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Stress and Social Support of Foster Parents During COVID-19

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Stress and Social Support of Foster Parents During COVID-19

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Literature Review

- Shortage of foster parents and critical need for them
- 13,000 children in Michigan's foster care system
- Common stressors named: higher support needs, mental health and behavioral issues of foster children
- Could help advocate for foster parents and reform supports
- Ecological framework plays an important role.
- Interviews allow the most information to be gained.
- Gaps in literature:
 - majority of existing studies are quantitative
 - types and sources of support aren't deeply looked into, and there isn't a big focus on social support.
- support is usually identified as one-dimensional,
 - whereas this study takes into account all types and sources of social support.
 - impact of COVID-19 on foster parent experiences
- A main difference is that this study is qualitative, and interviews were conducted.
- Phenomenological study exploring stress and social support that foster parents experience during COVID-19

Methods

- 16 licensed foster parents in Michigan who have fostered during COVID interviewed
- Convenience sample: recruited from statewide Facebook foster parent groups
- Purposive sample: participants filled out an interest form first
- Contact and set up their interview
- Completed a pilot test interview
- Virtually conducted semi-structured interviews and recorded them
- Watched the recordings and transcribed them
- Coding through looking at significant statements
- Thematic analysis and grouping findings into themes

Participant Demographics

- Sample size: n=16**
- 15 female participants (93.8%)
 - Age range = 31-56 years, Mean = 39.7 years
 - Race: 93.8% White; 6.2% Multiracial
 - Most participants had less than 4 years of fostering experience.

Results

Smaller world:

- *“Chilling out”*
- Bonds
- *“No escape”*
- Social isolation
- *“The most amazing thing was we got to bond with our kids.”*

“On an island”:

- No precedent
- Loss of foster parent community
- Lack of services
- Family support
- *“It became harder to find services for the kids and things we needed for them, but we also couldn't share that comradery”*

“More of a file, less of a face”:

- Court delays
- System critiques
- No more fostering
- *“Even if they told us they're gonna get adopted, it's taking forever. In a kid's mind it seems like forever so emotions are big.”*

Going virtual:

- School
- Visits
- Services
- More responsibilities
- *“It broke my heart because they're just watching their son play for 20 minutes on a computer because he's 16 months old.”*

Discussion

The critical role of being a foster parent comes with high demands. Existing literature emphasizes common stressors of foster parents to be higher support needs, mental health struggles, and behavioral issues. In light of COVID-19, there are limited studies that further explore stressors related to the pandemic. Those that do have found increased stress among foster parents, but the essence of how this was experienced lacks research. Our study begins to address the lack of knowledge of COVID-19's impact on foster families. We found that due to COVID-19, foster parents' stressors increased, and their supports were strained. Common themes of both stress and support were discovered. Our findings can help foster parents' voices to be heard in order to best reform support efforts for them amid a pandemic as well as moving forward.

Limitations

- Lack of diversity of participants regarding gender and race
- Interviews virtually rather than in-person
- Lack of generalizability

Implications

- Supervision of virtual parent visits
- Creating bonding opportunities for families
- Need for child/family therapy after difficult time
- Resources for returning to/finding services
- Possible next steps:
 - explore if race played a factor
 - quantitative survey with more foster parents