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## Understanding the Challenges Child Welfare Workers Encounter Related to Promoting the Online Safety of Foster Youth

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UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES CHILD WELFARE WORKERS  
ENCOUNTER RELATED TO PROMOTING THE ONLINE SAFETY OF  
FOSTER YOUTH

by

DENIELLE KIRK L. ABAQUITA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Computer Science  
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## Abstract

Foster care case managers are responsible for the wellbeing of foster youth in the foster care system. Teens (ages 13-17) in foster care are most vulnerable to serious risks, such as sex trafficking. Such risks have been heightened by the advent of internet-based technologies that connect foster youth with unsafe others at unprecedented frequency and speed. This thesis examines how case managers tackle the challenge of online safety as it relates to adolescents in the foster care system in the United States. I conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with case managers who worked with foster teens (ages 13-17) within the past 5 years. After each interview, I transcribed the recording and conducted qualitative data analysis to identify emerging themes. I found that foster teens face numerous online risks with sexual-related risks (e.g., sex trafficking) and contact-related risks (e.g., unsolicited contact) being most prominent. However, case workers may not be prepared to address all of these challenges because of lack of online safety training and support from foster parents. Also, case workers are overburdened with many responsibilities that make online safety a secondary priority. This thesis identifies the gaps in which case managers are trained and highlights the need for more support to handle online safety challenges. Therefore, this thesis recommends that the foster care system must place a higher priority in establishing support groups and collaborative training among foster parents, case workers, and foster children to fully manage foster youth online safety.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Child welfare workers in the United States play a critical role in protecting the well-being of our youth and supporting their families. One of their primary roles is to manage cases of child maltreatment by ensuring families are provided with the necessary resources outlined in their case plans (Smith & Donovan, 2003). As part of this responsibility, case workers conduct home visits, provide service referrals for families, and attend court sessions. In any given year, case workers can have as many as 130 cases or more (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). Edwards and Wildeman (2018) suggests that managing such high caseloads largely contributes to the high turnover rates in social services. In some states, these rates are as high as 30 percent (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). As a result, many child welfare offices are thus left under-staffed, under-resourced, and over-stretched (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). This leaves many cases with incomplete investigations, decreasing a child's opportunity to be reunified with their family and most likely having to stay in the foster care system until they age-out in adulthood (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018).

In the foster care system, Badillo-Urquiola et al. (2017) found that teens are particularly susceptible to facing online risks. Often, these teens exhibit attention-seeking behaviors resulting from lack of emotional maturity, which makes them especially vulnerable to these types of risks (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2017). Therefore, in addition to their already heavy workload, case workers must now also face the emerging challenges that surround online safety. Thus, the goal of this thesis is to examine the challenges case workers face in supporting foster families and the online safety of foster youth. The research questions for this thesis are as follows:



**RQ1:** *According to case managers, what types of online risks do foster youth most commonly encounter?*

**RQ2:** *What type of training or systems of support are provided to caseworkers for addressing these challenges?*

**RQ3:** *How do case managers work with foster families to address the concerns of online safety?*

To answer these research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 child welfare case managers who have worked with foster teens (ages 13-17) within the last 5 years. I asked participants about the unique challenges they have faced, training and support they receive to meet those challenges, and risks related to foster youth technology use.

I then performed qualitative data analysis to identify emerging themes related to answering our research questions. Specifically, I identified that foster teens primarily face high-risk online situations, especially sexual-related risks. However, case managers face minimal support to address these online safety concerns. They have numerous responsibilities and are overburdened, leaving online safety as a secondary priority. This thesis provides recommendations on how the foster care system can better equip and empower case managers to handle the challenges related to foster youth online safety.

## Chapter 2: Background

In this section, I synthesized previous research on the role of child welfare case workers in supporting foster families, followed by literature on foster youth and online safety. I then presented past findings on the role of case workers in foster youth and online safety.

### The Role of Child Welfare Workers in Supporting Foster Families

Child welfare workers in the foster care system, specifically case workers, have the primary responsibility of supporting foster families. Findings from Thompson et al. (2017) assert that case workers have a multifaceted career in that they have high levels and a wide range of responsibility within the child welfare system. Accordingly, the role of case workers expands to both foster children and foster parents.

Meanwhile, children in the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to a variety of mental- and physical-health risks (Turney & Wildeman, 2016). Specifically, foster children have a higher suicide rate than those in the general population in the United States (Brown, 2020). They are also highly susceptible to engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, leading to increased chances of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Harmon-Darrow et al., 2020). Foster care case workers are thus responsible for more than just the physical safety of foster children. They are also responsible for supporting foster children's socio-emotional well-being. In providing adequate support for both foster parents and case workers, foster children can receive the best support they need from both parties.

In order to best support foster youth, foster care case workers need to maintain collaborative and supportive relationships with foster parents. In the study by Denby et al.

(1999), foster parents felt a higher sense of satisfaction with their role when workers go out of their way to show foster parents that they're appreciated (e.g., greeting cards, regular check-ins). Denby et al. (1999) also suggests that foster care agencies establish a more grounded support plan that includes a "renewed commitment" to supporting foster parents, promoting the collaboration between foster parents, and affirming the importance of their roles. The main drivers of this plan are the child welfare workers. Accordingly, child welfare workers have a primary role in supporting foster families by cultivating positive relationships with foster parents and referring them to the resources and services they need (Smith & Donovan, 2003). However, case workers also need their own support. Thompson et al. (2017) found that when case workers were not well-supported (e.g., resources, fair compensation, etc.), case workers felt undervalued, which made them more likely to leave the profession. With high turnover of case workers in the child welfare system, this taxes the entire system, making it increasingly difficult to give foster parents and youth the support they need to thrive.

The recent innovations in information and communication technologies, such as mobile smartphones and social media, add additional complexity to the lives of foster youth, parents, and case workers. Therefore, this thesis seeks to identify the challenges that case workers face in handling foster youth online safety and their role in meeting those challenges. Examining these challenges and how case workers address them will provide a better understanding on how to further support foster care case workers and, by doing so, foster families.

## Foster Youth and Online Safety

In a recent literature review conducted by Badillo-Urquiola et al. (2017) on the topic of foster youth and online safety, they found that while technology access has its benefits and advantages for foster youth, there are also possible risks posed to foster youth that need to be addressed. Yet, limited research has been conducted on the role of technology in the lives of foster youth. Of the research conducted, foster youth have been found to be more susceptible to online risks than non-foster teenagers, according to a more recent study by Badillo-Urquiola et al. (2019). This is partially due to past experiences of abuse resulting in psychological traumas. For instance, foster teens have felt some form of rejection since being separated from their biological families, and according to foster parents, this has ultimately developed into attention-seeking behaviors directed outside of the foster home and manifested in their unsafe online interactions (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2019). As a result, foster parents were left helpless while trying to balance their foster teens' safety with providing access to technology.

Access to the internet can also be beneficial, however. Gustavsson and MacEachron (2015) discussed that foster youth can benefit from the vast access to online information to find medical information, employment resources, and schoolwork. Additionally, the ability to have online interactions with social service providers allows youth to readily receive support (Brinson et al., 2015). However, these studies also show that programs put in place to support foster parents and youth (especially those related to online safety) are poorly maintained, exclude the perspectives of foster youth, and fail to effectively safeguard foster youth from online risks. On the other hand, a research study by Finn & Kerman (2004) shows that by providing the adequate

online safety resources and training to a group of foster families, online difficulties and risks were mitigated compared to a control group of foster families.

This research will provide further details on the online safety challenges that foster youth currently face from the perspective of child welfare workers.

### The Role of Child Welfare Workers in Supporting the Online Safety of Foster Youth

Previous research conducted, Denby et al. (2016) shows that building a positive rapport between adults and youth is key to child emotional and developmental health. Specifically, social support in the form of positive relationships is thought to help prevent children from developing or taking part in destructive and risky behaviors. Accordingly, Denby (2016) created the DREAMR project to help foster youth connect with support professionals using technology. Foster teen participants in the study reported feeling “normal” like other teens in the general population and feeling heard since some youth were accustomed to strictly following directions from their caregivers. Although older teens felt it was unnecessary for them to always contact their service provider for simple tasks or permission regarding the phone, overall findings showed that the phone given to participating foster youth worked well in helping establish the relationship with their service provider. This suggests that communication between child welfare workers and foster youth is vital in order to address challenges like foster youth online safety.

Yet, research on the role of child welfare workers in foster youth online safety is still in its infancy. Although foster care case workers are known to have numerous responsibilities, addressing online safety of foster youth has not been explored or discussed as one of them. Overall, the role of child welfare workers in foster youth online safety is an area that is mostly

unexplored. This thesis looks further into the relationship between case workers, foster parents, and foster youth by interviewing case managers of foster teens to understand their perspectives on teen technology use and online safety. This study provides insight into how case workers can be provided with more resources to help foster families manage technology use and empower teens to take more control over their own online safety.

## Chapter 3: Methods

In the following section, I provide an overview of our interview study, followed by a description of our analysis approach. Finally, I describe our recruiting strategies and participant demographics.

### Overview of Interview Study

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 welfare case managers of foster teens (between 13 and 17 years old). Before recruitment, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone, depending on the availability of the foster care case managers. Before each interview, I obtained verbal consent from the participants and permission to audio-record the conversation. During each interview, I asked participants to talk about their personal experiences, overall challenges in managing foster care cases, teen technology use, and systems of support available to them (see Table 1). I also asked follow-up questions for clarification or for more information on various points that were discussed. Towards the end of each interview, participants completed a voluntary demographics survey that included questions about their age, sex, highest education level, current employment status, household income, and ethnicity. I then transcribed the audio recordings verbatim for data analysis.

Table 1. Semi-structured Interview Questions

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Questions</b>
<b>Background</b>	Participants' history of case management, personal experiences, motivations, and responsibilities.	<i>How long have you been a child welfare worker?</i>
<b>Challenges</b>	Participants' unique challenges they have faced, if any, managing foster care cases and their preparedness to meet those challenges.	<i>Are there any unique challenges to managing cases of foster teens compared to younger children?</i>
<b>Technology</b>	Participants' knowledge of and involvement with their teens' technology use and access.	<i>How do you feel the introduction of internet-based technologies, such as social media, have changed your responsibilities as a child welfare worker?</i>
<b>Systems of Support</b>	Participants' access to online safety training and access to tools to help support their caseload.	<i>Are there any technical systems of support in place for managing your cases? If so, please describe them in detail.</i>

### Participant Recruitment and Demographics

I recruited child welfare case workers who had managed cases of foster teens (between the ages of 13-17) within the past five years. Due to the limited availability of case workers, it was difficult to recruit participants. Therefore, I began cultivating relationships with various foster care agencies to establish trust and receive help in promoting our study. I contacted over 100 child welfare organizations via email, phone, and word-of-mouth. These agencies distributed our study flyer to potential participants and/or connected us to other agencies. Recruitment efforts lasted from February 2018 to April 2020. In total, I conducted 32 interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded, with an average length of 42 minutes. I obtained a sum of 21 hours and 59 minutes of recorded audio, which I then later transcribed for analysis. Participants were compensated a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time.



At the end of each interview, I asked participants to take an optional demographics survey. Six participants identified themselves as male, while 25 participants identified themselves as female. Participants were from Florida (N=23), Colorado (N=6), Kentucky (N=1), Massachusetts (N=1), and New York (N=1). Participants earned a range of college degrees: associate's (N=1), bachelor's (N=21), and graduate (N=11). All but one participant worked full-time. Case workers' household income ranged from \$10,000 to over \$100,000, but most were between \$30,000 - \$49,000 (13) followed closely by \$50,000 - \$79,000 (8). Lastly, 14 participants had less than 5 years of experience working as a case manager, while 10 participants had over 10 years of experience and 8 had between 5 to 10 years of experience (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participant Profiles

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Online Risk Types of Foster Teens</b>
P1	M	NY	5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Drug
P2	F	FL	4 years	Under 40	Contact-related
P3	F	FL	4.5 years	Under 40	Sexual
P4	F	FL	1 year	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P5	F	FL	2.5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P6	F	FL	5 months	40-49	Sexual, Cyberbullying
P7	M	FL	4 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P8	F	FL	5.5 years	Under 40	Sexual
P9	F	FL	5.5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Cyberbullying, Drug
P10	M	FL	5 years	Under 40	Sexual
P11	F	FL	15 years	40-49	Sexual
P12	F	KY	2 years	Under 40	Sexual
P13	F	FL	5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P14	F	FL	12 years	Under 40	Sexual
P15	F	FL	10+ years	50-59	Sexual, Contact-related
P16	F	FL	2 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Cyberbullying
P17	M	FL	4.5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P18	M	FL	16 years	Under 40	Sexual
P19	F	FL	6 years	Under 40	Sexual, Cyberbullying
P20	F	FL	4 years	Under 40	Cyberbullying
P21	F	MA	2 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related
P22	F	FL	3 years	Under 40	Sexual, Cyberbullying
P23	F	FL	3 years	Under 40	Contact-related
P24	F	FL	3 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Drug
P25	M	FL	7 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Drug
P26	F	FL	16.5 years	Under 40	Contact-related, Cyberbullying
P27	F	CO	18 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related, Drug
P28	F	CO	15 years	40-49	Sexual, Contact-related
P29	F	CO	12 years	40-49	Sexual, Contact-related, Cyberbullying
P30	F	CO	30.5 years	50-59	Sexual
P31	F	CO	21 years	50-59	Sexual
P32	F	CO	5 years	Under 40	Sexual, Contact-related

### Qualitative Data Analysis Approach

I analyzed the child welfare case workers' responses using a qualitative, deductive approach following Braun and Clarke's six-phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I began by familiarizing ourselves with our data by reading through each transcript. Next, I generated initial codes, which I then iteratively reviewed and refined. Afterwards, I discussed any discrepancies to form a consensus and finalized our codebook (see Table 2). In our final iteration of the codebook, I coded for the following themes: 1) ***Online Risk Type***: the type of negative experiences foster youth encountered online reported by the case workers, 2) ***Training for Risk Mitigation***: the type of training case workers receive to address online safety concerns, and 3) ***Challenges***: the difficulties case workers face in handling foster teen online safety

Table 3. Final Codebook

Themes	Codes	Subcodes	Illustrative Quotation
<b>Online Risk Types</b>	<b>Sexual Risks (88%, N=28):</b> Teens encountered online risks of a sexual nature (e.g., predation, sexting, or exposure to pornography).	<b>Sex Trafficking (82%, N=22):</b> Teen trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.	"I've had a pretty – in the last couple of years, human trafficking has gotten significantly worse." (P32)
		<b>Sexting (36%, N=10):</b> Sending and receiving sexually explicit photos or messages.	"I know under...well yes, underaged teens that were using it for sexting," (P1)
		<b>Pornography (18%, N=5):</b> Sexually explicit material for the purpose of sexual arousal.	"...and pornography have been an issue before" (P17)
	<b>Contact-Related Risks (59%, N=19):</b> Teens received and/or searched for contact with unauthorized or harmful individuals.	<b>Strangers (79%, N=15):</b> Unknown individuals that contact teens or are contacted by teens.	"Being able to communicate with strangers is a big challenge and is one of the most unsafe things for our teens." (P23)
		<b>Other Teens (21%, N=4):</b> Teens within and outside of the foster care system.	"That is one of our biggest issues with our teens right now, you know, inappropriate talking to other teenagers." (P21)
		<b>Family Members (11%, N=2):</b> Family such as parents, cousins, and other relatives.	"One of the kids I have, his mother's not supposed to be contacting him... she does it anyways." (P4)
	<b>Cyberbullying (22%, N=7):</b> Teens faced online harassment.	"...she was getting some negative feedback and some cyber bullying" (P26)	
<b>Illegal Drug Activity (13%, N=4):</b> Foster teens used the internet to perform illegal drug activities (e.g. selling, buying).	"...underaged teens that were using it to try and buy narcotics and then underaged teens using trying to sell narcotics to underaged teens in the residence." (P1)		
<b>Training for Risk Mitigation</b>	<b>Sex Trafficking (56%, N=18):</b> Training on handling cases of teens with histories of sex trafficking.	"So, I also was HT certified, and you had to be- you had to have a lot of training in human-trafficking to be able to work with a child who has experienced that." (P3)	
	<b>Online Safety (38%, N=12):</b> Training on maintaining the internet safety of foster youth.	"I've definitely participated in at least several internet safety trainings." (P21)	
	<b>Crisis Intervention (28%, N=9):</b> Training on handling cases of foster teens with crisis or trauma histories.	"In child and family services in two places I worked, they treat you to what they call therapeutic crisis intervention to help you prepare for resident going into crisis." (P1)	
<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Multiple Responsibilities (47%, N=15):</b> Case workers are responsible for the overall safety and well-being of the child, not just online safety.	"My role is to provide support to that foster teen, provide guidance, provide insight and help, sometimes I end up having to make caregiving decisions." (P26)	
	<b>Lack of Technology Expertise (41%, N=13):</b> Foster parents and caregivers often lack technology expertise.	"... and also better educating our foster parents because a lot of them are older and they might not be as into all the technology, not know all the ins and outs." (P21)	
	<b>Most Teens are in Group Homes (41%, N=13):</b> Shortage of foster home placements for teens.	"There aren't that many foster parents that work well with teenagers" (P7)	
	<b>Mediator between Foster Parents and Youth (22%, N=7):</b> Case workers play the role of mediator between foster parents and youth in order to solve issues or address their needs.	"Be the mediator. You want the kids to think that- to know that you support them and that you're trustworthy, so you're not just taking sides. I'd say the more difficult part is probably talking to the foster parent about it." (P10)	

## Chapter 4: Results

I present our findings in the following section. I first describe the types of online risks teens encounter based on the reports of the case workers. Then, I detail the training that case managers receive to mitigate these risks. Finally, I outline the challenges to mitigating these risks that case managers face. Table 2 provides a summary of our results. I present our results in order of prominence.

### Online Risk Types Discussed by Participants

In this section, I describe the various online risks types that participants cited in the interviews. The subsections are in order from the greatest number of participant responses to the least.

#### *The Most Common Risks were Sexual in Nature*

A majority of case workers (N=28, 88%) cited online sexual risks as the most prominent type of risks foster teens encounter.

Most case managers 82% (N=23) described cases of sex trafficking, in which the teens were being used for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Participants generally mentioned encountering these risks after simple questions on teens' online activities or, even in some instances, telling us about a case they most notably remembered. In most of these stories, foster teen girls were the primary victims. For example, P24 shared that, in some of her previous

female foster teen cases, teens easily sought attention through online interactions using social media:

*“Posting a lot of stuff to get certain attention from other men, of course, when it comes to my HT girls.”* – P24 (Female, Florida, 3 yrs. experience)

In P24’s specific case, this behavior specifically characterizes female teens who have had human trafficking histories. Additionally, case workers outlined hypothetical situations involving foster teens and sex trafficking activities. In P5’s experience, she highlighted a potential issue concerning social media and a previous sex trafficking victim:

*“She can go to the public library and say, “I’m going to do my homework”, but she can sign into Facebook and talk to her trafficker.”* – P5 (Female, Florida, 4.5 yrs. experience)

In other words, because wireless internet access is easily accessible, foster teens are able to go to public places and contact unauthorized individuals. In fact, most case workers found sex trafficking most concerning especially because of the unbridled access to the internet that teens tend to have access to now.

Additionally, 36% (N=10) of participants mentioned sexting, which involved sending and receiving sexually explicit photos or messages. In these cases, participants noted sexting based off of previous experiences with teen cases such as discovering texts on phones or seeing posts via social media pages. For instance, P16 described a case where she found a problematic case of sexting between an adult and a teen:

*“...so that was one situation where I found texts - text messages, pictures, videos - that were exchanged by this daughter who was an adult and our teenage boys.”* -P16 (Female, Florida, 10+ yrs. experience)

Sexting was especially notable in this in one instance according to P16. She discovered sexual exchanges between an adult and her underaged teenage boys. This was especially problematic since one of the teenage boys was in the care of the daughter's family as a foster child. Since they lived under the same roof for some time, the foster youth was also susceptible for further harm.

Lastly, 18% (N=5) added pornography as an online sexual risk, which involved teens viewing sexually explicit material for the purpose of sexual arousal. Participants mostly referenced past experiences with teens who viewed pornography and who were discovered in the act. For example, P30 details a teen who struggled with an addiction to collecting pornography:

*“...my one that hit the 300 images in 6 hours – I had a conversation with him and said you know you knew that was going to be problematic for you.”* - P30 (Female, Colorado, 30.5 yrs. experience)

Overall, an overwhelming majority of participants acknowledged that online sexual risks is one of the biggest risks teenagers face in the foster care system.

#### *Unauthorized Individuals often Contacted Foster Teens*

Over half of the participants (N=19, 59%) discussed online contact-related risks encountered by foster teens. These risks involved teens who received or searched for contact with unauthorized or harmful individuals such as strangers, other teens, or family members. The majority of these participants (N=15, 79%) mentioned that their teen cases had contact with strangers. It was especially evident in their responses that they were worried about the ease of finding contact via the internet and the potential of these individuals being predators who sought out foster youth.

Teens often contacted these individuals on social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat, and the majority involved female foster teens. P7 confirms this by referencing his previous experience with female human trafficking cases:

*“Unfortunately, they would use social media to meet older men, and when they would run away, they would use social media to go to those men as well.”* – P7 (Male, Florida, 4 yrs. experience)

In these situations, case workers like P7 would have to rely on law enforcement authorities in order to locate the teen. Otherwise, the teen would have to return on his or her own accord.

A portion (N=4, 21%) of participants touched on contact-related risks with other teens, both inside and outside of the foster care system. Participants found this contact harmful due to possible exposure to other risks such as cyberbullying, illegal drug activities, and sexual risks. For instance, P21 mentions inappropriate contact among teens is especially an issue she faces:

*“That is one of our biggest issues with our teens right now, you know, inappropriate talking to other teenagers.”* – P21 (Female, Massachusetts, 2 yrs. experience)

A remaining 11% (N=2) of participants spoke of contact-related risks with family members such as biological parents and other relatives who were known to be previous abusers. For example, P29 mentions how these individuals having contact with children can be problematic for her, the child, and the foster family:

*“If the kiddos have their phones and the parents either contact the foster family inappropriately or the kids inappropriately or the kids are able to like contact relatives, those are really difficult to monitor.”* – P29 (Female, Colorado, 12 yrs. experience)



All in all, participants mentioned how most of these teens are usually attention-seeking. Although they may want to cultivate friendly or healthy relationships, they sometimes seek it on platforms or using methods that may place them at risk for abuse, trafficking, or others.

### *Foster Teens faced Cyberbullying*

Out of 32 participants, 22% (N=7) discussed how teens faced cyberbullying, or online harassment. Responses included specific instances where participants encountered teens facing cyberbullying or discussed cyberbullying with teens. P22 specifically recounts the first time she realized bullying was no longer limited to in-person interactions in her discussion with a group of girls:

*“The girls came back with, “I’re bullying this girl on social media....” And that took this to a place of bullying that I wasn’t even thinking of.”* – P22 (Female, Florida, 3 yrs. experience)

Like other participants, P22 consistently discusses and monitors social media usage with teens, but even with this experience, P22 was reminded that bullying can now take the form of online harassment. This could help explain how other responses suggest cyberbullying is not as important as other risks. In these responses, participants momentarily mentioned cyberbullying but did not give concrete examples such as P16 who starts talking about cyberbullying but then shifts to a case about sexting and soliciting:

*“They have been in some form of cyberbullying and sexting. I had a case where my teenage boys were soliciting...”* -P16 (Female, Florida, 2 yrs. experience)

In all of these types of responses, cases of cyberbullying were not further discussed or detailed.

### *Social Media is an Outlet for Foster Teens to partake in Illegal Drug Activities*

Out of 32 participants, 13% (N=4) mentioned teens using the internet to perform illegal drug activities such as selling, buying, and using drugs. Participants typically discussed teens initiating or performing these activities on phones over social media or the internet. P1 reveals that teens used phones in order to buy and sell drugs like narcotics:

*“...underaged teens that were using it to try and buy narcotics.”* -P1 (Male, New York, 5 yrs. experience)

Because these foster teens use phones, some participants found these activities difficult to monitor. More often than not, case managers found themselves catching these teens after they have committed the acts. P25 explicitly outlines this in his response:

*“A lot of times I don’t know. I can’t really catch it until they’re maybe caught in the act...”* -P25 (Male, Florida, 7 yrs. experience)

Overall, only 4 participants explicitly mentioned illegal drug activities with one participant specifically stating the difficulty of finding these cases.

### Case Management Training for Risk Mitigation

This section outlines the training case managers said they received to help mitigate online safety risks. The types of training are ordered from the most participant response to the least.

### *Most Participants Received Sex Trafficking Training*

Out of 32 participants, 56% (N=18) recalled receiving sex trafficking training, which involved learning how to handle cases of teens with histories of trafficking. According to most participants, maintaining sex trafficking certification involved taking an additional amount of training sessions per year. For example, P10 covers the details maintaining certification in his case:

*“To be human-trafficking certified, you have to do quarterly trainings.”* -P10 (Male, Florida, 5 yrs. experience)

In the case of P10, maintaining quarterly training is how human trafficking certification is maintained. However, other participants mentioned having to attend additional training for a specific number of hours per year, so this requirement could vary depending on the program or state that the participant is working in.

In general, training educated participants on identifying the signs that a teen is involved in sex trafficking and finding the resources and methods to handle such a case. Often, participants were also educated on how to handle cases of teens who had histories of sex trafficking. P9 covers some of the details on the training:

*“...and I have to know the signs. I need to know when one of our teens is getting groomed, so I do receive training about that.”* – P9 (Female, Florida, 5.5 yrs. experience)

However, sex trafficking training is constantly evolving and adapting as new technology presents new challenges. Although the content discussed by P9 is still valid concerning sex trafficking education, participants found that training has increased in the amount and range of material. Specifically, training now covers more content on the online activities and applications

that teens have on their phones and, accordingly, what case workers can do to mitigate possible risks.

*Online Safety Training was commonly Sex Trafficking Training*

Out of 32 participants, 38% (N=12) mentioned internet safety training as part of caseworker certification or maintaining that certification. Online safety training often was discussed under the scope of human trafficking training. Often times, internet safety training encompassed a small portion of the overall content that was covered. This often touched on foster teen phone usage and the applications to be wary of on their devices since these can be gateways for solicitation and other risky activities. Since this was human trafficking-related, not everything was covered in terms of an overall training to address teen online safety.

*“...so I’ve actually have had different tech come and talk to us about different apps and things that kids use to solicit or to do secret activities” -P11 (Female, Florida, 11 yrs. experience)*

On the other hand, some participants were able to receive internet safety training separate from human trafficking. These participants were able to learn about healthy technology usage and safety, which encompassed how to best educate both foster children and foster parents on the risks as well as benefits of cell phones and the internet. At times, these opportunities were part of their curriculum, organization events, optional online courses, or conference events.

*“I took one through Children’s Hospital of Atlanta that was one of the best I’ve ever taken that was about specifically online perpetration and courses for that.” -P21 (Female, Massachusetts, 2 yrs. experience)*

For example, P21 expressed how one of the best online safety trainings she has ever had was provided by the Children's Hospital of Atlanta. These trainings can be optional, and as a result, it is up to the discretion of the case worker to be receive this training. However, almost all online safety training discussed by these participants were passive in nature. Most of these examples showed education on awareness, specifically what apps and behaviors to monitor. Training did not cover how to exactly handle these types of situations.

### *Crisis Intervention and Trauma History Training*

Out of 32 participants, 28% (N=9) mentioned that they received training on how to handle cases of foster teens with histories of trauma or those with ongoing crises in their lives. More often than not, children or teens in the foster care system have experienced traumatic pasts. At times, they are separated from their families and placed into foster care not by choice but by neglect or for their own safety.

*“From a trauma perspective, I was trained that I should want kids to have their cell phones because...the kids were ripped away from their parents, their neighborhood, their schools, every bit of normalcy that they know.”* -P18 (Male, Florida, 16 yrs. experience)

Particularly, participants were trained on how to mitigate the stress felt by these teens when they are in foster care and also how to handle possible crisis situations like teens running away. In P18's case, he was trained to ensure that his cases of foster teens have cell phones in order to maintain contact with individuals they are comfortable with. Overall, about 28% of participants explicitly stated that they were informed about trauma but also on handling crises.

## Case Workers Face Challenges in Addressing Online Safety Concerns

This section outlines the various challenges that case workers face in mitigating online risks. Case workers face multiple responsibilities on top of addressing online safety, foster parents' lack of technology expertise, shortage in foster home placements for foster teens, and mediating between foster parents and youth. This section is ordered from the greatest number of responses from participants to the least.

### *Online Safety is a Secondary Priority*

Out of 32 participants, 47% (N=15) explicitly mentioned that, in addition to the logistical responsibilities of case management, they may also juggle some caretaking responsibilities. These responsibilities tended to involve activities to maintain the health and well-being of the children or teens on their caseload. This included day-to-day activities such as transportation for school or doctor appointments and other necessities.

*“...but a lot of them don't have the availability to do a lot for teens as far as transporting and getting them to and from school or getting them to the necessary appointments that they have” – P23 (Female, Florida, 3 yrs. experience)*

Although some participants stated these responsibilities as a matter of fact or as a necessity to their job, others feel that some foster parents ultimately left them to shoulder these responsibilities. They believe that foster parents or caregivers should share these responsibilities or assume them altogether. One participant feels that the job of the case manager is to oversee whereas the foster parents' duty is to caretake:

*“I would look at it like it’s up to the foster parent and group home to maintain that foster kid’s well-being, and then I’m more of the overseer.” – P8 (Female, Florida, 5.5 yrs. experience)*

One responsibility of the case manager is to ensure the safety of their teen cases. However, sometimes, this responsibility extends to caretaking among other responsibilities according to some participants such as P8 and P23. Overall, because case managers have numerous responsibilities to take care of, this often leaves online safety as a secondary priority.

#### *Case Workers are Intermediaries between Foster Parents and Youth*

Out of 32 participants, 22% (N=7) emphasized the additional responsibility of mediating between foster parents and youth. In order for the dynamic relationship among case workers, foster parents, and foster youth to work, communication plays an important role. For the case worker, it is imperative that they play the role of mediator since they not only need to build trust with their foster teens, but they also need to build trust with the foster parents. At times, it is difficult to work with foster parents since they have set rules and regulations for how their household is run.

P10 (Male, Florida, 5 yrs. experience) in his interview covered how mediating between both groups is difficult but can be especially difficult with foster parents. He implies that case workers need to be able to handle mediating these complex relationships, and the primary challenge in this effort tends to be disagreements with foster parents while maintaining a rapport with the foster youth. Since both foster youth and foster parents need to be supported in different ways, case workers often feel at odds when they have to mediate between both parties. This adds an additional challenge to their jobs.

### *Foster Parents and Caregivers Lack Technology Expertise*

Out of 32 participants, 41% (N=13) implied how the lack of technology expertise among foster parents and caregivers presents additional responsibilities for case managers. Based on the responses, participants received limited training on online safety. Generally, participants attempted to monitor teens' online activity through means of communication with the teen or, sometimes, secret profiles on social media. According to these participants, the responsibility of implementing safety features such as monitoring software or content blockers primarily fall on the caregivers, but generally, foster parents did not have active roles in mitigating foster youth online risks. Overall, technology expertise among foster parents tend to vary.

*“And other people don't see it as easily or understand fully the technology.” -P27*

(Female, Colorado, 18 yrs. experience)

In P27's and others' experiences, foster parents may or may not be aware of the implications that certain technologies could have on teens. This is especially because the foster care system, according to participants, does not directly provide or recommend online monitoring systems for foster children. They also do not provide actionable training or

### *Online Safety Challenges are Heightened in Group Home Settings*

Out of 32 participants, 41% (N=13) explicitly mentioned that most teens end up in group homes. In other words, there is a shortage in foster care placements for teenagers. Participants like P13 covered how teenagers are the least desired age group among foster care parents:



*“Younger children are way easier to place in foster homes. Our teenagers often wind up in group homes. And the older they are, they generally get placed further away from the county that they like generate from because of lack of space or if they have a charge...”* – P13 (Female, Florida, 5 yrs. experience)

Usually, these teenagers lack the placements they need because of negative stereotypes or previous minor convictions or charges. Because of this, teenagers are moved from placement to placement often or are placed in group homes. Accordingly, foster teens often do not get the individualized attention that they would get from foster parents. This becomes a problem since not all of these foster teens are being monitored at any given time especially online. Furthermore, group homes congregate foster teens who could have similar or even worse histories of misbehavior, which could adversely affect other foster teens in the home. Additionally, since foster parents and caregivers lack technology expertise to handle various online safety risks, this further increases online safety challenges.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In this section, I discussed the results and how they answered our research questions. I first identified the risks that foster youth commonly encounter and examined the training that case managers receive to mitigate those risks. I also discussed the challenge of unbalanced online responsibilities between case managers and foster parents. I then presented policy and design implications to address these challenges from both top and bottom level perspectives. Lastly, I identified the limitation of this thesis and future research to consider.

### Foster Youth Mostly Encounter High-Risk Online Situations

One of the questions I asked case workers was what online situations their teen cases commonly encounter. I asked this question to identify any similarities between case workers' and foster parents' experiences. In a study by Badillo et al. (2019), researchers interviewed foster parents about their knowledge of foster youth online safety. Findings from that study showed that foster teens frequently encounter high-risk online situations, most of which were interactions with unknown individuals that were commonly sexual in nature. This thesis found that caseworkers had similar experiences with foster youth online safety where most risks encountered by foster teens were sexual in nature and contact related. With similar testimonies from both foster parents and case workers, foster teens are strongly linked to participating in or being exposed to risky online activities and, as a result, at risk for further harm like kidnapping and mental-health issues.

Foster care case managers are responsible for mitigating these risks. To do so, they often received extensive training in preparation, which is further discussed in the next section.

### Minimal Support for Case Managers to Address Online Safety Concerns

From the results, participants particularly mentioned receiving sex trafficking, crisis intervention, and online safety training. Foster care workers often discussed online safety in the context of sex trafficking. However, sex trafficking training is not all focused on online safety, and similarly, online safety does not only encompass sex trafficking risks. Accordingly, case workers did not receive extensive training on online safety and are thus not equipped to handle foster youth online safety concerns.

Previous research argues that foster care workers need to understand how technology works and all of the possible risks to foster youth in order to handle those risks (Finn & Kerman, 2004). Of foster care case workers who said they received some type of online safety training, they primarily discussed awareness training on technology and technology use. For example, participants said they were educated on what phone applications to be wary of on foster teens' phones and also the behaviors associated with sex trafficking online risks. What case workers did not discuss were how they were trained to handle those types of situations. When those situations do arise, only then online safety became a priority to case workers, most likely because of the limited bandwidth of case workers. Thus, it is imperative that foster care case workers receive the support they need to handle these online risk situations.

This study suggests that case workers are overwhelmed with their responsibilities. Other than simply receiving in-depth training, case workers also need to feel empowered to tackle foster youth online safety concerns. Further research must explore how case workers feel supported and what can be done to make that a reality.

## Online Safety Responsibilities are Unbalanced

Foster care case managers have the legal responsibility for the children or teens in their caseload. This research shows that they often face numerous responsibilities such as transportation and appointment management in addition to their primary responsibility of finding children permanent placements. However, they also have the responsibility of providing high-level support for the foster parents in their caseload. Often, the responsibilities of foster youth online safety are left as a secondary priority and are unbalanced between both case managers and foster parents.

This thesis found that between case workers and foster parents, the responsibility of online safety commonly falls on the case workers. Specifically, foster parents feel a sense of hopelessness when it comes to foster youth online safety (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2019). Participants in this thesis suggest that foster parents do not receive any type of extensive online safety training. Some may have limited knowledge on dangerous applications or websites, but overall, foster parents are not equipped to handle entire scope of foster youth online safety. Because of that, this research suggests that they often find themselves reaching out to case workers for help or placing the responsibility of online safety onto case workers. However, some case workers sought to place back responsibilities onto the foster parents, and thus, this creates a vicious cycle of who should be handling online safety concerns.

As a result, it is imperative to not only find ways to provide case workers the support they need but also foster parents with their own type of support. Although more research is needed to investigate how case workers feel supported, previous research does show that foster parents feel supported when their case workers actively engage with them (R. Denby et al., 1999). This is

difficult, however, because case workers are constantly preoccupied with their number of responsibilities. Therefore, research needs to find ways for case workers to feel supported so that they have the bandwidth to build deeper and collaborative relationships with their foster parents. In summary, this thesis suggests that both case workers and foster parents will largely benefit from becoming part of each other's systems of support.

### Policy and Design Implications

In order to address the challenges posed by this thesis and implement the proposed recommendations, there are top- and bottom-level perspectives for policy and design implications to consider.

A top-level perspective to promote change involves adding or changing policies in the foster care system regarding online safety. Specifically, the foster care system should consider various policy changes in order to help address foster youth online safety. The system should enact policies that place online safety as a higher priority in the training provided to both case workers and foster parents. However, simply adding this requirement is not enough. There must also be improved and extensive online safety training that addresses the current and future risks to foster youth today. Additionally, both case workers and foster parents must feel empowered to feel like they need to make online safety their responsibilities. Only until then will online safety be a more primary focus. That is why a bottom-level approach to addressing these concerns could also be effective, and this can be arguable the best approach.

A bottom-level approach for implementing effective policies and design for online risk mitigation is collectively involving case workers, foster parents, and foster youth. Improved

online safety training should first involve foster youth and consider their perspectives. Through their lens, the various risks and situations that this thesis discusses can be confirmed and also discussed in further detail. This will give case workers and foster parents the information they need to better prepare themselves. However, information should not be the sole indicator of how they should handle foster youth online safety. Case workers, foster parents, and foster youth should work together in forming plans of action that meet all of their needs. In doing so, not only will the online safety responsibilities be balanced, but all stakeholders will feel supported and empowered. Accordingly, this approach suggests that in order for the foster care system to best combat foster youth online safety concerns, support groups that bring together all of the stakeholders (case workers, foster parents, and foster youth) should be formed.

### Limitations and Future Work

This thesis describes the online risks that foster teens face according to case managers. In doing so, I also identified challenges that foster care case managers face in handling these online risks and how they meet those challenges. Although I interviewed 32 case managers, 72% (N=23) of these participants worked in Florida. Thus, the data I collected could have been the result of the prevalence of human trafficking in Florida (Gibbs et al., 2018). Specifically, this could explain how the majority of responses for online risks geared toward sex trafficking risks. Accordingly, this study and future studies could benefit from a larger variety of case managers who have worked in different states.

Additionally, while previous research has explored the perspectives of foster parents and this thesis examines the perspectives of foster care case workers, future research must explore

foster youth perspectives on their own online safety. By doing so, necessary stakeholders will be able to further understand and grasp the situations that foster youth commonly encounter. This will lead to future research and action that can support the foster care system in addressing foster youth online safety more effectively.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Child welfare workers are responsible for protecting the wellbeing of youth and supporting their families. One of their primary roles is working as a foster care case manager to ultimately find foster youth permanent homes. This thesis identified the challenges that case managers face in supporting foster families and the online safety of foster youth. Particularly, I discovered that foster youth most commonly encounter high-risk online situations such as sex trafficking. Although case managers received training to mitigate normal high-risk situations, more case managers and foster parents need effective training and systems of support to handle foster youth online safety concerns. However, case managers are overburdened with the number of responsibilities they have, and foster parents often lack the technology expertise that would help keep teens safe online. Accordingly, online safety is more of a secondary priority since the responsibility of handling online safety is continually moving between case managers and foster parents. In other words, online safety responsibilities are unbalanced currently. This leaves foster youth further at risk for future harm from online situations.

Therefore, the foster care system must prioritize the empowerment of case workers, foster parents, and foster youth. Specifically, new policies need to consider placing online safety as a higher priority in training and improving the quality of any such training. Additionally, support groups among all case workers, foster parents, and foster youth must be formed to fully identify online risk situations and how all stakeholders feel best supported. Future research needs to consider exploring the perspectives of foster youth and how case workers and foster parents can work together to mitigate online risks. If not, foster youth may continue to face high-risk online situations that are detrimental to their health and well-being.



Through this thesis, I realized that foster care case workers are hard-working individuals who need our support and recognition. While they often face numerous challenges in their daily life as social workers, they are the backbones for the majority of the marginalized children in the United States. Because of this, it is imperative that we remind ourselves of their hard work, and we advise to recognize their struggles and the struggles of the entire foster care community so that they feel empowered to do their best.

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