Systematic Review of Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention

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Abstract

This study utilized the PRISMA protocol to conduct a systematic review of the literature published in the United States from 1989 to 2018 to identify factors that affect foster parent retention. Foster parent perception of their own limitations within the child welfare system, the child welfare system's ability to function fluidly, and the foster parents' relationship with the agency affects retention. In addition, the lack of material resources or inadequacy of funding to cover the cost of services for the child was identified as a barrier to retention. Personal attributes such as flexibility, confidence, and motivation contributed to the caregiver retention as did attending pre-service and in-service training, and having peer support from an experienced foster parent.

Introduction

The United States's foster care population is beset by frequent turnover among foster parents, making foster parent recruitment and retention an urgent issue nationally and in states (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018). Foster care's purpose is to provide a safe but temporary environment for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. The foster care population rose each year from 2012 to 2017, from 396,000 to 441,000, and has exceeded 400,000 in eight of the 10 most recent years on record (2009–2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2019b). Foster parents serve as the crucial frontline resource for youth in care and help to meet youths' needs and support their permanency goals. However, a majority of parents serve between 8 and 14 months (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007)—

less than the average stay of a child in care (19.7 months; U.S. DHHS, 2019a). This means many children in foster care are experiencing multiple placements and moves

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between them. Indeed, less than 40% of states achieve the goal of having two or fewer placement settings for children in care (Jones et al., 2016).

Placement instability inevitably affects service to children, with consequences for both children's developmental outcomes and child welfare systems' administration. Foster care includes youth in infancy up to age 21 years in some states, coinciding with principal years in human development. The average age of a child in foster care is 8 years old (U.S. DHHS, 2019a). Instability in placements has been associated with increases in adverse behavioral health outcomes in youth, including anxiety, depression, aggression, conduct problems (McGuire et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 2007), and substance use (Stott, 2012). At the administrative level, it also contributes to greater mental health costs as measured by Medicaid claims (Rubin et al., 2004). Placement instability that results from foster parents' exiting service in particular also burdens child welfare systems to maintain a revolving door of recruiting, training, and equipping new foster parents to meet the needs of children in their care. Extending the length of new and existing foster parents' service (i.e., retaining them) may increase the stability of youths' placements and help lessen behavioral, financial, and managerial challenges incurred by placement instability.

Foster parent retention has been defined by the Children's Bureau as a concept that falls under "diligent recruitment," the systematic process of recruiting, retaining, and supporting resource parents who reflect the diversity of children who need placements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Diligent recruitment of foster parents requires that agencies make efforts to improve outcomes in children's permanency, safety, and well-being by addressing systemic obstacles to identifying, licensing, supporting, and retaining foster parents. For many states, the definition's emphasis on the term "recruitment" means that the significant time and resources are spent on recruitment strategies, indicating a need to address retention as an aspect of diligent recruitment. For clarity within this systematic literature review, the terms recruitment and retention are not used inclusively of one another, but rather to distinguish between bringing in new foster parents (recruitment) and keeping the existing foster parents (retention). More effectively retaining foster parents may improve permanency placement rates, as the majority of adoptions from foster care (52%) are done by foster parents (U.S. DHHS, 2019a). Despite this high reliance on foster parents to achieve permanency for children, a study conducted by the U.S. DHHS (2002) that surveyed foster care program managers in 41 states found that only 10 states reported having clear goals to retain foster parents. Most states also lacked a systematic approach to determine why parents discontinued fostering (U.S. DHHS, 2002).

Increasing foster parent retention may lead to cost savings for child welfare systems and in so doing create opportunities to further support existing foster parents. Funding for state child welfare systems is provided by local, state, and federal governments, with the federal government providing over $8 billion annually to states, tribes, and territories for their child welfare systems in recent years (Stoltzfus, 2017). Greater retention rates would conceivably decrease the frequency with which new foster parents need to be recruited and trained. As child welfare entities have some discretion as to how they spend funding (GAO, 2018), cost savings on recruitment and training could be used to enhance other children welfare services within their agency. Due to the increases in children entering the system, with complex and trauma-related conditions (e.g., aggression, delinquency, sexual behaviors, learning needs, developmental delays, medical complexities; Szilagyi et al., 2015), there is a growing need for professional foster parents. Professional foster parents undergo additional training and education, meet certain standards and qualifications, and are eligible to receive fees and allowances based on their levels of qualification and experience in caring for children with higher levels of need (Schofield et al., 2013). Retaining foster parents may beget a greater

capacity among states to invest financially in experienced foster parents.

There is furthermore new legislative impetus for increasing foster parent retention. While most children in foster care live in family settings, a substantial minority—10%—live in congregate care settings of group homes or institutions (U.S. DHHS, 2019a). The recently passed Family First Prevention Services Act (Division E, Title VII of P.L. 115–123) seeks to reduce the number of children in congregate care, requiring child welfare systems to identify safe, skilled, and therapeutic foster families who can help meet the needs of children previously placed in a more restricted institutional setting. There is some evidence that foster parents who serve longer are more likely to foster adolescents, as well as infants and children with special needs (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). The ability for child welfare authorities to retain experienced foster parents allows these agencies to proffer youth exiting congregate care, a family setting in which their caregivers have familiarity with the system, knowledge of existing resources, and experience meeting the needs of youth.

To address and ultimately increase retention in a targeted way, child welfare agencies must understand the factors that shape whether foster parents continue. A growing body of scholarly and gray literature has identified several barriers to foster parent retention. These include the financial burden imposed by fostering, as current monetary compensation has been described as insufficient to meet the needs of a child (Ahn et al., 2017, 2018; Geiger et al., 2013). Lacking access to child care services such as day care or transportation poses a related and additional barrier to retention (GAO 2018; Rhodes et al., 2001). Other, nonmonetary barriers identified include a lack of support and dissatisfaction with agency workers (Ahn et al., 2017; GAO, 2018; Randle et al., 2017; Rhodes et al., 2001), staff turnover (GAO, 2018), a lack of adequate information about their child's needs (Ahn et al., 2017), and not having input in their child's future (Rhodes et al., 2001).

While previous reviews have reported on the factors which shape the retention of child welfare agency staff (Zlotnik et al., 2005) and placement instability more broadly (Koh et al., 2014), no systematic review has yet been conducted to synthesize the emerging literature on the barriers or facilitators that influence foster parent retention. We seek to fill this gap by systematically reviewing 30 years of scholarly and gray literature evidence to identify and describe what factors influence foster parent retention.

Method

A systematic review of peer-reviewed and gray literatures was conducted to identify what factors influence foster parent retention (i.e., whether foster parents continue or discontinue fostering). Records were included if they addressed foster parents as a population, contained a focus on factors that affect foster parents' retention or turnover, were published between 1989 and 2018, and were available in English language. Due to variations in child welfare policies internationally, inclusion was also limited to records published in the United States to ensure relevance when considering policy implications. Gray literature included government, think-tank, and academic reports published outside peer-reviewed journals. The search protocol adhered to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) standards (Moher et al., 2009).

Search Strategy and Selection

Several databases were utilized in the search including HeinOnline, PsycINFO, Scopus, ThinkTank Search, and Web of Science databases and Google Scholar in April 2019. To increase this review's comprehensiveness, the search strategy considered both peer-reviewed studies and gray literature reports, including governmental and organizational (e.g., foundations) publications (Paez, 2017). Search phrases included combinations of the terms "foster OR kinship" and "parent OR family"
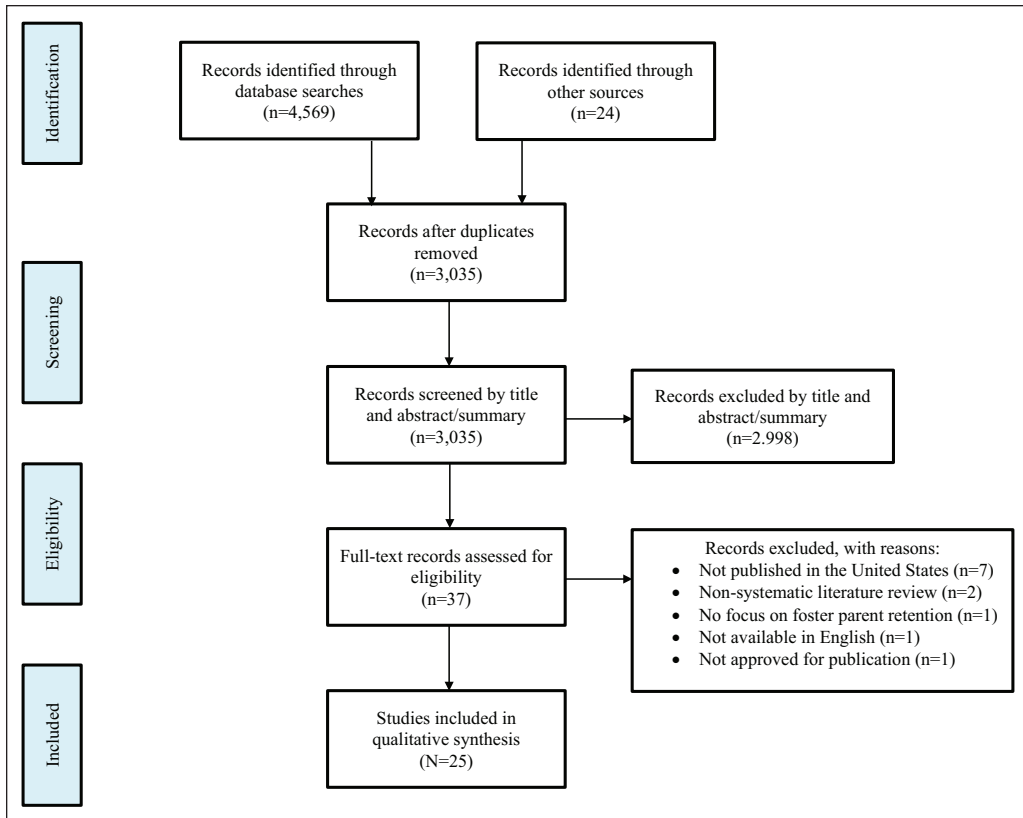
Figure 1. Flowchart.

with "retention," "retention strategies," "turnover," "placement stability," "length of service," or "satisfaction."

This resulted in a yield of 4,569 records. An additional 24 records identified through other sources were included (i.e., reviewers' personal knowledge and referrals from foster care experts), resulting in a total of $N = 4,593$ records considered (see Figure 1). Duplicates were identified and removed ($n = 1,558$). One reviewer screened records for eligibility by titles and then abstracts/summaries and removed records that did not meet the inclusion criteria ($n = 2,998$). Two reviewers read the full text of the remaining records ($n = 37$) and assessed them for inclusion using the same criteria. The reviewers discussed each record's eligibility and made decisions about records' removal through consensus.

Records were removed that were published outside the United States ($n = 7$), did not contain a focus on foster parent retention ($n = 1$),

were not available in English ($n = 1$), or non-systematic literature reviews ($n = 2$). An internal organizational report ($n = 1$) was removed after consulting with the authoring organization's research department due to not having stakeholder approval to be published. The remaining 25 records were deemed appropriate for this review and were included in the qualitative synthesis.

Data Collection and Synthesis

Two reviewers independently coded for factors that studies described as influencing foster parent retention (i.e., qualitative descriptions and significant quantitative associations). Reviewers discussed their coding to resolve any incongruence and reached consensus on codes applied. They then synthesized coded factors and analyzed thematically any factor that occurred across four or more studies.

Table 1. Study Methods.

Record	n	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Gray literature
Ahn et al. (2017)	385	X			
Chamberlain et al. (1992)	72	X			
Cherry & Orme (2013)	304	X			
Christenson & McMurtry (2009)	114	X			
Cooley et al. (2015)	155	X			
Crum (2010)	151	X			
Denby et al. (1999)	539	X			
U.S. DHHS (1993)	1,373	X			X
GAO (2018)[a]	—			X	X
Geiger et al. (2013)	649			X	
Gibbs & Wildfire (2007)	15,442	X			
Gregory & Kaye (2009)	—			X	X
Hendrix & Ford (2003)	82	X			
Keys et al. (2017)	115	X			
Kilos et al. (2017)[a]	—		X		X
Marcenko et al. (2009)[a]	—		X		X
Mihalo et al. (2016)	777	X			
North Dakota DHHS (2018)[a]	—		X		X
Rhodes et al. (2001)	86	X			
Rhodes et al. (2003)	131	X			
Rindfleisch et al. (1998)	804	X			
Rodwell & Biggerstaff (1993)	169		X		
Urquhart (1989)	1,173	X			
Utah Foster Care Foundation (2009)[a]	—			X	X
Wulczyn et al. (2018)	14,834	X			X

Note. DHHS = Department of Health and Human Services; GAO = Government Accountability Office.
[a]Missing gray literature sample sizes were not originally reported or were reported incompletely.

Results

Study Characteristics

The comprehensive search resulted in 25 studies appropriate for this review from peer-reviewed ($n = 17$) and gray ($n = 8$) literature (see Table 1). Most peer-reviewed studies used quantitative methods ($n = 15$). One peer-reviewed study used qualitative methods (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993) and one used mixed methods (Geiger et al., 2013). Gray literature reports utilized qualitative ($n = 5$) rather than quantitative or mixed methods ($n = 3$). Gray literature studies included reports produced by foster care foundations ($n = 2$), federal ($n = 2$), and state ($n = 1$) governments, and university research centers ($n = 3$). Three of the studies (Cooley et al., 2015; Marcenko et al., 2009; Wulczyn et al., 2018) that met the criteria for inclusion were not incorporated in the thematic synthesis, as the factors they found were not in three or more other studies. Fifteen of the included studies were published between 2009 and 2018, up from a combined total of 10 published during the two decades prior (1989–2008).

Data sources. Reported study sample sizes ranged from 72 individuals across three counties (Chamberlain et al., 1992) to 15,442 individuals across three states (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). Five studies had missing or only partially reported sample sizes (GAO, 2018; Kilos et al., 2017; Marcenko et al., 2009; North Dakota DHHS, 2018; Utah Foster Care Foundation, 2009). The majority of studies obtained data directly from current or former foster parents through surveys, interviews, and/or focus

groups (*n* = 23). Additional data were sourced using the same methods from state (*n* = 5), private (*n* = 2), and tribal (*n* = 1) child welfare staff or managers, and federal officials (*n* = 1). Two studies used administrative child welfare agency data (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Wulczyn et al., 2018). Three fourths of included studies used cross-sectional data (*n* = 18) and six used longitudinal data.

Approaches to measuring foster parent retention. Peer-reviewed studies operationalized the construct of foster parent retention in different, and sometimes multiple, ways. Quantitative and mixed-methods peer-reviewed studies measured associations with variables that describe three different aspects of retention, which we conceptualized as *fostering intention* (*n* = 9), *discontinuation* (*n* = 6), and *length of service* (*n* = 3). *Fostering intention* assesses parents' intent to continue or discontinue fostering (Cooley et al., 2015; Denby et al., 1999; Hendrix & Ford, 2003; Keys et al., 2017; Mihalo et al., 2016; Rhodes et al., 2001, 2003; Rindfleisch et al., 1998) and their likelihood of discontinuing fostering (Geiger et al., 2013). *Discontinuation*, perhaps the most direct measure of retention, assesses whether foster parents have actually terminated their fostering role. Studies alternately referred to this concept as "dropout" or "retention" rates (Chamberlain et al., 1992; Christenson & McMurtry, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2003), "placement disruptions" (Crum, 2010), and "former" versus "closed" foster homes (Rhodes et al., 2001; Urquhart, 1989). In comparison, *length of service* measures the duration parents spent fostering. Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) relied on administrative child welfare agency data to assess length of service, while Cherry and Orme (2013) and Ahn et al. (2017) used foster parents' self-reports. The only qualitative peer-reviewed study did not report the exact questions posed to participants about retention (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993).

Gray literature reports also varied in their measurement of foster parent retention. Both studies that relied on quantitative data compared current and former foster parents, consistent with *discontinuation* as described above, in one (Wulczyn et al., 2018) or nine states (U.S. DHHS, 1993). The gray literature studies that used qualitative data did not define retention, perhaps to produce richer information from participants, and referred to it in general rather than specific terms. Retention was described as foster parents' decision to foster (Marcenko et al., 2009), keeping open foster homes active (Utah Foster Care Foundation, 2009), and whether or not foster parents continue to serve (GAO, 2018; Kilos et al., 2017; North Dakota Department of Human Services, 2018).

Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention

Five factors were identified as affecting foster parent retention across four or more studies (see Table 2). The most common factor was foster parents' *relationship to the child welfare system*, which studies discussed both in terms of parents' relationships with agency workers as well as parents' attitudes toward and perceptions of the system more generally. *Material resources*, including financial means and the ability to access services related to one's parenting role, was the next most common factor. Studies also described *personal attributes*, intangible characteristics of foster parents such as personality traits or felt states of being (e.g., confidence) as affecting retention. A further factor was *training* for foster parents delivered either before or during service and the inclusion of specific topics within trainings. Studies identified the role of *peer support* from other foster parents as a final factor influencing retention.

Relationship to child welfare system. Nearly two thirds (*n* = 16) of the included studies described how factors related to foster parents' relationship to the child welfare system affect retention (see Table 3).

The relationship between parents and agency workers in particular was described as a potential source of support or strain for parents. Studies largely emphasized workers' roles in contributing to a positive relationship, including maintaining regular and quality communication

Table 2. Description of Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention.

Factor	Description
Relationship to child welfare system	The felt quality of foster parents' cumulative experiences with the child welfare system and child welfare workers, and foster parents' attitudes toward them.
Material resources	Financial means (e.g., incomes or allowances), or the ability to access services related to one's parenting role, including transportation, child care, respite care, or counseling.
Personal attributes	Intangible characteristics of individual foster parents including personality traits and felt states of being, such as confidence or control.
Training	Pre-service or ongoing trainings or classes for foster parents that are intended to support the development of knowledge and/or skills related to one's parenting role.
Peer support	The presence and quality of a social relationship between foster parents in which some form of support is received (e.g., shared knowledge or advice; being listened to, or emotionally supported).

Table 3. Factors Affecting Foster Parent Retention.

Record	Relationship to child welfare system (n = 16)	Material resources (n = 10)	Personal attributes (n = 8)	Training (n = 6)	Peer support (n = 5)
Ahn et al. (2017)	X				
Chamberlain et al. (1992)	X	X		X	
Cherry & Orme (2013)	X		X		
Christenson & McMurtry (2009)	X	X		X	
Cooley et al. (2015)[a]					
Crum (2010)			X		
Denby et al. (1999)	X		X		
U.S. DHHS (1993)	X	X		X	X
GAO (2018)	X	X			
Geiger et al. (2013)	X	X	X		
Gibbs & Wildfire (2007)		X			
Gregory & Kaye (2009)	X			X	X
Hendrix & Ford (2003)			X		
Keys et al. (2017)			X		
Kilos et al. (2017)	X	X	X		
Marcenko et al. (2009)[a]					
Mihalo et al. (2016)	X		X		
North Dakota DHHS (2018)	X				X
Rhodes et al. (2001)	X	X		X	X
Rhodes et al. (2003)		X			
Rindfleisch et al. (1998)	X	X			X
Rodwell & Biggerstaff (1993)				X	
Urquhart (1989)	X				
Utah Foster Care Foundation (2009)	X				
Wulczyn et al. (2018)[a]					

Note. DHHS = Department of Health and Human Services; GAO = Government Accountability Office.
[a]Studies did not find any of the above factors to affect foster parent retention.

with parents (Chamberlain et al., 1992; Geiger et al., 2013; North Dakota Department of Human Services, 2018; Rhodes et al., 2001; Rindfleisch et al., 1998; Utah Foster Care Foundation, 2009), being available and responsive to them when needed (Denby et al., 1999; GAO, 2018; Mihalo et al., 2016; Utah Foster Care Foundation, 2009), demonstrating respect (Mihalo et al., 2016), recognizing their contributions (Geiger et al., 2013), involving them in decision-making around their child's care (Christenson & McMurtry, 2009), and providing emotional support and sympathy through the fostering process, particularly during transitions (Geiger et al., 2013; Urquhart, 1989).

Increased support from agency staff was found to be positively associated with *fostering intentions* but had a less clear impact on *length of service*. In comparing groups of foster parents who were more or less likely to report an intent to continue fostering, Mihalo et al. (2016) found that receiving more agency support increased a parent's odds of being in the group with greater fostering intentions by 1.2 times ($p < .001$). Another study found that parents who fostered for longer periods of time were significantly more likely to anticipate receiving more help with fostering from child welfare professionals than did parents who fostered for relatively shorter periods, and that this was the strongest difference examined between the groups (odds ratio [OR] = 1.54, $p = .002$; Cherry & Orme, 2013). However, Ahn and colleagues (2017) found through a Cox regression analysis that agency workers' support was not significantly related to parents' length of fostering. Nevertheless, Ahn et al. (2017) also found, among 160 former foster parents, more than a quarter (28.16%) of the reasons cited for discontinuing were problems related to their agency, including having a bad experience with a worker(s) (7.76%), not receiving a response when something was needed (6.12%), and not feeling appreciated by the agency (4.49%).

More broadly, studies also described how foster parents' perceptions and experiences with the child welfare system affected their retention. For example, one study comparing 539 active and 265 former foster homes found the more a foster parent perceived red tape in a child welfare agency, their likelihood of being a former rather than active foster home increased by 2.1 times ($p = .0001$; Rindfleisch et al., 1998).

The National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (U.S. DHHS, 1993) described challenges in parent–worker relationships as "not surprising" due to the lack of training child welfare workers received on how to communicate with parents. Child welfare administrators who participated in the study attributed some parents' lack of input as part of the treatment team (evidenced by a lack of attendance at administrative or judicial hearings) as resulting from workers' varying attitudes toward parents (U.S. DHHS, 1993)

Material resources. Forty percent of studies ($n = 10$) described material resources as a factor influencing foster parent retention. These resources included foster parent payments/reimbursements and incomes, as well as the ability to access services related to raising a child.

With some exceptions, studies reported that having greater financial resources in the form of higher foster parent reimbursements and higher incomes benefits retention. These concepts are related as foster parents may consider any payments received for their service as part of their income. One study of 804 current and former foster homes found a home was 1.8 times more likely to be closed if foster care did not serve as a source of income ($p = .001$) and that having too small of an allowance was also significantly associated with being closed ($p = .0251$; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). Existing reimbursements were described as inadequate to cover the costs of raising a child (Christenson & McMurtry, 2009), and higher reimbursements were described as a need (GAO, 2018; Geiger et al., 2013; U.S. DHHS, 1993). Studies also noted that parents had "worries" about fostering's financial impact (Kilos et al., 2017) and "feared" additional funding cuts to payments and services that would make fostering prohibitively expensive (Geiger et al., 2013).

Using longitudinal administrative child welfare data with a large subsample (*n* = 7,908), Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) found that having a higher income was significantly associated with a longer *length of service* (*p* = .0249). Another study however used a latent class analysis to compare two groups of foster mothers (*N* = 304) and did not find income to be associated with membership in the longer-serving group (Cherry & Orme, 2013). With regard to *fostering intentions*, Rhodes et al. (2003) found families were more than three times as likely (OR = 3.61, *p* = .01) to plan to discontinue fostering if their income was below the sample median of US$30,000, whereas Cooley et al. (2015) did not find a significant association between income and intent to continue fostering.

Being unable to access and afford services that are necessary to and supportive of one's role as a foster parent was repeatedly described as harming retention. In a report by the U.S. GAO (2018, p. 24), foster parents and public and private child welfare workers in 31 of the 49 states surveyed reported that inadequate access to services made retention "moderately or very challenging." Parents were responsible for meeting the child's needs including transporting them to school, health appointments, visits to biological families, as well as connecting them to mental health services with an appropriate therapist, despite difficulty in receiving reimbursements for transportation and health care services not covered by Medicaid (GAO, 2018; U.S. DHHS, 1993). Rhodes et al. (2001) found that compared with continuing foster parents, former foster parents were less likely to have received assistance with transportation (OR = 0.24). In another study, former foster parents were more than three times as likely to cite counseling as their primary service need compared with current foster families, who ranked it about as important as other services (U.S. DHHS, 1993). In addition to increased access to transportation and heath care services, studies described respite care (GAO, 2018; U.S. DHHS, 1993) and day care (U.S. DHHS, 1993) as needs of foster parents who could affect retention.

Personal attributes. One third of studies (*n* = 8) found that foster parent retention was affected by parents' own personal attributes or qualities, such as flexibility, confidence, and motivation.

Studies suggested that parents' ability to adapt to their fostering role and understand their child influenced retention. For example, Cherry and Orme (2013) found that parents who had a greater *length of service* were more likely to have a lower need for social readjustment, or "the intensity and length of time necessary to accommodate to a life event" (p. 1628), than parents who fostered for shorter periods (*p* = .005). A parent's readiness to call their child's worker whenever necessary was also found to be associated with greater *fostering intentions* (*p* = .004; Denby et al., 1999). Keys et al. (2017) similarly found parents' flexibility as well as empathy were associated with being less likely to consider stopping fostering (*p* = .05).

Within their fostering role, parents' senses of competency and confidence in raising a child, commitment to their role, and control over their circumstances were also described as influencing *fostering intentions*. Mihalo et al. (2016) found that parents' self-reported likelihood to continue fostering was significantly and positively associated with their competency (efficacy) in their role (*p* = .03). Another report found that parents' lack of confidence was a barrier to recruiting and retaining Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)–preferred foster homes for American Indian Children (Kilos et al., 2017). Hendrix and Ford (2003) measured the collective influence of parents' senses of confidence and commitment, challenge, and control on their intent to continue fostering through the Family Hardiness Index. In a sample of 76 parents, including 64 who intended to continue and 12 who did not, parents who intended to continue fostering were found to have significantly higher hardiness scores than both the "do not intend to continue to foster" group (*p* < .001) and a non-fostering comparison sample (*p* = .001; Hendrix & Ford, 2003). With a larger sample of 649 parents, Geiger et al. (2013) also analyzed the effect

of one's sense of control on fostering intentions and found that having a lower external locus of control (perceiving control over specific situations as being beyond one's control) was associated with increased intent to quit fostering ($p < .05$).

Parents' motivations for fostering were discussed as a further attribute affecting retention. Interpreting open-ended responses from parents regarding what they find satisfying, which was found to be related to retention, Geiger et al. (2013) reported parents who were more satisfied and thus more likely to intend to continue fostering derived their motivation from the experiences of loving interaction with their child and providing for their child's needs, as well as a sense of collective responsibility.

Training. Six studies discussed the role of both pre-service (delivered before licensure) and in-service (delivered after licensure) foster parent trainings as affecting retention.

Rhodes et al. (2001) found that parents' feelings of being better prepared for their fostering role before beginning it, which pre-service trainings intend to promote, was significantly associated with having *fostering intentions* to continue as well as with not *discontinuing* fostering ($p = .03$). Parents who intended to continue to foster were more likely to report having received enough information during pre-service trainings on the topics of how to contact the agency ($p = .05$) and fostering teenagers ($p = .004$) than parents who intended to quit or former parents (Rhodes et al., 2001). The same authors found foster parents who intended to continue in their role were also significantly more likely (63%) to have received in-service training than did foster parents who planned to quit (50%) or former foster parents (43.4%; $p = .05$; Rhodes et al., 2001). Continuing foster parents were also more likely than the other groups to have received in-service training on specific topics of fostering a teenager ($p = .02$) or child of a different race/culture ($p < .001$), teaching a child skills for growing up and living on their own ($p = .04$), children's feelings about their own parents ($p = .005$),

and working with the child's (biological) parents ($p = .03$). In a large sample ($N = 1,373$), The National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (U.S. DHHS, 1993) found current foster parents were more likely to have received pre- or in-service training on the topics of disciplining a child and working with a child who was sexually abused than did former parents ($p < .05$).

Other studies reported descriptive findings that supported a connection between training and retention. In terms of *discontinuation*, Christenson and McMurtry (2009) found 80.39% of parents' who completed a pre-service training program known as Foster PRIDE continued to foster 1½ years later. The authors described the association between training completion and retention as significant, although an accompanying p value was not presented. Chamberlain et al. (1992) similarly found that parents who had received both additional in-service training and a stipend showed lower drop-out rates (9.6%) than either parents who received stipends alone (14.3%) or a control group (25.9%), although significance was not presented. In another study, 39% of parents reported that more training was needed as a retention method (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993).

Peer support. Five studies found parents' retention, as measured by *discontinuation* and *fostering intentions*, was linked to their receipt of social support from other foster parents by way of information or advice, or through shared experiences or a support group. Three of these found that current foster parents were significantly more likely than former foster parents to report being supported by other foster parents (U.S. DHHS, 1993 [$p < .01$]; Rindfleisch et al., 1998 [$p = .153$]; Rhodes et al., 2001 [OR = 2.84]). More specifically, Rhodes et al. (2001) also found that parents who planned to continue fostering were more than two times as likely to have a foster parent buddy than parents who were planning to quit (OR = 2.74, $p = .01$). A report by the North Dakota Department of Human Services (2018) additionally recommended, based on the input of regional foster/adoptive coalitions

funded by the state, offering foster parent support groups as a retention method.

Discussion

This review assessed foster parent retention in terms of factors affecting continuation of service as foster parents and did not examine the quality of the foster parenting nor did it assess welfare outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Recruitment of foster parents—without addressing retention—is missing an important factor in the shortage of foster parents. The factors identified throughout this literature review point to specific areas child welfare organizations can adapt their services and provide resources to increase foster parent retention rates. Likewise, retention of foster parents was also distinguished by personal attributes that child welfare systems can seek to nurture, support, train, and develop in pre-service and ongoing training of foster care providers.

Notably, none of the qualitative studies, and very few of the quantitative and mixed-methods studies (Table 1) in this review connected children's attributes or behavior to foster parent retention. This is a welcome finding, as child welfare systems are designed to respond to the needs of children and families in crisis situations and therefore the characteristics and behaviors of children who are in care are not factors to be avoided, but rather an essential aspect to which child welfare systems ought to be effectively responding. The few studies that do identify difficult child behavior (Denby et al., 1999; Gregory & Kaye, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2001) found this to be one of multiple factors that affected foster parents' continuance of service. Furthermore, Cooley et al. (2015) identify social support can be a mitigating factor to challenges foster parents experience when there is disruptive child behavior in the home.

Although it may seem obvious that foster parent satisfaction is connected to foster parent retention, it is not clear from the literature that child welfare agencies seek to increase or promote satisfaction. Agencies that do not currently have an adequate means of gauging

satisfaction may consider utilization of the Treatment Foster Parent-Satisfaction Survey (Mihalo et al., 2016) to identify the need for changes.

Implications for Policy and Practice

It is difficult to overstate the importance of foster parents within the context of the nation's child welfare system. Once a child is placed with a family, and for as long as that child is in that home, no single adult or set of adults spends more time with the child than their foster parent.

Child welfare agencies seeking to increase retention rates will note that there are variables promoting retention to which they can directly respond. The relationship between the agency and foster parents was the most cited in the literature review as a factor affecting retention. Promoting positive professional relationships between foster parents and their caseworkers as well as a culture of collaboration and support for foster parents can nurture a sense of inclusion for foster parents as part of the child welfare team. Agencies seeking to change their culture ought to examine their communication, recognition, and emotional support of foster parents. Agencies seeking to build a workforce that provides respectful engagement toward foster parents will be available and responsive (Utah Foster Care Foundation, 2009) in communication with and support toward foster families. This underscores the need for training our child welfare workforce to understand and meet the complex needs of the children and families they serve.

Federal efforts to address long spells in foster care and racial disparities in placement and permanency outcomes extend back to the 1990s. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act was enacted in 1994. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act was amended in 1996 by the Interethnic Placement Provisions, which provided the protections against discrimination based on race, color, or national origin to ensure children in out-of-home care are provided with permanent, safe, and stable homes without

delay. Most recently, the importance of the recruitment and retention of high-quality foster homes is reflected in passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act in the spring of 2018. The Act provides $8 million in competitive grants to states to support the recruitment and retention of high-quality foster homes through 2022. Since 2008, the Children's Bureau of the U.S. DHHS has provided discretionary funds to states, tribes, and territories to effectively identify, engage, and support resource families as a means of improving permanency outcomes and building lasting connections for children in foster care. To date, 21 grants have been awarded over three cluster periods (2008, 2010, and 2013). These funds have been used to test a diverse array of diligent recruitment activities, programs, and policies (Meltz et al., 2019).

The heavy burden on child welfare agencies to continually recruit and retain foster parents may also lead policymakers and administrators to think of alternatives to the existing foster care system. By way of example, the Family First Prevention Services Act promotes preventive support services so that biological families can remain intact and not have vulnerable children enter foster care in the first place. For children already in foster care, policy solutions promoting reunification and adoption will achieve child welfare agencies' permanency goals while reducing the need to spend resources on non-permanent solutions.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This literature review reports findings of foster parent retention in the United States. This study is limited by the quality and accuracy of the literature analyzed. Further methodological analysis into the quality of each study could provide different results. In addition, there is a risk the researchers missed relevant literature as part of the database search or while reviewing abstracts and articles for inclusion, especially among gray literature that did not mention retention in the title or abstract. Some of the studies are regionally focused (e.g., focus on a particular state) and

not intended to be generalizable. The authors purposefully limited the research to articles focused on foster care in the United States, but expanding to see how foster care retention is addressed in other parts of the world could prove useful.

Although there is a nationwide shortage of foster parents and therefore a need for foster parent retention, it is also important we retain foster parents who help promote child and family well-being outcomes. Future research could utilize longitudinal study of foster parents over time, and could focus on particular subset groups of foster parents (e.g., kinship foster parents) to see what differences result by examining these groups. Conducting a cost–benefit analysis of the economic impact on agencies, due to attrition of foster parents compared with the agencies' retention activities, may contribute to better understanding and practice in resource allocation. Further research linking factors that lead toward both foster parent retention and child well-being outcomes would not only relieve child welfare agencies of the burden of filling foster home vacancies, but would also allow these agencies to fulfill their mission of promoting the health, safety, and welfare of the children and families involved with the child welfare system.

Conclusion

Children in permanent families—not foster parent retention—is the ultimate goal of child welfare agencies. At times, child welfare agencies' efforts to promote permanency through adoption may lead toward foster parents discontinuing future foster care services. State and county child welfare agencies have the responsibility of protecting children from abuse and neglect, while seeking to provide and maintain safe and nurturing family environments for children in foster care as the agency seeks a permanent placement through reunification, adoption, or guardianship. Foster parents are a crucial component of the success or failure of these efforts, and can actively help promote permanency, stability, safety, and healing. This systematic review identified factors that promote continuation of foster care service. Increasing retention will not only allow state