monthly parent meeting to speak about the study. I attended a meeting via Zoom on February 9, 2023, to share information about the study. Parents who responded to the recruitment from these efforts participated in six paid group consulting sessions on Zoom where we discussed their experiences with the state child welfare agency, the research project goals and questions, and issues parents wanted to see addressed in the research. Each of the six sessions included two to four parent consultants – with a total of eight parents consulting on the project during this time. Parents were paid $25 for each session they attended. Overall, the parent consultants represented diverse communities and experiences, and their insights allowed me to include voices that are often excluded from academia in this project. Their experiences and advice grounded this policy-oriented study in the realities of families who were living through the system which I was researching as an external observer.

Secondly, paper 3 was conducted in partnership with the public child welfare agency in this same Midwestern State. This partnership was necessary for the kind of access needed to ensure the success and strength of the qualitative data collection and analysis in this study. However, negotiating access with this state child welfare agency was a lengthy and fraught process which took approximately 18 months to finalize. But, this process and the partnership

[1] The name of the organization is masked to preserve confidentiality of the parents.

with this agency offered unique insights on this public system by providing macro-level information on the state policy environment and challenges that were being passed on to frontline workers from this level. Moreover, this partnership allowed this dissertation study to be especially policy-relevant and publicly engaged because I was given the opportunity to present a final public-facing report to the directors of this state agency. This report included broad results from participating offices, and specific practice and policy recommendations that were provided explicitly by parents and workers who participated in the study.

As a whole, this project engages assorted methods, data sources, and perspectives to provide an applied, nuanced, and comprehensive look at the process of child welfare investigations in the U.S. This multifaceted array of data and methods offers both depth and breadth to answer practical questions about how the child welfare system operates and what this means for families, while also addressing various shortcomings and limitations of different existing data sources and methodological approaches in both child welfare and social policy research.

Positionality

I was raised in a multiethnic home by a white mother and Latine stepfather. We struggled with poverty and many of its contributing and resulting factors, including underemployment, limited access to healthcare and education, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, and child maltreatment. In our experience with these adversities, we engaged with numerous social service systems, including SNAP, WIC, TANF, Medicaid, and Child Protective Services. My family spent the first half of my childhood in a low-income neighborhood with underfunded schools and constrained opportunities. During this time, my education suffered because of trauma and poor schooling. At 8 years old, I could barely read, and my math skills

lagged even further behind. However, the summer before I began second grade, my family moved to a mobile home park in a primarily middle-class suburban area.

The social and economic challenges my family faced were not unique, even in our new locale. But it was apparent early in my life that my immediate family also carried immense privilege in how we navigated the various systems we were entangled within. My mother was investigated for child maltreatment numerous times during my childhood, and at every turn she was given the benefit of the doubt by the child welfare agency. My sibling and I, though decidedly unsafe at various moments in our lives, never formally entered foster care. Caseworkers gave my white mother chance after chance to keep her children in a home built on a foundation of eggshells. Even in moments of evident physical danger, social workers quietly shuffled my brother and I towards informal "shadow foster" with grandparents and our estranged biological father to avoid further system contact. While my white family was given the benefit to sidestep the formal foster care system, my Latine cousins – experiencing strikingly similar household challenges – were taken into a failing foster care system at the first word of concern, and they lingered in this system for years. The differences in our situations were, of course, primarily demographic – my mother and her children were white, her husband was white-passing, and we didn't speak Spanish at home. We also lived on the San Bernardino side of the border between Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties. My cousins did speak Spanish at home, their parents were more readily identified as Latine, and they lived on the Los Angeles side of the county line, meaning their cases were covered by a different child welfare agency than my household.

Prior to deciding to pursue research, all of these experiences pushed me towards an advocacy and public service occupation. Access to the premier public education available in my

privileged suburban community drove me to college and graduate school, and I initially worked towards a career in nonprofit child welfare advocacy and services. I engaged in three years of policy practice in the nonprofit sector in Washington State. This practice experience focused on reforming the deeply racialized child welfare and juvenile legal systems across the State. In this role, I conducted program design and evaluation of services aimed at improving disparate outcomes of youth and families involved in these two systems. While this work was profound, I met major bureaucratic barriers to our reform efforts. As a result, I became interested in a research career which would allow me to understand more completely, and thereby address, my personal and my professional experiences.

I undertook the present study with all of these perspectives and experiences shaping my orientation to research. My family's experiences with child welfare and its adjacent systems provide me with both exceptional insight and motivation for this study, and my professional experience has offered unique insights on the child welfare system's bureaucratic functions. It is my belief that these personal connections are by and large a benefit – I would not ask the research questions that I do if not for my lived experiences. Moreover, these experiences also lead me to be deeply invested in conducting principled and applied work in this space. My immediate and extended family are represented by several de-identified data points in the NCANDS dataset used in this study at various moments and in multiple states and counties. That reality drives me to be an ethical and passionate steward of both this data and my research work in these communities more broadly.

Nevertheless, at this point in my life, I am several layers removed from these experiences, though many of my extended family members are still in the thick of it. A leader in the child welfare field in Washington State once told me, "Experience expires,". I do not

necessarily believe that this is wholly true, and I reacted defensively when I first heard this statement. But compared to the poverty and adversity I faced as a child, I am currently in an incredibly privileged and well-off position as a fully-funded student at a prestigious research university. In many ways, my current position is just as influential if not more so than the experiences of my family as a child, at least in the eyes of community members outside of the University of Chicago who have been, at best, ignored by this University, and at worst exploited and harmed by the University's research and geographic expansion.

Of course, despite my perhaps "expiring" experience and growing privilege, my personal connection to my work has still unquestionably impacted the ways I think about and engage in my research. I understand that the influence of my experiences has implications for how I perceived respondents, interpreted data, and carried myself as a researcher. In addition to awareness of my personal ties to this work, throughout the process of this study, I aimed to remain aware of how I was perceived in connection to the institutions of higher education, research, and the University of Chicago quite specifically. I have a committee of trusted mentors who have supported me in maintaining awareness of the ways that both the privilege and adversity I am positioned between impact my research. Their support, in addition to my own cognizance, allowed me to hold the boundaries necessary to carry out this study effectively, ethically, and rigorously.

II. CHAPTER 2. Aggregating Inequalities: Analyzing the Regional Predictors of Child Maltreatment Investigation and Substantiation Density

Abstract

Decades of scholarship document individual-level disparities by race and income throughout the child welfare system, and a growing body of research has examined disparities by location, or place, too. However, few studies have examined how place may intersect with race, poverty, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions to influence aggregate child welfare outcomes, and in particular frontend child welfare outcomes like investigations. These oversights have left points of early, systemic intervention to reduce child welfare disparities unclear. To explore these dynamics, I draw on data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, merged with American Community Survey Data, to examine: (1) how county-level poverty rates, racial demographics, urbanicity types, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions are associated with the density of child welfare investigations and substantiations, and (2) how the associations between poverty rates, racial composition, policy provisions, and investigation/ substantiation rates vary by urbanicity. I find that the influence of poverty rates, racial composition, and related policy provisions is distinct across rural, suburban, and urban counties. The results contribute to our knowledge of when and where income and race disparities begin in child welfare and offer implications for how to address this policy problem.

Acknowledgement: The data used in this article were made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

The child welfare system is a massive, multi-stage policy institution that includes investigations, in-home services, out-of-home placements, adoptions, and extended foster care (CWIG, 2020). About 3.5 million children are the subject of an investigation for alleged child maltreatment in the U.S. yearly. These investigations are triggered by a referral, most often submitted by third-party professionals from the education, legal, medical, or social service systems (U.S. DHHS, 2021; CWIG, 2018). A labor force of over 20,000 workers manages these cases in hundreds of offices, which are housed in a complex web of state, county, and hybrid run child welfare systems across the U.S. (U.S. DHHS, 2021; CWIG, 2018, 2020). The reach of this system is vast, yet it is also a system with an infamous history of race and income disparities.

Child welfare has always been influenced by income, with the initial conceptions of child welfare being "benevolent" and focused on supporting struggling, impoverished white mothers, in particular (Roberts, 2009; Costin et. al., 1997). As the child welfare system expanded to "serve" Native American and Black families, the system's structure and philosophy became substantially more punitive – focusing less on providing tangible supports to families and more on punishing families by removing children or imposing other sanctions, like mandatory classes or services (Roberts, 2009; Costin et. al., 1997). Today, a disproportionate share of those 3.5 million investigations in the U.S. each year are conducted on families of color. Black, Hispanic[2], and Native American families endure significantly higher rates of system contact in every level of the child welfare system – from investigations to adverse outcomes of older youth exiting foster care (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Dettlaff, 2021; Roberts, 2009; Watt & Kim, 2019). Impoverished families and families in low-income communities also remain significantly

[2] Literature and discourse are moving away from using the term Hispanic, towards use of terms such as Latinx or Latine. The data used in this study uses the term Hispanic to define individuals and families of Latin origin and Spanish speaking families, and for the sake of consistency with this data, I use the term Hispanic in this manuscript.

overrepresented in the child welfare system (Fong, 2019a; Landers et al., 2019). Decades of research document these persistent, significant disparities by race and income (e.g., Hogan & Siu, 1988; Pelton, 1989; Pac et al, 2023; Dettlaff et al., 2023). Despite extensive research and resources put into this policy problem, little progress has been made. Families of color and poor families continue to contend with this arm of the government at much higher rates.

Of course, both child welfare policies and safety net policies that often support poor families who are most likely to become entangled in the system – like TANF and Medicaid, are highly delegated to and defined by states and counties. The federalized structure of child welfare and related policies has considerable consequences for implementation, and for the nature of the factors that shape policy outcomes. So, while countless studies assess the disparate impact of individual-level poverty and race in child welfare involvement, this literature masks substantial regional variations in both demographic factors like poverty and race, and in administrative factors like safety net and child welfare policy provisions. Moreover, while most U.S. policies governing families vary by place, many of the policies that operate adjacent to child welfare also relate to and define experiences of poverty and race. To illustrate, policy systems like the criminal legal system are more punitive, while systems like the public benefits system are less generous, in regions with greater concentrations of minoritized communities (e.g., Fong, 2019b; Soss et al., 2008; Schram et al., 2009).

These racialized policy structures have been theorized as responses to perceived racial and economic threat; administrators and frontline workers respond to communities of color and poor communities with harsher regulations and less supportive benefits, and these regional responses spill out onto other individuals who live in these regions, including those who are white and not poor (e.g., Dollar, 2014; Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Liska, 1992). We might

expect to see a similar operation of racial or economic threat in the case of child welfare policy, which operates adjacent to both the criminal legal and safety net systems. Thus, while poverty and race clearly matter at a family and individual level in child welfare, there is also emerging thought that place – or the characteristics of where a family lives, including regional demographics, structures, and politics – may influence child welfare policies and outcomes.

There has been growing evidence on the role of place in child welfare. For example, Fong (2019a) finds that CPS investigations and substantiations are highest in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates, while Wulczyn (2023) finds that disparities in foster care placements for Black children are larger in urban areas. The findings of these studies are intuitive given that place is directly correlated with service access and availability as well as proximity to systems adjacent to the child welfare system, such as the safety net system and hospitals (Allard, 2009; U.S. DHHS, 2021). Place appears to play an important role in child welfare, including the extent to which aggregate poverty and racial composition may matter in child welfare policy implementation and outcomes. Still, what we presently know about poverty, place, and race has not been enough to reduce the inequities present in child welfare. Limited research has assessed how the demographics and policies of place may overlap and intersect to influence child welfare system contact in different geographic contexts. Thus, systemic points of intervention in child welfare policy remain unclear because needs, risks, and policy solutions may depend on localized or interactive factors that we have yet to investigate.

This study seeks to further explore the regional roles of racial composition, poverty rates, and related child welfare and safety net policies at an aggregate level, and to examine how these factors *intersect* with place to produce regional child welfare outcomes. In assessing these roles, I focus on two key "first steps" in the vast, unequal child welfare system: investigations and

substantiations. By investigation, I mean the casework that is conducted to decide if a report is a legitimate concern, and by substantiations, I mean the determination from an investigation that an allegation of maltreatment posed considerable risk to a child. Investigations are a necessary first step in the child welfare system's surveillance of families (Fong, 2020; Merritt, 2020). Disparate outcomes in other parts of the system, like foster care, build on earlier steps in this large bureaucracy, like investigations. Investigations, therefore, offer information on underlying disparities that may amass over the life of a case, and substantiations highlight a discrete point of decision-making early in the system which can provide evidence on how disparities unfold.

Given the cumulative nature of initial steps in the child welfare system, in this study I aim to provide evidence about the role of regional poverty rates, racial composition, urbanicity, and policy provisions at the front end of the system. I answer two research questions: (1) To what extent are regional urbanicity, poverty rates, racial composition, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions associated with rates of child welfare investigations and substantiations? and, (2) Do the associations between poverty rates, racial composition, policy provisions, and child welfare investigations/substantiations vary by urbanicity? In answering these questions, I aim to provide evidence on points of intervention to reduce child welfare system contact, as well as the persistent race and income disparities throughout this vast system.

The Relationship between Poverty and Child Welfare Involvement

There is a massive literature on the relationship between child welfare and poverty, so much so that entire papers and reviews are written solely on the topic (e.g., Landers, Carrese, & Spath, 2019). Many authors have linked child welfare investigations, substantiated child welfare reports, and foster care placement with poverty and evidence indicates that poverty is the largest predictor of a child welfare investigation (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014; Eckenrode et al., 2014;

Slack et al., 2004; Kim & Drake, 2018). Some scholars have suggested that *definitions* of maltreatment are linked to poverty (Roberts, 2009; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). For example, "insufficient housing" and "medical neglect" are two allegations that child welfare workers can cite to justify a protective custody case (CWIG, 2019). These two reasons for child removal relate to economic hardships in many cases. It is uncommon for a child to be living in insufficient housing (e.g., the family is homeless, living in unsafe housing) because of a deliberate choice of a parent. The same is true of medical neglect; most parents are not simply choosing to not provide appropriate medical care to their child. Instead, medical neglect often occurs due to inaccessible healthcare services (e.g., Jenny & Metz, 2020).

Individual experiences of poverty are clearly connected to experiences perceived to be risky for children, and income clearly matters in how families then experience the child welfare system. On a more macro level, there is growing evidence that poverty may also matter in the aggregate, with investigations being more likely to occur in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates (e.g., Fong, 2019a), a reality which impacts every family in those lower income communities. This evidence on neighborhood-level poverty is indicative of the idea that poorer regions may face more, and harsher, child welfare system contact by virtue of the presence of poverty (e.g., Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Liska, 1992). As such, geographic contexts of poverty may matter in child welfare in addition to individual poverty. The present study examines the role of regional poverty rates and poverty-related policies across urbanicity types to further explore when and why poverty matters in investigations and substantiations.

The Impact of Race on Child Welfare Involvement

An extensive body of literature on the relationship between race and child welfare system involvement also exists, and again entire volumes have been written on the topic (e.g., Dettlaff,

2023; Roberts, 2022; Roberts, 2009). These studies' findings vary somewhat in effects and significance, but they consistently find that Black, Hispanic, and Native American families are more likely to be involved in the system at every stage of intervention, from investigations to length of time spent in foster care (Dettlaff, 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Maguire-Jack et. al., 2016; Putnam-Hornstein at. al., 2013; Roberts, 2009; Fluke, 2003; Watt & Kim, 2019). Some research has investigated the underlying mechanisms that may drive this disproportionality, such as racism and discrimination or poverty and service inaccessibility, but findings have been mixed, with some authors finding race as a primary explanatory factor and others arguing that place and/or income may moderate the role of race in child welfare (e.g., Rivaux et. al., 2008; Putnam-Hornstein et. al., 2013; Maguire-Jack et. al., 2021).

Moreover, qualitative research has revealed substantial racism and discrimination faced by families of color involved in the child welfare system. Roberts (2008) found that at a neighborhood level, families are acutely aware of the intense child welfare agency involvement in their communities and while this involvement has substantial social impacts, fear of the agencies is at odds with needed social service support. Merritt (2021) documented the experiences of racism for child welfare-involved families and finds that there is inherent racism in the surveillance, reporting and assessment, and the resulting determinations of investigations of Black and Hispanic parents in the child welfare system.

While results vary somewhat, current evidence tells us that race and ethnicity play a disparate and significant role in individual and family experiences in the child welfare system, and these disparities have high stakes for families of color across the country who are at greater risk of losing their children. Moreover, research has indicated that, like poverty, race may matter in the aggregate, with neighborhoods with more Black individuals seeing higher rates of system

contact and more punitive enforcement, a reality which impacts all families in those neighborhoods, including those who are not Black (e.g., Roberts, 2008 & 2014). These neighborhood-level racial disparities illustrate the possibility that race may play an aggregate role in shaping systemic responses in the child welfare system, as has been seen in the criminal legal system (e.g., Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Liska, 1992). The present study explores the aggregate, systemic role of race in child welfare on a national scale. I focus on the interactive role place and place-based factors may play in racialized child welfare investigation and substantiation outcomes, offering insights on systemic areas of intervention to reduce disparities.

The Influence of Place on the Child Welfare System

A smaller but growing body of literature investigates the role of place, or where a family lives, in child welfare. This is important, because recent research indicates that poverty - a major predictor of child welfare system involvement - has been growing in American suburbs for the past 10-20 years (Allard, 2017; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Whitehead, 2000). Given the extensive literature on child welfare and poverty, this shift in poverty in the suburbs is indicative of potentially increased suburban child welfare needs. This development provides motivation for new research on the role of place in child welfare investigations, especially because as poverty has moved to regions previously thought to be solidly middle income, the social service systems in suburbs have not kept up with increased need (Allard, 2017; Butz, 2016).

Recent studies have responded to this new literature, investigating the role of urbanicity types and features of urbanicity in child welfare. For example, Wulczyn (2021) finds that substantiation rates are higher in urban regions. In a later study examining foster care placement rates by race, poverty, and urbanicity, Wulczyn also finds that while placement rates are persistently higher among Black children, those disparities vary significantly across urban and

rural areas (2023). Wulczyn's recent work provides important insights on the distinct role of place in shaping the influence of race on foster care placement rates specifically. However, this study does not provide fully specified models and only focuses on the proportions of Black and white residents and urban and non-urban environments. The present study expands this examination to the first stages of the expansive child welfare system, investigations and substantiations, and offers fully specified models which examine multiple racial and ethnic composition variables across more distinct urbanicity types, including the suburbs.

Taken together, the recent literature on place and disparities in child welfare indicates that place may play a central moderating role in defining how and when poverty and race matter in child welfare cases. However, this literature in child welfare has largely focused on urban and rural locales, and less on suburban locales – leaving out a large swath of the U.S. population and limiting our understanding of how changes in suburban demographics may influence child welfare disparities. The present study longitudinally examines the factors that influence child welfare investigations and substantiations in urban, suburban, and rural counties, providing important comparative insights across distinct regions and offering evidence on the early development of disparities in the child welfare system.

The Role of Regional Policymaking in Defining Child Welfare Outcomes

Related to place and to poverty, a long line of scholarship demonstrates regional variations in many policy areas, such as safety net and healthcare policies. Many of these federalized policies, like TANF and the EITC, have documented associations with child welfare outcomes (e.g., Kang et al., 2018; Kovski et al., 2022; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022). The aggregate impact of regional variations in these social policy provisions are less understood in child welfare, though regional variations are known to produce disparate outcomes in other policy

fields (e.g., Allard, 2008; Michener, 2018; Phelps & Pager, 2016; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2008). The child welfare literature has historically focused less on regional variations other than the localized impacts of state-specific policies, like Extended Foster Care (e.g., Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Okpych & Courtney, 2019). However, a growing line of recent scholarship assesses the influence of regional child welfare policies, like the impact of child welfare administration structure, and regional safety net variables, like TANF benefit amounts, providing key insights on policies that may help explain disparate child welfare outcomes.

To illustrate, Elgin and Carter (2019) conducted a study of child welfare administrative structures using administrative data on the foster care system, finding that state-administered (or centralized) child welfare systems have significantly better permanency and placement outcomes for children in foster care than county-administered systems. Another study on the role of referral sources in predicting substantiated maltreatment reports and foster care placements finds that, holding other factors like referrals constant, state-administered systems place significantly more children into foster care compared to county-run systems (Nadon et al., 2023). Nadon and Ybarra (forthcoming) find that youth living in state-run systems, and in states where the minimum wage rate and the TANF benefit amount are higher, are significantly more likely to utilize multiple types of economic support services when exiting the foster care system.

This existing research highlights the role of state and local safety net and child welfare policies in understanding the outcomes of various pieces of the fragmented child welfare system. And, notably, most of these policies in the U.S. are also strongly related to poverty and vary by location (i.e., they are differentially implemented across regions). Investigating the role of such policies, therefore, may yield insights on poverty and geography in addition to the influence of the actual policies. To date, this literature has focused mostly on later stages in child welfare, like

foster care placement and transition-age foster youth. The present study explores these policy complexities by assessing how child welfare and safety net policy provisions and structures may relate to incidences of investigations and substantiations across different geographic regions, providing evidence on how such policies may drive initial system involvement.

The Present Study

Poverty, place, race, and related federalized policymaking offer some explanations for child welfare system involvement and outcomes. But it is unclear to what extent aggregate racial composition, poverty rates, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions matter across geographic contexts. Moreover, we presently know the least about how these factors matter at the *earliest stages* of the child welfare system, and in suburban areas, leaving out a large portion of the geographic population and overlooking the most obvious piece of the system to invest in prevention. In this study, I contribute to our current knowledge by providing evidence about aggregate disparities in the frontend of the system, and in suburban regions, offering comparative insights on the effects of regional race, ethnicity, and urbanicity variables and assessing the influence of key measures of geographic child welfare and safety policy net provisions. In doing so, I aim to illuminate regional concentrations of disparities at the early stages of the child welfare system and to explore systemic interventions which may improve equity in child welfare.

Methods

Data

This study draws on several sources of data. The two primary data sources are the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child Files for 2005-2019, and the American Community Survey (ACS) 3-Year and 5-Year files. The NCANDS data is retrieved from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN). The files contain

case-level data about all maltreatment reports investigated in the U.S. Technicians employed by NDACAN compiled the 2005-2019 files, and aggregated data to the county-level for this study. A limitation of NCANDS is that the name of the county is redacted for counties with fewer than 1,000 reports, to protect the identity of families. This greatly limits the number of counties available for analysis, especially smaller rural counties which have fewer reports. The number of counties available for analysis ranges from 781-849 counties[3] ($\bar{x}$=835.8), and the full sample of counties across years is n=12,537. Despite the limited number of counties, the sample is (1) well-balanced across urbanicity (see **Table 4**), and (2) representative of about 85% of the total reports investigated each year. **Tables 1** and **2** show the sample by state and year, respectively.

Table 1 Number of County Observations in Sample by State (n=12,537)

State	Percent	N	State	Percent	N
AK	0.6	75	*MS*	1.56	195
AL	1.68	210	*MT*	0.84	105
AR	2.27	285	*NC*	4.31	540
AZ	1.08	135	*ND*	0.24	30
CA	4.31	540	*NE*	0.48	60
CO	1.2	150	*NH*	0.84	105
CT	0.72	90	*NJ*	2.19	275
DC	0.12	15	*NM*	1.08	135
DE	0.36	45	*NV*	0.24	30
FL	5.38	675	*NY*	6.1	765
GA	6.1	765	*OH*	3.11	390
HI	0.12	15	*OK*	2.15	270
IA	1.44	180	*OR*	0.96	120
ID	0.72	90	*PA*	1.79	225
IL	4.07	510	*RI*	0.12	15
IN	6.46	810	*SC*	2.99	375
KS	0.72	90	*SD*	0.12	15
KY	3.95	495	*TN*	3.23	405
LA	1.08	135	*TX*	5.98	750
MA	1.32	165	*UT*	0.84	105
MD	1.12	140	*VA*	1.68	210
ME	0.6	75	*WA*	1.56	195
MI	4.8	602	*WI*	1.08	135
MN	0.84	105	*WV*	2.27	285
MO	3.11	390	*WY*	0.12	15

[3] Analyses were also run excluding counties which were not present in all 15 years; results were similar. For more than half the years of analysis, the number of counties is stable which may explain the robustness of the results.

Table 2 Number of Counties in Sample by Year (n=12,537)

Year	Percent	N
2005	6.63%	831
2006	6.55%	821
2007	6.23%	781
2008	6.58%	825
2009	6.58%	825
2010	6.60%	828
2011	6.65%	834
2012	6.77%	849
2013	6.77%	849
2014	6.77%	849
2015	6.77%	849
2016	6.77%	849
2017	6.77%	849
2018	6.77%	849
2019	6.77%	849

The aggregated NCANDS file is merged with ACS data from the same years, by year and County FIPS code. All ACS data was retrieved from the NHGIS Data Finder Tool. ACS files used for the study include both 3-year and 5-year data, depending on the availability of files for each year of the study's analysis, and include county-level estimates of the total population, racial and ethnic composition, and number of households in poverty. Files were appended across years. These estimates are used to generate two of the primary predictors of interest in the study – the household poverty rate, and the racial/ethnic makeup in a county – and also to generate the rate variables used for the dependent variables (investigations and substantiations). Of note, initial analysis for the study used the 1-year ACS estimates when those estimates were available (2010-2019). However, the 1-year estimates have a much higher number of missing counties than the 3-year and 5-year estimates, which reduced the sample size by over 1,000 for those years – and this reduction was primarily in smaller rural counties, which impacted the trends in rural counties beginning in 2010 (when the 1-year estimates were employed). To keep the analysis balanced, the 3-year and 5-year data was used instead, and sensitivity analysis shows

that the overall trends in the data using the 1-year data were similar to the trends identified using the 3 and 5-year data.

In addition to the NCANDS and ACS data, I leverage one additional data source for the third primary predictor – county urbanicity type. For this variable, I use a 6-category urbanicity variable from Allard & Pelletier (2021). There are also several regional policy variables in this study from various sources, such as whether a state has Extended Foster Care and whether a state expanded Medicaid. Details and definitions of each variable can be found in the ***Variables*** section below, and **Table 3** includes a list of all of the variables, years, and data sources.

Table 3 Data Sources

Variable Category	Variable/Year	Data Source	Notes
County Demographic Variables	2005, 2006	ACS 2005-2009 5 year	All ACS data files were retrieved from IPUMS NHGIS Data Finder: https://data2.nhgis.org/main
	2007, 2008	ACS 2006-2010 5-year	
	2009	ACS 2008-2010 3-year	
	2010	ACS 2009-2011 3-year	
	2011	ACS 2010-2012 3-year	
	2012	ACS 2011-2013 3-year	
	2013	ACS 2011-2015 5-year	
	2014	ACS 2012-2016 5-year	
	2015	ACS 2013-2017 5-year	
	2016	ACS 2014-2018 5-year	
	2017	ACS 2015-2019 5-year	
	2018	ACS 2016-2020 5-year	
	2019	ACS 2017-2021 5-year	
Child Welfare Outcomes	2005-2019	NCANDS Child Files, Aggregated by County and Year	The NCANDS data was retrieved from: https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov/datasets/datasets-list-ncands-child-file.cfm; the aggregated file was created specifically for this project by NDACAN technicians.
Regional Policy Variables	State's Child Welfare System Administration	CWIG	https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/services/
	State has Extended Foster Care (EFC)	U.S. Children's Bureau	Internal Document from 2/28/23.
	State's Average Monthly TANF Payments in $ for a Family of 3	University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research (UKCPR) National Welfare Data	https://ukcpr.org/resources/national-welfare-data
	State Expanded Medicaid	Kaiser Family Foundation	https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/
	Average County Unemployment Rate	U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)	https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/DataFiles/48747/Unemployment.xlsx?v=9620.4
	Proportion of Children Using Federal School Lunch Program	UKPCR National Welfare Data	https://ukcpr.org/resources/national-welfare-data
	State's Minimum Wage Amount	UKPCR National Welfare Data	https://ukcpr.org/resources/national-welfare-data

Variables

Dependent Variables

This study assesses two dependent variables: (1) *county investigation rates* and (2) *county substantiation rates*. Both variables are generated as follows: $Investigation(Substantiation)Rate_{yct} = ((Investigation(Substantiation)_{yst})/(Pop_{yct}))*(1{,}000)$, with $Investigation(Substantiation)Rate_{yct}$ being the investigation (substantiation) rate in a given year and county, $Investigation(Substantiation)_{yct}$ equal to the number of investigations (substantiations) in a county in a given year, and Pop_{yct} capturing the population in a county in a given year. Thus, the $Investigation(Substantiation)Rate_{yct}$ represents the number of investigations (substantiations) in a county each year, per 1,000 individuals. Separate models are run for each dependent variable, and both vary by year. Given the large variation in population counts across counties, structuring these outcome variables as rates is a best practice (Fleurence & Hollenbeak, 2007), and recent research in child welfare disparities has advocated for the use of rates as opposed to counts and probabilities (e.g., Wulczyn, 2023).

Primary Independent Variables

There are several independent variables of primary interest in this study: (1) *county household poverty rate*, (2) *percent of residents who are American Indian/Alaska Native*, (3) *percent of residents who are Black*, (4) *percent of residents who are White*, (5) *percent of residents who are any other race* (including Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, two or more races, or other race), (6) *percent of residents who are Hispanic* (any race), and (7) *county urbanicity*. The first 6 independent variables are continuous variables retrieved from ACS data[4] and are calculated by taking the count of individual residents in each of these categories, dividing it by

[4] All ACS data files were retrieved from IPUMS NHGIS Data Finder: https://data2.nhgis.org/main

the total population estimate from which these estimates were drawn, and then multiplying the proportion by 100. Each of these first 6 predictors varies over time.

For the *household poverty rate*, the mean for the analytical sample of counties is 7.3% and the median is 6.8%. For the purposes of this analysis, the raw continuous measure (percent of households in poverty in each county, annually) is transformed into a categorical variable to capture broader distinctions in poverty levels, allowing comparisons between poverty levels (e.g., low poverty vs. high poverty) and adding nuance to the analysis. In all of the models, this categorical measure of household poverty is used. The variable contains four categories, (1) low household poverty (>3.8% of households are in poverty), (2) moderately low household poverty (3.8-6.8% of households are in poverty), (3) moderately high household poverty (6.9-11.0% of households are in poverty), and (4) high household poverty (>11% of households are in poverty). The ranges for each category of this variable are defined by the quantiles of the continuous measure of the household poverty rate in the analytical sample. I employ the household poverty rate in this study because investigations are conducted at the household level, making this measure most relevant in analyzing systemic predictors of investigation rates. This variable is also time-varying.

For the *county urbanicity* variable, a 6-category categorical variable is used, with the following categories: (1) rural, (2) suburban, (3) urban with greater-than two-thirds suburban, (4) urban with less-than or equal-to two-thirds suburban, (5) urban with less-than or equal-to one-third suburban, and (6) urban. This measure was developed by Allard and Pelletier (2021), who adapted the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definitions of metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, using census tract-level data to sort large urban counties into these more detailed subgroups. This categorical variable does not vary over time. In each model in this

study, solely urban counties are omitted from the models as the reference group.[5] Notably, in the subgroup models, I use a three-category version of this variable: (1) rural, (2) suburban, (3) urban, and do so for the sake of simplicity in comparing urban groups to one another, and to preserve sample size for subsample analyses.

Regional Policy Variables

In addition to poverty, place, and race, the analysis also examines several related regional policy variables. *State's child welfare system administration* is a categorical variable, coded as 0 for state-run systems and 1 for county-run systems. This documents whether a state's child welfare system is administered at the regional or the county-level. Notably, two states – Nevada and Wisconsin – have a "hybrid" system, where some counties are state-administered and some counties are county-administered (CWIG, 2019). In Nevada, the whole state is state-administered *except* for Clark and Washoe Counties, which are county-administered (Roose, 2022). In Wisconsin, the whole state is county-administered *except* Milwaukee County (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, I hand-coded the counties in these two states to reflect these hybrid distinctions – so all Nevada counties are coded as state-run, but Clark and Washoe are coded as county-administered, and in Wisconsin, all counties are coded as county-run, except Milwaukee County, which is coded as state-run. This variable is time invariant, remaining static across the years of analysis.

Whether a *state has Extended Foster Care* (EFC), is coded as 0 or 1 for no or yes, respectively, and varies over years. Extended Foster Care policy allows a young adult to remain

[5] Allard and Pelletier (2021) provide the following definitions of county urbanicities: "Urban counties are defined as those containing the primary urban center of a given metropolitan area and suburban counties are those counties that are defined as part of the same metropolitan area, but do not contain the metro's primary city. Rural counties are defined as non-metropolitan counties. Among urban counties, we distinguish between 'large' urban counties located within the largest 100 metropolitan areas and 'small' urban counties located in metropolitan areas outside the largest 100 metros."

in foster care after age 18; it is a federal policy that can be voluntarily taken up by states, and it offers insight into the nature of child welfare provisions and resource distribution in a state[6]. The data is retrieved from an internal document from the U.S. Children's Bureau (2022). Whether a *state has expanded Medicaid* is a binary variable, coded 0 for no and 1 for yes if a state expanded Medicaid. The data is input annually, capturing yearly policy changes. The data is retrieved from the Kaiser Family Foundation[7]. The *average state unemployment rate* captures the annual average unemployment rate; the data is retrieved from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)[8]. The *monthly TANF benefit amount for a family of 3,* the *proportion of children in the state using the federal school lunch program (SLP),* and the *state's minimum wage amount* are all retrieved from the University of Kentucky's Center for Poverty Research (UKPCR) National Welfare Data[9], and each variable varies over time. The TANF benefit is the dollar amount of monthly TANF benefits for a family of 3 in each state, the proportion of children using the School Lunch Program (SLP) is generated as the share of students using the program per capita, and the state minimum wage amount is the dollar amount of a state's minimum wage.

Analytic Sample

All data sources for each variable were appended and merged by county FIPS code and year, and any counties present in ACS or other data sources but *not* present in the NCANDS data are dropped, keeping the primary analytic sample to the same number of counties available in the NCANDS data, n=12,537. Below, **Table 4** displays the descriptive statistics for this sample and the variables of interest in the study. The sample is well-balanced across years, with about 6.5% of the counties in the sample from each of the 15 years. The sample is also relatively balanced

[6] See table 2; data retrieved from the U.S. Children's Bureau
[7] See table 2 and: https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions
[8] See table 2 and: https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/DataFiles/48747/Unemployment.xlsx?v=9620.4
[9] See table 2 and: https://ukcpr.org/resources/national-welfare-data

across urbanicity types, with about a quarter of the sample being rural counties (n=3.341), about one-third of the sample being suburban (n=4,070), and about 40% being urban (n=5,126). For the time-varying covariates, the measures vary regularly over time, and calculations of the variance inflation factors and tolerances for each of the independent variables indicate that there are no concerns about multicollinearity[10] (Chatterjee & Hadi, 1986).

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for County Sample

Variable	Percent or Mean (SD)	N
State has Extended Foster Care	30.17%	3,783
Child Welfare System is State Run	74.87%	9,387
Urbanicity		
Rural	26.65%	3,341
Suburban	32.46%	4,070
Urban	40.89%	5,126
Household Poverty Rate	7.27% (3.06)	
Low Poverty	9.99%	1,252
Moderately Low Poverty	39.95%	5,008
Moderately High Poverty	39.95%	5,008
High Poverty	10.12%	1,269
Percent of Black residents	10.46% (12.26)	
Percent of Hispanic (any race) residents	10.59% (13.06)	
Percent of Native American/Alaska Native residents	0.89% (3.81)	
Percent of White residents	75.00% (17.97)	
Percent of All Other Races residents	5.75% (5.52)	
Investigation Rate per 1,000 residents	8.80% (4.81)	
Substantiation Rate per 1,000 residents	1.90% (1.35)	
State Minimum Wage Amount in dollars	$7.18 (1.37)	
State Monthly TANF Benefit for Family of 3 in dollars	$395.19 (172.84)	
State Unemployment Rate	6.31% (2.71)	
Proportion of Population Using Federal School Lunch Program	10.13% (1.8)	

[10] I used the *estat vif* command to test for multicollinearity; the VIF results are all less than 6, with a mean VIF of 2.9.

Analytic Approach

This study employs a hybrid multilevel modeling approach that combines the attractive features of fixed and random effects models. Fixed effects and random effects models are the primary tools used to analyze panel data (Firebaugh et al., 2013). Fixed effects regressions have the advantage of controlling for all time-invariant characteristics (even those that cannot be measured), so they are better equipped than random effects models to estimate causal associations. However, a limitation of fixed effects models is that, unlike random effects models, they cannot estimate the effects of variables that do not change over time. In my data, I am interested in examining associations for both time-varying and time-invariant characteristics. I therefore utilize hybrid random effects linear regression models which capture within-county associations (same as fixed effects model) and also capture between-county associations for time-invariant variables (same as random effects model).

In constructing these hybrid models, for time-invariant characteristics, variables are entered in the same way as in a typical regression model. But, for each time-varying variable, I include two variables in the models: the mean for each county over time (the between-county association) and the deviation from the county-level mean for each county (the within-county association) (Allison, 2005). The hybrid modeling strategy closely approximates a traditional fixed effects model for time-varying characteristics, with within-county associations for time-varying variables essentially equivalent to fixed effects estimates (all time-invariant factors are accounted for)[11], while also allowing time-invariant variables to be estimated (Allison, 2005). In

[11] While I include a between-effects measure for time-varying covariates in the statistical model, I report the within-effects coefficient only for time-varying measures because it has the benefits of the fixed effects modeling approach described above.

each model, I also employ robust standard errors clustered by county to adjust the standard errors for the clustered nature of the data.

To answer the first research question, *To what extent are regional urbanicity, poverty, racial composition, and child welfare and safety net policy provisions associated with rates of child welfare investigations and substantiations?*, I leverage the hybrid random effects modeling strategy described above on the full sample. The models are specified in Stata, using the *xtset* command to set the time variable as year and the clustering variable as county. I use Stata's *xtreg* command to fit a linear hybrid random effects model with robust standard errors analyzing all of the covariates above in two models, one for each dependent variable.

To answer the second research question, *Do these associations between poverty rates, racial composition, policy provisions, and child welfare investigations/substantiations vary across urbanicity types?*, I again leverage the hybrid random effects modeling strategy, using the same panel data settings and regression commands, but conduct fully interacted models separately for each of three urbanicity subgroups – rural, urban, and suburban, and doing so for both outcomes. I assess the results of these fully interacted models and examine if the associations between the demographic and policy factors are significantly distinct by subgroup, testing for differences in coefficients using the equality of coefficients test illustrated by Paternoster and colleagues (1998).

Results

Research Question 1

Investigation Rate Regression Results

The full results for the hybrid random effects regression model with investigation rate as the dependent variable are displayed in **Table 5**. Coefficients in these tables are percentage point

effects on the *rates* of investigation per 1,000 individuals. Several poverty, race, and urbanicity variables are significant predictors. An increase in the percent of Hispanic residents in a county is associated with a .51 decrease in the rate of investigations (β= -0.51, p=0.000). Compared to counties with low household poverty rates, those with moderately low household poverty have a .31 higher rate of investigations (β =0.31, p=0.034). Urban counties with more than 2/3^{rds} suburban regions (β=0.21, p=0.043) and urban counties with less than 1/3rd suburban regions (β =0.40, p=0.007) see higher rates of investigations, compared to solely urban counties. Many of the regional policy variables are also significant. State-administered child welfare system (β=0.86, p=0.000), having expanded Medicaid (β=0.57, p=0.000), and an increase in the use of the school lunch program (β=0.66, p=0.000) are positively associated with investigations, while an increase in the unemployment rate (β= -0.31, p=0.000), a one unit ($100) increase in the monthly TANF benefit (β= -0.005, p=0.000), having Extended Foster Care (β= -0.99, p=0.000), and a higher minimum wage amount (β= -0.413, p=0.000) are negatively associated with investigation rate. Importantly, the relative effect sizes of the state-level policy variables are consistently larger than the race, poverty, and urbanicity variables, apart from TANF. For example, the effect of EFC is a .99 decrease in the rate of investigations, more than triple the effect of moderately low poverty rates. This is to be expected in that most of these variables are binary, except TANF and SLP, and a switch from no to yes is a relatively different change than a one-unit increase in a continuous percentage, for example.

Table 5 Full Sample Regression Results for Investigation Rate

	β	SE	z	P>z	[95% conf. interval]

State's Child Welfare Administration *(County-Run is reference group)*						
State Has a State-Administered CW System	0.861	0.245	3.510	0.000	0.381	1.341
State Unemployment Rate	-0.306	0.041	-7.520	0.000	-0.386	-0.226
State Monthly TANF Amount *($100/unit)*	-0.550	0.100	-4.040	0.000	-0.800	-0.300
State has Expanded Medicaid	0.577	0.164	3.520	0.000	0.255	0.898
State has Extended Foster Care	-0.995	0.131	-7.590	0.000	-1.252	-0.738
Fraction of State Using School Lunch Program	0.659	0.158	4.180	0.000	0.350	0.968
State Minimum Wage Amount	-0.413	0.057	-7.210	0.000	-0.526	-0.301
% Other Races *(% white is reference group)*	-0.019	0.014	-1.370	0.172	-0.047	0.008
% Native American/Alaska Native	0.032	0.166	0.200	0.845	-0.294	0.359
% Hispanic	-0.509	0.055	-9.330	0.000	-0.616	-0.402
% Black	0.012	0.054	0.220	0.828	-0.094	0.117
Household Poverty Level *(Low Poverty as reference group)*						
Moderately Low Household Poverty Rate	0.313	0.148	2.120	0.034	0.023	0.603
Moderately High Household Poverty Rate	0.295	0.242	1.220	0.223	-0.180	0.769
High Household Poverty Rate	-0.292	0.369	-0.790	0.428	-1.015	0.431
Urbanicity *(Urban as reference group)*						
Rural	-0.075	0.153	-0.490	0.627	-0.375	0.226
Suburban	0.040	0.080	0.500	0.614	-0.117	0.197
Urban>2/3rds Suburban	0.210	0.104	2.030	0.043	0.007	0.413
Urban<2/3rds Suburban	0.108	0.122	0.890	0.376	-0.131	0.347
Urban<1/3rds Suburban	0.403	0.151	2.680	0.007	0.108	0.698

Substantiation Regression Results

The full sample results for the model analyzing substantiation rate as the dependent variable are displayed in **Table 6**. In the substantiation results for the full sample, there are some similar trends, but fewer significant results and the effect sizes are relatively smaller than the investigation rate results. An increase in the percent of Hispanic residents is again associated with a significant decrease in the density of substantiations (β= -0.13, p=0.000), while moderately low poverty (β=0.11, p=0.002) is associated with a .11 increase in substantiation rates, compared to low poverty counties. Urban counties with less than 1/3rd suburban regions

(β=0.13, p=0.001), compared to solely urban counties, also see a .13 increase in the rate of substantiations. Some regional policies are also significant, with counties in a state-administered child welfare system (β=0.51, p=0.000) and counties in a state with expanded Medicaid (β=0.31, p=0.000) having higher rates of substantiation, and counties in states with a higher unemployment rate having .07 lower rates of substantiations (β= -0.07, p=0.000).

Table 6 Full Sample Regression Results Substantiation Rate

	β	SE	z	P>z	[95% conf.	interval]
State's Child Welfare Administration *(County-Run is reference group)*						
State Has a State-Administered CW System	0.509	0.085	5.980	0.000	0.342	0.676
State Unemployment Rate	-0.065	0.014	-4.770	0.000	-0.092	-0.038
State Monthly TANF Amount *($100/unit)*	0.003	0.030	-0.080	0.932	-0.001	0.001
State has Expanded Medicaid	0.309	0.055	5.650	0.000	0.202	0.416
State has Extended Foster Care	0.016	0.037	0.420	0.672	-0.056	0.087
Fraction of State Using School Lunch Program	0.067	0.043	1.570	0.117	-0.017	0.151
State Minimum Wage Amount	-0.020	0.019	-1.040	0.298	-0.057	0.017
% Other Races *(% white is reference group)*	0.001	0.005	0.130	0.894	-0.008	0.010
% Native American/Alaska Native	0.085	0.047	1.820	0.068	-0.006	0.177
% Hispanic	-0.133	0.019	-6.870	0.000	-0.171	-0.095
% Black	-0.039	0.021	-1.860	0.062	-0.079	0.002
Household Poverty Level *(Low Poverty as reference group)*						
Moderately Low Household Poverty Rate	0.110	0.036	3.070	0.002	0.040	0.180
Moderately High Household Poverty Rate	0.107	0.061	1.740	0.082	-0.013	0.227
High Household Poverty Rate	-0.007	0.101	-0.070	0.946	-0.204	0.190
Urbanicity *(Urban as reference group)*						
Rural	0.015	0.036	0.410	0.680	-0.056	0.086
Suburban	0.015	0.023	0.660	0.509	-0.029	0.059
Urban>2/3rds Suburban	0.025	0.043	0.590	0.556	-0.058	0.108
Urban<2/3rds Suburban	0.045	0.041	1.100	0.270	-0.035	0.126
Urban<1/3rds Suburban	0.130	0.040	3.250	0.001	0.052	0.209

Research Question 2

Results for Investigations

Table 7 displays the results for the subgroup analysis of investigation rates. Compared to the results for the full sample models, there are some similar trends, and the effect sizes are relatively similar as well. However, some geographically distinct results arise. In comparing results across contexts, the coefficient for percent of Black residents is only significant in urban counties (β=0.16, p=0.047), though there is no significant difference in coefficients compared to the nonsignificant suburban and rural effects. The association with percent of Native American/Alaska Native residents is significantly lower in rural counties (β= -0.19; p=0.464) compared to urban counties (β= 0.97, p=0.07), though the coefficient is not significant in any models. There are no significant differences in poverty level coefficients by subgroup and no poverty levels are significant in any models, though the coefficient for moderately high household poverty is approaching significance in suburban counties (β=0.45, p=0.07). Several regional policy variables also vary significantly across contexts, with rural counties having a significantly larger effect size for Medicaid (β=1.36, p=0.000) and for the minimum wage rate (β= -0.69, p=0.000) compared to both urban and suburban counties. Rural counties also have a significantly different effect of having a state administered child welfare system (β= -0.16, p=0.87) and having a higher unemployment rate (β= -0.43, p=0.000), compared to urban counties (β= 1.43, p=0.000 and β= -0.19, p=0.001 respectively in urban counties); but, the coefficient for the state-administered system is not significant in the rural models. On the other hand, urban counties have a significantly different effect (i.e. it is less protective) of being in a state with Extended Foster Care (β= -0.54, p=0.004), compared to both suburban (β= -1.04, p=0.000) and rural counties (β= -1.52, p=0.000). Notably, in these models, we see some of the largest effect sizes in the analysis. For example, rural counties see a 1.52 decrease in the rate of

investigations with EFC, and urban counties have a 1.43 higher rate in state-administered child welfare systems. Given the mean investigation rate across counties is 8.8% per 1,000 cases, these are substantively significant results.

Table 7 Regression Results for Investigation Rate, by Urbanicity Subgroup

	Model A: Urban			Model B: Suburban			Model C: Rural		
	β	SE		β	SE		β	SE	
State's Child Welfare Administration *(County-Run is reference group)*									
State Has a State-Administered CW System	1.433	0.332	***c	0.643	0.418		-0.101	0.619	*a*
State Unemployment Rate	-0.193	0.060	***c	-0.296	0.071	***	-0.428	0.074	***a
State Monthly TANF Amount *($100/unit)*	-0.635	0.209	**	-0.455	0.152	**	-0.310	0.239	
State has Expanded Medicaid	0.226	0.239	*c*	0.265	0.241	*c*	1.358	0.373	***ab
State has Extended Foster Care	-0.536	0.184	**bc	-1.044	0.173	***a	-1.522	0.319	***a
Fraction of State Using School Lunch Program	0.353	0.220	*c*	0.572	0.244	*	1.327	0.354	***a
State Minimum Wage Amount	-0.204	0.087	*c	-0.353	0.083	***c	-0.688	0.138	***a
Race/Ethnicity Composition *(%White is reference group)*									
% Other Races	0.002	0.020	*c*	-0.046	0.026		-0.080	0.050	*a*
% Native American/Alaska Native	0.965	0.525	*c*	-0.018	0.119		-0.188	0.257	*a*
% Hispanic	-0.314	0.072	***	-0.482	0.089	***	-0.582	0.129	***
% Black	0.159	0.080	*	-0.025	0.055		0.000	0.229	
Household Poverty Level *(Low Poverty is reference group)*									
Moderately Low Household Poverty Rate	0.259	0.215		0.246	0.183		0.429	0.651	
Moderately High Household Poverty Rate	0.311	0.290		0.454	0.258		0.096	0.815	
High Household Poverty Rate	-0.237	0.409		-0.150	0.467		-0.586	0.877	

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001 | a=sig. different from urban | b=sig. different from suburban | c=sig. different from rural

Results for Substantiations

Table 8 shows the results for the subgroup analysis for substantiation rates. The overall results are relatively similar to the results for investigations in each individual subgroup model, but, like the full sample analysis, the number of significant coefficients and differences is lower and the relative effect sizes are also smaller compared to the investigation rate models. In comparing coefficients for race/ethnicity across urbanicity types, the effect of the percent of Black residents is significantly more of a risk factor in urban counties compared to suburban counties, though the coefficient is only significant in suburban counties (β= -0.07, p=0.001). None of the poverty levels coefficients in these models are significantly different from each other, though, suburban counties are the only counties where there are any significant coefficients – suburban counties with a moderately low household poverty rate see a .09 higher rate of substantiations (β=0.09, p=0.026), and the coefficient for moderately high household poverty rates is approaching significance in this model as well (β=0.13, p=0.062).

For regional policy variables, there are some significant differences across subgroups. The effect of the monthly TANF benefit amount is significantly different in rural counties (β=0.10, p=0.005), compared to urban counties, where the coefficient is negative and not significant – although the effect size in rural counties is relatively small compared to the effect size of TANF benefit rates in other models. Additionally, the effect of having a state-administered child welfare system is significantly different between rural and urban counties, with urban counties seeing a significant increase in substantiations associated with having a state-run system (β=0.76, p=0.000) and rural counties having a nonsignificant coefficient. This result for state-run child welfare systems is noteworthy in that the effect size, a .76 increase in substantiation rate in urban counties, is substantially larger than the effect sizes of all other variables in this particular model.

Table 8 Regression Results for Substantiation Rate, by Urbanicity Subgroup

	Model A: Urban			Model B: Suburban			Model C: Rural		
	β	SE		β	SE		β	SE	
State's Child Welfare Administration *(County-Run is reference group)*									
State Has a State-Administered CW System	0.757	0.127	*** *c*	0.470	0.145	**	0.223	0.179	*a*
State Unemployment Rate	-0.034	0.020		-0.084	0.023	***	-0.086	0.027	**
State Monthly TANF Amount *($100/unit)*	-0.06	0.070	*c*	0.001	0.063		0.131	0.069	**a*
State has Expanded Medicaid	0.246	0.077	**	0.235	0.080	**	0.499	0.138	***
State has Extended Foster Care	0.073	0.048		-0.038	0.057		-0.008	0.092	
Fraction of State Using School Lunch Program	-0.001	0.059		0.052	0.067		0.223	0.1058	*
State Minimum Wage Amount	0.001	0.025		-0.012	0.026		-0.035	0.054	
Race/Ethnicity Composition *(%White is reference group)*									
% Other Races	0.002	0.007		-0.002	0.008		-0.012	0.014	
% Native American/Alaska Native	0.112	0.103		0.153	0.032	***c*	0.012	0.061	*b*
% Hispanic	-0.103	0.023	***	-0.129	0.038	**	-0.146	0.046	**
% Black	0.022	0.031	*b*	-0.068	0.021	***a*	-0.050	0.098	
Household Poverty Level *(Low Poverty is reference group)*									
Moderately Low Household Poverty Rate	0.093	0.056		0.088	0.039	*	0.125	0.159	
Moderately High Household Poverty Rate	0.091	0.075		0.129	0.069		0.154	0.215	
High Household Poverty Rate	0.099	0.120		-0.082	0.149		0.079	0.245	

Note: p value is *>0.05 **>0.01 ***>0.001 | a=sig. different from urban | b=sig. different from suburban | c=sig. different from rural

Discussion

In this study, I examined how county-level poverty rates, urbanicity types, racial/ethnic composition, and regional child welfare and safety net policy provisions shape child welfare investigation and substantiation rates, and then investigated how the associations between

aggregate poverty rates, racial composition, and policy provisions might vary across urbanicity types. Using a hybrid random effects regression approach to analyze longitudinal, aggregate data on child welfare investigations and county-level demographics, I provide important contributions to the literature on how place shapes the role of race, income, and social policy provisions in the aggregate in child welfare. I add to our existing knowledge by analyzing aggregate disparities at the frontend of the child welfare system and assessing the interactive influence of place on such disparities, specifically providing novel insights on suburban counties. Overall, I find that the influences of racial composition, poverty rates, and policy provisions are unique across place, making clear that the nature of disparities is not universal.

Specifically, the results provide clear indications that urbanicity plays a significant, moderating role in child welfare investigations and substantiations. In the full sample analysis, I find that urban counties with large proportions of suburban regions (urban>2/3^{rds} suburban) have a significantly higher density of investigations, and urban counties with small proportions of suburban regions (urban<1/3rd suburban) have a significantly higher density of *both* investigations and substantiations, compared to entirely urban counties. In this full sample analysis, I also find that, compared to low household poverty rate counties, counties having moderately low and moderately high household poverty rates see an increase in both investigation and substantiation rates. In these full sample models, the percent of Hispanic residents is the only significant race/ethnicity variable, and it is associated with a decrease of the rates of both investigations and substantiations.

However, in the subgroup analysis, unique explanatory factors emerge across urbanicity types. To illustrate, in the analysis of the full sample of counties, moderate poverty counties experience significantly higher investigations and substantiations, compared to low poverty

counties. However, when the sample is divided across urbanicity subgroups, the effect of poverty rates is not significant in either rural or urban counties, though it remains significant or nearly significant in suburban counties. The coefficients are not significantly different across the models, though the suburban results are the only significant poverty rate results across subgroup models – indicating, at the very least, that poverty rates matter in suburban contexts. Importantly, moderate poverty families are likely to sit at or near the benefits cliff for public social service supports that may be needed to prevent or close child welfare cases, like SNAP or childcare subsidies. Families who may not qualify for or have access to government supports can sometimes rely on nonprofit services to provide supports. However, a growing body of research finds that suburban regions often face a dearth of nonprofit services (e.g., Allard & Pelletier, 2023; Allard, 2017). This lack of nonprofit supports available in suburban regions may explain the significant findings for moderately low and moderately high poverty counties in suburban regions in this study and may be indicative of a need for further investment in and expansion of suburban nongovernment organizations to bolster the limited suburban social service arrays.

Results for racial composition are similarly mixed across urbanicity subgroups. But, regarding the associations between investigations/substantiations and race, I find overall, across all urbanicity types, that an increase in the Hispanic population is associated with a decrease in both investigation rates and substantiation rates. These findings confirm the aggregate results in the full sample models. but are somewhat counterintuitive to existing research on individual-level racial and ethnic disparities. Notably, counties with a higher proportion of Hispanic residents tend to have higher median household income and higher percentages of adults with college degrees than those with a lower share; many such counties are in traditionally Hispanic and immigrant entry regions and near large cities with wealthy suburbs, such as Chicago, New

York City, San Francisco, and the metro D.C. area (Singer, 2004). Given the results in this study for household poverty rates in suburban areas – that moderate poverty suburbs experience greater densities of investigations and substantiations than low poverty suburbs – the concentration of Hispanic families in areas with wealthy suburbs may explain this finding. Moreover, it is important to remember that the estimates are county-level rather than individual-level estimates. It is quite possible that the individual effect of being Hispanic is greater in locations with small numbers of Hispanic individuals. However, overall, it is difficult to draw specific conclusions on the influence of Hispanic residency, and future research on this area is needed.

Furthermore, I find that an increase in the proportion of Black residents, relative to an increase in White residents, is associated with a significant increase in the rate of child welfare investigations in urban counties, and though the coefficients are not significantly distinct across subgroups, urban counties are the only regions where this coefficient is significant. Notably, this finding is present only for investigations and *not* for substantiations. Substantiation is not a necessary requirement to remove a child from their parents, *and* prior investigations are considered a risk factor in future investigated maltreatment cases (Eubanks, 2018, p.139). Thus, investigations are not a "less bad" outcome when compared to substantiations. Rather, this result is indicative of the existence of a greater degree of surveillance and early system contact in urban regions with larger Black populations, which is in line with existing literature on racial threat (e.g., Stults & Baumer, 2007). The presence of a larger Black population is associated with a greater systemic response of the child welfare system in these regions, which impacts all families in such areas.

In contrast to the race findings in urban counties, I find in suburban counties that an increase in the proportion of Black residents is associated with a *decrease* in substantiations (and

the coefficient is significantly different from urban counties), while an increase in Native American residents in suburban counties (but not in rural and urban counties) is associated with an *increase* in substantiations. These mixed results regarding the effect of racial composition across urbanicity types are complex and difficult to tease out, but they are substantively significant in addition to their statistical significance, because they indicate that regional racial composition interacts with place to shape investigations and substantiations. As such, interventions aimed at reducing racial disparities may need to target specific areas to see a reduction in aggregate inequities in child welfare policy outcomes. For example, the results of the present study indicate that efforts to reduce disparities for Black families should be redoubled in urban regions in particular, while efforts to promote equity for Native American families ought to be expanded in suburban locales.

The findings also reveal that regional child welfare and safety net policy provisions play a significant role in investigations and substantiations, and some of these roles are substantively distinct across urbanicity types. Three trends in regional policy effects stand out in these results. First, regional child welfare policymaking appears to play a significant role in shaping the densities of investigations and substantiations, even for policies that may seem unrelated to this stage in the system. For example, results indicate that having Extended Foster Care (EFC) policies may reduce densities of investigations, though not substantiations, and the decrease associated with enacting this policy is significantly stronger in suburban and rural counties, compared to urban counties. This finding is somewhat surprising given that EFC is not directly related to investigation policies or practices. However, having EFC is indicative of both the generosity of a state's child welfare system, and of the state's child welfare resource distribution. On the other hand, having a state-administered child welfare system is significantly associated

with an *increase* in investigations and substantiations in most, but not all, of the models and subgroup analyses. This finding adds to the growing body of literature highlighting the efficiency of centralized child welfare agencies, compared to decentralized, county-run systems (e.g., Elgin & Carter, 2019; Nadon et al., 2023), though in the case of investigations and substantiations, efficiency resulting in greater numbers of families being impacted by the child welfare system is not necessarily ideal, despite possible other benefits of centralized systems, such as improved service delivery functions (e.g., Nadon & Ybarra, forthcoming). Both results, while statistically significant, are also *substantively* significant, with these two policy variables having some of the largest effect sizes across the various models, indicating meaningful effects of these policies. These findings are intriguing and should motivate further research into the mechanisms behind different child welfare policies which may shape investigations and substantiations.

A second trend in the regional policy results is that an increase in the state minimum wage rate is significantly associated with a decrease in investigation densities across counties, as is an increase in the monthly TANF benefit in the state. These findings are relatively consistent across the full model and the urbanicity subgroups. The effects of these two variables indicate that poverty-alleviation policies, specifically cash transfers and income support, play a significant and important role in reducing initial child welfare system contact for U.S. families. This is a considerable finding, as it offers a macro policy pathway for reducing disparate contact with the child welfare system for low-income families and communities. As such, the results from this study regarding the minimum wage and TANF should motivate further advocacy and reform efforts related to income supports for child welfare-impacted families and for low-income families perceived to be at-risk for involvement in the system.

However, across many of the models, increased participation in the federal school lunch program is significantly associated with increases in investigations, and expanded Medicaid is recurrently associated with a significant increase in both investigations and substantiations. These findings are not surprising given the nature of both programs – both directly increase the amount of surveillance low-income families may face. Expanded Medicaid increases access to and participation in medical services, which expands the visibility of low-income families to mandated reporters in the medical system, and thereby increases their chances of a report being made to a child welfare agency. Participation in the SLP may have a similar effect, increasing the visibility of children in the school system, or it may be a proxy for child poverty. These findings are indicative of the fact that some safety net programs, though intended to help families, can expand the punitive purview of the government in the lives of lower income families and families of color, in a way that income support (e.g., TANF benefits) may not. It may also be that if TANF participation does increase the visibility of families, the effect of that increased scrutiny is reduced by the improved financial station of families receiving more TANF benefits.

Third, the effect of several of the regional policy variables in the present analysis is significantly different in rural counties compared to urban and/or suburban counties. For example, the increase in investigations associated with participation in the SLP is significantly larger in rural counties than urban counties, and the increase in investigations associated with expanded Medicaid is significantly larger in rural counties compared to both urban and suburban counties. Moreover, while the monthly TANF benefit has a nonsignificant association with substantiations in urban and suburban counties, the effect is significant and positive in rural counties – and the coefficient is significantly different in rural counties compared to urban counties' negative coefficient. These results may highlight the types of professionals most likely

to make referrals into the system in rural counties, or they could indicate negative perceptions or stigma of safety net engagement in rural counties. The different effects of policy provisions in rural regions could suggest that policies to address income disparities in rural areas may need to be designed to address these place-based distinctions, but more research is needed.

Finally, it is important to note that, though I examine both investigation and substantiation rates, the findings across these two distinct outcomes are relatively similar and there are not discernably different trends in the nature of effects between the two outcomes across the poverty, place, and race measures. Some studies show that child outcomes for substantiated cases, compared to unsubstantiated investigations, are comparable (e.g., Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009; Snyder & Smith, 2015), and the present study may depict such similarities as well. Moreover, the effect sizes in the investigation rate models were consistently larger than those in the substantiation rate models, despite similar trends in effect direction. The lack of consistent directional distinctions between investigations and substantiations, coupled with the stronger effect sizes associated with investigations, may indicate that prioritizing investigations research and policy and practice interventions in investigations may be promising strategies for advancing our knowledge of, and addressing, racial and economic disparities throughout the vast child welfare system in the United States.

Although the findings of this study have substantial policy and practice implications, the study comes with some important limitations. First, the analysis is conducted at the county level, which is a blunt measure of urbanicity, poverty, and race. For example, we know that within counties, and even within individual cities and towns, large variations in poverty, race, and urbanicity exist. The nature of the NCANDS data is such that more granular analysis at a census tract or neighborhood level is not possible. The tradeoff is that this analysis provides a large,

national assessment of broad trends. Second, the limitations of the NCANDS data result in a reduction in the number of the counties available for analysis. The analytical sample is still well-balanced across urbanicity subgroups, and this sample represents the majority of investigated reports in the U.S. (approximately 85% of cases). However, this limitation may mean that the results for rural counties in the present analysis are potentially underpowered, and results from very small counties are omitted from this analysis, which limits the applicability of the findings in such contexts. Third, there are some case-level factors in investigations that cannot be accounted for in this aggregated analysis. For example, recent studies find that the source of referrals is a significant predictor of substantiations, and that the types of referrers vary significantly by place (Nadon et al., 2023). The aggregated data cannot capture the influence of these variations in referral sources, which is simply a limitation of the analysis. Lastly, the child welfare and safety net provisions analyzed in this study are also aggregated in the sense that they simply capture participation *rates*, amounts, and/or structure of policies. These regional policy measures do *not* capture whether an investigated family actually received a certain policy provision and what impact that may have had on an actual case. Rather, the regional policy measures provide general, systemic trends in associations between child welfare investigations/substantiations and relevant state and county-level policies. Moreover, the list of policy measures included in the present analysis is not exhaustive, and many other social policies may shape child welfare outcomes, like childcare subsidies, though data on such policies is not as readily available as those measures captured here. Finally, the structure and coding of the data pose limitations for discussion of race and ethnicity. This study explores the aggregated influence of sociodemographic variables like race and ethnicity, which limits the direct implications about race that can be discussed. Furthermore, in coding the racial categories,

because the data is aggregated, it becomes statistically necessary to collapse some racial/ethnic categories, despite there being great nuance in what multiracial and Hispanic mean, for example. We know both categories of individuals face individual-level disparities in child welfare, and the present data structure and definitions limit the degree to which this analysis can be useful in exploring the impact of those nuanced individual disparities. So, given the correlational nature of the analysis and the limits in what can be captured by existing data, caution is warranted in the interpretation of the meaning of these policy effects.

In the face of extensive evidence about individual place, race, and income disparities in child welfare, this study highlights where geographic concentrations in aggregate disparities at the front end of this system may exist, providing insights on possible interventions in addressing disparities. Some overall trends in this study indicate promise for preventing child welfare system contact generally, like the effect of increasing the minimum wage – and these macro insights ought to motivate both future research and advocacy efforts. However, both risk and protective factors for child welfare investigations and substantiations vary quite substantially across geographic regions, with differential impacts of racial composition, poverty rates, and safety net and child welfare policy provisions by urbanicity. These unique results across urbanicity subgroups offer ideas for distinct strategies to address race and income disparities in child welfare, such as amplifying efforts to support Black families in urban counties and increasing nonprofit service availability in suburban counties. Further investment in and research on these strategies is warranted, given this study's findings. Overall, broader reform and advocacy efforts must take place-based distinctions into account. This study should inspire targeted and tailored efforts to expand needed services and supports across different urbanicity

types in order to best serve the specific needs of the millions of child welfare-impacted families and communities across the country.

III. CHAPTER 3. "If I Can't Provide as a Mother… I Don't Get my Kids Back": Parental Experiences of Financial Sanctions in the American Child Welfare System

Abstract

Most families impacted by the child welfare system are low-income and eligible for public benefits. Consequently, many families navigating the child welfare system are also involved with institutions of poverty governance. Scholars have separately conceptualized both child welfare and poverty governance as punitive and research underscores negative constituent experiences with each system of governance. This study draws upon these two distinct literatures to demonstrate how parents who are investigated for child maltreatment also experience financial hardships associated with poverty governance. I analyze qualitative data from 21 interviews with child welfare-impacted parents in a Midwestern state to describe how parents experienced income loss tied to compliance with child welfare system requirements through three poverty governance-related mechanisms: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility. These mechanisms had significant negative impacts on family well-being and reunification, for example by reducing parents' ability to demonstrate capacity to materially provide for their children during highly scrutinized visitations. I end with a discussion of broader policy implications, highlighting the conceptual similarities between poverty governance and child welfare, and emphasizing the need to conduct child welfare policy reform with an eye towards poverty policy institutions.

American poverty policy is widely theorized as a paternalistic system, dedicated to punishing and disciplining the poor (Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). Scholars have described poverty governance as punitive; it provides controlling, yet insufficient, benefits to impoverished individuals and families, paired with consequences for not meeting regulations such as fines, fees and loss of benefits. States with more people of color experience the most regulated benefits and harshest punishments (e.g., Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Ojeda et al., 2019; Soss et al., 2008; Quadagno, 1994; Soss et al., 2011). Intricately tied to poverty governance in the U.S. is the American child welfare system; most families who encounter the child welfare system are also eligible for public benefits, often living lives governed by both systems (Hagedorn, 1995; Roberts, 2002). In addition, a disproportionate number of child welfare-impacted families are families of color (Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2022). Child welfare policy has been characterized similarly to poverty policy, where child welfare workers' "core function" is defined as explicitly punitive: to investigate families for alleged maltreatment and remove children from their homes as a punishment for "bad parenting," while offering insufficient tangible supports to struggling families who come to the attention of the child welfare system (Costin et. al., 1997; Hagedorn, 1995; Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2022).

Substantial research recognizes the punitive ideology behind both poverty governance and child welfare governance in the U.S., and the impact this ideology has on poor families in practice. We know many families are impacted by both systems of governance, but with little specificity about how this overlap works and what the consequences are of this reality for impoverished families. The present study focuses on a key intersection of the child welfare and poverty policy systems: the financial hardship experiences of child welfare-impacted families who are also caught within features of poverty governance, like public benefit regulations. This

study demonstrates that involvement in the child welfare system results in financial sanctions which are carried out in concert with facets of poverty governance, particularly public benefits, child support fines, and low-wage work. The co-occurrence of poverty governance and child welfare sanctions further entangles families in poverty and prolongs the punishment of family separation – doubly punishing families who are engaged with both the poverty and child welfare systems.

I establish this argument using qualitative data from parents involved with a Midwestern State's child welfare system, analyzing interview data collected from 21 semi-structured interviews with 17 individual parents in this state. Interview data illuminates three primary mechanisms through which parents experience income loss and financial sanctions as a result of demands inherent within the processes and functions of the American child welfare system: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility.

Parent Experiences with Child Welfare Policies & Services

Many previous studies have examined various aspects of parental experiences with the child welfare system – the requirements and difficulties associated with navigating the system, their experiences of race and income biases in the system, and how they perceive support and services within the system. Once a family is investigated and a child protection case is opened, existing research finds that the child welfare system is notoriously complex and difficult to successfully navigate. This process is particularly demanding if, at the end of an investigation, a parent is "substantiated" or "indicated" for maltreatment, meaning evidence was found for some form of abuse or neglect. In these "substantiated" instances, children are typically removed from the home and placed into protective custody, or foster/kinship care, until a parent completes

certain requirements mandated by a child welfare worker and a judge in order to consider a home safe for the child or children's return. Requirements typically include attending court hearings and medical screenings/appointments for themselves and their child(ren) and complying with various services laid out in a case plan, such as parenting classes, mental health treatment, substance use treatment, and/or employment trainings.

Throughout navigation of the bureaucratically complex child welfare system, parents have reported a multitude of negative experiences with both private and public caseworkers, service providers, and judges, including judgment, fear, stress, and financial hardships (e.g., Tembo & Studsrød, 2018). Evidence suggests that these negative experiences are especially pronounced for Black families and poor families, who also endure racism and classism simultaneously (e.g., Kokaliari et al., 2019; Merrit, 2021a; Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2011). For example, Merritt (2021b) illustrates how mothers experienced CPS involvement, finding that parents experienced racialized judgment and mistreatment in their interactions with CPS workers, which negatively impacted the mothers' mental wellbeing and ability to parent effectively. Furthermore, Fong's 2020 study examining family experiences with child protection through observations of investigations in Connecticut, highlights how the system forces parents to undergo punitive surveillance to receive assistance from child welfare and related systems, breeding fear of institutional engagement in families. Another documented negative experience of parents impacted by the child welfare system is of particular interest in this study: forcing parents to pay child support while children are in foster care. We have compelling quantitative evidence that parents routinely experience this practice, and this practice is associated with significant increases in the time to reunification for parents who are required to pay these fines (e.g., Cancian et al., 20212; Cancian et al., 2017). In the present study, I qualitatively explore the

imposition of child support fines and offer evidence about *why* we see the quantitative outcomes related to reunification and child support fines present in the existing literature.

Outside of the negative experiences parents have had in the system, meeting case requirements, understanding one's rights, and advocating for one's children are all opaque processes with the potential to disempower parents and other kinship caregivers, creating barriers to reunifying families, including financial and practical implications such as time constraints (e.g., Estefan, 2011; Kemp et al., 2009; Lalayants & Merkel-Holguin, 2023; Roberts, 2002; Roberts et al., 2014; Washington & Despard, 2024). While research makes clear that basic navigation of child welfare system procedures and the experiences parents have throughout this process are challenging, inequitable, and coupled with perilous access to needed services, other research has examined the impact of required or mandated services offered/referred by child welfare agencies. D'Andrade and Chambers (2012) find that there are steep requirements associated with the ability to receive services in the child welfare system, and to return children to the home. While complying with these requirements is often difficult, other research has found that some of these required services, like employment programs, can improve reunification trajectories, prevent future system contact, and improve the effectiveness of other services like drug treatment programs (e.g., Berger & Waldgofel, 2011; Brooke & McDonald, 2007; Grella et al., 2008; Slack et al., 2003). In the present study, I add to this existing literature on parental experiences in the child welfare system by exploring experiences of financial hardships caused by tandem navigation of both the child welfare bureaucracy and poverty governance systems.

The Relationship Between Child Welfare & Poverty

Related to experiences of financial hardship, there is a storied history between the child welfare system and poverty, and the literature on this relationship is vast (e.g., Kim et al., 2023;

Landers, Carrese, & Spath, 2019; Martin, 1985; Pelton, 1989). Countless authors have linked child welfare investigations, substantiated child welfare reports, and protective custody cases with poverty and research emphasizes that poverty is the principal predictor of a child welfare investigation (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014; Eckenrode et al., 2014; Slack et al., 2004; Kim & Drake, 2018). Moreover, the majority of families investigated by the child welfare system are eligible for public benefits and the child welfare system governs many of the same families impacted by poverty governance (Nelson, 1991; Hagedorn, 1995; Roberts, 2002). Research also indicates that investigations are more likely to occur in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates and in family contexts in which poverty-related adversities occur, with the most restrictive child welfare practices being more likely to occur in regions with less generous safety nets (e.g., Edwards, 2016; Fong, 2019a; Fong, 2017). However, across the many existing studies on this relationship, findings on the *mechanisms* behind *why* poor families are more likely to be involved in the child welfare system have been mixed. As a result, it remains unclear whether poverty drives maltreatment risk or if bias against low-income families drives surveillance and resulting child welfare system outcomes, or if some mix of both mechanisms may be at play.

Despite uncertainty on the mechanism of disproportionate child welfare system contact for low-income families, ample evidence suggests that the very *definition* of maltreatment is linked to poverty (Roberts, 2002; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). For example, "medical neglect" and "insufficient housing" are allegations that child welfare investigators can use to warrant the removal of a child from their parent(s) (CWIG, 2019). These two allegations are typically driven by economic hardships in many cases; it is unlikely that a family is homeless or living in unsafe housing ("insufficient housing") because of a deliberate choice of a parent, and most parents are not simply *choosing to forgo* appropriate medical care for their children. Medical neglect most

often occurs due to unaffordable or inaccessible services (e.g., Jenny & Metz, 2020). Outside of these explicit examples of poverty-related definitions of maltreatment, most children enter foster care for the allegation of neglect – about 74% in 2022 (U.S. DHHS, 2023). Extensive scholarship from various regions of the world has argued that the nature of neglect is related to a lack of economic resources because neglect is generally tied to an insufficiency of resources, be that money, food, time, or emotional capacity (e.g., Gupta, 2017; Pasian et al., 2020; Roberts, 2002; Slack et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2023).

Given poverty's well-established relationship with child welfare, an obvious solution to child welfare disparities is to simply reduce poverty. There is existing evidence that income support programs like TANF, SNAP, and the EITC, and income from other sources like employment, reduce incidences of reported maltreatment, investigations, substantiations, and foster care placements (e.g., Berger et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2018; Kovski et al., 2022; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022; Pac et al., 2023), though level of effect and the impact of different types of income or programs varies. Additionally, research on the role of income and public benefits in child welfare-impacted family reunification finds evidence of improved reunification for families who have additional income from working (e.g., Kortenkamp 2004; Lee et al., 2017).

Yet, tension exists between the evidence that cash and near-cash safety net programs, and other forms of income (like working), may improve child welfare system outcomes of low-income families, and other research finding that involvement with the child welfare system may drive economic disconnection for low-income families. For example, research has found that child welfare involvement disrupts eligibility for public benefits and constricts income via difficulties obtaining employment (e.g., Hook et al., 2016; Keagan Eamon & Kopels, 2004; Kortenkamp 2004; Lee et al., 2017). Scholars have found that these economic disconnections are

associated with increased time to reunification for parents due to economic hardships posed by these disconnections (Marcenko, et al., 2011; Marcenko et al., 2012). Despite the protective effects of income and cash or near-cash benefits, involvement with the child welfare system has a documented capacity to disrupt these protections. In the present study, I qualitatively explore the economic disconnections that other scholars have quantitatively described, providing nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which these disconnections occur. While much of the existing literature describes poverty as a *driver* of system involvement, I describe how and why system contact leads to further experiences of poverty and economic hardship due to reductions in public benefits and social service access, employment instability while balancing case requirements, and child support fines imposed on parents whose children enter foster care.

The Ideologies Governing Poor Families

The literature on the relationship between child welfare and poverty, and on parents' experiences with the child welfare system, exposes dire issues in child welfare policy and practice. Researchers have called attention to the child welfare system's core functions of surveillance and invasive scrutiny of family life (e.g., Edwards, 2016; Fong, 2020; Pelton, 1989), reliance on punishment, the legal system, and law enforcement mechanisms such as police reports and court-mandated services and case requirements (e.g., Edwards, 2016; D'Andrade & Chambers, 2012; Hagedorn, 1995; Roberts, 1999; Roberts, 2012), as well as the system's legacy of racism and historical ties to racist laws like slavery (e.g., Roberts, 2022; Dettlaff, 2023).

These criticisms are not dissimilar to the criticisms associated with poverty governance in the U.S. The guiding ideology of the American welfare state is motivated by New Paternalism, driven by classist and racist rhetoric such as scholarship focusing on the lack of "competence" and "discipline" of the poor (Mead, 1997). Such discourse motivated the rise in the new poverty

policy arrangements associated with American welfare reform. Inherent in this reform is *paternalism* – the idea that the poor do not know how to care for themselves and must be steered towards making "good decisions" (Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). Also embedded in welfare reform is *neoliberalism*; safety net reforms were designed to support private capital markets through reduced spending on social benefits and encouragement of the private, unregulated labor market (Page & Soss, 2017; Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009).

New Paternalism permeates poverty policy through three main mechanisms. First, the paternalistic orientation of poverty governance operates through stringent rules which make receipt of social services, like TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and the EITC, conditional on the fulfillment of "social obligations", like compulsory work, administrative requirements to receive benefits, and punishments to correct inappropriate behaviors like failure to comply with regulations, such as loss of benefits and fines or fees (Freeman, 2019; Page & Soss, 2017; Soss et al., 2011; de Souza, 2021). Second, the neoliberal orientation operates through poor individuals being guided into underpaid, "low-skilled" jobs by virtue of work requirements and the insufficient benefit amounts of current programs (Dickinson, 2016; Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009; de Souza, 2021). The nature of the jobs to which low-income individuals are shepherded into are typically hourly, low-wage positions with unstable work schedules and unpredictable earnings. These types of jobs are shown to be detrimental to mental health, family life, ability to secure a second job, and overall financial security (e.g., Jacobs & Padavic, 2014; Lambert, 2008; Schneider & Harknett, 2019; Wacquant, 2009). Both these mechanisms work together in furtherance of a third mechanism: reduction in use of welfare benefits. While we see a rise in restricted-use benefits like Medicaid, and benefits solely tied to work, like the EITC, receipt of cash welfare in the form of AFDC/TANF declined by about 72% from 1994-2008 (Soss et al.,

2011). Notably, minoritized families are impacted by this most severely; states with more Black and Hispanic individuals have the lowest benefit rates, the least regulated labor markets, the strictest rules and sanctions, and the lowest rates of benefit use (e.g., Hero & Preuhs, 2007; Ojeda et al., 2019; Soss et al., 2008).

Woodward (2021) offers a conceptual argument that ties the criticisms of child welfare practice to the theoretical underpinnings of poverty governance. She argues that the child welfare system operates under the same New Paternalism that was the motivation behind welfare, therefore serving as another form of punitive governance of the poor, similar to poverty governing institutions such as safety net policies and the low-wage labor market (Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). Woodward describes several mechanisms designed to reform "bad" parents, including work-enforcement and service requirements. Similarly, in 1995, Hagedorn highlighted the historical similarities between the rise of New Paternalism in poverty policy and the growth of a punitive, well-staffed child welfare system. But, to date, there have been no empirical studies on this connection and the work of Woodward, though more recent, is entirely theoretical. This study offers evidence to enrich our empirical understanding of the connections between the governance of poverty and child welfare policy. I build on Woodward's argument by empirically illustrating how the ideologies governing poor families and individuals in the U.S. function in practice in child welfare, and by describing the harms this has on families who are jointly impacted by both poverty and child welfare governance.

In this paper, I answer two research questions: (1) What are parents' lived experiences with income loss and financial sanctions in the child welfare system?; and (2) How do parents understand the relationship between child welfare system involvement and financial well-being? Answers to these questions provide insights into the relationship between the child welfare

system and the punitive poverty policy regime, exposing the financial repercussions parents face as a result of child welfare system policies and procedures. I examine three distinct experiences of punitive practices in child welfare that are tied to poverty governance: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility.

Methods

Study Design

This study uses general qualitative inquiry, focused on thematic analysis of parents' experiences of income loss resulting from child welfare system involvement (Kahlke, 2014). The study was designed to explore how parents experienced child welfare system involvement and the ways in which the contexts of poverty, place, and race may shape these life experiences. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 parents, with the aim of telling the story of the lived experiences of parents who were investigated for child maltreatment, and the context within which they had these experiences – such as their family demographics and dynamics and the neighborhood where they lived. My overall goal in these interviews was to document parents' lived experience of poverty, place, and race in child welfare in order to assess areas for policy and practice improvement in this Midwestern state and/or across the U.S more broadly.

This particular paper focuses on just one emergent finding from these interviews, which developed through both frequency and declaration by the parent participants during interviews (LeCompte, 2010). After about half of the interviews were conducted (n=11), parents were consistently reporting repeated, substantial experiences of income loss and financial punishments due to the regulations associated with navigating the child welfare system. Parental declarations of the significance of this finding resulted in my decision to focus further analysis on this

specific result. I reentered the field to explore this emergent concept more fully. In the next round of interviews, I expanded interviewing to include direct questions[12] about the experience and process of financial implications of navigating the complex child welfare system's bureaucracy. The remaining interviews included six new parents, and four follow-up interviews with respondents who had ongoing system contact that had not yet been fully chronicled in the study. These interviews offered a detailed description of how parents experienced financial sanctions in the child welfare system. In the results, I describe parents' stories of the punitive financial processes associated with involvement in the child welfare system and offer parents' insights into what these processes meant for them and their children.

Data Collection & Sample Characteristics

Data was collected from 21 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 17 individual child welfare-impacted parents in a Midwestern State. Interviews ranged from approximately 40-120 minutes in length and parents were paid $75 incentives via a cash application of their choice after an interview. Interviews were based on the interview guide in **Appendix A**. This document was a guide and not a word-for-word list of the exact questions asked. The conversation with the parent did not always unfold in the exact order of the questions in the guide; I used the interview guide as a scaffolding for the kinds of questions upon which I aimed to gather data in alignment with the study's aims. Most parents participated in just one interview (n=13), but four parents experiencing ongoing system contact – their case was still open when they were first interviewed, or a new case opened – agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. Follow-up interview questions are included at the end of the interview guide in **Appendix A**. I conducted second interviews with two goals: (1) To follow-up with parents who had ongoing system

[12] See questions 5 and 6 in **Appendix A**, which were specifically added to explore this emergent theme.

contact to explore any new experiences, and (2) To explicitly examine the emerging finding on income loss with parents actively experiencing this result. All interviews were conducted from July to November of 2023 on Zoom.[13]

Any parent in this state who had been investigated by the state's child welfare agency at any point in time, regardless of the outcome or current case status, was eligible to participate. Parents who participated in the study were recruited from a local parent support group, "Parents Helping Parents (PHP).[14]" PHP is partially connected to the state's child welfare system; the program receives some public support, and depending on the county, is run by a public child welfare worker or a local nonprofit. I selected PHP as a recruitment site due to its wide reach across the state, allowing for geographic variability, and its connections with the public child welfare agency. While many parents receive supports through private agencies/nonprofits, I was particularly interested in recruiting parents who had substantial contact with public child welfare workers due to the prevalent role government workers carry out in investigations. I contacted a public child welfare caseworker who was engaged in the PHP program in one large urban county in the state[15] and requested this individual's support in recruiting parents; this worker shared flyers with clients between February and August of 2023. I also snowball sampled by asking parents who agreed to an interview with me to refer any parents who may fit the criteria for the study but were not involved with PHP; in total I interviewed 12 parents recruited directly through PHP and five parents referred to me via snowball sampling.

[13] Parents were given the option to meet in-person at a location of their choosing for the interview; all chose Zoom.
[14] The name of the agency is masked for confidentiality purposes. References to the "large urban county" throughout this manuscript refer to the same large urban county in a Midwestern state.
[15] Importantly, though this worker was employed in a large urban county, parents across the state regularly were in contact with them for support and they provided case management services in multiple counties.

The sample of 17 parents included three fathers and 14 mothers; seven of the 17 participants identified as white and the other 10 identified as Black or African American, with one Black respondent also identifying as Hispanic. About half of the sample (n=8) resided in one major urban area, while the remaining nine respondents lived in surrounding suburban regions. About 2/3^{rds} of parents were single parenting, while 1/3rd were co-parenting[16]. Parents had between 1 and 8 children in the home, with the majority of parents interviewed having 3-4 children. The parents' children ranged in age from infants (less than 1 year) to established adults in their 20's and 30's; most children were 6 and younger at the time of the parent's first contact with the child welfare system. All parents except one had *previous,* prior history with the child welfare system before the current case(s) that we focused on in the study, including either experience in the system as a child or previous experience with the system with their own children.

Experiences with the child welfare system, including the "most recent" or "current" contact (the focus of the study) were complex and layered, with parents reporting varied experiences across different cases and different children, some of which occurred previously or at overlapping times. Previous and overlapping cases sometimes included protective custody or foster care placements and parental rights termination. Only two of the 17 parents had children that did not enter foster care in the current case(s) we discussed during the interviews, though some parents had a previous history with multiple investigations that had *not all* led to foster care removals. The characteristics of parents in the study are fairly representative of the kinds of families who come into contact with the child welfare system, with the exception of the small

[16] Co-parents/partners/spouses/other biological parents were eligible to participate via snowball sampling. Two couples (n=4) participated in the study. They were interviewed separately from their partner and both couples had child welfare system histories that predated their current relationship.

number (one) of Hispanic parents in the study. Most custodial parents who become involved in the child welfare system are women, many are single parents to very young children, and a large share are Black/African American[17]. Parent characteristics are detailed below in **Table 9**.

Table 9 Parent Sample Characteristics

Parent Characteristic	Number of Respondents or Range (n=17)
Race	
Black/African American	10
White	7
Hispanic [1] [2]	1
Gender	
Man	3
Woman	14
Eligible for Public Benefits (low-income)	16
Number of Children in Household	1-8
Age Range of all the Respondents' Children	<1 – 32
Parenting Status	
Co-parenting with biological/legal parent	3
Co-parenting with partner/stepparent	3
Single parent	11
Urbanicity	
Urban (major city)	8
Suburban (outlying suburban county of the major city)	9
Case Status [3]	
Child(ren) entered foster care at some point	15
Child(ren) never entered foster care	2
Children were returned to parental custody before or during study	15
Children were actively in foster care throughout entire study	2
Parent had rights terminated for at least one child at some point [4]	3
Parent had at least one child "age out" of care [5]	2
Previous History with the Child Welfare System	16

[1] These categories are not mutually exclusive; one Black parent also identified as Hispanic
[2] I use the term Hispanic, as opposed to Latine or Latinx, as this is the term the parent used to describe themselves
[3] Categories are not mutually exclusive
[4] All parents who had rights terminated for at least one child also had children currently in their custody
[5] By age out, I mean the child reached legal adulthood before being returned home or adopted

[17] See U.S. DHHS, 2021 for summary data on 2019 child welfare system contacts across the U.S.

Analysis & Coding

I conducted thematic analysis to examine the data in this study, which involved a hybrid strategy of qualitative analysis. This strategy encompassed both a deductive approach (e.g., Crabtree & Miller, 1992) as well as a data-driven inductive approach (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998), which allowed for respondent-driven experiences to emerge in the data while still permitting the a priori areas of interest in the broader research questions to be integral to the analysis. The first stage of analysis involved the development of broad categories of findings, which included a mix of both deductive categories of interest to the researcher prior to data collection and inductive categories which emerged during data collection and analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Deductive categories included *poverty*, *place*, *race*, *child welfare policy/practice*, and *intersectionality of poverty, place, and race* – the main areas of content through which I sought to understand parental experiences in the initial study design. Several inductive categories also emerged during analysis, such as *family life*, *social services,* and *child welfare history*. This paper focuses on *income loss,* a broad category in this data, which was both deductive and inductive in nature. This content category was respondent-driven and emerged naturally, but I proceeded to collect data intentionally and directly on this topic once it emerged, and I deductively defined this category in the analysis phase.

Once categories were defined, I reviewed transcripts, audio recordings, and notes from interviews with the goal of identifying patterns in the data that fell within the various categories. I took reflective notes on patterns across these categories and constructed a list of initial themes and subthemes which emerged as patterns among the broad categories. From here, I developed a closed codebook of themes and subthemes, which could be applied deductively to the data by research assistants and by myself. This coding scheme included specific codes to identify the

themes within the category of income loss, and other thematic codes within broader categories. The coding scheme was input into Dedoose Version 9.0.17 software for coding and analysis.

Two research assistants and I each applied codes to interview transcripts using Dedoose. Research assistants were trained and onboarded to the software and subject matter in team meetings, and all three coders initially jointly coded the same four transcripts in order to define, describe, and compare the codes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). During this time, we examined the meaning and definition of the codes and tested the reliability of the codebook and themes, revising codes and definitions as needed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Through this feedback process, we reached consensus on theme labels and meanings in the coding scheme across various transcripts before each individual was assigned their own individual transcripts to code.

Having conducted the interviews and developed the codebook myself, I was deeply immersed in the data; both research assistants were new to the subject matter and quite distant from the data. The collaborative coding process allowed the three coders to achieve some semblance of balance in the tension between both immersion and distance to the data, given our varied experiences with the subject and interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). To further support intercoder reliability, I engaged several best practices identified within qualitative projects that seek interrater reliability: (1) Three researchers coded the data, (2) both the research assistants were entirely removed from the data collection process to provide external perspectives on the codes, while I collected all the data and was able to offer this internal perspective as needed, (3) the team of three coders represented a variety of coding and subject matter expertise, and (4) coders met regularly to discuss transcripts and reach consensus on code definitions (Cofie et al., 2022).

Results

Across the 21 interviews, parents repeatedly described engagement with the child welfare system as directly financially damaging for their households. There were three common themes related to this economic precarity: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility. Below, I detail the findings from each theme, describing the impact these findings had for parents and highlighting the ways in which these findings connect to poverty governance in the U.S.

"I've already scheduled myself to work, trying to make a living to get my kids back…": Job Scheduling Precarity & Child Welfare Agency Requirements

Parents reported persistent challenges with maintaining or securing employment while navigating child welfare system bureaucracy. Specific elements contributing to these reports by parents included adherence to social service requirements, random drug testing, unpredictable visitation, court, and medical appointments, and legal and social barriers to employment due to having an allegation of child maltreatment on one's record.

First, many, but not all, of the parent respondents worked within the precarious low-wage, "low-skilled" labor market which created serious difficulties in balancing work hours with case requirements. As I described above, the child welfare system, much like poverty governing institutions, strongly encourages work because employment is viewed as a protective factor in maltreatment cases, and as a result, many parents who are not working are desperate to take the first job they can get – often unregulated, low-wage, "low-skill" jobs. As Karen, a Black mother to a teen daughter put it, "*I lost my job when they called [the child welfare agency], and so I am trying to find me a job now, and [the caseworker] is calling me about it… I just pray to God to*

hurry up and get this job. Once I get this job, I know this will give me a lift up." Though not always an explicitly stated rule, many parents like Karen were desperate to secure or keep employment because they perceived having a job as a mechanism to "lift up" their chances to get their kids home, a perception driven by caseworkers who strongly encouraged parents to work.

Ironically, despite the expectation and desire to work, for many parents, both the unpredictability and the social stigma associated with having a child welfare case plan resulted directly in lost employment options, lost work hours, and/or difficulty in securing new jobs. To illustrate, Kat, a white mother in a suburban area explained that she had to quit a consistent job driving trucks cross-state, for fear of missing requirements for her and her wife's case while she was on the road for that job. Finding another job that fit her family's case scheduling demands proved to be immensely difficult due to unpredictable visit schedules, random drug tests which were, indeed, random and impossible to plan around, and stigma associated with admitting these scheduling needs.

> **Kat**: "*Well, since this case opened, I'm not able to go on the road or nothing because I don't want missed visits or drops to count against me, so I've lost that job. So I haven't been able to really keep a stable job because I can't sit here and say, 'Well I've got [child welfare agency][18] obligations' and then people don't call me back. I've been able to keep a couple of jobs. I'm like, 'Look, I have visits these days.' But then visit days have changed, everything's changed and it's like how can I keep a consistent job? I've got a mortgage to pay… So I found a FedEx job, but that's only going to be part-time and it's 7:30 to 9:30, and then 5:30 to 9:30, something like that, part-time, split shift, fifteen an hour… I want to go back to truck driving. But even if I have an in-town job, it's ten-to-twelve-hour days. So it doesn't work with the case demands. My wife doesn't work. I need to have a good job to prove we can care for our kids.*"

[18] The name of the state's child welfare agency is masked throughout the data presented here to conceal the state in which interviews took place.

Even parents who were able to secure more predictable salaried jobs struggled to maintain these "better" employment situations. Anne Marie, a white mother of two boys under age 5 in a different suburban area, was navigating multiple unfounded cases with the child welfare agency. Even when cases are unfounded, parents can be encouraged to accept "safety plans", which require parents to engage in mandated services and involve continued contact by the child welfare agency. Many parents, including Anne Marie, reported not knowing they could say no when encouraged to prolong their contact with the system through a safety plan. Having recently successfully overcome the challenges of an open case in which she was given a safety plan as opposed to having her children enter foster care, Anne Marie had persevered and gotten a new, higher-quality full-time job offer in a preschool, which she was excited about. However, a new case was anonymously called in to the child welfare hotline, with an allegation of sexual abuse against Anne Marie. With this new case, the child welfare agency protocol required a call to Anne Marie's new employer even before the allegations were fully investigated, resulting in a delayed start at this job and continued social stigma once she could start.

> **Anne Marie**: "*I received new, unfounded call July twelfth. The investigator called me, they said that I had a case open. They told me what it was about, but it's just an anonymous [child welfare agency] call. It doesn't mean that you're guilty or that the allegations are true… So, I did speak with her on the phone and said you know, 'I'm having custody issues with my son's father. He's making false calls on me. He's been doing this for about a year or so and I've been unfounded. I don't feel like it's necessary for you to come into my home and have a meeting with me over something I've already been investigated by police for and expunged for.' But, the case went on for almost a month or so. On August 2nd, [the child welfare agency] contacted my new job and told my job about the allegations against me. My job delayed my start date because I do work with children. So, they delayed my start date. And then [child welfare agency] closed my case eight days later after they contacted my job. This caused my principal to call me and*

ask me if I still wanted to work at the school. It was embarrassing really. It was embarrassing because everybody knows my business now. I was able to keep the job offer, but I lost that first paycheck."

Other parents experienced financial and emotional destabilization from their cases, resulting in loss of family businesses and other household assets. Tariq, a Black father in the major city of this Midwestern region, described his family as doing very well before their child welfare case. He and his wife owned their home and a business in a historically Black middle-class neighborhood in the city. But the financial well-being of their household was dramatically destabilized in the aftermath of their child welfare case opening. Tariq's wife was required to attend inpatient substance abuse treatment, which resulted in her no longer being in the home full-time. As a result, Tariq was managing the entire process of their case requirements, including his wife's medical care, on his own. This included attending court dates, medical appointments, his own set of required services including parenting classes, and visitations, without spousal support. This process created immense emotional and financial stress and resulted in Tariq being unable to keep up with running his business.

***Tariq**: "Our store was [just down the street from the house]. I'm at the store. My hours were seven a.m. to ten p.m., so I'm at the store all day. That night when I closed the store and I go home, I go home to an empty house. That was the beginning of our saga with [the child welfare agency]… In the process of the saga, when all my kids got removed, we really struggled financially and emotionally trying to keep up with mandatory services and requirements while also worrying about our kids. We ended up losing everything in the process… we lost the business, we lost our home, and we lost two cars."*

Furthermore, several parents who did not explicitly *lose* employment options reported struggling to manage a typical hourly job schedule while navigating a similarly demanding and unpredictable child welfare system, including required social service completion, random substance use testing, court dates, state-mandated medical appointments, and visitations. These

requirements are directly at odds with employment for the vast majority of low-income parents, and the result of this struggle is that many parents lose work hours and associated employment income during their cases. Parents were compelled to prioritize the child welfare requirements for fear of never being reunified with their children. Michelle, a Black mother in the major city of this region explained: "*I had to miss work to do random [drug] drops, or doctor's appointments and stuff like that. Because I got to. So, I lose those work hours because if I don't go, then I failed automatically in the eyes of the department*." As Karen put it, parents "got to go" if they don't want to be seen as parental failures while they are trying to get their kids home.

Notably, a subset of parents with more stringent case requirements were forced to comply with more intensive requirements such as Tariq's wife who was in a daily inpatient rehab program. For parents experiencing additional demands on their time through the child welfare agency, it can be almost impossible to work. For example, Stephanie, a white mother of two daughters and a son, described how she was juggling multiple court-mandated services for both mental health and substance abuse concerns while trying to work at a grocery store. She perceived these challenges as a "consequence" for her actions, but the challenges also were very difficult to overcome, and the employment balancing act was a barrier to getting her kids home. She lost work hours while having to juggle all her required services, and she faced social stigma in having to confide in her boss about why she could not work.

> **Stephanie***: "I would have parenting [classes], I would have [counseling service], I would have NA meetings, so substance use. Plus, I was having to go to [a different counseling agency] at nighttime as well, and random drops like twice a week. It was constant demand, you know what I mean?... I messed up and I brought this consequence on myself, but at the same time it still poses extreme difficulties. If I was at work, and I had to drop. I had to drop by, I think, by 2:00 p.m. I would have to--explaining that to my job, why I need to leave in the middle of the day, is embarrassing, first off. Thank God I*

had an understanding boss who I knew before this happened, but I was missing hours that I could've been working, and I needed to be working. That caused a barrier to getting my kids back as well."

Outside of the sheer number of requirements many parents must meet in order to successfully reunify with a child that has been taken into state custody, parents repeatedly reported challenges with the unpredictable and frequently shifting nature of case requirements. Parents trying their best to hit this moving target of requirements struggled immensely when working in a similarly unpredictable and punitive low-wage labor market. Joy, a Black mother who was working in the gig economy through an employment app on her phone, detailed how having to adjust to changes in the child welfare agency's schedule and expectations impacted her ability to effectively secure work and income. She explained that, despite needing to work to maintain a stable home for her kids to return to, the agency routinely would change scheduled appointments and visits for her daughter without prior notice. Joy would be punished in the app she worked through for having to cancel a shift at the last minute to prioritize her daughter. Joy was balancing work performance with child welfare performance, and the tension between the two was irreconcilable. As of November 2023, Joy had still not been reunified with her children.

Joy: *"When they had the clinical thing for my daughter, I had to call off work for that because they told me last minute. Any other thing that they had that they wanted me to do, I had to call off work for. That's taking money away from me. It's taking time away from me to be able to pay my bills, to be able to be self-sufficient. I had this app called Instawork. With Instawork you're able to pick your own schedule, like if jobs come up that you can work you can pick it. Even with that, if I would schedule myself out for certain jobs that I work, right, because I gotta work. And then they would come along and be like, 'Well, we got this scheduled on this day.' Now, in order for me to properly call off, I would have to call off twenty-four hours in advance or I'm going to have to give my shift away. If I didn't do either one of those in the proper time frame, I get penalized through the app. Then the app will tell me, 'Well, you can't get any new shifts for a whole*

week.' Now I'm missing money because I have to cancel late when I told you all plenty of times, 'Hey, can you all please let me know two weeks in advance so I can have enough time to make adjustments.' If you're telling me about something the day before and I've already scheduled myself to work, trying and make a living to get my kids back… What am I supposed to do?"

Despite being expected, and wanting, to work, parents with child welfare cases were embedded in two layers of governance which made their reunification with their children incredibly difficult. Firstly, parents were engaged with and pushed into a largely low-wage, part-time labor market, a feature of poverty governance which involves unpredictable and precarious scheduling and pay. At best, working an hourly position in a grocery store, as a truck driver, or in the gig economy can be difficult to schedule around. Yet, these parents were also engaged in the child welfare system's set of regulations and were forced to navigate another layer of unpredictable scheduling of visits, services, and substance use tests which did not mesh well with any job schedules, never mind precarious ones. The end result is that parents who are bound by neoliberal expectations to work *and* child welfare system requirements have an incredibly difficult time balancing both, resulting in lost positions, delayed job offers, lost businesses, lost hours, and economic hardships which make reunification with children especially challenging.

"You're forcing us to repay what you guys took away from us.": Paying Child Support when the State Takes Your Children

While many parents experienced employment hardships and scheduling difficulties as a result of having to manage extensive case requirements to reunify with their children, non-custodial parents whose children are in out of home placements experienced an additional consequence of an opened child welfare case: child support payments to the state and/or garnished income to cover these payments. Child support payments are basically a fee or a fine for having one's children enter the foster care system; the charges are intended to be a deterrent

to, and a penalty for having one's child(ren) enter foster care. Back-owed or delinquent child support fines from while a child was in care must be paid even once a child has returned home, and it is unclear how or if the money actually reaches a child in the foster care system. This lost income often creates further economic hardships for families already struggling to make ends meet, trying to maintain their households, and get their kids home.

Michelle is an example of a parent who was reunited with her children, but still forced to pay back-owed child support even though the state was no longer caring for the children. Michelle explained how she struggled to adjust to this lost income and worked overtime to help support her children even now that they were back in her full-time care. "*I'm paying, I think one something each kid… For the three, I mean that's $300 something bucks taken out of my check. I mean it got a little better now that I'm working on my healthcare and stuff like that. Checks is a little better, but still, I mean who wants $300 taken out of the check? That's a whole month of groceries. Sometimes I would work overtime to help*."

Other parents forced to pay child support to the state expressed confusion about where the money was going. Sue Anna, a Black mother of five children who was also caring for three of her nephews, described how she was asked to pay child support when all eight children were removed from her home. But she felt the children still did not look properly cared for when she would see them. So, despite paying money for her children to the state and having two of her children's SSI provided to the state as well, she continued to spend extra money to provide for her children while they were in kinship care with a family member. This created financial hardships for her because the money was what she was supposed to be living off of at the time.

> **Sue Anna**: *"The department were trying to make me pay child support… The family member that had them, they wasn't doing what they supposed to by my kids. The case worker was telling them that I was to pay child support, so I'm supposed to be buying*

them clothes. And, every time I see my kids, they was looking raggedy. The type of money we was bringing in from Social Security and our business was good. So [the child welfare agency] was getting checks, big checks for my boys, but they weren't taking care of my kids like they supposed to. I had to step up and take my money that I was living off of to take care of my kids while they was in custody."

As Sue Anna's experience illustrates, outside of direct payments to the state, the child welfare agency can also garnish income from both children and parents from social security/disability. Jane, a white suburban mother of 7 mixed-race children, described how, despite not working, her disability benefits were garnished, and her husband was forced to pay additional child support as well. Jane explains that the child welfare agency "took everything away" – including her children – but despite that, the agency insisted on taking child support from her husband on top of garnishing Jane's SSI.

Jane: *"I am physically disabled so I do get social security. [My disability] doesn't affect the way I parent, but it does affect the ability to be able to work, so standing on my feet for multiple hours… But my disability did not play any part in not being able to care for my children. So, I did get social security before they took everything away from us… But then, they filed child support on us too. They had already taken my disability check for the kids, because they receive a certain amount towards my disability. They already had that. So look, they couldn't take any more from me, but they did charge my husband [additional child support]."*

While the child welfare agency forcibly garnished income or demanded payments from many parents in this study, other parents were able to avoid this particular sanction by virtue of making little to no money at all. Harriett, a Black mother of three children reported that she was asked to pay but couldn't, and she expressed concern that the practice was imposed without parental consent, as a form of repayment to society for a parents' actions.

Harriett: "*They tried to [take child support], but I didn't have anything--what were they going to get out of me? Five dollars? They tried to take child support for my youngest*

one but I wasn't making enough. But, like when they do get child support from someone, you're forcing us to repay what you guys took away from us. We didn't ask you guys to jump up in this case or matter or to "take care" of our kids. Why do we need to pay you child support for what you did to us?"

As with fines and fees imposed for failure to comply with poverty governance rules like safety net benefit eligibility requirements, parents involved in the child welfare face child support fines if their children are removed from their custody. The decision to remove children from the home is viewed by parents as a punishment for "bad parenting", which would seem to be punishment enough. However, parents are then charged additional fines for child support, which may or may not actually make it to the children in care. Moreover, once parents "do the work" to get their kids home, they can continue to be charged. The money paid towards these fines is taken out of the hands of poor families, even when they are deemed good enough to be reunified with their children, which further destabilizes the economic well-being of these low-income families.

"This bill didn't get paid because the kids had to eat when they came to visit…": Budgeting through Reduced Benefits & Services

The final result of this study highlights how poverty governance institutions like public housing and public benefits also shrink when a parent's children are removed from their custody. I find that having an open child welfare case can, and typically does, cause reduction or termination of public benefits and eligibility for other social services. All but one of the parents in this sample were eligible for and receiving public benefits, which they relied on to support their family's wellbeing prior to their case opening. However, parents who have children removed from their custody typically lose some or all of their public benefits, including food stamps, TANF, and housing vouchers, because those benefits require custody of their children

and/or because income cut offs are assessed differently when children are not in the home. Parents reported feeling like their loss of resources was a punishment for being bad parents, and this punishment put their capacities to be reunified with their children at risk.

Importantly, despite reduced or terminated benefits – and difficulties trying to get jobs to make up the difference – parents were still explicitly expected to contribute to resources for their children's care, like diapers, food, and adequate shelter (for overnight visits), during highly surveilled visitations with their children. Out of both a desire to provide parental care, and a fear of the child welfare agency's judgment, parents repeatedly described how they would prioritize resources for their children despite their reduced benefits. As Michelle explained: *"Yeah, they took away my [SNAP]. They took away my TANF. They took all that away. They took [the kids] off the [SNAP] card, so I was getting way less than what I would be getting if they were added on. But I still had to provide food, diapers, wipes, drinks [for visitations]. And I would still buy them clothes and stuff like that."* Despite no longer having the public benefits explicitly designed to help her support her children, Michelle prioritized her children's expenses.

Stephanie further described how she had to navigate her reduced public benefits, and the tug-of-war that was trying to pay her bills and still feed her children during visits without her food stamps. She explained the fear she had about proving that she was a good mother to her caseworker who was supervising visitations, in order to avoid further child welfare battles.

> **Stephanie**: *"I was getting food stamps. Then it got cut off because it was just me. I think I might've got a little bit still. The kids were still coming for visits and I was still having to provide food and all these things, and it put a barrier in my way. I feel like the department should be removing barriers, right?... I mean it meant that money that I was supposed to be putting towards bills and that, I had to put towards food. I mean that's basically it. Money was--I had to rob Peter to pay Paul, type of thing. This bill didn't get paid because the kids had to eat when they came to visit, because if I can't provide as a*

mother, then you continue to punish me and I don't get my kids back. You know what I mean? It's all a big tug of war really. It's a power struggle I feel like."

Outside of SNAP and TANF benefits, parents who were receiving public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers (Section Eight) also experienced benefit reductions which increased the costs they were having to manage. As Sean, a Black father of two children in a major urban area explained, *"We had Section Eight, yes. But they reduced the amount when they took the kids out the house. We kept the apartment, but we paid more on the rent. A couple hundred more a month because of [the child welfare agency]."* In the face of difficulties securing employment, having to pay child support fines, and losing SNAP and TANF benefits, parents like Sean also then experienced an increase in monthly rental cost. Housing is a fundamental resource considered for "safe" parenting – caseworkers inspect homes during investigations and prior to reunification. As a result, the need to maintain housing despite its increased cost had a strong pull on parental finances in the tug-of-war that Stephanie described above.

Karen, a Black mother of a 14-year-old daughter who I quote above as desperately searching for a job, struggled with her housing voucher even once she secured a new job by her second interview. Karen's daughter was taken into the child welfare agency's custody because of law enforcement intervention in a fight between youths in her self-described "bad neighborhood", and she relied on a housing choice voucher to pay her rent in this neighborhood. Her voucher amount was cut when her daughter was removed from the home which resulted in further challenges for Karen, who wanted to move to a better neighborhood for her daughter. She describes attempting to comply with requirements imposed on her, but still struggling to improve her family's situation, despite this compliance, because of the reduction in her voucher benefit.

Karen: *"I've been trying to move for the last… four years, and it's like a standstill. I'm currently on Section Eight, but they took my daughter off the lease because of the case.*

So the rent went up. And with the lower amount, it's like they just don't want you to move anywhere… I was trying to elevate my life and do better and be a productive citizen [but] you all choose not to help me do this. You all say get a job. I get a job. Then here it is I'm saving my money; I'm getting my credit together. What is the holdup that I can't leave this neighborhood? I'm just not willing to move just to be in [another] bad area and put my daughter in a worse situation than we are now…"

Parents also faced struggles in accessing non-means-tested services and resources, like diaper banks. Harriett, a Black mother of three, described being denied diaper bank resources, and her resulting financial struggles: *"I told the caseworker, 'I'm not working right now, what can I do for it, like diapers and everything like that?' And they were like, 'You could go to the diaper pantry.' But then when I get to the diaper pantry they told me I had to have custody of my son… You tell me that you're a resource to help me with my kid, but you're telling me that I have to full custody of my son to get the resource that I need, but I got referred by [child welfare agency], the place that helps support your guys' facility. So, I [worked for] Uber here and there to make ends meet and cover these costs. It wasn't like I had a full amount of stuff I needed. I was just basically surviving."* During a time when Harriett was experiencing the balancing act of adhering to child welfare services and case plan requirements to get her kids home, she was also trying to make ends meet in-between these requirements with extra shifts for Uber in order to make sure her son had diapers during his visits.

For parents who are dually involved in both the poverty governing institutions, like public housing and public benefits systems, and the child welfare system, they experience the punishments of child welfare governance and poverty governance in concert. The loss of one's children causes a reduction or loss of benefits. For parents with children in foster care, reduction of benefits like housing vouchers and the loss of benefits like TANF directly affected parents' capacity to be reunified with their children. Parents are expected to have the resources to feed

their children during highly scrutinized visitations, and to have safe and stable housing for their children to return home to, yet having an open child welfare case reduces the funds available to parents to provide such resources.

Discussion

This paper analyzes qualitative data from semi-structured interviews to explore parents' experiences with income loss and financial sanctions resulting from navigating the public child welfare system. Overall, I find that families face substantial, negative economic repercussions caused by having an open child welfare case and navigating the processes required to have children returned to their custody once a case opens. I find that negative economic repercussions in the child welfare system operate through three key mechanisms related to poverty governance: (1) lost jobs and lost job hours due to scheduling precarity, (2) forced child support payments to the state and/or garnished wages, and (3) reduced public benefits and social service eligibility. I find that each of these mechanisms operates independently of one another – and indeed, other studies have quantitatively documented each of these three mechanisms individually (e.g., Cancian et al., 20212; Cancian et al., 2017; Kortenkamp 2004; Lee et al., 2017; Marcenko, et al., 2011; Marcenko et al., 2012). However, I also find that these mechanisms functioned cumulatively and jointly with one another, which severely impacted parents' ability to maintain a stable household and reunify with their children.

First, across the board, it was clear that having a child welfare case opened had a substantial impact on parents' ability to secure and maintain employment and on parents' performance and availability for jobs, despite the fact that work was perceived as mandatory in order for children to be returned home to a parent – a perception parents described but also a real expectation that is investigated and judged by workers (Slack et al., 2003) Parents described the

precarity of balancing court-mandated services, random drug tests, and erratic visitation and appointment schedules with hourly jobs, and the resulting impossibility of balancing the unpredictability of both the child welfare system and the low-wage, "low-skilled" labor market.

The child welfare system encourages work, similar to the workfare expectations within new poverty governance (Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009), and research indicates that employment and other required services can be effective at improving family outcomes (e.g., D'Andre & Chambers, 2012; Berger & Waldgofel, 2011; Brooke & McDonald, 2007; Grella et al., 2008; Slack et al., 2003). Yet, navigating the child welfare system is so unpredictable, demanding, and punitive that it results in parents losing jobs, businesses, and work hours, *even though* they are expected to (and want to) work. Thus, parents are impacted by the child welfare system in similar ways to families engaged with new poverty governance – an expectation to work, in a labor market not designed to meet the needs of low-income families, but with the added layer of complexity that is working through the bureaucratically complex child welfare system requirements in order to secure or maintain custody of their children – a process so taxing it may as well be another job.

Second, despite the child welfare system already weakening the financial stability of families through undermining employment prospects and capacity, system involvement also generated economic hardships for parents through required child support payments and garnished employment income or SSI checks if a child was placed in foster care. While required child support payments to a state for foster care "services" are not consistent practices in every state, most states refer all children receiving Title IV-E federal foster care services to the state child support enforcement agency, per federal guidelines (Azevedo-MCCaffrey, 2022). In the

Midwestern State in which this study was conducted, the referral of parents to the child support enforcement agency is routine practice in the child welfare agency.

We know that most parents impacted by the child welfare system are already poor, and quantitative analyses have highlighted how child support fines impose an additional barrier to family reunification (Cancian et al., 2012; Cancian et al., 2017). In this qualitative analysis, I found that most parents reported being charged child support, though those with extremely low or no income were not required to pay. For parents that *were* required to pay, this resulted in substantial loss of income for their households, which caused challenges even for parents whose kids had come home already. While the impact of this policy for families is clearly negative and inequitable in its impact on low-income families, the policy also illustrates an empirical example of the new poverty governance mechanism of fines and fees within the child welfare system. Similar to the criminal legal and safety net systems, these child support payments are required of child welfare-involved parents despite uncertainty about where the money goes and the inability of many parents to pay as a means of control and disempowerment of poor families (Page & Soss, 2017; Wacquant, 2009).

Third, beyond work and child support fines, I find that child welfare system-impacted parents who are receiving public benefits (most parents) typically experience termination and/or reduction of public benefits, creating further financial hardships for parents. This finding confirms existing quantitative evidence about the economic disconnections associated with child welfare system involvement (e.g., Hook et al., 2016; Keagan Eamon & Kopels, 2004; Marcenko, et al., 2011; Marcenko et al., 2012) and offers new insights into *how* these disconnections operate through the public benefits system. Reducing "reliance" on public benefit systems, is, of course, a fundamental priority of neoliberal welfare reform; safety net requirements like time limits and

burdensome renewal paperwork are designed with an intention of decreasing the number of recipients on cash welfare, and they do so quite effectively (Katz, 2013; Soss et al., 2011; Wacquant, 2009). This analysis reveals that the child welfare system operates in tandem with poverty governance. The reduction or termination of benefits of parents whose children were taken into state custody is imposed on any parent receiving public benefits in this state – and every respondent in this study who received public benefits (n=16) endured this sanction. Parents experienced reductions or elimination of TANF, SNAP, and Housing Choice Vouchers, each of which has different and also accumulating impacts on families. Despite elimination of TANF benefits and reduced food stamps, parents were still expected to provide food and diapers for their children, and parents feared not doing so would result in being deemed a bad parent, and not getting children returned home. The visitations in which parents were expected to provide food and diapers for their children are highly scrutinized as part of the decision to close a child's protective custody case, and thus parents were quite fearful about getting these visits "right" (Ansay & Perkins, 2004).

Parents also reported the unique challenges of reduced housing vouchers and loss of access to social services like diaper banks. Parents with vouchers faced increased rental costs if their children entered foster care, and parents lost access to non-means-tested services like diaper banks, despite needing to provide both shelter and diapers for their kids during visitations. These changes increased financial demands on households while parents were already juggling more difficult to obtain work and fewer safety net benefits like SNAP. Yet, in the face of reduced financial resources, parents still felt a responsibility to buy clothing and toys for their children, and the financial hardship associated with providing this care on a reduced benefit budget created monetary difficulties for parents. The result of reducing/eliminating public benefits is that low-

income parents are forced to weather the judgment of caseworkers with even fewer resources than they began their system-contact with. Despite that negative result, this mechanism is working exactly as designed – the child welfare system functions in a way that reduces public benefit caseloads and expenditures, a key goal of poverty governing institutions.

While an important step in expanding our knowledge of child welfare's impact on parents and in tying child welfare policy to poverty governance, this analysis also has limitations. First, while all three findings – employment precarity, child support payments, and benefit reduction – are the result of broad paternalistic federal policies and neoliberal social structures, the ways that each mechanism operates likely varies somewhat across states and locales, and the effects of these mechanisms will be felt different depending on the contexts in which parents live. The data presented here represents experiences in one Midwestern State, and primarily one major city and its suburbs within that state. Additional qualitative work on financial sanctions in other geographic contexts will be important for understanding nuances in this policy problem, and strategies to address it more fully. Second, this study relied on sampling from a parent support group (PHP) which likely attracts certain types of parents, for example those that are English-speaking and with consistent access to the internet in order to research and find such groups. PHP parents may also be qualitatively different from parents not engaged in this kind of support group, such as in personality and in regional access to resources. Finally, the overall sample size is small with the sample of non-PHP parents being even smaller (n=5), and this sample size has an added limitation in that it also does not include data from any parents living in rural areas and included only one parent who did not identify as low-income (eligible for public benefits). These sample limitations likely influenced the experiences families were reporting in this study. The impact of the income loss mechanisms that I report here may be distinct across different family

and household contexts. On the whole, the sample in this study is likely on the more advantaged end of the spectrum of parents who are impacted by the child welfare system; they were in urban and suburban regions with more resources, most were connected to at least one service agency by virtue of the sampling strategy, all spoke English, etc. The implication of these sampling limitations is that there are likely many communities of parents for whom navigating the financial precarity associated with child welfare system involvement is more challenging.

Despite these limitations, this analysis offers some important implications for policy and practice in both the child welfare and poverty policy areas. First, child welfare workers – and their counterparts in courts and social service agencies – should make a concerted effort to increase the predictability and prior notice of their scheduling of visitations and services. This effort would dramatically improve parents' capacity to maintain gainful employment, a vital expectation which is currently very difficult for parents to meet. Second, states do have some discretion over the degree to which they solicit child support enforcement, and this study highlights erring on the side of enforcement directly harms family well-being, without a clear benefit to children while they are in care. As such, more state child welfare agencies ought to consider eliminating child support enforcement.

Finally, this study makes clear how intricately connected poverty policy and child welfare policy are – in both philosophy and in practice. Work policy, welfare policy, and housing policy all *directly* influence most child welfare impacted-parents, and the way these policies are structured plays a vital role in system-impacted parents' ability to have their children returned home if they enter protective custody. This makes it imperative that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in both the child welfare and poverty policy areas are in conversation with one another. This paper's results indicate that policy issues like public benefit eligibility, fair work

week policies, and child support policies are all highly relevant to the lives of child welfare impacted families. They are also implemented in policy fields quite separate from child welfare. As such, policy changes needed to improve low-income family experiences in the child welfare system cannot be made by child welfare administrators or advocates alone. Rather, a future with a child welfare system that is less punitive and more equitable is a future that demands collaboration across the child welfare policy and poverty policy institutions.

IV. CHAPTER 4. Street-level Disparities: How Place Shapes the Process of Frontline Child Welfare Investigations

Abstract

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play important roles in defining policy implementation and outcomes through direct interactions with clients and discretionary decision-making. The organizational contexts in which SLBs work, however, like the resources available within the environment and the demands of external stakeholders, shape the choices available to SLBs. This implies that the concept of place, or the physical and human characteristics of a geographic area, may be important to street-level decision-making, but exactly how is currently unknown. In this paper, I examine how place shapes street-level decision-making through the case of public child welfare investigations in rural, suburban, and urban regions. I analyze qualitative interview data from investigators and supervisors (n=24) embedded in a comparative case study of four public child welfare offices in one Midwestern State. Results indicate that place influences three key resources in the organizational environment, which shapes individual worker decisions: (1) regional service availability, (2) geographic distance and time, and (3) local politics. Each of these environmental resources mattered differentially in urban, suburban, and rural regions, creating unique opportunities and constraints for child welfare practitioner decision-making. Given these place-specific results, I conclude that street-level theory should further incorporate the notion of place.

Scholars of public policy and public administration have long made the case that both policy design and policy outcomes are inherently tied to the decisions of individual street-level workers, like teachers, caseworkers, and judges, who are responsible for directly implementing policies and practices on the frontlines of human services (e.g., Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2020; Lipsky, 1969; Lipsky, 2010; Prottas, 1978). Researchers have further contended that the frontline decision-making and discretion of these actors is shaped by the organizational context in which they work, such as by the resources available in an office, the organizational culture and practices, and agency-level rules and regulations (Brodkin & Marston, 2012; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Lipsky, 2010).

What is less obvious in some of these studies is that the organizational context is determined, at least in part, by the environmental conditions in which organizations operate – including the supply of resources and clients in the environment, norms and values of the professional fields an organization is part of, and political priorities of public and private stakeholders – and this context thereby shapes individual worker decision-making as well (Binder, 2007; Blau, 1970; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Davis, 2007 p.19). Variations in local organizational rules and regulations, driven by the unique environmental contexts that human service organizations are embedded in, are known to produce distinct policies and constituent outcomes in different regions, with differences in policy rules and regulations shaping both the equity and efficacy of state and county-level social policies like safety net and Medicaid policy (e.g., Allard, 2008; Fording et al., 2008; Michener, 2018).

Implied within the idea that environmental and organizational contexts shape frontline policy implementation and outcomes is that *geographic* difference is likely important. Specifically, variations in street-level decision-making may be dependent on *where* a worker

conducts their professional practice and/or *where* a client lives due to differences in geographic resources, politics, and culture. Throughout this paper, I will refer to these geographic characteristics with the term "place", defined as "the physical and human characteristics of a spot on the map" (National Geographic Society, 2020). The term place broadly comprises a region's features, such as the size and density of a local population, the urbanicity and built environment of that region, and the sociopolitical demographics of the area. Research across many different fields of policy, like education, safety net, criminal legal, healthcare, and child welfare, have demonstrated how place – especially differences in politics, culture, population size and density, accessibility and quantities of resources like social services or transportation, and demographics – shapes the nature of policies and services and the experiences constituents have with these policies and services across locales (e.g., Fording et al., 2008; Logan et al., 2012; Maguire-Jack et al., 2015; Michener, 2018; Phelps & Pager, 2016). Yet, how these differences in policy experiences and outcomes across place come to exist is less clear.

In this paper, I argue that place is a fundamental aspect of the organizational environment, and in turn, place shapes street-level agency and worker decisions, defining constituent experiences and policy outcomes differentially by location. Place, by definition, plays an inherent role in shaping the organizational contexts in which frontline workers do their jobs because it encompasses the physical and social features of a region which these organizations, their workers, and their clients must contend with on the day to day, such as distance and transportation, density of services and resources like schools, hospitals, groceries, and other social service providers, and the local politics and culture behind the behaviors of both clients and other agency actors that organizations may rely on, such as judges or police. While prior literature discusses environmental factors that influence organizational and worker behaviors,

like availability of agency resources, pressures to conform to professional norms, federal political priorities, and funding needs and requirements, literature on street-level decision-making has largely neglected the geographic characteristics within the organizational environment, leaving out a key piece in the process of how policies and services are realized and implemented. I argue that place plays a direct role in defining the process of decision-making by individual street-level workers because it shapes the environment in which street-level organizations and workers operate within. I illustrate this argument by examining how place influences frontline decision-making in a specific area of human services: child welfare.

The field of child welfare is a high-stakes human services field; a field structured much like other human services, such as safety net services or mental health services, with significant discretion and authority given to local agencies and individual frontline workers, but with the end result of the decisions of these workers having the potential to result in the loss of one's children. It is a substantively important field in which to understand more about street-level decision-making, given these stakes, and it is also a field with known geographic variations in constituent outcomes and experiences (e.g., Fong, 2019; Roberts, 2008; Wulczyn, 2023). Moreover, the child welfare field is one in which scholars have done much less street-level theorizing than other related fields, like education or healthcare, which has limited the capacity for effective discussions about policy and practice reforms in this policy area.

As such, this paper explores the operation of street-level theory through the empirical case of child welfare investigations, with a focus on how place shapes the practices of frontline child welfare investigators. Specifically, in this study, I explore how the context of place influences the frontline decision-making of street-level child welfare investigators and supervisors. I conduct this examination through a comparative case study of four public child

welfare offices in one Midwestern State[19]. I analyze interview data collected from 24 frontline child welfare investigators and their supervisors in urban, suburban, and rural regions to explore how differences in place shaped the process of decision-making in child welfare investigations in this state. In assessing place's role in shaping child welfare investigation decisions, I offer insights on how street-level child welfare policy and practice come to be and highlight how place may influence policy implementation and outcomes in this policy field.

In conducting this analysis, I aim to provide novel evidence on how the intersection of street-level bureaucracy and place may define child welfare policy processes and outcomes. I explore the following research question: How does place influence the decisions that street-level child welfare investigators and supervisors make about families? In answering this question, I find that place affected three key resources in the organizational environment, which thereby shaped street-level bureaucrat decision-making: (1) regional service availability, (2) geographic distance and time, and (3) local politics. These results offer two contributions to our existing knowledge. First, I provide a theoretical contribution to existing research on street-level theory in finding that place shapes the behaviors of street-level bureaucrats through its influence on the resources in the organizational environment. Second, I provide applied evidence on how street-level decision-making operates in child welfare, and how the intersection of street-level theory and place may shape child welfare policy outcomes, such as race and income inequities.

Street-Level Theory & the Organizational Environment

Street-Level Bureaucracy is a phrase coined by Lipsky (1969) to describe the conditions faced by frontline workers like teachers, caseworkers, and judges. These frontline workers are the direct provisioners of government services, benefits, and sanctions to constituents, and in

[19] The name of the state which participated in this study is masked throughout this document for the sake of confidentiality of this state agency.

these exchanges, street-level bureaucrats are the primary point of government interaction for most constituents (Lipsky, 1969; Lipsky, 2010). Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) have significant discretion and autonomy in their work, and this discretion allows them to shape what policies look like and ultimately how policies reach constituents and clients (Lipsky, 2010). As a result, despite how policy may be written, intended, and evaluated, SLBs are the primary definers of the policies in which they enforce and implement; a major federal law may say one thing on paper but be executed differently by the workers who provide the services associated with that policy. Child welfare workers are a clear example of the types of SLBs about which Lipsky theorizes. Caseworkers in the child welfare system have substantial authority in decisions about individual clients and families and significant discretion in how they make decisions, such as how to carry out an investigation or when to substantiate a family's allegation of maltreatment.

Street-level bureaucrats, however, are also conditioned by the organizations in which they work (Brodkin, 1990). State and local agencies and organizations are responsible for significant policy choices, like defining and imposing eligibility and renewal requirements for public benefits (Brodkin & Marston, 2013, p. 146). In these agency-level choices, human service organizations create unique constraints and allowances for SLBs, because agency decisions result in distinct organizational policies and regulations, organizational cultures and expectations, and organizational resources and capacity, all of which impact how street-level bureaucrats can conduct their work at the agency they are embedded within (Smith & Donovan, 2003; van Berkel, 2020; Soss, et al., 2011). Consequently, individual street-level bureaucrat actions are dependent on the organizations which employ them. While they have authority and discretion in their routine decision-making, those decisions occur within and are defined by an organizational context (Brodkin, 1990; Brodkin & Marston, 2013).

Yet, organizational scholars have made the case that the agency conditions in which SLBs are embedded are determined by an even greater force: an external institutional or organizational "environment". The external organizational environment encompasses elements outside of an organization that may influence its behavior, such as the supply of resources and clients, the values of the professional fields an organization is part of, political and public demands, and the interests of funders like foundations (Duncan, 1972; Hasenfeld, 1992; Jahansen & Andrews, 2012). These external factors can constrain the types of opportunities available to an organization and thereby also shape the context in which frontline workers then make their own individual decisions (Binder, 2007; Blau, 1970; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Davis, 2007 p.19). For example, while a child welfare agency may have a practice requiring individual workers in the agency to offer every client at least one referral to optional services, that rule may be driven by an external environmental factor, such as a funding relationship with another service agency or organization in the region. An individual worker will be beholden to this *organizational* rule, but they are therefore also being influenced by the external organizational environment underlying that regulation when they make decisions about families.

In this study, I conceptualize *place* as an important component of the organizational environment and therefore a prevailing moderator of street-level bureaucrat behaviors. The idea of place is largely separate from existing conceptualizations of street-level decision-making, but I argue that place plays a fundamental role in defining elements of the organizational environment, including resource and client supply, politics, culture, and demographics of stakeholders, thereby impacting how workers can and do make decisions about clients. For example, the density of social services and nonprofit organizations – key resources to child welfare agencies, who make referrals to such organizations routinely – varies significantly across place (Allard & Pelletier,

2021 & 2023; Bachrach, 2006; Weinhold & Gurtner, 2014; Shapiro, 2021). Moreover, external factors like politics, culture, and demographics of clients and stakeholders, which are known to influence organizational policies and practices, street-level bureaucrat decision-making, and constituent outcomes, all vary substantially across geography and are dependent on *where* an organization and a worker conduct their practice (e.g., Agnew, 1996; Logan et al., 2012; Maguire-Jack et al., 2015; Michener, 2018; Phelps & Pager, 2016).

While the importance of place is implied in existing street-level scholarship, it has not been discussed as a constraint on the discretion and actions taken by SLBs. To illustrate, if we know that rural and suburban regions structurally possess fewer social service agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide services (Allard & Pelletier, 2021 & 2023; Bachrach, 2006; Shapiro, 2021; Weinhold & Gurtner, 2014), we then know that the capacity of SLBs in the area to make referrals will be limited. In this way, the kinds of choices a frontline worker may make about an individual or a family are necessarily tied to these place-based characteristics. For example, a teacher may want to use their discretion to secure additional services for a student in a rural area, and the school – their organization – may even encourage this behavior, because service referrals are a best practice in education. But this teacher, the street-level bureaucrat, cannot make this decision if such services simply do not exist in their geographic environment. Despite individual worker intent to carry out, organizational interest in, and professional environmental support for this action, the worker's decision-making is still constrained and defined by *place*.

The Case of Child Welfare Bureaucracy

In this paper, I explore this idea by examining the role of place in frontline decision-making through an empirical case of street-level bureaucrats: frontline investigators and

supervisors in a public child welfare agency. Child welfare is structured much the same as other social policies in the U.S. where street-level bureaucracy has been investigated and theorized – it is highly fragmented and delegated to states and counties, and the decision-making necessary to complete policy actions, such as investigating an allegation of maltreatment, is generally held by an individual frontline worker or manager (Hagedorn, 1995). These agency managers and frontline caseworkers are important social actors who translate abstract policies and politics into frontline policy and practice. SLBs in child welfare make vital decisions about maltreatment risk and family resource needs in their daily work, like assessing client homes and behaviors, deciding to refer families to external services, making substantiation decisions about allegations of child maltreatment, and recommending actions to take with families after a case has been substantiated, such as protective custody or in-home safety plans. Street-level child welfare workers also have a considerable amount of discretion in how they make these day-to-day decisions and how they implement policy and agency requirements, which directly defines the ways in which parents and their children experience and perceive child welfare policies (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Lipsky, 2010). Like other human service sectors, the actions of SLBs in child welfare are also defined by agency resources and regulations, like staffing capacity, service availability, and organizational rules (Hagedorn, 1995; Lipsky, 2010; Smith & Donovan, 2003).

Despite the similarities between other social policies and child welfare, child welfare workers have rarely been the focus of street-level research. While some existing literature examines individual worker perceptions' role in shaping child/family outcomes (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2011; Morales et al., 2006), only one existing study takes an explicit street-level approach to child welfare decision-making. Smith and Donovan (2003) applied Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy in the context of child welfare agencies to investigate everyday practices of

frontline workers and find that their decision-making is affected by organizational pressures, such as time limitations. In addition to organizational pressures, caseworker practices are impacted by pressures to conform to the expectations of institutions, like federal agencies and foundations that provide funding, in the organizational environment. Smith and Donovan's work offers compelling evidence that street-level theory is a useful lens to assess child welfare policy, and their results raise important questions about the kinds of environmental and social factors which may matter in frontline child welfare practice as well.

Disparities in the Child Welfare System

Another important motivation for investigating the role place may play in street-level decision-making in the child welfare system is a pernicious and seemingly relentless policy problem: race and income disparities in family experiences with the child welfare system. Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American/Indigenous families endure significantly higher rates of system contact in every level of the vast child welfare system – from investigations to adverse outcomes of older youth exiting foster care (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Dettlaff, 2021; Roberts, 2009; Watt & Kim, 2019). Impoverished families and families in low-income communities are also significantly overrepresented in today's child welfare system, though it is unclear to what extent these disparities are related to risks posed by living in poverty as opposed to bias about low-income families (Fong, 2019a; Landers et al., 2019).

Some critical child welfare scholars name street-level bias in decision-making by frontline workers as the primary driver of race and income disparities in the child welfare system (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008). Despite claims of frontline worker bias, limited research has assessed how child welfare worker decision-making and bureaucratic factors, like distribution of services or resources, may shape disparities in child welfare. Thus, areas in policy

and practice to interrupt and prevent race and income disparities are difficult to define. This paper uses a street-level approach to deliver new information on what is behind the inequities in child welfare and provides insights on where to act to address child welfare policy problems.

In the face of these confirmed inequities by income and race in child welfare, one promising area of research has focused on how differences across rural, urban, and suburban areas may influence child welfare system involvement. For example, studies by Wulczyn have shown that substantiation rates are higher in urban regions and that although foster care placement rates are higher among Black children overall, those disparities vary significantly across urban and rural areas and are highest in urban areas (2021, 2023). Nadon (forthcoming) expands on that work, exploring how urbanicity may matter specifically in investigations, as opposed to foster care placements. She finds that urbanicity is a significant mediator of the predictive influence of poverty and race in investigations, with differential associations between regional poverty rates and regional racial demographics across urban, suburban, and rural regions. This existing work on place makes a compelling case that place plays a role in race and income disparities in child welfare. In this paper I suggest that understanding how place intersects with street-level discretion may be part of the answer as to why.

Methods

Study Design & Data Collection

This study employed a comparative case study design, with the intention of illuminating how, why, and which decisions are made about families that are investigated in the state child welfare agency (Yin, 2009; p. 16). The state child welfare agency is the overall case in this analysis, and it is a system bounded by place and policy (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 98). The units of analysis in this comparative case study are four different offices in a Midwestern state.

The offices differ by geography/urbanicity, race/ethnicity, and poverty levels, which serve as points for comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p.99). The study was conducted in partnership with the state child welfare agency of this Midwestern State. State administrators provided access to four offices which were purposively sampled to reflect state variations in urbanicity and demographics, which functioned as points of place-based comparison.

All investigators and investigation supervisors in each of these offices who had been at the state child welfare agency for a minimum of 24 months (two years) were eligible to participate in the study. In this analysis, I examine 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with frontline child welfare supervisors (n=9) and investigators (n=15) sampled from across these four offices. Interviews lasted between 45-110 minutes. In addition to interviews, I spent approximately 15 hours total across two working days at each of the four offices, observing one-on-one staffing meetings, all-staff meetings, and typical activities at each office, for a total of about 60 hours of observational data.

Office Sample

As described above, this study involved data collection across a sample of four different child welfare offices in one Midwestern State. These offices were purposively sampled to cover a range of demographics in this state. The offices included: (1) Dawson, which covers a primarily rural, white, and impoverished region of the state; (2) Morrow, covering a primarily suburban area with some mixed urban and rural sections, which has a mix of racial/ethnic composition and a moderate poverty level; (3) Syverson, which has jurisdiction over a primarily suburban area with some rural pockets, and has a mix of racial/ethnic composition and a moderate poverty level; and (4) Everglen, which is located within a racially segregated, high poverty region of a major urban county – Fremont County, which possesses a wide array of demographics and

slightly above-average poverty rate. **Table 10** below displays some abbreviated demographic information for each office and their surrounding counties.

Table 10 Abbreviated Demographics for Sample of Child Welfare Offices

Office Location	Counties Covered by Office	Urbanicity	Total Population	% Black	% White	% Hispanic	% Foreign Born	% Persons Living in Poverty
Dawson	*Potter*	Suburban	44,245	1.2%	96.7%	1.3%	1.0%	12.1%
	Mason	Rural	28,020	3.8%	94.3%	2.1%	1.1%	15.1%
Morrow	*Campbell*	Urban	178,383	19.3%	72.5%	5.7%	6.3%	13.8%
	Brandt	Suburban	129,911	1.6%	95.4%	2.8%	1.7%	8.9%
	Armstrong	Suburban	38,450	0.8%	96.6%	2.0%	1.6%	6.9%
Syverson	*Dyer*	Suburban	141,527	12.0%	21.5%	13.9%	8.0%	14.8%
	Genesee	Suburban	48,419	2.0%	95.4%	6.6%	1.4%	8.7%
	Lewis	Suburban	15,504	0.8%	97.0%	0.2%	1.1%	8.6%
Everglen	*Fremont*	Urban	5,109,292	23.6%	65.1%	26.3%	21.0%	13.7%

Sources: Midwestern state child welfare agency, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023; Allard & Pelletier, 2021
Note: These demographics are abbreviated to capture the primary populations in a county; in most instances, the percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and Two or More Races was 2% or less.

Individual Caseworker Sample

Within each of the four offices, I interviewed between 5 and 7 workers. At each office, the state agency provided a list of contact information for all investigators and supervisors who met the 24-month agency work history criteria. In total, this list included 29 individual workers. Four of these workers had left their positions by the time I reached their office, and one worker declined to be interviewed, leaving me with a final sample of 24. I sent confidential mass recruitment emails using BCC to all eligible workers at each office, attaching a one-page summary of the study and an approval letter from the state agency, two weeks prior to my visit, scheduling several interviews in advance of my arrival. Any workers I did not hear back from via email, I recruited to participate in-person once I arrived at the office. I offered them copies of the

one-page summary of the study, the approval letter from the state agency, and a brief verbal explanation of the study and what an interview would be like.

Most interviews took place in-person in the workers' office location, though three of the 24 interviews took place over Zoom after my visit to the offices due to scheduling conflicts. All interviews took place between December 14, 2023, and February 8, 2024. Interviews were based on the interview guide in **Appendix B**. The sample of workers skewed towards women (n=18), with half the sample identifying as white (n=12) and a quarter of the sample each identifying as Black (n=6) and Latinx/Hispanic (n=6). Most workers had a background in social work, child welfare, or mental health, but a third of the sample had a background in law enforcement or legal studies[20]. **Table 11** below displays further details on these individual worker characteristics.

Table 11 Individual Worker Characteristics

Worker Characteristic (n=24)	Dawson	Morrow	Syverson	Everglen
Number of Respondents	5	6	7	6
Race				
Black	0	1	2	3
White	5	4	3	0
Latinx/Hispanic	0	1	1	4
Gender				
Man	2	1	3	0
Woman	3	5	4	6
Worker Position				
Investigator	3	4	4	4
Investigation Supervisor	2	2	3	2
Type of Interview				
In-person Interview	5	5	6	5
Remote Interview	0	1	1	1
Educational/Professional Background				
Social Work/Mental Health/Child Welfare	3	4	5	4
Law Enforcement/Legal	2	2	2	2

[20] In the Midwestern state where this study was conducted, workers previously were required to have a social work or related degree in a mental health or human services field. This requirement was altered in recent years and now includes law enforcement and legal system education as well. The rate of workers who have such backgrounds has expanded steadily over the past several years as a result.

Analytical Approach

I conducted thematic analysis to examine the data from the comparative cases in this study, which involved both a deductive (e.g., Crabtree & Miller, 1992) and inductive approach (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998). This hybrid strategy permitted a priori areas of interest in the broader research questions to be an integral part of the analysis while also allowing respondent-driven experiences to emerge in the data. The first stage comprised the creation of broad categories of findings, which included a combination of inductive categories which arose during data collection and analysis as well as deductive categories of interest before data collection (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Deductive categories included *poverty*, *place*, *race*, *child welfare policy/practice*, and *intersectionality of poverty, place, and race.* Inductive categories included *individual worker discretion, service availability*, *geographic distance and time, staffing capacity*, *local politics*, and *training and education*. Data were analyzed both across and within the four cases to identify themes in the process of child welfare investigations and decision-making. I began first with general cross-case analysis of categories that emerged between all the different cases and proceeded to within-case analysis of distinct categories and subcategories in individual offices/regions (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 101).

From the categories defined during this process, I reviewed transcripts, audio recordings, and notes from interviews with the guiding context of the broad categories I had defined, with the aim of detecting patterns in the data that fell within the various categories. I took reflective notes on patterns present throughout these categories and constructed a list of initial themes and subthemes present within the data categories. I then created a closed codebook of themes and subthemes, and which could be applied deductively to the data by research assistants and by

myself. The thematic codebook was organized by category, and input into Dedoose Version 9.0.17 software for coding and analysis of the interviews.

I applied codes to interview transcripts using Dedoose, with the help of two research assistants. Assistants were trained on the Dedoose software and subject matter in group meetings, and all three coders first coded the same four transcripts to define, describe, and compare the codes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). While we jointly coded, we discussed the meanings of codes and tested the reliability of the coding scheme, editing definitions and codes as needed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Through this process, we reached consensus on theme labels and definitions within the codebook. Moreover, I was immersed in the data and codes, having conducted all of the interviews myself and developed the codebook. On the other hand, the two research assistants were new to the subject matter and distant from the data. The cooperative process allowed the three coders to achieve a balance in the tension between distance to the data and immersion in it, given our varied experiences (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

To support intercoder reliability, I followed several best practices which have been identified for qualitative projects which prioritize intercoder reliability: (1) Three different researchers coded the data, (2) both the research assistants were entirely removed from the data collection process to provide external perspectives on the codes, while I collected all the data and was able to offer this immersed perspective when needed, (3) the team of coders represented a variety of both subject matter and qualitative coding experience, and (4) coders met frequently to confer about transcripts and reach agreement on code definitions (Cofie et al., 2022).

Results

I find that place affected three key resources in the organizational environment, which shaped SLB choices and behaviors: (1) regional service availability, (2) geographic distance and

time, and (3) local politics. These three resources encompass known components of the organizational environment, and they arose as explanatory factors in the choices and behaviors of street-level actors in child welfare agencies, varying substantially across urbanicity. SLBs in all four offices made it clear that the availability of services – including child welfare services like foster homes and others like mental health services, the physical distance of a region and time associated with navigating this distance, and the local political resources – especially judges and district attorneys, each substantially influenced their decision-making and shaped the processes and outcomes of investigations. Below, I detail findings on these three environmental resources separately across the rural, suburban, and urban cases, highlighting the importance variations in urbanicity had in defining the resources at the disposal of workers in each region, and the ultimate decisions that the SLBs made about children and families on their caseloads as a result.

Rural – Dawson Office

Street-level child welfare practice in the rural office, Dawson, was distinctly shaped by the rural nature of the region. Across services, distance and time, and politics, the overarching reality in Dawson was a scarcity of resources in general. Street-level workers in Dawson faced insufficient social services in the region, impoverished families with limited means to travel long distances to reach services, and conservative judicial politics which restricted workers' authority to advocate for what they perceived to be best for families on their caseload.

Regional Service Availability

In Dawson, the primarily rural office in this comparative sample, workers depicted the area as sparse and devoid of supports. SLBs in Dawson repeatedly explained that the area largely lacked any social services to refer families to in general. Ray, an investigator in Dawson, described the counties he had jurisdiction over: "*I cover Potter and Mason counties… They are*

primarily lower income communities…. Most of the towns are primarily hundreds compared to thousands… The big city has all the amenities. There's just not as many in our area compared to further north or even further south." While child welfare workers typically have discretion in their ability to refer families to services, the discretion of these SLBs is constrained by the kinds of services available in their environment. In Dawson, what was available to child welfare workers was largely negligible.

As a result of being located in a deeply rural region with few resources of any kind available to anyone, workers in Dawson did not have much to utilize at all in the process of their investigations. Their ability to make choices that could benefit – or harm – their clients, was simply limited by the region's miniscule service array. The lack of services described by workers encompassed everything from therapists to hospitals, to foster parents, to substance use testing facilities. All five workers interviewed in this office explained that this limited social service array impacted their ability to do their work. Emma, a supervisor in Dawson, illustrated how a lack of foster homes caused her to choose to avoid protective custody placements.

> **Emma**: "*I think that this area is limited on resources, so [the child welfare agency] for the longest time was looked at as a resource… Now, we're trying to educate to just say, 'Listen, we're not going to take this child into protective custody… He or she wouldn't benefit.' Because for a while we were having, the court would say, 'Well, he or she has a criminal record. We could just put them in [child welfare agency] care'… But, it is just a fast track into residential facilities because there are no foster homes here.*"

In a region with more foster homes, workers may have made the decision to respond to criminal records or other lower risk concerns with foster care placements, but in Dawson, where few foster homes meant a child would end up in a residential facility far out of the area, instead of a home, workers were instead choosing to educate court personnel to avoid protective custody for issues that were more minor.

Michelle, an investigator under Emma, also felt that place constrained the decisions she was able to make about families on her caseload. Despite this reality, she stated that the state child welfare agency made policies and rules without taking place into account. Michelle shared that was forced to make decisions about families that she did not want to make due to policy and procedure, an outcome she felt could have been avoided if this geographic region had more resources for families.

> **Michelle**: "*[A]ssuming that we're going to have foster parents that want these kids, that's out of the question… Everything's in [largest city in the state]. Everything's different in [Fremont County]. There is [Fremont County] [child welfare agency] and then there is down state [child welfare agency]. Policy and procedures are driven from [Fremont County] [child welfare agency], and it doesn't mean anything to down state, because they are not the same… They're not the same anything. When we get these rules that we have to follow for something that happened in [Fremont County], I mean that's exhausting because it's not feasible here… We've got a mom. I took protective custody of her child. I had to. I had no choice to. We're getting ready to terminate her rights. It'll be her third child that we've terminated rights. I do not want to this… She needs a [substance abuse] facility… But there's a lack of education, support, and resources in these areas to avoid this outcome."*

The rurality of the Dawson area presented distinct service restrictions for the office and workers in this region, with frontline workers in this child welfare office having to contend with limited social services and resources, like foster homes and substance use treatment, to offer parents and children in the course of their daily work. Despite these geographic limitations, workers were impacted by child welfare agency rules which did not take place into account. Investigators and supervisors avoided making the choice to place children into foster care for "lesser" issues due to a lack of foster homes, while others like Michelle felt they were forced to

make the decision to pursue protective custody and parental rights termination, when they could not get parents needed services in this rural area.

Geographic Distance & Time

Ray, who described the lack of "amenities" in Dawson, further described the physical nature of this geographic region, "*There is not a whole lot here… We deal with a lot of smaller towns, talking two or three hundred people that are very detached from each other."* While SLBs in Dawson made clear that services to support families were generally limited, any that were available were often inaccessible because of how "detached" the communities in these two counties were from one another. The physical distance associated with navigating the Dawson region imposed another resource constraint on the routine decision-making of SLBs in this rural area by restricting the ease of access of any of the existing services. Samantha, the other supervisor in Dawson, explained:

> **Samantha**: "*So the big domestic violence shelter and the place that really helps—that's an hour. Or [mental health facility]— that's another hour. So we are really in a community that lacks. But the thing is that all of us community professionals can only utilize what we have… I think we do the best what we can with what we have, but it's a struggle. It's a lot harder than those places that aren't more rural. And with poverty, some people only have one car, and that parent goes to work with that one car. Or they don't have any cars. It's like how do we get these people to services?*""

Although the domestic violence shelter and mental health facility were helpful to clients, they were not easy to access for clients and this inaccessibility imposed another barrier on the actions child welfare SLBs could take. Andrew, an investigator under Samantha, further explained what these distances meant for his work: "*I think we have the capacity to know that there's these needs out there and maybe identify that they exist, but I don't have the capacity… to*

necessarily fix it. I have the capacity to link you to that service… I can identify it, but if I can't get the family to that place, I cannot make any decisions that let me fix it."

Between the detached nature of the built environment of this rural region and families' limited resources like cars or gas money, workers were hard-pressed to use their authority and discretion to support families on their caseload in this rural region, even if they wanted to. As Samantha explained, community professionals can only utilize what they have. For workers like Samantha and Andrew, the geographic distance that parents had to overcome in order to have even a limited portion of their service needs met were great enough that it restricted these street-level bureaucrats' capacity to help altogether. Ultimately, the decisions of investigators in Dawson were constrained by how little they had and how difficult it was for clients to reach the few services which did exist.

Local Politics

Outside of the limited services and large size of the region, Dawson workers had to manage the specific political orientation of another resource: other workers in their counties, such as judges, whose legal sign-off was often required in order for child welfare workers to make key decisions about families, like mandating services or placing a child under protective custody. The local politics of the judicial system in the Dawson region substantially shaped the ways that families' cases would proceed in the child welfare system, despite the will and intention of the child welfare workers. While workers in major urban areas contend with politics in a broad sense, they face a far larger number of individuals in these political institutions like law enforcement agencies and courts. Workers in Dawson, however, contended with the same two county judges, district attorneys, and police chiefs on literally every single case and their

politics pervaded every decision. Emma, a supervisor in Dawson, described the judges in Mason and Potter Counties.

> **Emma**: "*Well, in Potter County, we have a much older, conservative judge who is very pro parent. In Mason, I think the judge trusts us. But in Potter, the judge does not support child welfare. Even when we recommend protective custody for very severe cases, he will deny these petitions like 90% of the time*."

While workers have substantial discretion in the determinations they make about a case – deciding if it is substantiated, if a family needs service referrals, or if a child should be removed from their parents' custody, the ability of workers to use that discretion is constrained by the political leanings of the courts in their regions. Importantly, protective custody, or foster care, is not the only thing workers need judge or district attorney adjudication on. Judges are also required in order to court-order services, which many workers viewed as an important interim step between voluntary services and protective custody petitions. Michelle described how this impacted the decisions she could make about one of her cases in Potter County.

> **Michelle**: "*Potter County's habit is to just not adjudicate, because they don't meddle in parents' rights. What this county is known for is they accept a petition, and they just continue that for status for six months until everybody's done what they're supposed to do… Then it requires a new investigation to be called in and a petition of protected custody instead of them just adjudicating that case... It creates double the work for them to handle it that way rather than just accepting a petition, setting it for adjudication, leaving the kids in the home…I had the investigation. I tried to get [diversion services] in place. Mom didn't want to do it. Very, very mentally ill. We filed for… court ordered services. Mom still has no mental health treatment… It has taken three months to get the court to actually set an adjudication. For ninety plus days, this child has been with her mentally ill mom…"*

In this instance, Michelle had made the discretionary choice to not seek protective custody of this child, but instead to court-order services for the parent. Yet, her decision was

prevented by the local politics of the court in Potter County. The local politics embedded in the region bled into other institutional resources necessary for child welfare agencies' functioning, like the courts, and ultimately these politics played a defining role in the kinds of decisions SLBs were able to make about their clients in Dawson.

Suburban – Morrow & Syverson Offices

In the Morrow and Syverson offices, frontline investigators' decision-making was uniquely molded by the characteristics of the suburban places in which they conducted their practice. Workers in these two offices contended with high demand for nonprofit services by moderate-income families, long nonprofit waiting lists, large caseloads across expansive county regions, and conservative local politics within their judicial resources, all of which impacted the means that workers had to do their jobs and the kinds of choices they could make in the course of their routine work.

Regional Service Availability

Though suburban offices had unique challenges, workers in these regions made clear that, compared to more rural regions, the suburban offices had access to, at a minimum, basic services to refer families to. Calla, a supervisor in Morrow shared, "*I think we're fortunate that we are so centrally located. We have other regions [in the state], they have absolutely nothing. So, I don't know how those parents even begin to meld themselves back together when they can't even get the basic services. And I'm talking like substance abuse services, mental health counseling… I think we do have access to services here*." While some workers shared in interviews that there could certainly always be *more* services, workers in Morrow and Syverson were not constrained by a lack of bare minimum resources in these suburban locales the way workers in Dawson were. But, the actions of SLBs in the suburbs were shaped by different aspects of place instead.

While suburbs had more services and families, on average, were a little economically better off in these areas than in Dawson, the larger availability of social service resources was important in these communities, because workers had to address unique challenges with families in Syverson and Morrow. Namely, parents who were involved with the child welfare agency in these regions, unlike in both the urban and rural offices, were not all explicitly impoverished; they did not necessarily qualify for some or all public benefits. However, parents in the suburban locales were still in need of some services to support their families, like mental health services, which they could only afford to receive from nonprofit organizations in the area. In discussing service availability broadly, Holly, one of Calla's investigators, shared that she generally felt like the office had enough services to work with. But, when asked about areas she might want to improve in the child welfare system, she mentioned specifically services that were no cost to families who did not quite meet conditions for means-tested services.

> **Holly**: "*As far as this region as a whole, additional services available at no cost to families that need it. To fill that gap for those families that maybe aren't necessarily poverty-level, but they aren't necessarily middle-class either. In this area, we see a lot of those families in that gap. There's a struggle there, you know, where they don't technically qualify for some services because they make just a little too much, but they desperately need it or they're gonna be right back where they were, in that gap. We just don't have the nonprofit services to fill that gap here… There is a high demand for them, the waiting lists are very long. There's not a lot I can do for families in that gap.*"

The waiting lists at these service organizations that Holly mentions were a unique subtheme that emerged in the suburban areas. Although there seemed to be greater numbers of services available broadly, compared to rural areas, the services themselves had limited capacity to serve additional clients, of which there was a much higher volume in this area, because it was geographically larger than the Dawson jurisdiction but was also more densely populated. Theo,

an investigator in Syverson, explained the significance of the waitlists in the nonprofit or private agency organizations in these suburban locales.

> **Theo**: "*Waitlist. Waitlist. Waitlist. I could refer a parent for this service. I have no problem with doing this. But it doesn't matter if I do. When I talk to the people providing services, they tell me there's a waitlist. I would say yeah, yeah, that waitlist thing is a big problem in this area. And, again, I don't know what's going on inside those agencies. But I would say that the lack of staff available to help those families would add to the waitlist problem… Just not enough people to help this many individuals*."

Waiting lists were a significant issue posed by the volume of cases, especially moderate or middle-income cases, in these two suburban regions. Workers were not limited in their decision-making by a lack of services overall, but instead their authority to refer families to external services was constrained by high demand for nonprofit services for middle-income families, and by the presence of lengthy waitlists for such services. Even when workers have "no problem" making the decision to refer for services, workers like Theo felt that making such a choice in this area was almost pointless because there was not enough capacity available to help families in the region.

Geographic Distance & Time

In addition to waitlists due to a high density of cases, the physical geography of the suburban areas created additional constraints on SLB decision-making. Compared to the region Dawson had jurisdiction over, the counties covered by Syverson and Morrow have triple or more the population of the Dawson counties and are slightly larger than the size of the Dawson region in terms of square miles. This physical geography resulted in a larger volume of cases in the suburban regions, which posed another significant resource barrier for frontline workers: it imposed substantial limits on SLB time at these child welfare agencies. While SLBs in Dawson contended with a large geographic region, this distance was perceived as more of a barrier for

clients than workers. In the suburban counties, investigators themselves were driving longer distances to serve a much larger population. The time it took to serve a larger caseload created restrictions on worker capacity in these offices, which shaped their choices in the field with families. Natalie, a supervisor in Syverson explained, "*In investigations, your volume is what it is… But, some of the far reaches of this region are an hour away, and that really does significantly impact our caseload and our options because if you're on the road a whole afternoon trying to see a family, you have less time with that family, and you're not able to get some of your case notes entered and get some of your work done as effectively.*"

Patrick, an investigator who worked under Natalie in the Syverson office, further detailed the implications of the geographic distances in this region.

> **Patrick**: "*The history in Genesee County is, when I was doing case work back in the early 90's they had maybe five or six child deaths out there… then [the child welfare agency] put an office out there. But then they closed the office now and we came up here [to Syverson] a few years ago… I'm afraid it's going back the way it was because people don't want to drive out there. They're not going to run the investigations the way they need too because they don't have time to do it right. I've already seen a few sloppy things done out there… It's a time thing. Driving. I mean, it's an hour back there, hour back. People don't want to do it. You know, yeah that worries me that stuff 's going to start getting missed again…"*

In a field where the stakes are that parents lose custody of their children, or that children die, having the time and service resources to do one's job effectively is vital. Patrick's description highlights how geographic constraints on workers' time can mean that workers lack capacity to make the "right" call in their day-to-day work. These time constraints impacted the decision calculus of SLBs in child welfare through restricting the kinds of information they have time to gather and the time they have to process and respond to that information. Overall, in suburban regions, workers' actions were shaped by the lengthy geographic distances to reach

families on their caseloads. This regional resource challenge was unique to the suburban places in which investigators were working, and it impacted how workers could interact with clients at the frontlines.

Local Politics

Like rural areas, workers in suburban areas noted that the political leaning of their adjacent judicial resources impacted the way parents' cases could proceed within the courts and shaped the kinds of decisions SLBs could make about their clients. Many, but not all, of these suburban counties were also each governed by singular judges and district attorneys. Caroline, an investigator in Morrow, explained that the political constraints on her decision-making were "vastly different" depending on the county she was working in with a parent.

> **Caroline**: "*So in our area [the counties are] vastly different. And I think part of that is the communities themselves. Armstrong County, once you're in court there, they don't have as many cases that come into court out there. So a lot of the cases in Armstrong County are placement cases… but they are very strict. And I'm always very upfront and honest with families. If I have to remove their kids in Armstrong County, you need to stay on top of your services and you have to get them done. You have a year out there and for most cases, after the year mark, they're moving to termination of parental rights. [That judge] doesn't mess around. It's a very, very [conservative] area, the primary judge out there is a much older judge. He has been on that bench I don't even know how long, years and years. I know… he does tend to have I think kind of traditional views…*"

Caroline's supervisor, Erin, further illustrated how the political alignment of the judicial resources in the region defined her work: "*The judge and [district attorney] in Armstrong are extremely strict. They will push for protective custody and termination even if we don't recommend it. So, in that area, I tell my investigators, they have to be very pointed and detailed. They have to advise parents accordingly, and they have to be prepared to deal with that outcome even when it's not their first choice.*"

Like in Dawson, workers in suburban counties were pressed against the local politics of the region, and the investigators and supervisors had to contend with this political reality in their day-to-day work among their judicial counterparts. Supervisors like Erin had to instruct their individual workers on these processes, while workers had to carefully plan their actions and instructions with families to address the judicial politics. Altogether, the local politics of this area substantially influenced the actions of judicial personnel and thereby defined the kinds of decisions that child welfare SLBs could make about the children and parents on their caseloads.

Urban – Everglen Office

Frontline child welfare workers in the Everglen office were uniquely positioned by the urban resources available in their environment. SLBs in Everglen had no major concerns about service availability, which allowed for discretion in service referrals. Yet, work in this locale posed a distinctively urban resource challenge: segregated public transportation systems, which most families on workers' caseloads in Everglen were reliant on. Moreover, workers in this region encountered unique local politics, contending with progressive judicial politics which workers felt constrained their authority to decide to mandate services.

Regional Service Availability

Compared to both rural and suburban regions, the Everglen office had a noticeably larger number of social service agencies in their organizational environment to refer families to. The Everglen office is located in one of the "big cities" with "all the amenities", as Ray in Dawson had put it. Everglen is situated within a major metropolitan region with seemingly endless services and resources, when compared to a locale like Dawson, and the office has jurisdiction over a very small section of the city, just a few neighborhoods in a major city with over 200 neighborhoods. While workers only received cases from this small handful of neighborhoods,

families were able to be referred to and seek out services across the entire city. There were enough public, private, and nonprofit human service organizations in the region to even counteract the persistent waitlist concerns raised by workers in Syverson and Morrow. Linnea, an investigator, explained how she perceived the flow of services in Everglen.

> **Linnea**: "*There are more agencies and there are more services everywhere here. Even just when we close out a case, then we have to do...if it's a domestic violence case, we have to do a DV consult. I'm listening to all of the agencies that are literally smack dab in the middle of Everglen… There are so many community services."*

Linnea was confident in the availability of services for her clients. Of course, like in Syverson and Morrow, workers still indicated there could always be more services and they occasionally did content with some waiting lists, too, but there was an overall perception of availability of *something* to help clients in this area of the state. Ana, another investigator in Everglen, explained that she felt that human services supports were largely available to refer families to, though the programs to help with financial challenges with things like rent were somewhat lacking.

> **Ana**: "*As far as the parenting, the mental health part, domestic violence, yes [we have those]. But sometimes their needs are other needs such as I need a job, I need rent. Yeah, there is a program… that can help them with rent but for how long, one month…"*

Maria, Ana's supervisor, had previously worked in a different suburban office outside of Fremont County. She explained how the expansive service array surrounding Everglen shaped the work of her and her supervisees, "*In this area, there's so many services for all kinds of families. People are poor, but they don't lack in the same way as other places because there's a lot here... We as an office have the capacity to do more here because there's places to send folks… For everything they could possibly need… Different language services, immigration support, art therapy… There's a lot the [child welfare agency] can offer them."*

In the major city in which Everglen was embedded, workers' hands were not tied by sparse services and completely full up services like in rural and suburban offices. The big city amenities afforded child welfare SLBs choices in Everglen which they simply did not have elsewhere. The variety of services created greater capacity for investigators and supervisors to do their jobs as they saw fit in Everglen, a solely urban reality in child welfare practice in this state.

Geographic Distance & Time

Although transportation was a challenge raised in the rural and suburban offices, a distinct type of geographic resource challenge was present in Everglen: unreliable public transportation. The distance was greater in rural and suburban regions, but most families had access to at least one vehicle to travel, even if gas or work schedules created additional barriers. In Everglen, this was not the case and families relied on public transportation to get around. While there may be a plethora of services, comparatively speaking, in Everglen, the availability of services and the usefulness of referrals to such services, were constrained by clients' ability to get to these services. Linda, one of the supervisors in Everglen, explained the challenges this created in her work. Most families are quite poor in this neighborhood – a root cause of the child welfare concerns in this area, according to Linda – and parents struggled with transportation to services, despite a long list of available services existing.

> **Linda**: "*There's a lack of family resources here that I think is the base problem of what [the child welfare agency] goes through… I have a list— well, my workers composed a list of services that can benefit anybody, even like for parenting, just like small things, or a physician, or like, a clinic, if they don't have a clinic. They composed a list and we automatically give that to each family, just in case. But, because there's the lack of transportation too, with a lot of these families, so they can't get to where they need to.*"

I was given a copy of this list that Linda refers to; it was actually several lists, broken down by service area, such as childcare, housing, education, and mental health therapy. It was

extensive, these lists constituted packets consisting of several pages each. Yet, while the list was quite large, and these services may be all of 7 miles from a family's home, 7 miles can be just as long as the 90-minute drives parents were contending with in Dawson for families in a big city who have no cars and must rely on public transportation. Moreover, this area of the city – a highly segregated region with mostly low-income Black and Latinx communities – was largely cut off from public transportation. Isabel, another investigator in Everglen, explained the challenges parents faced with the public transit system in this neighborhood.

> **Isabel**: "*I will say the transportation system down here is not great... The [public transit system] doesn't run as accessible as in [the other side of the city]… There's a big gap… I just think the setup of the [public transit system] is not that feasible or fast, or reliable… Buses don't show up. The train doesn't run here…. I will work with them and ask, 'Does this seem too far from you? Let me look on the map. What about this day? Can we do it this day?' I'll work with them to make it easier because like I said, I also know that most of these families work on these strict schedules.*"

Elaine, an investigator in the Everglen office, additionally described how the local public transportation limitations influenced her decisions with families: "*[S]ometimes I know families can't really get somewhere even if I find the right private agency to help with whatever is going on. If they don't want to make it work… there's no reason to do it. That time and research, I can do something else."*

In spite of seemingly available services, workers in Everglen had to contend with a resource barrier associated with the urban environment they worked in—public transportation—in order to get parents the services they needed. The wide array of available services created distinct allowances for discretion of SLBs in this office, with a larger list of services to choose to refer families to, but the transportation challenges constrained how much this discretion could matter. Workers like Isabel might look at maps with parents to "work with them" to make things

easier because of the public transit barriers to get families to service agencies in this city, while others like Elaine felt that the use of referrals was almost pointless if she knew a family could not get to the agency they were referred to. The physical nature of the Everglen region presented particular opportunities for worker discretion but also constrained decisions like the use of service referrals through unique mechanisms like public transit limits in this urban area.

Local Politics

In contrast to rural and suburban regions, where workers struggled with generally more conservative political environments, child welfare workers in Everglen practiced in a more progressive region. This environment generated different limits on worker decision-making in this office, though with some similar results. The progressive alignment of this area resulted in legal resources in the region, like district attorneys, being opposed to intervention in family life when requested by child welfare SLBs. Linnea, an investigator in Everglen, explained how the political orientation of the court in Fremont County, where Everglen is, was shifting and how this impacted her ability to use her authority to require parental adherence to service plans.

> **Linnea**: "*In [Fremont County], we are moving towards a less invasive philosophy of intervention here. So, I went to a training in November or December... We're going to do more [family preservation]. I think the [district attorney] is already on board with that so that is why a lot of our cases [for court orders] have not been getting accepted… Even now, we don't keep cases open long anymore. Before, if you couldn't find a parent or a parent didn't want to talk to you, we would have to stalk that parent down to the ground. Now, soon as a person said we don't want to talk to you, they're done. We can just close the case now. We're not super aggressive with enforcing things anymore… Alright. I can't offer services. I can't do anything about it...*"

Ana further detailed how this political environment shaped her interactions with clients. When asked if she ever sought court-ordered services, she replied: "*No, because we try to, and this is my work experience here, when we get courts involved… [The district attorney is] going*

to ask me, 'Did they want the services?', and I say, 'Yeah.' And then they say, 'So why are you screening it? Why are you bringing it up to my attention if they're already agreed with you that they're going to do it? It is not right to force, they said want it.'. But those services are voluntary, and they aren't doing them… There's nothing I can do. The courts don't support it."

In this progressive environment where court authority is being questioned in policy and practice, Linnea and Ana both felt powerless to use their discretion to seek orders to mandate parents to comply with a service plan, because the judicial personnel in this region were less strict and were politically aligned with avoiding legal force. Thus, in Everglen, despite having the discretionary authority to seek court-mandates with parents when they deem it necessary, frontline workers' capacity to pursue such a decision was inhibited by the political alignment of the legal resources in their region.

Discussion

This paper explores how place functions as a component of the organizational environment that street-level bureaucrats in child welfare investigations work within, and the implications place therefore has for these SLBs' decision-making with families. I find that place influenced three primary resources in the organizational environment, which shaped the actions of frontline child welfare workers: (1) regional service availability, (2) geographic distance and time, and (3) local politics. These place-based factors impacted the ways in which investigators and supervisors could do their jobs, and these impacts varied across urbanicity, operating uniquely in rural, suburban, and urban environments.

First, I find that place impacts the supply of social services available to child welfare workers, a key resource component of the organizational environment for child welfare agencies. The quality, quantity, and variety of human services to refer families to were directly connected

to where families lived and where investigators worked. The rural office, Dawson, had a narrow array of services available for families, and this dearth of services restricted workers' ability to make decisions that they perceived to be in families' best interests because it created a limit on the kinds of actions workers could take, such as referring families to services or placing children in qualified foster homes. In the suburban offices, Syverson and Morrow, SLBs had what appeared to be a larger number of services at their disposal in their day-to-day decisions with families. However, their decisions to refer families to services were constrained instead by a high volume of demand on these services, especially by middle-income families, which created long waiting lists for nonprofit services and thereby limited the decisions investigators could make to support families in the suburbs. On the other hand, in the urban office, investigators were working with what was comparatively a seemingly endless array of services. The variety and quantity of services in this region increased the discretionary capacity of workers in Everglen through the availability of a vast range of services to refer from. The wide availability of services in Everglen created novel allowances for worker choices in urban areas, while these opportunities for SLBs to seek out and offer the best fit – or indeed, any – services for families were simply not afforded in the rural and suburban offices.

I secondly find that the geographic distance of a physical place impacted the kinds of decisions child welfare SLBs made in their routine processes with families. In Dawson, the physical environment posed substantial barriers to the families with whom the SLBs worked; what services did exist in the region were long drives away and while workers had capacity to get to the parents around these counties, parents did not have capacity to seek out limited, far-off services. The size of this geographic region, coupled with the poverty of families in the area, further constrained the actions that SLBs could meaningfully take to support families in Dawson.

On the other hand, the physical distance in the suburbs impacted workers more directly. Workers in the suburbs noted a much larger volume of cases than the Dawson office but they had to contend with this volume despite larger geographic regions in which they had to travel to see families. This travel time limited workers' capacity to make the most effective decisions because it constrained the amount of time they could spend with families to gather information, and the time they had to process that information to make decisions. In Everglen, the story was again different. By virtue of its urban location, very few families owned personal vehicles in the poor neighborhoods covered by Everglen, and public transit on this segregated side of the city was unreliable or nonexistent. Thus, workers' capacity to support families and the kinds of service referrals workers made were still shaped by the local geography even in this small urban locale.

Finally, I find that local politics defined the realm of possible decisions child welfare SLBs could make through the political alignment of judicial resources on which child welfare workers relied. In both the rural and suburban offices, workers on the whole grappled with more conservative politics, like judges and district attorneys with more "traditional views" who were opposed to government interference or who were severely strict with families whose children had come into state custody. The conservative political leaning in the suburban and rural offices restricted workers' capacity to use their authority to make decisions they had deemed correct for families, such as mandating services or choosing to not terminate parental rights. On the other hand, in Everglen, the local politics were markedly more progressive. Courts in this area were moving towards more liberal views of family preservation and were therefore less willing to court-order services. This resulted, of course, in some of the same outcomes as the rural and suburban offices, despite the political orientation being on the opposite end of the spectrum: the progressive legal politics of this urban area hampered SLBs' ability to use their discretion to

mandate services. While workers perceived they had enough services in this urban region, they did not have the political resources necessary to use their authority to require parents to comply with service referrals.

Overall, the ways that environmental resources, like services, distance and time, and politics, mattered in street-level child welfare practice was dependent on the place where these workers were located. Yet, beyond the impact place had on street-level worker decision-making, these results also highlight the important role of street-level theory in child welfare policy and practice. I find across the board that individual workers can and do use discretion much the same as other street-level bureaucrats, like teachers, doctors, and judges. I also find that child welfare workers' ability to make decisions and use discretion is defined by their organizational environment – including place – just like other fields of human services. However, what is unique about the child welfare field arises regularly across the interviews: the stakes of the decisions being made by frontline workers in this field. A decision made by a worker in child welfare can result in the loss of custody of one's children, or the death of a child, or the prolonged trauma of a child. These stakes, coupled with the known race and income disparities present in the outcomes of families who come into contact with this system, make it imperative to understand the factors that influence the decision-making of frontline child welfare workers. In exploring how place influences the street-level decision-making of child welfare investigators in this study, I find that specific place-based factors may shape the disparate policy outcomes we see in child welfare: the political orientation of judges and courts, the distance and capacity of regional workers, and the size and capacity of the social service array in an area.

While an important step in expanding our knowledge of how place influences the operation of street-level theory in child welfare practice, these findings also come with several

limitations. First, there are several geographic limitations in this sample of workers and offices. While there was a lot of common ground among the workers across offices as well as distinct trends in practices across urbanicity, this sample of offices is not fully representative of every kind of geographic region, and in particular the influence of place may look different in different states or even different counties. Relatedly, the four different offices capture different levels of place – with rural and suburban offices covering county-level regions but urban offices covering more micro neighborhood-level regions. These layers of place do not precisely compare, and in fact the service delivery systems for other related public systems, such as TANF or public education, are not comparable across these geographic regions, either. As a result, the analysis across offices in this study only offers blunt insights into place. However, the structure of most child welfare systems in the U.S. looks quite similar to that of this state, and this limitation will be a persistent one in studying the concept of place in child welfare policy. The study offers a macro view of the way the concept of place broadly matters differentially across different types of regions, but future research is needed to explore the detailed nuances present in different kinds of geographies in child welfare and street-level practice more broadly. Finally, this study only provides a small sample of supervisors in each office and does not include any mid-level or regional child welfare agency supervisors, which limits the degree to which these findings can speak to more meso-level organizational factors.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important implications about both street-level theory and child welfare policy and practice. Street-level bureaucrats are constrained by the organizational environments in which they are embedded, and in this study, I offer evidence that this process encompasses place. Factors like a region's service arrays, geographic distance of a region, and local politics all play a direct role in the kinds of decisions street-level child welfare

workers can and will make in the routine processes of this policy system. Moreover, child welfare is a field in which street-level bureaucrats, street-level organizations, and the organizational environment – including place – matter tremendously. The experiences families have with child welfare investigations depend on the individual worker they have and the environment which shapes that worker's decisions. This street-level and place-based perspective offers insights into the outcomes we see in child welfare, including those which are disparate by race and income, providing important evidence on moments in the system's processes in which these policy outcomes may come to exist.

V. CHAPTER 5. Discussion

When taken together, these three papers offer important evidence about the persistence and prevalence of systemic disparities and systemic mismanagement and ineffectiveness in child welfare policy. Across this study, I offer new information on how both place and bureaucracy shape the influence of race and income in the child welfare system and shape the frontline decisions of workers and parents, both individually and in the aggregate. The results across these three chapters employ multiple methods to explore the complex administrative and demographic factors at play in the child welfare system from varying perspectives. Each of these chapters provides essential evidence on how to reduce the persistent race and income disparities in the child welfare system, how to generally reduce system contact, and how to improve child and parent experiences in the child welfare system overall.

Paper 1 highlights the aggregate demographic and policy drivers of child welfare system involvement across urban, suburban, and rural environments. This paper provides three key findings which underscore the moderating role of place in child welfare policy and practice. First, urban regions see the most investigations in counties with larger Black populations. Second, suburban regions experience the most investigations in moderate poverty counties. Third, rural counties experience the most investigations in areas with more "generous" safety nets, such as expanded Medicaid. Taken together, these findings provide an important takeaway: disparities by race and income are not universal or homogenous, but instead vary significantly by place. As such, policies and practice to improve race and income equity must take place into account. Policies intended to reduce anti-Black racism ought to target urban regions in particular, while practices and services focused on near-poverty and moderate-income families are needed more in suburban areas. On the other hand, in rural counties, the role of the safety net and related

social services needs to be explored in more detail. Thus, in addition to clear policy and practice implications, this chapter highlights some key areas for future research as well.

In paper 2, I offer important insights on the function of both poverty and bureaucracy. In this chapter, I find that low-income families are impacted by both child welfare policy and poverty policy jointly, and this overlap in these two policy systems' functioning creates unique barriers for parents endeavoring to be reunited with their children. Most families in the child welfare system are also impoverished, and as a result, they are stuck between rules and regulations for both poverty governing institutions – like public benefits and the low-wage, part-time labor market – and the child welfare system's regulations and requirements. In attempting to balance these two policy systems' rules and requirements, parents experience unique income loss and financial sanctions through precarious employment scheduling, child support fines, and lost or reduced public benefits. These experiences of child-welfare impacted parents occur by virtue of bureaucratic rules in both poverty policy and child welfare policy driven by New Paternalism. The results illuminate several clear policy and practice recommendations: more fair work week laws are needed to support vulnerable parents, more flexibility is needed in child welfare service and visitation scheduling, child support fines for child welfare-impacted parents ought to be abolished, and public benefits eligibility needs to take into account unique circumstances associated with child welfare system involvement for parents.

Paper 3 offers another perspective on child welfare experiences from street-level bureaucrats in a public child welfare agency. In this chapter, I explored the role of place in street-level bureaucrat decision-making. I find that place has a prevailing impact on how frontline child welfare investigators and their supervisors can make decisions about the families on their caseloads, because place shapes the organizational environment that these workers are embedded

within, such as through service distribution and local politics. This chapter illustrates the limitations of arguments which name street-level worker bias as the primary driver of child welfare system disparities (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008). While these street-level workers certainly play an important role in defining family outcomes in child welfare, this chapter highlights the external constraints which often limit worker authority. Workers may have the very best of intentions, but when embedded in a geographic environment which is conservative, devoid of resources, or segregated, individual frontline workers must directly contend with these place-based constraints in order to do their jobs, and sometimes these constraints are simply insurmountable. This chapter offers important insights on instances where interventions or practice and policy reform may be needed, such as in judicial politics and discretion, and in expanding the geographic human service array in rural and suburban areas. Without reforms in these areas, many individual workers' hands become tied in their attempts to support children and parents impacted by the child welfare system.

Although this study is presented as three individual papers, the study was explicitly designed as a mixed methods project with the intention of offering crosscutting results beyond each individual moment of data collection. Specifically, this project was designed as an explanatory sequential study, with the quantitative results in paper 1 being used to inform and further explore in the two qualitative chapters, and with multi-level data collection being used to analyze diverse perspectives across the child welfare system (Cresswell & Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019). While each method and point of data collection provided unique individual results, the design also worked as intended; the qualitative data and chapters offer insights on the quantitative results and the three chapters provide collective evidence on the broader child welfare system. In particular, the quantitative chapter of this study offers important new evidence

on the interactive role that place plays in shaping the impact of poverty, race, and social service bureaucracies in the aggregate. However, this macro quantitative analysis is not well-positioned to explore the mechanisms and processes that may explain the results of this chapter, and the qualitative results afford needed insights.

Paper 1 reveals some important trends in child welfare investigations across different regions. In urban areas, results indicate that the highest rate of investigations are carried out in counties with larger proportions of Black residents. This is a result which other studies of different outcomes, like foster care placement rates, have found, and it is not a particularly surprising result (e.g., Wulczyn, 2023). Yet, taken as is, it is unclear why we see this result. The qualitative data collected in this study provides key insights: parents and workers alike described deep-seated anti-Black racism in urban areas in particular, especially by referrers like doctors and in worker perceptions of neighborhoods and families in urban regions. Additionally, the qualitative respondents spoke of urban segregation and transportation challenges, which uniquely impacted concentrations of minoritized families in these urban areas. Moreover, in suburban regions, the quantitative analysis reveals that counties with more moderate household poverty rates see higher rates of investigations. This is novel insight into the functioning of the child welfare system in suburban areas, where we currently have limited evidence. However, again, the drivers of this result are unclear with just the quantitative findings. Qualitatively, I find that families in suburban regions were contending with long waiting lists for nonprofit services and with benefit cliffs which made securing needed resources difficult. Also, workers in paper 3 made clear that moderate income families were uniquely positioned to struggle in the suburbs due to gaps in the service array, which may explain the result in the quantitative paper.

Finally, in paper 1, I quantitatively find that rural counties experience higher rates of investigations associated with more "generous" safety net policy provisions, like expanded Medicaid, and these counties also see a less protective effect of other more generous policy provisions like TANF benefit amounts, compared to urban and suburban regions. Workers in paper 3 offered important perspectives on this result. In rural areas, the human service array was so generally limited, that any expanded availability of services, like expanded Medicaid, would be likely to result in new opportunities for surveillance of low-income families in these regions which are otherwise distinctly isolated, increasing system contact overall. Moreover, in an area where even access to something as basic as groceries could be difficult, never mind access to counseling or drug treatment, additional income from a program like TANF could only shift a family's resources so much. The qualitative insights across this study offer important evidence on how and why we see the quantitative results presented here, and provide key evidence on how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers might consider responding to these findings moving forward.

Furthermore, these chapters collectively demonstrate three broader insights on child welfare policy and practice. First, this study makes clear that street-level theory and research on federalized policymaking can offer important explanations about the mechanisms by which the disparities and inefficacies in child welfare policy outcomes come to exist. Though street-level theory has been used to theorize and investigate policy experiences and outcomes in many different social policy systems, in child welfare, we have understood less about how street-level theory operates, to the detriment of research and advocacy efforts aimed at improving the child welfare system. The significance of frontline policymaking and street-level theory is borne out across all three empirical chapters in this dissertation, even when not explicitly focused on

workers. In the first paper, the results underscore significant variations in state and county-level policy environments. This level of federalized policy authority has played a substantial part in the development of the significant position of street-level organizations and street-level bureaucrats, and the results in paper 1 offer compelling evidence that federalized policymaking is a key factor shaping child welfare outcomes (Brodkin, 1990). In the second empirical chapter, we see further the role of individual workers and agencies, even when it is not the focal point of the results. In describing their experiences with financial sanctions, income loss, and barriers to employment, parents discussed pressures to work from individual caseworkers, fears about judgment by individual workers during visitations, and rules and regulations of the local organizations and agencies that they were receiving services and supports from. While the parents in this study were clearly contending with major federal-level policies and ideologies, they had to contend with these policies while also interacting with street-level bureaucrats and organizations. In the final empirical chapter, of course, street-level theory is demonstrated directly in analysis of individual worker decisions about children and parents on their caseload. These frontline decisions have substantial implications for the outcomes of families with whom workers interact, including race and income equity, and worker decisions intersect substantially with the geographic environment in which street-level child welfare workers are embedded. Results across this study demonstrate the need for future child welfare policies, interventions, and research which explicitly consider street-level theory, because to not do so leaves out a key piece of the process behind both child welfare policy implementation and family outcomes.

The second overarching takeaway from this study is that place plays a fundamental role in child welfare, and in fact this role is so powerful that it shapes the impact of street-level theory in this field, too. Across all three papers, place impacts child welfare policy implementation and

family outcomes. In paper 1, I find a significant moderating effect of place on the effect of aggregate poverty, race/ethnicity, and safety net and child welfare policy provisions, offering evidence that how and why poverty, race, and social policy provisions matter in child welfare system involvement is distinct across geographic contexts. Even in the second paper, where place is less of a prevailing theme, it is clear that place matters, with paper 1 even offering some insights as to why. While I find in paper 2 that concurrent governance by both poverty policy and child welfare policy creates unique situations of income loss and financial sanctions for parents, we know that states and locales have discretion over the kinds of poverty policies that parents were governed by in this paper. For example, the precarity of low-wage work experienced by parents in this study might be different in a state or city where workers were covered by regional "fair work week" laws (e.g., Kwon & Raman, 2023; Lambert, 2020). Additionally, the impact of loss or reduction of benefits for these parents would be distinct depending on where parents live; the benefit amounts vary significantly across states, and the impact of lost income will be felt differently depending on the cost of living and availability of other services and supports in a region, as is evidenced by the differential impact of policy provisions analyzed in paper 1.

The third empirical chapter offers further evidence that place shapes the process of child welfare policy implementation, with differences in place defining the contexts in which child welfare workers practice and the kinds of decisions workers can therefore make about children and parents. Much existing child welfare research has treated the policy problems in child welfare, especially race and income disparities, as uniform. This study illuminates a different reality: inequities in child welfare, and challenges in child welfare policy and practice, are not identical or consistent. Rather, the experiences and outcomes families impacted by the child welfare system will face are dependent on where these families live. Future efforts to reform

child welfare and address policy problems in this system must consider place if these efforts are to have any meaningful impact on parents and children in the child welfare system.

Finally, the results of all three empirical chapters make clear that child welfare policy does not exist independently, but rather it is reliant on the role of the safety net and other social services. In each paper of this dissertation, the findings illuminate just how substantially child welfare – as a concept, and as a policy system – depends on other services and policies. In paper 1, I find that social policy provisions, like Medicaid expansion and TANF benefit rates, are significantly associated with child welfare investigations and substantiations. In paper 2, parents impacted by the child welfare system reported significant challenges associated with their cases which were caused directly by policies in other institutions, like the low wage labor market, child support enforcement, and the public benefits system. At the same time, the workers in the final paper reported significant place-based constraints associated with availability of services and the political orientation of other public servants in their region, like legal personnel.

The extent to which parents are vulnerable to child welfare surveillance, the degree to which parents undergo financial hardship as a result of a child welfare case, and the ability that child welfare workers and agencies have to provide tangible supports to families in need are all directly connected to other policy institutions and social services. All policy problems identified across this study, such as the racial inequities in urban child welfare investigations, the economic hardships faced by parents navigating child welfare system processes, and the lack of adequate resources for child welfare-impacted parents in rural and suburban regions, are policy problems that bleed across the borders and boundaries of policy areas which are often researched and legislated in silos. If we are to create more equitable and effective child welfare policy and practice, research, advocacy, and reforms targeted at child welfare cannot operate independently,

as they often do. The policy problems faced by child welfare-impacted families are not just child welfare or social work problems; they are public policy, public administration, public health, economic, and legal problems. Solving the problems identified across this study's empirical chapters requires that these separate social systems and bodies of research be in conversation with one another.

In addition to these three general contributions, this dissertation study also has some overall limitations. First, the conceptualization and definition of place throughout the study varies, vacillating between state, county, city, and neighborhood differences in place across the three papers and even within individual papers. The concept of place is complex and nuanced, with macro, meso, and micro conceptualizations of place being commonplace. This multi-method study captures aspects of many different levels of place, which offers broad insights into how place may matter generally in child welfare. However, the variation in the meaning of place across the papers in this dissertation study makes comparisons across papers in this dissertation challenging, and makes drawing overall conclusions about place, like precise descriptions of certain kinds of regions such as the suburbs, unrealistic. For example, rurality is an aspect of place explored in this study, but paper 1 explores county-level rurality across hundreds of counties, while paper 2 has no rural participants, and paper 3 explores rurality in one specific case which covers two individual counties. This study offers important evidence that place matters, but the limitations of how place is conceptualized across the study restrict how much can be practically done with this evidence.

A second overall limitation across the full study is the inconsistent conceptualizations of and focus on race across the three papers. To illustrate, paper 1 is the only paper in which race is an explicit focus of the analysis. Although race is a main focus, there are substantial limitations

to the analysis in this paper given that the data comprises aggregate regional demographics, not individual characteristics. Race was a persistent *theme* among interview data with both parents and workers, but it was not the primary focus of other papers 2 or 3. Moreover, when parents and workers described race, it was largely more individualized, discussing an individual family or a specific neighborhood. Race is a complicated social construct and there are tradeoffs to examining the concept both in the aggregate and individually. Of course, there are decades of evidence indicating that race and ethnicity play a substantial role in child welfare and thus appropriately conceptualizing and addressing race is vital in child welfare studies. In this study, I set out to offer insights from both individual and aggregate perspectives, but the final dissertation papers were ultimately quite limited in the extent to which they each speak to the meaning of race in child welfare in general. This limitation is related to a third limitation of the dissertation, which is that the study is written in a three-paper model. Interview protocols for workers and parents each had quite explicit questions about race, and race and racism were persistent and strong themes in both portions of data collection. However, the two papers which were initially written with that interview data did not focus on race and in some ways, the emergent analysis conducted for papers 2 and 3 is quite distinct from paper 1, despite the concepts being obviously related. There is a large amount of data that has yet to be fully analyzed or utilized from this dissertation, and some of the more macro and cross-cutting insights in the study, especially those about race, are lost in the dissertation in this particular format.

Both the limitations and main takeaways across this study also offer some insights on next steps in research to further address the policy issues identified across this study. First, future research, including that which utilizes yet-unused qualitative data from this study and other new studies, needs to more meaningfully explore how the social meaning of both race and poverty

may shift across place. The implications of the analysis from the three papers in this study make clear that place plays a moderating role in how race and income matter in child welfare, but more nuanced qualitative analysis is needed to explore how and why this is the case. Second, while I made the case in this study that investigations are the "first stage" in a lengthy and extensive child welfare system, across the study, the role of the referral source – that is, who outside of the child welfare system calls the child welfare hotline to report a child welfare allegation – arose regularly in data collection and in feedback from practitioners and researchers alike. Investigations matter, and the outcome of investigations has a significant role in how parents and children will move through the rest of the child welfare system. However, the first point of contact with this system comes at the point of referral, and the decision of a hotline worker to "screen in" this referral as legitimate, or not. Future research, especially qualitative research, is needed to explore the processes behind the decision to refer by other street-level workers, like teachers, cops, and doctors, and the processes behind the decision to screen in a case by hotline workers. Future research in this area can provide additional evidence on the roots behind child welfare system disparities.

Third, this study offers some compelling evidence on the role of street-level child welfare workers and agencies, but the broad goals of this study focused on poverty, place, and race, and as a result, the role of the bureaucracy investigated in this study is not neatly understood, separate from these sociodemographic factors. Future child welfare research ought to focus more explicitly on the use of discretion and the overall frontline decision-making of child welfare workers, poverty, place, and race notwithstanding, to support continuing to build street-level theory more broadly in child welfare. While street-level theory cannot ever be truly separated from poverty, place, and race, there is still much needed general evidence on bureaucracy to

build in child welfare in particular. Third, the role of place in this study is obvious, and important. However, this study largely offers blunt, macro insights on the fact that place does matter, but provides less granular information on how place matters, especially in the quantitative chapter which assesses county-level characteristics. Future child welfare research, especially quantitative studies, needs to explore more granular aspects of place, such as zip code or city level demographics and urbanicity, in order to provide more meaningful information on where and how to intervene to improve family outcomes in the child welfare system.

Overall, child welfare disparities and bureaucratic inefficacies are generated by complex practices, and interventions to address them ought to begin at the earliest stages of child welfare system involvement. However, research, policy, and practice have a long way to go to address the challenges faced by families across the child welfare system, especially those faced by families of color and low-income families. This dissertation offers important insights on the next steps that research, policy, and practice ought to prioritize in the near-term. Interventions in policy and practice must consider place and street-level worker decision-making, including place-based constraints on that decision-making. Yet, more than anything, child welfare researchers and policymakers should take away one major reality from this study. Fixing the child welfare system necessitates working with other institutions and systems. Reform of child welfare policy and practice alone is not enough to reduce the barriers and hardships faced by children and parents who are impacted by the child welfare system, and this dissertation makes that abundantly clear. It is imperative that child welfare policy break out of the silo it is so often forced within if we are to encourage a genuine idea of child and family welfare in this policy system.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Parent Interview Guide

Updated September 2023

Introduction:
There is evidence about inequalities in the child welfare system, with some families being overrepresented in the system, such as families from low-income neighborhoods, poor families, and families of color. This is a study about how poverty, race, and location may shape decisions and outcomes in CPS cases. I am talking to parents, like yourself, whose children have been involved with [the child welfare agency in the state], and I am also talking to caseworkers who do the investigations. My goal is to understand more about how a family's race, income, and where they live may influence the experiences families have with [the child welfare agency], and I hope to use this information to recommend policy and practice changes. I know talking about some of this may be difficult. You can take your time, take a break any time you need, and you can choose to not answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. Do you have any questions before we start?

So, I want to first start by hearing more about you and your family.

1) Tell me about a bit about yourself and your family.
    - *Probes*:
        - Where you live/where you grow up
        - Education/job
        - Family
        - Children
        - Hobbies

Now, I would like to discuss your family's experience with [the child welfare agency]. I know talking about this may be hard, so please take your time and we can take a pause any time.

2) Next, tell me the story of how your family got involved with [the child welfare agency]?
    a) What was happening in your family at this time?
    b) Who made the call on your family to CPS, if you know? (*teacher, doctor, family, etc.*)
        - Why do you think this person reported your family?
    c) What were the allegations cited in the investigation of your family?
    d) What happened during the investigation? What was the process like?
    e) What was the caseworker who did your investigation like? (*age, gender, race, demeanor, parent, etc.)*
        - Who were the other professionals involved in your case, and what were they like? (*judges, service providers, police, etc.)*
    f) What happened after the investigation? What was the decision made about the case? (*unfounded, indicated, kids entered foster care, etc.).*

g) What is the status of your case now?

3) In this instance, as your family was dealing with [experience that led to CPS involvement], what would you say your family needed most?

4) Can you describe any services that [the child welfare agency] provided/referred for your family during the investigation period?
    a) Which service(s) were the most helpful?
    b) Did any services help meet the need you described for me a few moments ago?

5) Were you receiving any other services or benefits, like social security, food stamps, TANF, Section 8?
    a) If yes, did your case impact your ability to receive these at all?

6) Did your case influence your income or finances in any other ways? For example, lost job or lost hours, or child support payments.[21]

7) What do you think the role of child protective services is?
    a) Follow-up: How would you describe the job of investigators/the goals of [the child welfare agency]?

8) Do you think they fulfilled this role in working with your family? Why or why not?
    a) What other roles did they serve?

9) How, if at all, has your experience with [the child welfare agency] influenced how you think about the child welfare system?
    a) Has this changed how you engage with the government or politics in anyway? How so?

<u>Next, I want to talk a bit more about poverty, race, and where families live. These factors are complicated and can influence a family's experiences in different and intersecting ways. I want to get your thoughts on how these things may or may not have mattered in your interactions with [the child welfare agency] and in your family's case.</u>

10) So, first, you told me above that you live in [area]. Can you tell me more about this place?
    a) What is this area like in terms of who lives there?
        1. Race
        2. Culture
        3. Income/poverty
        4. Ages
    b) Would you describe this area as urban, suburban or rural?
        - What does [urban/suburban/rural] mean to you?
    c) What kinds of services, stores, restaurants, jobs, etc. are in the area?
    d) Do you know of anyone else in your area who has been investigated by [the child welfare agency]? Friends, neighbors, etc.?

[21] Questions 5 and 6 were added in response to emergent results about income loss.

- Do you think your experience is like or unlike theirs? How so?

11) How do you think where you live may have shaped your family's experiences with [the child welfare agency]? (*services availability, poverty/neighborhood risks, etc.)*

12) Next, how would you describe your family's race and ethnicity?

13) Do you think being (families race ethnicity/ies) mattered in your involvement with [the child welfare agency] or in how the investigation went? How so?
    a) How do you think families who are [different race/ethnicity] experience [the child welfare agency]?

14) Okay, and lastly, how would you describe your family's financial situation?

15) What kind of impact, if any, do you think your finances had on your family's investigation?
    a) Do you think people who have higher incomes or are upper class have different experiences with [the child welfare agency] investigations? How so?

16) So, now we have talked about all three factors – race, location, and poverty. I am curious how you think these three factors may have interacted in your family's case. Talk to me about that.
    a) For example, do you think your income may have mattered more or less if you were [race] or living in a different area?
    b) Do you think where you lived might have mattered more or less if you were [income status] or [race/ethnicity]?

<u>Thanks so much for your time. We are almost done. I want to end on a more optimistic note, by hearing your ideas on what could be better.</u>

17) Based on your family's experience with [the child welfare agency], if you could change [the child welfare agency] in any way at all for future families, what would you want to do?

18) What would have made your experience with [the child welfare agency] better?

19) You told me above that the goal of [the child welfare agency] was [goal]. What would need to happen or change in order for [the child welfare agency] to achieve that goal?

20) If your family's involvement with [the child welfare agency] could have a positive outcome, how would you write the end of your story in terms of your experience with [the child welfare agency]?

21) What hopes do you have for your children and your family in the future?

Thanks so much for your time today. That's all I have for questions today. Do you have anything else you want to share, or anything to ask me?

FOLLOW-UP Second Interview Questions

Introduction
I hope things have been going okay since we last talked. I am doing follow-up interviews with a few parents who have ongoing cases to see if you have any updates with [the child welfare agency] that you want to share. I also have a couple new questions about some issues that other parents have brought up that I wanted to talk about if we haven't discussed it already. This should be shorted than our first conversation, probably closer to 30 or 40 minutes. And, just like last time, we can take a break at any time you need. Does this sound okay?

1) How has everything been going since we last spoke?

2) Do you have any updates on your case you want to share?
    a. If the case has closed, have you experienced any new or additional contact from [the child welfare agency]?

(***3&4 ONLY if parent had not discussed this with me previously***)

3) Were you receiving any other services or benefits, like social security, food stamps, TANF, Section 8?
    a. If yes, did your case impact your ability to receive these at all?

4) Did your case influence your income or finances in any other ways? For example, lost job or lost hours, or child support payments.

5) Is there anything else that you want to share with me about you, your kids, or [the child welfare agency] at this time?

Thanks so much for your time today, that is all the questions I have this time. Do you have anything else you want to share, or any questions for me?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Investigators and Investigation Supervisors

Updated September 2023

NARRATIVE: "*I want to begin by getting a sense of the geographic area where you work*."

1) What areas do you/your office have jurisdiction over? What areas would you say you/your supervisees investigate most often? Which ones the least?

    1a) Describe a typical case in each of these areas. What are the typical concerns families are facing?

    1b) Does being located in any of these areas impact clients' ability to adhere to case plans, treatments, court ordered services, etc.? How so? (*probe about access to social services, transportation, proximity to family, support, jobs, programs, etc.)*

2) Next, I want to talk through an example case with you and discuss how you might assess risks in this case.

COMPOSITE CASE: Picture yourself investigating/supervising this case and imagine this family.

CPS screened in a report of neglect and physical abuse which now needs to be investigated. Four people live in the home: two children, ages 8 and 9, the biological mother, and her husband, the children's stepfather. The report alleged concerns about inappropriate supervision, physical abuse of both children, and domestic violence. Specifically, a teacher reported concerns about the children being unattended at home after school, and the same teacher noticed bruises on the upper arms of both children. The alleged physical abuse and domestic violence perpetrator is the stepfather, who is also alleged to abuse alcohol. He works full time in construction. The mother is currently unemployed and allegedly struggles with depression and alcohol abuse.

    2a) What other information do you want to know about this case? What key pieces of evidence or knowledge do you think are missing?

    2b) Given what information you do have, what are your initial thoughts about this case? What are the biggest concerns you immediately think about?

    2c) Walk me through the process of how you/your organization would proceed with this case.

    2d) ***supervisors only***: What advice or instruction might you give your staff in proceeding with this investigation?

2e) Given the information you currently have, what kinds of services, if any, would you/your office offer this family or refer them to? Why? (*probe for policies, agency practices, etc.)*

2f) Is this the kind of case you/your supervisees would recommend for Intact services? Why or why not?

2g) Is this family similar to your typical cases? Is there anything that doesn't ring true to your practice experience?

2h) Envisioning the best-case scenario for this family, how would you imagine their story ending?

i. How often would you say this ending is what happens?

ii. If it doesn't happen often, why not?

NARRATIVE: *"Now, I want to move on to talk more broadly about the child welfare system in general and your work in the context of this system."*

3) A lot of evidence and media has discussed racial disparities in child welfare. What do you think about this information?

4) How does your office or the department try to respond to issues of poverty in the families you serve? (*probe for specific policies or practices, trainings, direct services, etc.*)

4a) What are your thoughts on these responses to class disparities?

5) A lot of evidence and media has also discussed class or income disparities in child welfare. What do you think about this information?

6) How does your office or the department try to respond to issues of race disparities in child welfare? (*probe for specific policies or practices, trainings, culturally responsive services, etc*.)

7) I've asked you about the role of three things in your work today – poverty, location, and race. How do you think about these factors in conjunction with one another? - Do you see any patterns in the ways these factors overlap in your work?

8) What challenges do you face in addressing disparities in your work? (*probe for funding, staff capacity, office culture, community culture, federal/state policy*)

9) What do you think could be done to address disparities?

NARRATIVE: "*Lastly, I want to end with some basic questions about your role and your background.*"

10) How long have you been in your current position? What work were you doing before?

11) Demographics:

    a. What is your educational background?

    b. How would you describe your race, ethnicity, sex, and age?

12) That's all I have for today. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you would like to share, perhaps something I should have asked but didn't?