

Supervision and Organizational Resilience: Considerations for Staff Retention in Child Welfare Agencies

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper presents results from a mixed methods online survey on factors related to child welfare professionals' experiences with supervision, considered within the framework of organizational resilience.

Methods: This analysis presents results from 543 child protective service (CPS) professionals in the United States.

Results: About a quarter of these child welfare professionals currently held supervisory roles. Comparisons of those without supervisory roles indicate higher mean ratings on perceptions of support and care from those not currently in supervisory roles, while those currently in supervisory roles reported higher mean ratings on perceptions of potential growth and promotion. Outcomes including intention to stay in child welfare, satisfaction with position, and salary were significantly associated with positive supervision components. These professionals' qualitative responses highlight a need for consideration of supervision approaches that reflect trauma-informed components and that foster organizational resilience.

Implications: Implementation of these critical supports for child welfare professionals may have lasting impacts on the well-being of children, youth, and families.

Keywords: Child welfare, resilience, retention, supervision, trauma, trauma-informed leadership, clinical supervision, reflexive supervision.

Introduction

This exploratory study considers supervision as one type of leadership within child welfare agencies (Park & Pierce, 2020) and its potential to impact organizational resilience outcomes such as employee retention and satisfaction (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Organizational resilience reflects the ability of agencies to function effectively and even thrive despite environmental challenges (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021), which is relevant given the reality that child welfare professionals work within the context of environmental stressors, which can include exposure to vicarious trauma and direct exposure to trauma related to their occupational roles (Fink-Samnack, 2022; Molnar et al., 2020). Child welfare settings are unique workplaces where professionals may experience collective occupational trauma, potentially contributing to challenges in retaining staff and suggesting opportunities to utilize trauma-informed supervision as one approach to build resilience within child welfare agencies (Fink-Samnack, 2022; Collins-Camargo & Antle, 2018). Although supervision can be a core, and in some jurisdictions mandatory, component of a supportive organizational structure, existing research suggests that those in supervisory roles may not be afforded the same opportunities to engage in supervision practices (Griffiths et al., 2019). This study examines supervision quality and its association with retention and employment satisfaction among a sample of child welfare professionals with and without supervisory roles.

Organizational Resilience Within Child Welfare Agencies

Despite an established literature addressing turnover, employee burnout, and difficulties in sustaining child welfare employees (Griffiths, Murphy et al., 2020; Kim & Kao, 2014), there is limited theoretical basis to examine organizational factors that can support resilience in child welfare (Griffiths et al., 2017). One theory that has been applied in business settings is the organizational theory of resilience, which suggests that having a resilient organization can foster possibilities to sustain a workforce, even in the face of challenging circumstances (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Child welfare organizations do not exist in isolation and trauma is one specific type of external difficulty that impacts these agencies in various forms. This includes families' direct experiences of trauma and vicarious trauma among staff (Molnar et al, 2020). Organizational resilience in the Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn (2021) model reflects an organization's capacity to deal with challenges and to persevere despite difficulties and pressures from the external environment. Existing literature has examined how individual characteristics of staff and supervisors impacts worker resilience and burnout (McFadden et al., 2015), as well as how supervisor leadership traits impact turnover (Park & Pierce, 2020). This analysis expands on this literature by considering organizational resilience as contributing to outcomes of workforce growth and evolution (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021).

Child welfare agencies and systems experience persistent and profound challenges, including heartbreaking and often high-profile cases, staffing shortages, public and legislative pressure, and supporting clients and staff through traumatic experiences (Hunt et al., 2016; Oates, 2023). The organizational theory of resilience posits that organizational structures within an agency can buffer these environmental challenges and elements outside of a system and impart values and beliefs that foster a resilient and sustained workforce (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021).

Supervision in Child Welfare

Supervision in child welfare agencies can serve as one supportive organizational structure that may impact child welfare resilience outcomes including workforce retention and satisfaction. While research suggests that child welfare organizations have the reputation of being task-focused, managerial, and not compatible with emotional reflection, both supervisees and supervisors are aware that compliance-driven approaches contribute to turnover (Beddoe et al., 2021). Supervisors in child welfare settings need their own trauma-informed supports, as supervisors who do not have this support for themselves can be challenged to provide it to their staff (Collins-Camargo & Antle, 2018; McCrae et al., 2015). Additionally, the literature does identify a lack of leadership training for those frontline practitioners who progress into supervisory positions, further impeding their ability to provide quality supervision to their staff and adding to the need for their own professional development supports (Carpenter et al., 2013; Hair, 2013; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014).

There has been a moderate exploration about the need for trauma-informed supervision for frontline staff in the literature (Hunt et al., 2016, Park & Pierce, 2020). However, there remains a gap when exploring the supervision needs of supervisors (McCrae et al., 2015; Oates, 2023).

The theory of organizational resilience identifies internal knowledge sharing as a way for "organizational members to share their organization-specific experiences, wisdoms, and insights" (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021, p.

15). Although this theory does not specifically describe this internal knowledge sharing as supervision, child welfare supervision serves these functions in child protective service (CPS) agencies and is consistent with the definition of internal knowledge provided by Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn (2021).

Trauma Exposure in Child Welfare

Trauma has been described in the literature as a physiological response to an event or series of events that are extreme and/or potentially life threatening in nature (Haskell & Randall, 2009). Occupational trauma has the same definition, however, is experienced within an occupational context (Oates, 2023). Child welfare professionals are exposed to occupational trauma by way of frequent exposure to the neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional harm of children, persistent threats and actual violence from families involved in the system (Hunt et al., 2016; Wise, 2017), and at times, a practitioner's own experience of trauma (Oates, 2023). This persistent exposure to occupational trauma can result in the experience of primary and vicarious trauma symptomology, which is well documented in the literature as an occupational hazard for child welfare workers (Abassary & Goodrich, 2014; Fink-Samnick, 2022; Hunt et al., 2016; Levy & Poertner 2014; Oates, 2019).

Trauma impacts all levels of child welfare practice, such that it can be considered a setting with "collective occupational trauma" (Fink-Samnick, 2022, p. 107). Supervision is considered one specific avenue for building trauma-informed practice into child welfare agencies (Collins-Camargo & Antle, 2018; Oates, 2023). At the agency level, supervision is one specific institutional mechanism that child welfare agencies utilize to support and mentor staff.

Creating trauma-informed child welfare systems is generally considered best practice and has long included enhancing well-being of employees (Chadwick Trauma-Informed Systems Project, 2012; Park & Pierce, 2020). There is a need for additional consideration of the role of supervision in fostering trauma-informed organizations, as well as in examining potential impacts of trauma-informed practices on employee retention and satisfaction. This analysis explores supervisory characteristics within the emerging framework of Trauma Informed Supervision and Support (TISS), which identifies trauma-informed supervision principles specific to child welfare practice (Oates, 2023). The TISS framework is based on the six trauma-informed principle outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which are: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment; voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender considerations (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014). In summary, the six trauma-informed principles in the context of the TISS model are:

1. Safety: is there safety within the supervisory relationship?
2. Trustworthiness and transparency: is there a transparent agreement about what supervision is and what it will be used for?
3. Peer support: exploring the role of connecting with others who do the same work as you
4. Collaboration and mutuality: understanding that supervision is a partnership
5. Empowerment, voice, and choice: centers the practitioner as central to supervision and empowers them to fully contribute and name their needs within a support and supervision context
6. Cultural, historical, and gender considerations: considerations to how power constructs impact a practitioner's ability to fully engage with support and supervision within an occupational setting

It is important to note that the TISS framework relates to both frontline workers and people in supervisory roles when examining the support and supervision needs of those working in a child welfare context.

Retention in Child Welfare

It is well established in the research literature that child welfare organizations perpetually struggle to retain child welfare practitioners. Lack of access to good evidence-based and responsive supervision is frequently cited as a reason (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Wilkins et al., 2017). However, there is a need to examine retention in child welfare from the perspective of organizational resilience and to move away from deficit-focused assessments, instead examining structural and organizational factors that may contribute to positive staffing outcomes within these agencies (de Guzman et al., 2020). The existing literature has examined organizational factors associated with child welfare worker retention, including supervision, and organizational supports (de Guzman et al., 2020; Griffiths, Collins-Camargo et al., 2020; Kim & Kao, 2014; Trujillo et al., 2020). The role of gender in child welfare retention studies has been mixed (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008), with one recent study suggesting that supervision may be one form of

relationship-based factor impacting turnover among these professionals (Prost & Middleton, 2020). The geographic location of child welfare agencies has also been examined as a factor impacting both supervision and retention in child welfare, with findings suggesting a need for additional research and the potential for supervisors in urban areas to have a greater intention to leave their agencies (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2008). Retention of supervisors in these agencies has not been as thoroughly researched as that of frontline staff (Griffiths, Murphy et al., 2020) and little is known about supervisors' own experiences with being supervised.

Current Study

This exploratory study considers child welfare supervision as a component of fostering trauma-informed and resilient child welfare organizations. First, we examine supervision characteristics related to trauma-informed supervision (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014) among child protection professionals who are currently in supervisory roles, as well as those who are not supervisors. Second, we consider supervision experiences of CPS employees both with and without current supervisory responsibilities and consider preliminarily connections to the TISS framework (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014). Third, we consider whether factors derived from the analysis of supervision items relate to outcomes including intention to stay in position and satisfaction with employment and salary. Finally, we examine open-ended comments regarding supervision for those child welfare staff with and without current supervisory responsibilities.

Methods

This study used an exploratory survey design created to collect statewide staff data on employee retention from three public, state-administered child welfare agencies in the United States. Directors in three child welfare jurisdictions in the United States were invited to participate in this study. These administrators distributed a cover letter and survey link to staff using their agency email address. The study was approved by the IRB at the first author's institution. Responses were anonymous and collected using one author's Qualtrics account. State agency directors were provided with de-identified, aggregate results for their individual state, but not for other states included in this sample.

While not included in this analysis, the original study sample included child welfare professionals in both the United States and Sweden. Data from the Swedish sample are not included in this analysis, as the Swedish child welfare system involves a layperson or more de-professionalized supervision model (Liljegren et al., 2014), which differs from the professionalized child welfare supervision approach in the United States.

Child welfare jurisdictions in the United States sent the survey link to all employees (N of approximately 3,000 total) with a response rate of 25% (753 responses).

Table 1. Frequencies of Demographic Characteristics of CPS Workers

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Supervisory duties		
Yes	134	24.7
No	359	66.1
Missing data	50	9.2
Age range		
Under 30	94	17.3
Over 30 to 40	182	33.5
Over 40 to 50	124	22.8
Over 50 to 60	74	13.6
Over 60	16	2.8
Missing data	53	9.8
Location		
Population less than 50,000	206	37.9
Population 50,000 to less than 100,000	148	27.3
Population over 100,000 less than 200,000	74	13.6
Population over 200,000	55	10.1
Missing data	60	11.0
Gender		
Male	48	8.8
Female	440	81.0
Other	3	< 1.0
Missing data	52	9.6
Current salary range		
Less than \$30,000	8	1.5
Over \$30,000 to \$50,000	383	70.5
Over \$50,000 to \$80,000	97	17.9
Over \$80,000	3	< 1.0
Missing data	52	9.6
Satisfaction with current salary		
	<i>M</i> = 2.55	<i>SD</i> = 1.22
Extremely dissatisfied	123	22.7
Somewhat dissatisfied	149	27.4
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	58	10.7
Somewhat satisfied	153	28.2
Extremely satisfied	10	1.8
Missing data	50	9.2
Satisfied with current position		
	<i>M</i> = 3.39	<i>SD</i> = 1.24
Extremely dissatisfied	51	9.4
Somewhat dissatisfied	77	14.2
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	77	14.2
Somewhat satisfied	201	37.0
Extremely satisfied	85	15.7
Missing data	52	9.6
Years expected to stay working in child welfare		
	<i>M</i> = 2.86	<i>SD</i> = 1.17
Less than 2 years	76	14.0
More than 2 years to 5 years	151	27.8
More than 5 years to 10 years	85	15.7
More than 10 years	227	41.8
Missing data	4	< 1.0

Note. N = 543.

Other respondents, not included in this analysis, worked in capacities including adoptions, administrative roles, and foster care placement. Employees working in various capacities responded to this survey and only those individuals who worked in child protective services were included in this study analysis, resulting in a sample of 543 respondents. Missing data were less than 10% on all items. The data utilized in this analysis were collected between 2018 until 2019.

Sample Characteristics

Sample characteristics appear in Table 1 and include respondents who currently held supervisory positions (25%, $n = 134$), as well as those who were not currently in supervisory positions (66%, $n = 359$) with 9% of respondents ($n = 50$) not answering this question. The modal age group was those between 30 and 40 years of age (37%, $n = 182$), with about 38% ($n = 206$) reporting working in a location with populations of less than 50,000. Of the 543 CPS workers included in this study, 81% ($n = 440$) were female with about 71% ($n = 383$) earning between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Fourteen percent ($n = 76$) expected to stay in child welfare less than two years, while 13% ($n = 71$) had worked for over 12 years in the same agency. This variable was recoded to reflect those expecting to work five years or less compared to others.

Study Instrument

The web-based survey was derived from the "Stay" interview tool used to assess factors that might impact child welfare staff willingness to remain in their professional roles (Comstock & Brittain, 2006). The original tool was a qualitative instrument that was based on the philosophy of getting feedback from employees prior to the standard exit interview. Topics included general employment questions, child welfare resilience, supervision and mentoring, agency qualities, retention of others, and individual experiences of the agency. The authors revised

Table 2. Frequencies of Supervision Variables

Survey question (<i>TISS principle</i>)	n	%	Factor Loading
Factor 1: Trauma-informed			
A source of support (<i>Peer support</i>)	$M = 3.47$	$SD = 1.39$.910
Strongly disagree	80	14.7	
Somewhat disagree	54	9.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	57	10.5	
Somewhat agree	182	33.5	
Strongly agree	136	25.0	
Missing data	34	6.3	
A source of positive motivation (<i>Trust</i>)	$M = 3.35$	$SD = 1.34$.892
Strongly disagree	73	13.4	
Somewhat disagree	61	11.2	
Neither agree nor disagree	106	19.5	
Somewhat agree	152	28.0	
Strongly agree	117	21.5	
Missing data	34	6.3	
Reflecting supervisor's care for me as a person (<i>Safety</i>)	$M = 3.22$	$SD = 1.36$.867
Strongly disagree	85	15.7	
Somewhat disagree	68	12.5	
Neither agree nor disagree	109	20.1	
Somewhat agree	142	26.2	
Strongly agree	104	19.2	
Missing data	35	6.4	
Providing management and support (<i>Collaboration</i>)	$M = 3.32$	$SD = 1.24$.864
Strongly disagree	65	12.0	
Somewhat disagree	59	10.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	109	20.1	
Somewhat agree	195	35.9	
Strongly agree	79	14.5	
Missing data	36	6.6	
Relationship focused (<i>Safety</i>)	$M = 3.32$	$SD = 1.26$.817
Strongly disagree	62	11.4	
Somewhat disagree	68	12.5	
Neither agree nor disagree	115	21.2	
Somewhat agree	164	30.2	
Strongly agree	94	17.3	
Missing data	40	7.4	
Supporting growth and promotion (<i>Empowerment</i>)	$M = 3.10$	$SD = 1.30$.803
Strongly disagree	83	15.3	
Somewhat disagree	85	15.7	
Neither agree nor disagree	111	20.4	
Somewhat agree	155	28.5	
Strongly agree	74	13.6	
Missing data	36	6.6	
Focused on case consultation (<i>Collaboration</i>)	$M = 3.66$	$SD = 1.25$.705
Strongly disagree	52	9.6	
Somewhat disagree	44	8.1	
Neither agree nor disagree	69	12.7	
Somewhat agree	203	37.4	
Strongly agree	139	25.6	
Missing data	36	6.6	
Factor 2: Punitive or compliance focused			
Based on monitoring or compliance	$M = 3.87$	$SD = 1.11$.813
Strongly disagree	33	6.1	
Somewhat disagree	27	5.0	
Neither agree nor disagree	69	12.7	
Somewhat agree	222	40.9	
Strongly agree	156	28.7	
Missing data	36	6.6	
Punitive or punishment focused	$M = 2.45$	$SD = 1.35$.666
Strongly disagree	181	33.3	
Somewhat disagree	84	15.5	
Neither agree nor disagree	120	22.1	
Somewhat agree	75	13.8	
Strongly agree	47	8.7	
Missing data	36	6.6	

Note. $N = 543$.

components of this tool to be a quantitative survey that reflected the original tool, with the addition of demographic characteristics of the child welfare professionals.

Respondents completed an anonymous survey using Qualtrics, an online survey platform hosted on a secure university server with settings to ensure no collection of IP addresses. The survey included 65 items consisting of open-ended qualitative questions, categorical, and Likert-scale questions, with a median completion time of approximately 15 minutes. The survey included questions related to child welfare staff demographic characteristics, intention to stay in child welfare, and reflections on supervisory experiences.

Measures

Retention Items. Participants were asked, *"How many years do you expect to stay working in child welfare"* with answer categories of less than two years, more than two to five years, more than five years to 10 years, and more than 10 years. Participants were asked, *"Please rate how satisfied you are with your current position"*, and *"How satisfied are you with your current salary"* with answer categories from very dissatisfied to very satisfied.

Supervision Questions. Questions related to experiences being supervised asked whether the respondent was currently in a position that included supervisory duties (Yes/No), and a set of questions that asked respondents to think about their child welfare supervisors and then asked: *"Would you say that your supervision was"* with a list of supervisory characteristics ranked from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Participants were asked to think about their supervision in child welfare and were asked to rank answers from strongly disagree to strongly agree with questions listed in Table 2. Nine supervisory characteristics were included in the survey (see Table 2) with respondents asked to rate from strongly disagree to strongly agree about their supervision. Three of these supervisory characteristics, "source of support", "care for me as a person", and supporting growth and promotion" were identified as items reflective of trauma-informed supervision (SAMSHA, 2014), and are matched with relevant components of the TISS framework (Oates, 2023).

Open-Ended Supervision Question. Respondents were aware that the focus of the survey was on retention and were also invited to provide open-ended comments in response to the statement: *"Without sharing any confidential information, please feel free to share any other thoughts about supervision here"*.

Data Analysis

SPSS 29.0 software was used to conduct all statistical analyses (IBM Corp, 2023). A univariate descriptive analysis examined respondent characteristics and means of supervisory items. These items included serving as a source of support and positive motivation, reflecting on the supervisor's care, providing management and support, being relationship focused, and supporting growth and promotion. Bivariate, independent samples t-tests were examined for differences in mean scores for supervisory items and whether the respondent currently had supervisory roles. Exploratory factor analyses were conducted for all supervisor components and are presented in Table 2. The workers' perceptions of supervisor characteristics suggested a positive supervision factor (seven-item subscale accounting for 57% of the total variance). The factor means were calculated and subsequently used in analyses, with higher mean scores indicating a higher endorsement of these supervisory items. Binary logistic regressions were conducted to examine whether factors impacted outcomes including intention to stay more than five years, satisfaction with position, and satisfaction with salary.

Qualitative analysis of the open-ended question included two phases based on content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 2004). A total of 252 responses to the open-ended question were thematically coded into general themes of support ($n = 133$) and gaps in support ($n = 55$) in supervision. Two of the authors independently conducted a thematic content analysis of the qualitative comments to identify themes of supports or gaps in supervision, as identified in the existing literature and from unique participant responses. These authors reviewed coding results and found agreement on approximately 90% of the identified themes. Discrepancies in the coding of the qualitative comments were discussed to find consensus, yielding 100% agreement on qualitative coding.

Results

Employee Characteristics

Several employment variables were considered to gauge CPS workers' current job satisfaction and retention (Table 1). CPS staff reported moderate satisfaction overall with their current positions. Satisfaction with current salary

($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.22$) and satisfaction with current position ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.24$) initially ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied). These items were recoded into binary variables (extremely and somewhat satisfied compared to other responses) for subsequent analyses.

Supervision Factors

This analysis considered respondents' ratings on several supervision items for those with and without current supervisory roles (Table 3). Using means from the ordinal supervision variables and the dichotomous (Yes/No) question regarding current supervisory duties, these analyses found significant differences in three of the supervision items for those in supervisory roles and not, respectively: (1) a source of support (mean of 3.31 versus 3.54); (2) safety through supervisor's care for the worker as a person (mean of 3.06 versus 3.28); and (3) empowerment through supporting growth and promotion (mean of 3.28 versus 3.06). Factor analysis yielded two factors, which are considered to be positive and punitive supervision items. Means from these factors were entered into binary logistic regression models along with the gender of the worker and the location of the agency in terms of population size. The positive supervision factor was a significant predictor of intention to stay among supervisors, of satisfaction with the position for all respondents, and satisfaction with one's salary among those not in supervisory roles (Table 4).

Table 3. Frequencies of Supervision Variables United States

Supervisor Characteristic	Entire sample <i>M (SD)</i>	Supervisory duties		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
		Yes <i>M (SD)</i>	No <i>M (SD)</i>			
A source of support (TISS Support)	3.47 (1.39)	3.31 (1.41)	3.54 (1.39)	-1.63	490	.05
A source of positive motivation	3.35 (1.34)	3.27 (1.28)	3.39 (1.36)	-.92	490	.18
Reflecting supervisor's care for me as a person (TISS Safety)	3.22 (1.36)	3.06 (1.36)	3.28 (1.37)	-1.58	489	.05
Providing management and support	3.32 (1.24)	3.32 (1.29)	3.34 (1.22)	-.12	489	.45
Relationship focused	3.32 (1.26)	3.26 (1.19)	3.35 (1.29)	-.70	484	.24
Supporting growth and promotion (TISS Empowerment)	3.10 (1.30)	3.28 (1.31)	3.06 (1.29)	1.67	490	.04
Focused on case consultation	3.66 (1.25)	3.55 (1.24)	3.72 (1.24)	-1.32	488	.09
Based on monitoring or compliance	3.87 (1.11)	3.85 (1.13)	3.90 (1.08)	-.42	488	.34
Punitive or punishment focused	2.45 (1.35)	2.51 (1.33)	2.41 (1.36)	.74	488	.18

Note. $N = 359$. Strongly disagree = 1, somewhat disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, somewhat agree = 4, strongly agree = 5.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Analyses Estimating Odds of Intent to Stay and Satisfaction with Position and Salary

Characteristics	Intention to stay more than 5 years				Satisfaction with position				Satisfaction with salary			
	Current supervisory role No		Current supervisory role Yes		Current supervisory role No		Current supervisory role Yes		Current supervisory role No		Current supervisory role Yes	
	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Exp(B)	<i>p</i>
Gender (female =1)	1.35	.41	2.22	.25	1.26	.55	.84	.81	1.51	.32	1.20	.76
Location (less than 50K =1)	.91	.65	1.15	.73	2.09	.003	.59	.22	2.60	<.001	1.10	.79
Factor 1 - Positive supervision (mean)	1.11	.27	1.69	.01	2.06	<.001	2.93	<.001	1.30	.02	1.29	.16
Factor 2 - Punitive supervision (mean)	.96	.73	.96	.84	.87	.35	.75	.17	.98	.87	.92	.68

Themes from Open-Ended Question Response

Importance of Support in Supervision Among Current Supervisors. Those who were currently serving as supervisors identified the theme of support, with statements such as: *"My supervisor is the reason I am still with the agency. She provides me with support, and there was one instance where I was struggling with a removal, as I enjoyed working with the family and it was an in home case. She chose to assist me on the removal, and provided me support the entire way"*.

Another current supervisor noted that, *"My supervisor has been very supportive and willing to help carry cases when we became overloaded"*. These current supervisors also noted ways that their supervisors empowered them to grow within the agency, such as: *"My current supervisory experience ... is a much more positive and supportive relationship and includes clinical supervision, discussion of skill/professional growth, and support in many areas rather than solely case consultation and compliance with assigned tasks/timeframes"*.

Importance of Supportive Supervision among those Not Currently Serving as Supervisors

Those not serving as supervisors also noted positive things about their supervisors. Workers described the ways that their supervisors provided support, such as: *“My supervisor is attentive. When I come to her with a problem, she helps provide solutions”*. They also shared ways that their supervisors cared for them as people and created an environment of safety, such as *“One of the ONLY reasons I have stayed in my job is because my supervisors have cared about me as a person and instead of criticizing me they ask how they can help me do better”*. They also noted that supervisors had empowered them through encouraging growth or promotion opportunities, such as *“A supervisor can really make a difference in turnover. Good supervision will allow someone to flourish, grow, develop, and self—manage”*.

Participants who Reported More Negative Experiences in Supervision

Those who were currently serving as supervisors provided negative comments about their own supervision. They identified gaps in support, with one participant stating, *“I have felt the lack of support and an overwhelming sense of drowning while they continue to give demands and orders”*. Supervisors identified ways in which they do not feel safety in terms of whether their own supervisors cared about them as people. For instance, one supervisor stated: *“The agency itself has taught supervisors that they should be available at all hours and make you feel bad when you draw a line for self-care. I feel it is ironic that we are all about families and children, but we allow our own families to fall by the wayside”*. They also noted that there were gaps in provision of opportunities to grow professionally, with one participant stating: *“Supervisors do not provide the necessary tools to seek advancement.... I feel that they are providing supervision the same way they were provided supervision”*. Respondents noted specific concerns related to trauma, in statements such as, *“Very rarely (has anyone) checked in with me about secondary trauma/emotional stress”*.

Workers not in supervisory roles also noted concerns related to supervision. They noted that rather than providing support, some supervisors *“... were power hungry bullies who abused their power in the worst way. The culture of the work environment under current leadership is toxic and tantamount to modern-day slavery”*. In terms of care regarding workers or safety, respondents suggested gaps, described in comments such as, *“Supervision should also be a check in on the worker’s mental health/secondary trauma reaction. If a worker asks for help or says they are overwhelmed, action should be taken in a way that does not seem punitive”*. In a related comment, one respondent stated: *“There is little care for our personal lives or to take care of our own families or self-care”*. They noted challenges related to empowerment in terms of growth or potential promotion. One respondent stated, *“Supervision was administrative and did not generally encourage my growth or learning or take into consideration what I needed in order to perform optimally”*.

Discussion

This exploratory study addresses a gap in the literature and examines supervision as an organizational factor that can support resilience within child welfare agencies (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Trauma is a recognized factor that impacts the CPS workforce, and this study examines three specific trauma-informed components of supervision among those child protection professionals with and without current supervisory roles. Specifically, these professionals reflected on their perceptions of supervision including trauma-informed principles of support, safety, and empowerment (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014). Professionals reported marginal agreement on measures of supervisory support, safety in the sense of care for them as people, or growth and promotion opportunities. This reflects previous research findings that child welfare supervision is often compliance-focused and may not include trauma-informed approaches (Beddoe et al., 2021).

Positive supervision components, including three items relating to trauma-informed supervision principles of support, safety, and empowerment (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014) were significantly associated with job satisfaction, one outcome associated with resilient organizations (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). While this study proposes that trauma-informed supervision should be considered within the context of organizational resilience, additional research is needed to assess organizational pathways leading to outcomes, such as retention and job satisfaction. This analysis also considers satisfaction with salary, which could be considered as an organizational outcome with resilience implications. Although low salary has been found to be a factor leading to turnover in these settings (Zlotnik et al., 2005), there has been limited research regarding supervision roles and satisfaction with salary within child welfare agencies.

Perceptions of supervision were consistent with existing literature indicating a need for trauma-informed practices in child welfare supervision (Park & Pierce, 2020). The findings in the current study provide a preliminary foundation for examining CPS supervision as one component of organizational resilience.

Professionals in the current study shared examples of supervision that reflected supportive practices, as well as those that were not reflective of trauma-informed or supportive practices. There is a limited theory base to explain pathways between trauma, supervision, and retention in child welfare settings and the organizational theory of resilience provides a potential framework. Environmental factors, including trauma, impact the child welfare workforce and supervision can be considered as an important organizational structure with potential to support employees and foster organizational resilience (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Furthermore, Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn's (2021) theory considers resilience as an organizational outcome that helps staff to maintain optimism despite traumatic situations. Theoretical components, such as the value of investing in the health of the organizational system, which could include staff, have direct implications for child welfare agencies (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). This theoretical perspective's foundation is critically important in child welfare settings where environmental pressures, including trauma exposure, can lead to employee strain. Considering organizational resilience within child welfare settings can enhance possibilities for fostering a positive workforce climate, which may contribute to better outcomes for the families served in these settings within child welfare agencies (Glisson & Green, 2011). Other existing theories, such as transformational leadership theory (Park & Pierce, 2020), focus on the individual characteristics of the supervisor and may not account for supervision components, such as supporting growth and promotion or other structural factors impacting staff retention in these large bureaucratic institutions. While previous studies have noted that the quality of supervision is a component of retention (Chenot et al., 2009; Hanna & Potter, 2012; Kim et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2011), this theoretical perspective positions supervision within the larger framework of organizational resilience.

Considering ways to establish models of child welfare supervision that are trauma-informed may enhance these pathways to organizational resilience. At least three of the TISS framework components, based on SAMHSA's key trauma-informed principles including safety, support, and empowerment (Oates, 2023; SAMHSA, 2014) merit additional consideration for those currently in supervisory roles, as well as those who do not supervise others. Based on the TISS framework, support for supervisors and supervisees could involve sharing experiences, particularly those that involve trauma exposure. Similarly, safety could include ensuring that there are opportunities for staff to discuss their own wellbeing and the impact of trauma on their roles as child welfare professionals. Finally, empowerment could involve intentional efforts to demonstrate the value and encouragement of supervisors and those not in supervisory roles (Oates, 2023).

Additional research is needed to examine whether existing supervision models known to focus on organizational culture, such as reflective supervision (Julien-Chinn & Lietz, 2019), could be adapted to include trauma-informed principles. However, since there is awareness that some of the managerial components of traditional child welfare system supervision can undermine reflective supervision (Rankine, 2018), organizations need to reassess the role of supervisors to maximize the potential retention benefits of reflective supervision within this context (Bernstein et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2020; Rankine, 2018). Child welfare professionals' responses highlight a need to consider the unique role of supervision within these agencies, as well as to consider innovative models for supervision in child welfare agencies.

Implications

These study findings suggest a range of solutions and strategies to elevate the critical role of supervision in fostering resilience in child welfare organizations. Opportunities exist to consider trauma-informed approaches to supervisory training and interactions between supervisors and staff. Characteristics of established supervision models, such as reflective supervision, have been found to be associated with characteristics, including job satisfaction (Shea et al., 2020). Perhaps some of the limitations of reflective supervision or other models could be augmented with trauma-informed components to build capacity among child welfare supervisors (Low et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Future research could include trauma-informed and organizational resilience components into existing measures and tools, such as the Reflective Supervision Self-Efficacy Scale for Supervisees (RSSESS; Shea et al., 2020). Supervisors may lack space or time for enhancing supervision skills (Rankine, 2018), and those who are in current supervisory capacities may need administrative or leadership support to ensure that they are also provided supervision with trauma-informed components.

Additionally, these results suggest a need to listen to and utilize both the lived experience of practitioners (Oates, 2023), and the wisdom of supervisors (Griffiths et al., 2019). Agencies could learn from the experiences of supervisors who use trauma-informed approaches and supervisors would benefit from training programs and support for strengths-based supervision (Julien-Chinn & Leitz, 2019). Supervisors within child welfare agencies can take specific steps to support staff and to move agencies toward outcomes to support organizational resilience outcomes, including employee retention (Trujillo et al., 2020).

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, there are limits to the generalizability of the results, as the respondents were from three specific child welfare jurisdictions in the United States. While all members of this population of child welfare professionals were invited to participate, there is no way to ascertain whether the response reflects a generalizable sample from those three jurisdictions. Therefore, this should be considered a convenience sample and we cannot be sure that these respondents reflect the overall population of CPS staff in these jurisdictions. Although assumptions were examined for logistic regression, these conclusions should be considered within the limitations of the convenience sample. Given the variability across agencies, there may be specific features that impact supervision, including training, turnover, and licensure or degree requirements. Also, while the instrument used in this analysis was created using an established qualitative data collection tool (Comstock & Brittain, 2006), the quantitative survey used here was designed specifically for this research. Similarly, the qualitative themes presented here were open-ended responses in an online survey, and may not be valid representations of respondents' perceptions and experiences. Therefore, it is not possible to report reliability scores from previous research. In addition, the survey used in this study did not specifically ask respondents about whether their agency had adopted a trauma-informed approach to supervision or child welfare practice more generally. Future analyses could use an established tool, such as the Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care (ARTIC) to measure attitudes among child welfare professionals (Baker et al., 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Traumatic Stress Institute, n.d.). This analysis connects specific supervision items to the TISS model, and the questions asked may not be a direct match to those principles. For instance, while "a source of support" could be connected to supervisors, there may be other forms of support that would better reflect trauma informed practice, such as peer support. Additionally, as the TISS connection was done post hoc, the items in this study only related to a small number of the TISS elements, and future analyses could better match each component to a survey questions. Finally, this analysis did not include one important component of the TISS framework that involves consideration of culture and history. Child welfare agencies are increasingly called to recognize disproportionate and harmful impacts on people of color (Roberts, 2022), and additional consideration is needed to assess these impacts on practitioners working within these agencies (Oates, 2023).

These results provide an opportunity to learn from the experiences of child welfare staff and to consider supervision within the larger context of organizational resilience. This information can be used to inform supervisory training programs and quality assurance initiatives. Child welfare agency employees' experiences with supervisors have implications for training and mentoring of new child welfare staff. Trauma-informed supervision may contribute to organizational resilience, which may buffer some of the environmental experiences of trauma that can impact staff in child welfare agencies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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