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Fathers' Service Experiences with the Child Welfare System

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Fathers’ Service Experiences with the Child Welfare System

This research report provides an overview of the findings about 18 men’s experiences of service involvement with a Children’s Aid Society in Southern Ontario. The data reported here are part of a larger study that also focused on these men’s daily living realities (the research report about men’s daily living realities, as well as a document with the entire stories of the 18 men in their words, are available on the Partnerships for Children and Families web site: www.wlu.ca/pcfproject).

Fathers are marginalized in thinking about child welfare interventions and they are often relegated to the background when families are engaged by child welfare authorities. A premise of this research project was that child welfare’s capacity to engage constructively with fathers could be increased by knowing more about how they perceived their child welfare involvements. A corollary premise was that increasing child welfare’s constructive engagements with fathers would benefit children and families, as well as fathers.

This research report begins with a brief review of the literature related to men’s involvement with child welfare services. Then a brief overview of the research methods used for the research is provided. The largest part of the report presents the research findings: the themes of the positive and negative aspects of child welfare involvement that were derived from the men’s stories. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings (Note: Both the literature review and the overview of the research methods presented in this report are borrowed from a forthcoming chapter by Cameron & Coady that includes the results pertaining to men’s experiences with child welfare services, as well as men’s daily living realities).
Child Welfare Perspectives on Fathers

A review of six child welfare textbooks\(^1\) published between 1998 and 2003 found that fathers generally were not given specific attention. References to parents were common. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that child welfare interventions typically focus on mothers and mothering (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; D’Cruz, 2001; Freymond, 2007; O’Donnell, 2001; Scourfield, 2003; Swift, 1995). Only one of the six texts reviewed had a focused discussion about fathers, and it noted the invisibility of fathers in child welfare and the skewing of parental responsibility towards mothers (Shireman, 2003).

Similarly, a review of four child welfare/family social work journals\(^2\) over the period 1999-2004 revealed a total of seven studies on the topic of fatherhood. Two articles discussing the involvement of fathers in placement decisions appeared in *Child Welfare* in 2001. There were four articles, one focusing on teen fathers and the other three on the effect of father involvement on children’s health in the *Child and Youth Services Review*. One article in the *Journal of Family Social Work* explored the issue of parenting education for incarcerated fathers.

Most of the available research about fathers involved with child protection authorities has focused on their limitations. Child welfare literature has traditionally focused on fathers as abuse perpetrators and on their absence from families (Greif & Bailey, 1990). Fathers involved with child welfare are described as having higher rates of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment than fathers in the general population. They are portrayed in terms of their personal emotional challenges, substance abuse, difficulties in their partner relationships, school and work problems, and criminal or delinquent activities (Brown, 1983; Chadiha & Danziger, 1995; Devault &
A few authors have pointed out that, despite such difficulties, a considerable number of fathers involved with child protection authorities maintained involvement with their children whether they lived together or not (Hendricks, 1983; Perloff & Buckner, 1996). However, overall, considerations of these fathers’ strengths and potential contributions to their children’s and families’ well-being were essentially absent from the child welfare literature.

Historically, the Anglo-American child protection focus has been on mothers and mothering (Cameron, Coady & Adams, 2007; Franck, 2001; Swift, 1995; Sonenstein, Malm & Billing, 2002). Child protection service providers engage with mothers irrespective of whether they are stay-at-home mothers or employed (Franck, 2001; O’Donnell, 2001). There is evidence that men tend to be emotionally and physically avoided by child protection service providers (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; D’Cruz, 2002; Lazar, Sagi & Fraser, 1991; O’Hagan, 1997). Male partners can be viewed by child protection service providers as transient and interchangeable (Marshall, English & Stewart, 2001; Scourfield, 2003). Reinforcing men’s invisibility is mothers offering their own interpretation of fathers’ roles in children’s lives. There is a perception that mothers act as gatekeepers with their views frequently accepted and not verified by service providers (Sonenstein, Malm & Billing, 2001).

Fathers are frequently considered to be potential physical threats to their partners and
children, as well as to child protection service providers. This can contribute to a reluctance of front-line service providers as well as foster parents to be actively involved with these men (Featherstone, 2003; Greif & Bailey, 1990; Marshall, English & Stewart, 2001; O’Hagan, 1997; Scourfield, 2001, 2003). Predominantly female service personnel may fear that men may become violent, even if they have not been so in the past; this is particularly the case in situations of domestic violence when men may be actively and automatically avoided (Featherstone, 2003; O’Hagan, 1997).

There is some evidence that fathers who wish to be more involved frequently have to overcome obstacles and demonstrate their commitment to their children in ways that mothers often do not (Franck, 2001; The National Child Welfare Resource Centre for Family Centred Practice, 2001; O’ Donnell, 2001; Sonenstein, Malm & Billing, 2002). Not surprisingly, there are several recommendations in the literature for more concerted efforts to engage fathers in families involved with child protective services through intervention models that are physically and psychologically more accessible to men (Connor, 2002; Dalla & Gamble, 1998; Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Franck, 2001; Harris, 1991; Hendricks, 1987, 1988; Hopkins, 1972; Leashore, 1997; Peled, 2000).

**Research Methods**

This research report is based on interviews with 18 fathers with recently closed child protection cases at a child protection agency in southern Ontario. Fathers were chosen randomly from a longer list of child protection cases identified from computer records as having a custodial or non-custodial father involved with child protection services. One constraint on this selection processes was including a comparable proportion of cases having a child placed in care to the
host agency’s proportion. Also, a similar proportion of cases involving domestic violence between partners to the host agency’s ratio was selected.

Fathers were interviewed two or three times representing about 4-6 hours of conversation with each father. The interviews focused both on men’s more general life stories as well as on their child welfare involvement, but the latter is the focus of this report. Most interviews took place in the respondent’s home. A very simple interview strategy was used involving a preamble asking each father to imagine that a movie or book of their life was being made and to decide what was in the story. The story could begin in the present or past and should include what they thought would be most important if they wanted someone to understand their life.

Fathers were asked where they would like the story to begin and neutral probes were used to encourage them to discuss this topic. The interviewer recorded on a pad a list of additional topics mentioned during the discussion and returned to them later in the interview or in subsequent interviews. Otherwise, the father was asked what came next in his story. Interviewers also asked to talk about a standard set of topics (e.g. childhood, family life, education, work, child welfare involvement) in later interviewers if these were not discussed through the previous procedures.

Each interview was audio taped and listened to by the interviewer prior to the next interview to identify possible focuses for this discussion. Each interview proceeded on the basis of informed consent and participants were given a gift of $100 for consenting to be interviewed. The tapes for each father’s interviews were transcribed and transcripts averaged between 65-100 pages for the combined interviews. Each respondent received a copy of this transcript as well as the research team’s summary story from this transcript. Each father was encouraged to contact
the research team with any additions or corrections that he wished to make. Respondents who wished were given a copy of the study’s summary report.

Two broad analytic strategies were used with these stories. First, three research team members read the complete transcript of the interviews with each father. They agreed on the predominant topics and story lines in each life story. The story lines and topics in each story were encapsulated in an approximately 13-15 page summary story using almost exclusively the respondent’s own words. As mentioned, each respondent received a copy of this summary to verify its appropriateness. The purpose of these summaries was to allow comparisons to be made across fathers’ stories without losing a sense of the specific individuals involved.

The second broad analytic strategy involved building a thematic coding schema from the original transcripts based on consensus among multiple readers from the research team. These transcripts were then coded using the N-Vivo qualitative data management software. The major patterns within each part of this coding framework then were identified supported with illustrations from the transcripts.

It should be acknowledged that this research is about only 18 fathers involved with one child protection agency in southern Ontario. As with most qualitative investigations, the small sample, the open-ended methods of investigation, and the inherently subjective nature of the analytic and interpretive processes means that we cannot assume that identical patterns would be identified with different groups of fathers or by another research team. So little is known about men involved with child protection services that there is no way to judge how typical or unique the circumstances of the men in this study were. If nothing else, particularly in light of the positive contributions many of the fathers in this study make to their children and families, this is
a strong argument for the importance of developing a richer understanding of men involved in
cchild protection services. On the other hand, it is reasonably safe to assume that meaningful
proportion of fathers involved with child welfare have similar experiences to the men in these
stories.

Findings

The qualitative analysis of the transcripts led to the development of core themes of
positive and negative aspects of service involvement. The discussion below presents an overview
of these core positive and negative themes, along with some quotations to illustrate the issues.

A: Positive Aspects of Men’s Involvement with Child Welfare

1. Workers Who Were Understanding and Supportive

   One of the most positive aspects of many of the men’s experiences with child welfare was
having a worker whom they liked and could relate to well. Worker characteristics and style that
men valued and viewed positively included being straightforward, honest, nice, understanding,
nonjudgmental, reliable, supportive, decent, flexible, a good listener, courteous, fair, and
friendly.

   Raymond noted that he liked his current worker because she’s always very
straightforward . . . she’s to the point, she’s direct. He noted similar qualities in the intake
worker:

   She was good. I really liked her, she was thorough, she didn’t fall for all of (ex-wife’s)
bullshit. She was really thorough; she was blunt, to the point. She has to be that way, and
I didn’t have a problem with that. And she’s the one that helped out a lot with getting
counselling and things like that.
Raymond had a total of three workers during his involvement with CAS. He said: They were always helpful. They came by every two weeks to talk with the kids and talk with me . . . I was treated fine . . . I found them supportive.

Caleb said his family service worker was a nice guy; he’s very understanding . . . (he) has been very good. He realizes how frustrating children can be. He was impressed that his worker understood how difficult it was to manage his son’s behaviour at times and did not judge him as a bad person for having slapped his son: They said well, you know, given all the troubles you have with (child’s name), getting mad at him, we can see that happening. Caleb also liked a worker who came into the home to help him with parenting skills: he’s extremely good . . . sometimes he just takes me out for a coffee . . . just gets me away from the situation.

Zack noted that the workers he dealt with were reliable: they’ve always been there . . . I can call and leave a message . . . and (they’ll) call me back . . . they help. With reference to his main worker, he emphasized how important it was to him that AI can get involved with them anytime I want . . . if I call him . . . we’ll get together for coffee and . . . you know, if I have issues that I need to talk about, he’s there. Zack appreciated this worker’s understanding of his point of view and his willingness to be flexible with rules. Zack said that when he complained that the supervised visits with his kids at the agency Adidn’t allow me to be a dad, the worker allowed him to have visits with his kids at his ex-wife’s aunt’s house so that they could swim in her pool and interact more naturally. He noted the importance of the support he received from this worker. Zack was very thankful that this worker explicitly said to he and his ex-wife that it’s not that you’re bad parents and also Ahelped her (ex-wife) understand that a lot of my ideas and a lot of the things I was saying weren’t wrong. In summary, Zack said: AChildren’s Aid was very
supportive. . . . You know, a lot of people say they hate Children’s Aid, you know, they’re good for nothing. Well I absolutely disagree . . . they’ve been a-a-a very big help . . . they’re making me accountable too.

David also spoke to the support that his first worker provided: (worker) was always really, really good . . . she spent a lot of time with us. Collin said the workers he dealt with were decent people . . . doing a difficult job. Nigel was impressed with the flexibility of his worker in bringing his children from their out-of-town placement to visit with him at his home: I was quite blown away by that. He added that AI got along quite well with the . . . social worker . . . it was great, I was very grateful for their involvement. William said quite simply: Awe’ve been listened to . . . Children’s Aid has really helped us out; if we look at it they have really done a good job.

Even some of the men who had very negative experiences with child welfare found some workers whom they liked and they often contrasted these workers to the ones they disliked. Burt had a very poor relationship with his family service worker and contrasted her with some of the workers he had encountered previously. Speaking of previous workers, he said:

I found them quite nice. They didn’t look at me like I was a rapist, . . . cause that’s what my wife was saying about me. . . . they said they have to investigate me and make certain these are all not true allegations . . . (but) I found them quite courteous.

Rob, who did not like or respect the male family service worker who worked the longest with he and his family, said that the male intake worker he talked to initially wasn’t a bad guy . . . (he) was a little more honest with me. He said you’ll be lucky to be back home by Christmas’ (which turned out to be true). Rob was appreciative of the fact that this worker arranged for a supervised access visit with his children. He recounted:
My wife was pushing very hard with the intake worker, who was an alright guy, and he decided, because my wife was pushing so hard to have me see the children, and I was pushing so hard, he said OK, we’re gonna set up a meeting with you and the children and I’ll be present if you want, I can sit in another room behind glass, or you can have me present in the room.

Rob was also thankful that this intake worker gave permission for some of his extended family to supervise his walking with his children on Halloween.

Dean, who found his family service worker to be very distant, hard to reach, and unsupportive, found a CAS visitation supervisor to be the polar opposite:

Phenomenal lady, really nice, . . . she’s just an awesome lady. She makes my visits nice, makes you feel welcome, which helps. The way she talks, she’s friendly. She’s just super friendly . . . and then she’s always giving me advice . . . (She helped to) get me an appointment, (unsupervised) access to my daughter . . . She is there helping fathers and mothers, whoever, she believes in getting the family back together . . . She is like heaven, this lady is amazing.

2 Provision of Helpful Services

Men talked about a number of helpful services that were provided by CAS workers. Such services included counselling, teaching skills, providing or facilitating various types of tangible help, providing good foster care placements, and ensuring the protection of their children.

Zack talked about how the counselling that his worker provided to both he and his daughter had helped them: AThey taught her to tow the line when I wasn’t around. They, they made her accountable. . . . Children’s Aid holds me accountable . . . they’re teaching me all the time. He also discussed how his Wraparound team worker Ahelps me with my parenting skills, sometimes he just takes me out for a coffee, you know. Just, gets me away from the situation for a few minutes. With regard to a more tangible and practical issue, Zack was thankful that the Wraparound team, which included a CAS worker:
(They) did my income taxes cause I hadn’t done em in three years . . . and they got all of that cleaned up for me. . . . (and) they’ve set me up with a social agency to help me with the, uh, you know, the food and stuff when I needed the help. . . . And, you know, they worked with me, like (they said) if you need anything, you just call and we’ll come and we’ll help.

William, whose son was placed in foster care because of concerns about incest between he and his sister, talked of how the family meetings with his worker were helpful and how he felt like the CAS was working together with them to reunite their family: We go to meetings . . . for our kids to hopefully bring them back together again. He was also appreciative that Children’s Aid has helped us out with driving the kids here and there . . . (and) they do take them for dinner maybe once a month and talk to the kids.

Caleb described how his worker helped he and his wife with ideas on how we can be better parents and with realizing that they have to really work out . . . (their) relationship too. He also noted how his worker helped he and his wife communicate with his son’s school: He talked with the school. He met with (wife) and his (son’s) teacher.

Nigel talked of how CAS helped him obtain legal representation to defend himself against accusations his ex-wife had made about him and also arranged for a court assessment of the family situation, which ultimately led to his having custody of his son and joint custody of his daughter:

You can go through Children’s Aid . . . you can get a Legal Aid lawyer to represent you and your children . . . and then I applied for this (court family assessment), I forget the name of this, but it worked wonders for me. This lady, . . . she went to see (ex-wife), came to see me, she saw the children, and then at the end of it, . . . she wrote a report. And the report she wrote was quite damning against (ex-wife) and her recommendation was that (ex-wife) needs a little help, I mean, she’s having problems coping and she’s irrational. . . . She suggested that they (the kids) come live with me. Without their involvement, it (court) would have probably gone on, dragged on forever and ever and . . . they were a great service to me.
Summing up his involvement with CAS, Nigel said So, so as far as I was concerned, it was, it was great . . . I was very grateful for their involvement.

Although most of the counselling that Raymond and his family took part in was through outside agencies, he did say that CAS workers also provided helpful informal counselling:

Family Services was helpful . . . they talked to Sarah (daughter) and they talked to Eugene (son).

He was very thankful for the counselling that their CAS worker gave to his daughter when she became pregnant:

(CAS worker) came over one night and spent an hour and a half with (daughter), . . . talking to her, telling what they did, what they do, gave her books to read, gave her people to call, to try to tell her, you know, that we’re not going to take your baby away from you. So we went through that . . . (daughter) was feeling much better about herself.

A number of men whose children had been placed in foster care talked positively about their children’s experiences with foster parents. Zack said: My, my two, my oldest girl and my youngest girl . . . were in the same home . . . and they developed a very close bond with the foster mother. Eric noted that I met the foster parents a couple of times . . . They seemed to be OK, cause he’s, they’re both teachers I think. . . . The foster parents, you know, they were good for the kids. Peter was thankful that the CAS found a good foster home for his children for the five month period that his estranged wife was unable or unwilling to look after them and during which he was recovering from a stroke. Collin talked about the benefits for his 16 year old son of being in a CAS foster home on a voluntary agreement and remaining involved with the CAS even as he moved toward independent living: There’s a lot of benefits to being, him being involved with Children’s Aid.
Although Carlos had mixed feelings about his involvement with CAS, he acknowledged that they helped provide safety for his young daughter from the dangerous, drug-related lifestyle of his ex-girlfriend by giving custody to his parents: At first, I’m glad child welfare was there. Because they were able to stop my estranged girlfriend from picking up my daughter and putting her into a situation where she might not be alive today. So I’m glad that they were there and stopped that.

3. Connecting to and advocating with other services and resources

Men talked of how the CAS connected them to, and often advocate on their behalf with, services that proved to be helpful to them and their families. Such services related to counselling, skill development, housing, social assistance, and foster care.

Raymond talked about the counselling that he participated in with his daughter: So I wanted to go to the sessions with her, so that we could actually talk . . . Sarah would tell me how she felt about things . . . So it was good. It was really good . . . Sarah and I are very, very close. A lot closer than we were. Raymond was particularly positive about the parenting course that he was referred to by CAS:

I also went for a raising teenagers course . . . which I think, out of all the schooling I have, those eight courses were the best thing that I ever took in my life. They were . . . amazing. Just the relationship between my kids and myself, after that course, it’s just totally different. so that’s what counselling did for me, it helped me tremendous, tremendously.

Caleb discussed how family counselling sessions were helpful:

(Counselling) allowed us to talk, talk aloud a little bit . . . He (the counsellour) was, you know, you could try doing this and gave us a few ideas on how to try and work some things out. He sort of allowed us to talk aloud and then would sorta jump in and, and give us guidance where we might need it . . . Two things that I always remember offhand that I really got out of it was trying to see the situations before they occur. And, and thereby,
don’t get into a situation where you might lose your temper. So that’s one of the things we’ve tried to work on.

Although Dylan was very negative about his involvement with CAS, he talked about the positive impact of an anger management program. He said this program helped a lot . . . one thing, like I learned . . . is like you accept responsibility for your actions, like and you don’t minimize it or deny it anything like that. Dylan noted that in his individual counselling for anger management, he found one counsellor to be much better than another:

The one (counsellor) here, we had too much of a friendship going on, it was more friendship than counselling, and he didn’t challenge me, he didn’t put pressure on me too much, didn’t give me homework, didn’t challenge me or nothing. And to me it was more of a hindrance than a help. Whereas the one (counsellor) in Toronto, oh man, if I work with her, my butt is grass. Cause I could already tell she knows how to challenge me, put me on the spot, and get to me, but to me, when people make good points, like I make sure I listen to it. . . . She put me on the spot, made me work. And that’s what I want. I get more out of, use out of that than just someone I can go talk to.

Although Felix thought that most of the counselling programs he was referred to were a waste of time, he did talk positively about a sex offender group that he attended: It was neat actually. . . . I found out I wasn’t alone. . . . (I) learned how to realize when one’s rationalizing and make sure I’m not rationalizing . . . recognize the cycle.

Rob was resentful of CAS involvement but acknowledged the helpfulness of the counselling to which both he and his wife were referred. His individual counselling that occurred soon after he was removed from the family home because of a violent incident was particularly helpful:

The counselling that I went through . . . for eight weeks . . . was a huge help. . . . The guy that I went to at (agency), he was very, you know, he, he put it in perspective . . . of what I’d done wrong. . . . So he treated me, you know, he didn’t judge me, he just told me where I was, where I was going, and this is the reality of it . . . you’re gonna have to deal with it. . . . And that was a huge help.
Rob added that My wife was going for all kinds of counselling too . . . and it really started to help.

Zack described how CAS advocated for him with housing and welfare after he got out of his substance abuse treatment program. With regard to housing, he said: Children’s Aid called, they called housing . . . and said he’s gonna need a place to bring these kids once he comes home. With regard to welfare, he noted:

After I got outta treatment it (his monthly welfare cheque) was like $430 and my rent was $237 and I had heat and hydro major heat and hydro on top of that. So I ended up, uh, so then Children’s Aid came to my rescue and said Look, this guy has got kids every weekend, you know. Um, can you do something about this, he needs more money. Before the end of the business day they had a cheque for almost a thousand dollars put in my account. I hadn’t seen that much money in for like a long time. So I’m very grateful to CAS.

Zack also talked of how CAS connected him with services that helped him with his drinking problem:

I went into all kinds of crap, like, the shakes again, really major shakes. I ended going to detox that afternoon because he (his pastor) had to call Children’s Aid. Well, it (detox) wasn’t bad actually. (After detox) I came in here (his home) . . . and I poured them (bottles of alcohol) down the sink. Cause, I’d made a decision, and that was it, I wanted my kids back. . . . So I have a recovery group that meets once a week, at (church). I hang out with a bunch of sober people. (It’s) a Christian based recovery group and it’s, it’s just, it’s first rate, I just love it.

David credited his second worker with advocating for them with the police to take their daughter into custody when she was on the run from home and engaging in very risky behaviour: If it wasn’t for her (worker), she (daughter) wouldn’t have been picked up that night. There’s no question in my mind. He was also very positive about the closed and open correctional/treatment facilities that his daughter was placed in: Every time she gets into a custody situation it’s
wonderful cause we know where she is tonight . . . so she’s safe. You know, now she’s in open custody but she also knows that if she runs from there, then she’s breaking her probation again.

Dean, who was quite negative about his experience with CAS, found the anger management program that he was required to attend very helpful:

You know, that anger management course, whatever it was, four month course, was really good. (It) showed me the things I was doing wrong and how I thought it was her fault, but you know, I set her up or I led her into it. And, or I was just plain denial. . . . It showed me where my anger was coming from. A lot of it’s probably from my childhood. . . . It helped me, to show me how my abusive behaviour was . . . just wrong. . . . It was a very good course . . . it was an excellent program.

4. Providing a wake-up call

A number of fathers described the initial involvement of CAS in their lives as a wake-up call that enabled them to start to turn their lives around. Zack said that when his children were apprehended by CAS because of his alcoholism and inability to take adequate care of them it prompted him to take stock of his life. When he left detox, he went home, found the alcohol he has stashed all over the house, and poured it down the drain because I’d made a decision, and that was it, I wanted my kids back. He went on to say: As horrible as this whole situation has been for me, losing my kids for those months, it had to happen . . . it had to happen. And now it’s like I have a second chance. Like, I could have lost everything.

Caleb described how child welfare involvement turned his family’s life upside-down and caused he and his wife to take a hard look at their relationship and how it was related to the problems they were having with their son. Speaking of the their relationship, he said: I think it [CAS intervention] made (partner) and I work harder . . . there became a big push to really sort that out, fix it . . . I guess a lot of renewed vigour over fixing things . . . becoming better parents . . . it makes us kinda stronger I think sometimes.
Upon child welfare intervention, Carlos realized how his life had degenerated into drug use and domestic violence and that he could have lost everything. Out of love for his daughter he cleaned up his life-style, and moved home with his parents (who had been given custody of his daughter). He described how being under house arrest was actually helpful to him: The whole house arrest . . . even though it was bad, like I didn’t want to be under house arrest, like inside, I was happy, because I had an excuse not to go out . . . to stay away from everything. Because I, you know, I had something guarding me, . . . and it helped. Carlos said, “now it’s like I have a second chance . . . and now I appreciate opportunities when they come.

Although Dean was quite negative about his involvement with CAS, he described a similar dramatic turnaround in his life due to the shock of CAS involvement. He quit doing drugs and got his first steady job in an effort to earn visitation and custody rights for his daughter. He commented: It’s amazing what a little girl does to your life. Elaborating on the wholesale change in his life, he described:

My whole life’s been totally flipped upside-down. But it’s all for the positive. It’s better for me, straightening out my life. So this is all forcing me to get my life straightened out. That’s the only ironic thing about the whole thing, is, my life is gonna be better.

George also described how the birth of his first child and his battle to win custody of her from his estranged wife and to keep her from being apprehended by CAS enabled him to leave behind his past involvement with drugs and gangs and change his way of life. The fact that his daughter was born without defects despite his wife’s extensive use of drugs led him to his Christian faith. He said: “You know, so that was for me an affirmation of his (God’s) existence . . . and it was just, for me, that changed my life. In order to prove to CAS that he had changed his old habits and was a fit father he endured almost two years of regular drug tests: You know, it
didn’t bother me peeing in a cup, you know. I had something to prove, and I did. George also left behind other aspects of his gangster past and got a straight job:

I didn’t want to be pushing my baby down the street in a stroller and have a car pull up beside me and shoot me down and have my baby roll down the street, or sit there without a father. I said I’m not gonna have that happen. I’m gonna be there for my kid. And I, and that’s when I made the commitment.

Although Rob was very bitter about the way that CAS had intervened in his life, he acknowledged that the overall impact was positive in that it helped he and his wife to recognize what was wrong in their life and to make positive changes. He said:

When we first had our children, we, me and my wife discussed all these things we were going to do with our children. And you know, this is what we wanted to do. We wanted them to ski, we wanted them to bicycle, we wanted them to fish. We wanted to spend weekends with them, doing all these things.

Rob’s story detailed how this plan did not materialize because they began burning the candle at both ends working and drinking too much. He became a workaholic (working 70-80 hours a week) while his wife worked full-time as well. They both became heavy drinkers, they developed marital problems (including violent arguments), and the kids were ignored. He said that the shock of CAS involvement made us realize we’d completely lost sight of what we’d intended to do . . . (and) what raising children meant to us.

B: Negative Aspects of Men’s Involvement with Child Welfare
1. Negative Worker Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviours

The common complaints about negative worker characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours grouped together under six broad concerns: being cold, uncaring, and unsupportive; being judgmental; being manipulative and untruthful; lacking professionalism and competence; having an anti-male bias; and having unrealistic expectations and being rigid and overly intrusive.
Cold, Uncaring, and Unsupportive. Many men complained of some workers being cold, uncaring, and unsupportive. Paul said of his worker: I don’t like her attitude, what she’s come out and said. . . .(sometimes) they’re very pleasant to your face but next thing you know, your getting doc, court documents at your door, bang, bang, it’s very cold. They’re very cold that way . . . very two-faced. Rob said that his worker was not a very compassionate person toward the family.

Burt described how even though he had been cleared of the allegations that his ex-wife had made against him, had gained custody of his three year old son, and had been managing well as a single dad, his family service worker was never positive or supportive over the one and a half years she had been working with him:

It’s always been abrasive. Never, I’ve never received an apology (about believing ex-wife’s false allegations against him). . . . Never heard anything in the way of positive feedback. Never heard that you’re doing a good job. Never heard that (son’s) doing alright, or (son’s) happy. Well, the odd time she’ll say oh, son looks pretty happy’ but it’s never said toward me . . . never, never like as far as an acknowledgement (of his parenting ability). She doesn’t do that. Never has that I can remember. . . . She’s waiting. It seems like she’s waiting for me to fail.

Dylan and his wife made the difficult decision to give up their two special needs children through a Crown wardship agreement with CAS so that the children’s needs could be better met, but Dylan felt that the worker never showed any sensitivity to he and his wife: We made a sacrifice, that’s why I don’t understand why they treated, treated me like shit. I still don’t understand it, I’ll never understand it. Cause they don’t have to be that cold-hearted about it.

Judgmental. Many of the men encountered workers whom they felt were judgmental toward them. Felix, who was bitter about being forced to live apart from his wife and young
children for over three years due to concerns about violence tendencies and sexual offences committed when he was a teen, felt ridiculed by some CAS workers:

Sometimes I felt I was being laughed at. They told me to write up a term, terms of visitation or something like that, or terms of . . . we went to court with it and, shortly after coming out of court, they’d poke and prod, saying that’s not what we wanted, and this is what we want. I just sorta had the feeling I was being laughed at. Well, actually, I have the feeling now that I was being laughed at. . . . I just felt abused and pushed, prodded . . . Athis is what you’re gonna do and we don’t give a damn . . . we’re just gonna poke and prod and keep you away and I think they still kinda watch.

Paul and his wife struggled with a rebellious teenage daughter, enlisted the help of the police to deal with their daughter’s running away and risky behaviours, and eventually agreed to CAS wardship for her. Paul felt that he and his wife were treated by CAS workers more as uncaring and neglectful parents than as the caring but frustrated parents they were:

I always, always, always felt guilty before proven innocent. And I always thought that it should be, should’ve been conveyed a little bit easier to the parent. (It should be more like) listen, we’re gonna get both sides of the story and we’re gonna try and sort this mess out. And I would have been happy with that, but . . . they are judging they, they don’t know what’s going on.

Paul also reacted to judgmental language used by CAS workers in written documents for court when they were proceeding voluntarily with CAS wardship. He and his wife reacted angrily to mention of them abandoning their daughter and of their daughter being sexually molested while in their care (she had been sexually assaulted in a neighbourhood park during daylight hours).

Paul said:

What the fuck are they (CAS) talking about? We never abandoned her. . . . We would never abandon our children. She was taken out of here (the home) because of her violent behaviour . . . and she was placed in a group home we never abandoned her. What about the sexual molestation? We sent her out into the park to be molested in broad daylight? What’s that?
Paul said that when he challenged the CAS worker about these issues, the worker merely said that they had to have cite some serious reasons to justify Society wardship. Paul also talked of his outrage at how another court document contained the CAS allegation that (wife) and me were more concerned about our parental rights than (daughter’s) welfare. Paul related that the legal aid lawyer he enlisted to challenge such language in the court documents was not surprised by it, but that they were successful in getting the CAS to acknowledge that both of these written allegations were inappropriate and should be removed.

George, who left behind his gangster past and eventually won custody of his three daughters, said that he had a very difficult time convincing CAS workers that he had changed and that it was his ex-wife who had not. He felt judged on the basis of his past: They didn’t believe me because of my rough and rowdy past. You know, because of how violent my past was.

Dean described how he felt that the CAS workers judged him as a piece of crap because of having assaulted his partner. He felt that workers accepted uncritically his partner’s characterization of him as a very violent, lashing, mental abusing, psychotic guy and that this was unfair:

Sure I was the abuser, and I was the one who did the assault, but that was one small portion of my life . . . (yet) that’s me for the rest of my life? . . . from a one-time incident? . . . and she’s (partner) looking like the angel . . . we were both messing with each other’s heads. I did, you know, I did do wrong. But, don’t go overboard. It’s wrong, it’s hurtful.

Manipulative and Untruthful. Some men claimed that their workers were manipulative and even lied to them. With regard to feeling manipulated, Dylan felt that workers encouraged him to disclose personal struggles and then used this against him: They used the depression and
suicide against me. That’s why, to me, it’s like, I know honesty’s not always the best policy, but sometimes it can come back and haunt you and bite you in the butt. . . . That stuff I should have just kept to myself.

Rob said that in contrast to an intake worker who had been honest with him in saying that it would probably take at least three months before he would be able to return to the family home after an incidence of violence (pouring ketchup over his wife’s head), his family service worker lied to him: (worker) started making promises, that oh, you know, maybe in four weeks you’ll be home, you know, we’ll have to see, you know, I gotta talk to you, this and that. . . . And he made, continuous, lied continuously to me about realistically when I’d be back home. Furthermore, Rob thought that this worker lied to him deliberately to try and prove that he had an anger management problem:

And I know why he did it . . . because he wanted me to lose it on the phone . . . cause they record everything. . . . I’m sure that’s what he was trying to do, to provoke me . . . and there was just no way I was going to fall for that. He did it to my wife and he did it to me and I felt very, it was insulting.

Dean thought that his worker lied to him and withheld information from him about the expectations for his drug testing:

I asked her how often do I get random tests, for my drug screening. (She said) I don’t know . . . oh, whenever. In my court files, papers that I got served, it says the first so many months, twice a week, the next so many months, once a week. It’s all there in writing and she’s like AI don’t know. Well, why is she lying to me? How do I trust a liar? I have no faith in her because she just straight out lied to me.

Tarak, who was very bitter about having to live apart from his wife and young son for over two years because of what he considered cultural differences in parenting, particularly with
regard to his older step-son, was very bitter. Of the workers that he was involved with, Tarak said simply, ‘Well they lie, that’s what they did. They lie.

A lack of professionalism and competency. Concerns about lack of professionalism and competency seemed to underlie the complaints that many men had about the lack of contact from their workers and the difficulty in getting in touch with them. Rob said of his worker: He wouldn’t return phone calls. You know, you’d phone him and phone him, and you know, a week would go by without him returning our call, two weeks. Rob went on to say that:

I had no contact basically with (worker). I think I had a couple of phone, I had one phone interview. He didn’t actually meet me, it wasn’t until the last four month supervisory order where he actually came out and talked to me. . . . And he never really talked to the children. . . . And, you know, he wasn’t very professional, wasn’t very organized.

Dean also complained about the difficulty in contacting his CAS worker and getting any information from her: I can’t get my caseworker even on the phone. She won’t even answer, she won’t return my calls. He described how this was very upsetting around Christmas time when he was trying to arrange permission for his mother to see his daughter (her granddaughter): I phoned three, four times, yeah, my mom cried, you know, she didn’t get to see her. Dean was particularly upset at the fact that while he was denied access to his daughter, the worker made no effort to keep him informed of how she was doing: Every maybe six weeks, I should have a small update, you know, daughter’s doing good in school . . . daughter hasn’t been overly sick . . . this is what’s going on in your case . . . I have no communication with them at all. Furthermore, he described how his worker kept postponing a meeting with him to discuss his gaining full weekend access visits with his daughter: So this has been four or five months now, she’s keep bumping me (putting off meeting with him) about what’s going on with my daughter. So I’m left
in the dark. It’s very frustrating. He went on to say that: She’s never been to my home . . . just at
court she’s talked to me a few times . . . she don’t talk to me, never, never, answer any questions.
The woman has done absolutely nothing for me.

Similarly, Dylan talked of not being able to reach workers by phone and of their not
calling him back: every time I tried, no one would call me back, so I just gave up. He added that
Athey said they were going to help and they never did.

Even though CAS was supportive of him in his eventually successful quest for custody of
his two teenage children, Raymond described how the court process was extended by the lack of
competence displayed by CAS workers in handling necessary documentation and paperwork:
Family Services didn’t issue the documentation to (ex-wife) on time. Family Services did screw
up a lot on their paperwork. It (court) would have gone a lot faster at times if they had done their
homework in certain instances.

Related to concerns about worker competency, a number of men talked of not liking
younger workers who didn’t have their own children and couldn’t seem to identify with the
normalcy of parenting struggles. Dylan said:

That’s one thing that ticked me off too is, especially when people (CAS workers) , they
don’t have kids, and here they are trying to give you advice on how to raise kids. I don’t
care who it is, . . . if they don't have kids, it’s like, shut up. Cause it’s two different things
when you work with kids and when you have your own kids.

George said: I really disagreed with a lot of them, like a lot of the newer (Children’s Aid) people
that come freshly out of university that have no kids . . . trying to tell me how I should do things.
You know, I disagreed with that. Raymond had a similar opinion: I really think if you’re dealing
with kids though, you should have your own kids. Related to this concern, he questioned the
competence of one of his workers: I didn’t like him. He was sorta wishy-washy, didn’t seem to really know what he was doing. I just, I didn’t like him.

**Anti-male bias.** Related to Ajudgmental attitudes, some men also perceived an anti-male bias from the female workers they encountered. Eric said:

It was all females against, attacking a guy. . . . it felt like I was getting, being ganged on. . . . It was a lot of wasted time because they were always right, regardless of what you said. Every time I raised my voice in any way, they had it on paper, in the courts it went, says, oh, you raided your voice to her.

Burt claimed that his female worker was a man hater:

She comes across physically that way, she comes across, her, just her mannerisms, her form of speech. And it was when I seen her speaking to a client who was a girl at the, the courthouse, I seen her, she was quite a pleasant girl, (the worker) was. She was, she can be very pleasant with her clients . . . (but) I have never witnessed that with me. It seems like she is waiting for me to fail.

Burt did acknowledge that his worker’s attitude was likely more personal than systemic: I realize that a lot of my problems (with CAS) are specifically associated to the worker I have assigned to me. I find, I find it hard to believe that the rest of Children’s Aid is like this.

Dean felt that CAS workers had a one-sided view of domestic violence that reflected an anti-male bias:

Some men maybe just do come in and pound on their women and beat them, . . . but in my case, and I, I know there’s several other cases that I’ve talked to other men, and the women hit them and abuse them also, and yelled and screamed . . . I think they should have the female, the women, also go through an anger management course. Because it does take two to fight most of the time. 

Dean had the impression that CAS workers Aedared more about the mother’s perspective than the father’s. He said the workers Aalways made me feel that she was more important than me. . . . I
just felt less important. . . . It’s like both parents should be equal, like no one parent should be
better than the other parent.

Raymond also alluded to the anti-male bias of the larger CAS/police/court system. He
talked about the response of the CAS and the police to his estranged wife’s assault on their
daughter:

They weren’t going to charge her . . . (they said) it was self-defence. So I said, ADid you
see any bruises on her (wife)? She (the CAS worker) said they were all on (body) parts
that she (wife) didn’t want to show. Meanwhile, my daughter’s got black eyes, she’s got a
cracked lip, her cheek is swollen, and if it had been me that had done that, I would have
been, I would have spent the night in jail.

Unreasonable expectations, rigidity, and overly intrusive. Dylan, whose two special needs
children were made Crown wards, felt his workers had unreasonable expectations because: I
tried my hardest and did everything I could possibly do, but it wasn’t good enough. With regard
to rigidity, Dylan gave the example of how his workers would not adjust the date of his and his
wife’s final visit with their children to be on the children’s birthday: To me, it’s just they didn’t
want to compromise, they just wanted to be power hungry and control freaks and they didn’t
want to think of the best interests of the kids. . . They could have made is easier, so we could
have seen the kids on their birthday.

Not surprisingly, a number of men felt the CAS were overly intrusive. Eric, whose son
and daughter were placed in foster care for a year because of allegations against him that he
denied and that he said were never substantiated, had a very strong reaction: They were in
captivity for a year . . . (this caused) a lot of pacing and damage. . . it would have been better for
the kids to stay home and the agency to work with us from the house. Paul, who had both
positive and negative experiences with the CAS, found some workers to be overly controlling.
With regard to a particular incident with one worker, he said if you wanna wrap it up, that’s what it really is, like it’s very intrusive. Raymond, who was positive overall about his involvement with the CAS, felt that the agency was overly intrusive in some regards. He appreciated the agency’s support but thought they overstepped their mandate in becoming involved with his son’s school: Family Services actually went in to talk with the school about the kids, . . . and now Family Services wants to sit down and talk to me about why my son isn’t doing good in school. I think that’s getting a little bit out of their jurisdiction, I think. Similarly, Caleb, who was also positive about CAS, also found aspects of intrusiveness he did not like or agree with: Overall, I see the purpose of the organization . . . it’s a good organization . . . (but) I don’t like somebody hanging over me waiting to see if I’m gonna do anything else. . . . Cause I felt they, more or less, were interfering in a place they didn’t belong.

2. **Negative Aspects of the Child Welfare System**

Some men referred to broader, systemic problems of the child welfare system. Men’s comments about the negative aspects of the child welfare system grouped together under four concerns: bureaucratic, unresponsive, and uncaring system; formulaic intervention plans; powerlessness of the system; and worker turnover/frequent changes in workers.

**Bureaucratic, unresponsive, and uncaring system.** More generally, many men characterized the child welfare system as bureaucratic, unresponsive, and uncaring. Rob complained bitterly of how long it took both for him to get access visits with his children after he was charged with assault against his wife, even though he and his wife considered it a minor incident (pouring water on her), and there were no concerns identified about his interactions with
his children. One factor in this delay was the length of time it took for the family service worker to meet with him after the intake worker had transferred the case to family services: I (eventually) met him (the family service worker), but it took four or eight weeks after the intake worker. Then, Rob said he (the worker) wouldn’t return phone calls. You know, you’d phone him and phone him, and, you know, a week would go by without him returning our call, two weeks. Rob also complained of how long it took for him to be allowed to return home, even though his wife and children clearly wanted him back. He said: They (CAS) didn’t really care what was happening to the children, emotionally, being without their father. They didn’t even communicate with children. Rob also was critical of how little follow-up the CAS did once he did return home. Their supervision order was terminated within a couple of months of his returning home and the worker visited only once during this time period. Rob argued convincingly that it would have made much more sense to have him return home earlier and have more intensive and longer monitoring of the home situation: (CAS) should have been assessing us through the, maybe the first six months, assessing us as we were living together, over a longer period of time. You know, it would have been more beneficial to the family.

As described above (see Lack of Professionalism and Competency), Dean was very frustrated at his worker’s and the system’s lack of caring and responsiveness to his desire for more access visits with his daughter, with the worker constantly putting him off and not returning phone calls. He described feeling like he was in a double-bind situation with CAS. Although his worker was not helpful to him at all and did not keep in touch with him, he felt that he could not complain: I’ve been told by other people to ask to change (workers), talk to her
supervisor and get a new one (worker)’. But then I’m thinking, then I’m just a trouble-maker, so I get worried.

Peter, who was separated from his wife and in the hospital recovering from a stroke when his wife placed the children in foster care, was upset that CAS made no effort to facilitate his children visiting with him in the hospital over a three month period. When he was released from the hospital, but still in a wheelchair, he made arrangements to visit with his children at the CAS office, but he was limited to seeing them once every two weeks for one hour, which did not seem fair to him. Although Peter was thankful that the CAS looked after his children for the period of time that his wife was unable to do so, he was critical that they were not sensitive to the need that he and his children had to see more of each other.

Eric, whose young teenage son and daughter were placed in foster care for a year before being allowed to return home, talked of how the whole family was traumatized unnecessarily. Despite the fact that CAS concerns had not been substantiated and that Eric and his wife had a very close relationship with his children, they were not allowed to see the children for the first three months: They were with foster parents for a year, we didn’t see them for three months. . . . So that was a lot of, oh lot pacing and damage. Eric said his children reported that they kept crying, and basically crying themselves to sleep to go, to come home. Eric reported that he never felt supported by CAS workers despite the fact that he and his wife did everything that was asked of them in terms of attending counselling and parenting and anger management classes.

Collin, whose two sons were apprehended from his estranged wife and placed in foster care, was first frustrated by the prolonged court process of making his sons Society wards and allowing him access to them:
It took six months basically of going to court, getting you know, like call me back next week . . . going to court, going back, waiting, waiting, waiting, and I’m still, I’m not seeing my children and each time I’m going up there, first, I didn’t even have a lawyer; I’m just saying, I’m just a guy that wants to see my kids.

He was later frustrated by the rules and conditions placed upon his visits with his sons, and how these were frequently changed without explanation. He felt that CAS and the foster homes did not take his needs and feelings into account:

I used to bring him (son) back (to the foster home, after an evening visit) about 11 (p.m.). And then they suddenly decided that they should be back by nine-thirty, you know, and to me, that’s not much of an evening. . . . and, in fact, sometimes I would bring (son) back and there’d be an empty house, so I thought that’s not fair. And then, of course, I was really unhappy when they cut the visits back to once every two weeks.

Raymond also commented on problems with the way CAS handled the court process, and in doing so, he acknowledged that the problems might be due more to systemic issues than individual incompetence. He said:

Their (CAS’) legal department, I think needs a little bit of help. You know, maybe they just don’t pay enough there or something, I don’t know, but it just seemed they were, they were sloppy at times, I found. Like not speaking up when they should, and not knowing the facts. Now, then again, they’re there and they’ve got maybe 50 cases to do in a day sometimes, so to get to know everything is pretty hard.

Formulaic Intervention Plans. Many men talked of being forced to jump through the hoops of formulaic intervention plans that were not meaningful or helpful to them. Eric said it seemed that they (CAS) had a checklist to go by . . . and we were their puppets, on a string . . . . They tell us to jump and we have to. . . . They were always right, regardless of what you said.

Tarak described how:

You have to go to these programs to satisfy them . . . I have to go to anger management, I have to go to parenting course, I have to go to AA . . . and then there was the random check for alcohol use . . . . But there’s no difference . . . I’m telling you . . . the way I’m treating my kids, it’s the same.
Similarly, Felix said:

Children’s Aid, um, had me jump through hoops eh, wanted me to go to anger management, so I went to anger management. They wanted me to take a parenting course; I took a parenting course. . . . I didn’t see the point, cause they told me all this stuff I already knew.

Although Raymond did find the parenting course that he was mandated to attend meaningful, he thought it odd that he was made to attend such a course even though it was his estranged wife who had been identified by CAS as abusive to the children and they were no longer living together. In his fight for shared custody of his daughter, Dean felt obliged to follow through with every referral to a program that his worker recommended, even though it seemed like overkill to him: So I just go with the program. And I keep following everything they say to do and I just, I keep doing it, you know. I just keep doing it.

Powerlessness of the System. Paul was frustrated with the powerlessness of the child welfare system, as well as of the police and the court, to control and protect his acting-out teenage daughter. He said:

When they (CAS) came into our life, I thought, God, thank God for one thing, at least we’re get some help for her . . . and she hasn’t had no help yet . . . She has not listened to authority . . . not going to counselling. They cannot keep that girl in custody or in a group home to this day. I don’t know where my 13 year old daughter is. She’s out on the street. . . . I can’t see them doing anything for (daughter) . . . she runs the show.

Paul recounted one conversation he had with a police officer about what he could do to stop his daughter from running away from home. The police officer had said if you lock her (daughter) in her room or you keep her from going out that door . . . it’s called abuse and you can be charged. Incredulous, Paul asked: If my daughter, who’s having a problem here, acting out, being violent, and she decides she wants to crawl out the window at three-thirty in the morning, and go
to Kitchener, at 12 years of age, or go to Toronto, you’re telling me that I can’t stop her?. The police officer replied, “That’s what I’m telling you.

David had similar feelings about the powerlessness of CAS and the legal system to control and help his difficult teenage daughter. He described how difficult it was for the system to ensure his daughter’s safety: She has been in and out of foster care ten times. . . . Every single police officer that has been in my home for (daughter), we’ve probably had 10 different officers, and every single one of them say We can’t do anything. The young offender act, we cannot do anything’. David recounted how, when his then 14 year old daughter ran away to live with her 17 year old sister, who had many problems of her own, he tried to make Family and Children’s Services go and get her. CAS told him that as soon as she left our jurisdiction we have nothing to say, nothing. He said, “It’s ridiculous, but , I felt that everybody’s hands were tied. No matter which direction we tried to go, everybody’s hands were tied. After two and a half years of involvement with CAS and the legal system, David and his wife finally managed to get their daughter into secure custody for three months, where she responded very well to the structure and limits. Following this, CAS got her into a six month structured residential treatment program; however, he was quite worried about her turning 16 and leaving the program. David said: All of a sudden she has even more rights cause she’s 16. . . . So your hands are tied because the kids know, the kids really do know the laws.

George, who finally gained custody of his three children after a long process of trying to convince the CAS and the courts of his ex-wife’s involvement with drugs and prostitution, talked of his frustration with trying to get CAS to intervene while his wife had custody of the children. George talked of going to his wife’s home to find his infant daughter unsupervised and covered in
feces while his wife was using cocaine and prostituting. At such times he would call CAS and say, “you need to get to her house, you need to check into it right away. Most of the time, however, he said that by the time they (CAS) get there, you know, she’s either cleaned the mess up or she’s gone. George suggested:

They (CAS) need to have a quicker response time. . . . They need to have more authority. To be able to come in and look closer at homes, as opposed to just walking in the kitchen, and saying How’s everything going’ . . . like, they should be able to walk through the house and check more because all they can do is go to the child’s bedroom, see the child’s OK, then they have to go. You know, she (wife) used to hide all sorts of (drug) paraphernalia and people in her bedroom and . . . it was just damn frustrating . . . trying to prove it. . . . Family and Children’s Services says, ‘well, you gotta prove it, you’ve gotta catch her in the act or get someone who will testify. And then, when you get someone who testifies, her lawyer says, ‘well, this guy’s a crack head, like how credible is he. Well, like who else is it gonna be . . . you’re not gonna find a priest or a rabbi in a crack house with them. . . . It was just hard, frustrating, just many days, sleepless nights, many tears, just anger, frustration. . . . I wish sometimes they (CAS) had more control, to be able to go into a house and look closer at situations, because, often, the situation is far too late by the time they get there . . . and the damage is already done.

Nigel, who finally gained custody of his son because of his wife’s mental health problems, also talked of his frustration in trying to get CAS to recognize and do something about his wife’s poor parenting:

I contacted Children’s Aid . . . because there was some, just some odd behaviour going on. But they said ‘well, there’s nothing we can really do because there’s nothing specific here, it’s not like she’s mistreating the children, beating the children, or anything like that, but it was all sorts of psychological things.

Burt, who also eventually gained custody of his son due to his wife’s mental health problems, had similar difficulty in having CAS and the police do something about his concerns about his wife’s parenting. He said: I had reported abuse of (son) to Family and Children’s Services. (CAS worker) came to investigate . . . I had taken pictures. Basically what they said is they closed the file on that, saying they could not substantiate any abuse. Furthermore, Burt
complained: On three occasions throughout that week, the police directed me leave the child with her (his wife), even after I told the police she was bipolar.

**Worker turnover/frequent changes in workers.** Finally, some men talked about the systemic problem of worker turnover. Dylan talked about how difficult and frustrating it was that the CAS kept switching workers. On the same issue, Rob noted that when he was transferred to another worker it took six weeks to arrange for resumption of his access visits with his children. Although not many men referred specifically to the problem of worker turnover/frequent changes in workers, perhaps because they assumed it was a normal part of the bureaucratic system, this issue was inherent in many of their stories.

3. **Other Negative Impacts of CAS Involvement**

In addition to the emotional toll that is evident in the preceding sections of the results on the negative aspects of CAS involvement, many men also discussed the financial toll that was exacted and how this often interacted with the emotional toll. Eric, whose two young teenage children were apprehended and placed in foster care for a year before being returned to the family, talked of the financial costs of missing work, hiring lawyers and paying for counselling:

Lost hours from work, and lost, you know, well, waste of money for the lawyers . . . and counselling . . . it took me six, eight months to pay that . . . it made me broke. Eric also referred to the interaction between financial issues and emotional costs with regard to how he and his wife could not provide the same things for the children as the foster family could:

They (the foster parents) did totally different what we’ve, we’d do, so when the kids came back, they, you know, allowances and flea markets and, you know, we didn’t have no money for cottages and you know. You know, we didn’t have money for that stuff, and, so when they came back, the kids were almost expecting the same, same type of treatment.
William, whose son was placed in foster care due to concerns about incest, talked about how the combined emotional and financial impact made the family’s situation very difficult:

It’s hard, when two kids are living apart, that should really be living together. Like the punishment has been, thousands of times over, that’s an exaggeration, maybe. Because, you know, we’ve not only had to, to have two kids apart, the financial has been just incredible. You know, we’ve had to make sure (son) gets fed well, clothes and whatever, and we have to go down there (to the foster home) and check on his homework. . . . It’s been back and forth (between family home and foster home) . . . (and) somebody has to stay with (daughter). . . . It is really stressful; no wonder why I lost all that weight.

Rob, who considered himself lucky that his wife’s employer covered the cost of some of their extensive counselling (anger management, marital, and alcohol counselling), still talked about the costs of paying for some of the counselling and for drug screening, paying for lawyers (they eventually had to go to legal aid lawyers), and being required to live apart from his family for a number of months. Although it did not come to fruition, partially because Rob was able to stay with his mother, Rob talked of a scenario that could have unfolded:

If I have to get an apartment, my wife’s gonna lose the house, because she gonna go in arrears . . . it’s gonna take six months to resolve this issue. And the kids are gonna be pulled out of their school that they’re with. They’ve been traumatized already. Dad’s been hauled out of the house. Now they’re gonna be traumatized by going to a different school. Chances are, if they’re being pulled out of a school where they’re living, because mother can’t afford to keep them there, they’re going into a lower class neighbourhood, maybe worse kids, lower standards at the school. And they (CAS) don’t care. They basically told us that from the start; we don’t care about your financial position.

Nigel, who was positive about how CAS supported him in his eventually successful legal battle to get custody of his son, talked of the very heavy financial costs that the legal battle entailed:

(Ex-wife) is very persistent, and she would never give up, right. . . . Every time you go to court it’s a thousand bucks. . . . We’d spend another nine thousand dollars. And you know, I was just baffled, where does this money go, like why are we spending this money?
Burt, who also ended up gaining custody of his son, but without support from CAS, recounted a conversation he had with his CAS worker after custody was settled:

I said, basically you did nothing but cost me about six thousand dollars in lawyer fees. I said, I’ve wasted my time from work at court, and I said, it’s not needed. And she (the worker) says, Well, you have to look at the bright side, or the good side of things . . . you’ve got your son with you and he’s good and safe. And I’m thinking, you’re the ones that were basically pushing all the access (for his ex-partner).

Tarak, who was not allowed to return home to his wife and son for two years, talked of both emotional and financial costs. With regard to the emotional impact, he said:

Two year . . . they have supervised visits . . . they wants to see how I reacting with my kids. They are my kids, I love them. Then I have, what, two hours only for the week? Do that to somebody who love their kids . . . What are you . . . push them to do . . . I didn’t do that, but, . . . they have all their parents kidnapping their kids and go away with them.

With regard to financial impacts, Tarak recounted:

I find a place and I move. Now that’s the hard part. Now I have to support them here and I have to pay rent in another place. So, that extra money on me. Then, all the time I’m gonna waste losing time from work to go to their meeting or whatever.

Carlos, who was under house arrest and living with his parents (who had custody of his young daughter), lamented about the cost of paying for parenting courses that he considered of limited use: I have my own things to pay for. And it’s 35 bucks, I’m out $35 every time; if you’re looking at ten sessions, that’s $350". . . . So yeah, it’s just a lot of money . . . and for all those 10 courses, maybe two or three of them I got things out of.

David, who had a middle to upper-middle class socioeconomic status, and who was able to afford private (versus legal aid) lawyers, talked of the considerable financial (as well as emotional) impact that was occasioned by his teenage step-daughter’s long involvement with
CAS and the courts. He said simply: We’ve spent thousands and thousands and thousands, literally, of dollars. Thousands of dollars.

**Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Before moving to a consideration of the implications that can be drawn from the themes of positive and negative aspects of men’s involvement with child welfare services, it is useful to take a step back to consider some aspects of the individual men’s stories from which the themes were derived, as well as some of the limitations of the results.

With regard to the 18 individual stories of men’s involvement with child welfare, although it was sometimes not easy to assess the overall quality of each man’s experience, our rough qualitative assessment was that seven of the men (Burt, Eric, Dean, Tarak, Felix, Dylan, and Rob) were quite negative overall about their involvement with the CAS, six (Nigel, William, Caleb, Collin, Raymond, and Zack) were fairly positive overall, and five (Paul, George, Carlos, Peter, and David) had a relatively equal mix of positive and negative experiences. A review of the individual stories of men’s service involvement also yielded the awareness that individual men often had very different experiences with different workers and services. No matter how positive their overall experience was, all men had some criticisms of CAS. Conversely, no matter how negative their experiences, almost all men had something positive to say about some CAS worker or service with whom or which they were involved. Notwithstanding our assessment of a relatively equal mix of men with positive and negative experiences with child welfare and the fact that all men had both good and bad things to say about their service involvement, the fact remains that there was more material in the results presented above pertaining to the negative versus the
positive aspects of child welfare involvement. This is not surprising given the highly contentious, emotionally-sensitive nature of child welfare involvement.

Similar to the results pertaining to men’s daily living realities, one striking commonality across the stories of the individual men in this study was the depth and sincerity of their caring for their children. Most of the men in the sample had endured some separation from their children, whether this was in the form of foster or group-home placement of children, marital/common-law separations, or court-ordered removal of the man from the family home. In such instances, men talked movingly of the pain of separation from their children, and of their intense desire and need for more access to, if not custody of, their children. This relates to the theme of the *Awake up call* that child welfare involvement occasioned for many of the men. Six of the 18 men (Zack, Caleb, Carlos, Dean, George, and Rob) spoke specifically of how child welfare involvement and the reality or threat of losing their children caused them to re-evaluate their priorities and turn their lives around, but this seemed to hold true for many other men in the sample. Although some people might take such depth of caring for one’s children for granted, it will be discussed, below, how some of the themes in the results suggest that this might sometimes be overlooked by the child welfare system.

With regard to limitations of the study’s results, it must be acknowledged that the men’s stories do not represent unbiased accounts of their experiences with CAS. Clearly some of the men in this sample would have presented as very difficult clients and the CAS workers who were involved with these men might have had very different accounts of their work together. Still, the three researchers who conducted the interviews with the 18 men in this sample were struck with how almost all of the men made an effort to provide a balanced account of their experiences. For
instance, almost all men acknowledged that they were not blameless, that there were some aspects of CAS intervention that were warranted, that some workers and services were helpful, and that the work of the CAS is necessary and difficult.

It must also be acknowledged that this small sample of men may not be representative of the range of men who have involvement with the CAS. For instance, it was surprising that 6 of the 18 men in the sample (Nigel, Burt, Zack, George, Raymond, and Carlos) had gained custody of at least some of their children over their ex-partners, many of whom had serious mental health and/or substance abuse problems (although Carlos did not actually have custody of his daughter, his parents did, and he lived with his parents). This is clearly a higher percentage of custodial fathers than one would expect in a more random sample. Although one might conjecture that this could bias the results toward more positive service experiences, only three of the six custodial fathers (Raymond, Nigel, and Zack) were in the overall positive experience category, while one of these fathers (Burt) was in the overall negative experience category.

Regardless of the extent to which this sample of men are representative of men who become involved with CAS or the extent to which these men’s stories may or may not be accurate reflections of reality, the themes derived from the stories represent these men’s perception of their experiences as child welfare clients. It is necessary to understand men’s perception of their experiences in order to come up with ways to better serve men as child welfare clients and there are important lessons to be drawn from the themes in the results of this study.

Implications for Practice

In comparing the themes in the positive and negative aspects of child welfare involvement, the most striking contrast is between the theme of "Workers Who are
Understanding and Supportive and the themes subsumed under Negative Worker Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviours (e.g., workers who are cold, uncaring, judgmental, and unsupportive). It is not possible to contribute these starkly contrasting portraits of good and bad workers primarily to the different perceptions of different men (e.g., that some men are just more critical or have higher expectations than others) or to the difficult nature of some of these men (e.g., that some of these men were very difficult clients and it may not have been possible for any worker to establish a more positive working relationship with them). Although each of these factors may have influenced the findings, what stood out is that almost all of the individual men talked of encountering both good and bad workers. Thus, most of the more difficult, critical men with the highest expectations described some good workers they had encountered. Conversely, most of the men who were easier clients described some workers with whom they were not impressed.

Sometimes men’s perceptions of workers were influenced by the presence or absence of simple, straightforward behaviours that conveyed respect or disrespect. Things as simple as returning phone calls, keeping them informed about their children or their court proceedings, and explaining intervention plans were very important to the men. In many instances, however, it seemed that men’s perception of “good” and “bad” workers was not related so much to what workers said or did, but rather how they said or did what they did. For instance, a number of men commented that they appreciated workers who were straight with them, even when this involved challenging them, being intrusive, or denying them something they wanted, as long as the worker could see their side of things and treated them with respect. What the men could not tolerate were workers who seemed cold, uncaring, and judgmental, and who were not straightforward and
honest. Such perceptions also seemed to be related to some men’s worry about and expectation of an anti-male bias in child welfare. Some men, particularly those who recognized themselves as being rough around the edges or having engaged in behaviours that were socially unacceptable (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, criminal activity, violence) were very sensitive to being judged as bad and undeserving fathers.

The implications of these findings for child welfare workers seems clear and they are in line with the findings of an earlier study that was part of the same, larger research project. This earlier in-depth study of a small sample of good worker-client relationships in child welfare (de Boer & Coady, 2007) found a number of attitudes and actions that were characteristic of “good” child welfare workers (those who were able to establish good helping relationships with difficult clients and maintain these relationships through difficult circumstances, including child apprehension). Some of these findings that seem particularly relevant to the experience of men in this study include: (a) responding to client negativity with understanding and support instead of counter-hostility and coercion; (b) conveying a respectful and non-judgmental attitude; (c) not prejudging the veracity of intake, referral, or file information; (d) exploring and discussing concerns before jumping to conclusions; (e) following through on one’s responsibilities and promises; (f) using a person-to-person, down-to-earth manner (vs. donning the professional mask); (g) seeing and relating to the client as an ordinary person with understandable problems; and (h) going the extra mile in fulfilling mandated responsibilities (de Boer & Coady, 2007). In addition to such general ways of being and working, some things may need to be emphasized even more when working with men. These include genuine reassurance (with behavioural follow-through) that they are recognized as a caring parent regardless of their behaviour and any
allegations against them, they will be kept informed of what is happening with their case, and, in particular, if they are separated from their children, they will be kept informed of their well-being and afforded as much access as possible to them. Following these principles would help to countering men’s perception of the child welfare system as bureaucratic, unresponsive, and uncaring.

There are other, more specific implications for child welfare practice that can be derived from the results of this study. One implication concerns referring men to outside services as part of the intervention plan. Clearly, many of the men benefited very much from services such as individual counselling, marital/family counselling, anger management programs, and drug and alcohol treatment programs. Some men, however, found that intervention plans were too formulaic, some services were not relevant or helpful to them, and they were being made to jump through hoops. Thus, implications for practice include tailoring intervention plans to the individual needs and wants of men and explaining or selling the services to men so that they can understand what they are about and how they might help. Other implications relate to systemic issues in the child welfare system. Although many of these, such as returning phone calls, keeping men informed, and being prepared for court, are intertwined with individual worker attitudes and behaviours, systemic changes such as better funding, lower caseloads, and more emphasis on helping versus policing would help to remedy these problems. Relatedly, a higher priority on avoiding the separation of family members and minimizing the amount of time that children and/or fathers are removed from the home, and on working with families in the home, would go a long way toward improving the service experiences of child welfare clients.
It is hoped that this study’s focus on men’s experience of involvement with child welfare services helps to humanize the image of such men, who are often viewed as unwilling, uninterested, and difficult clients. It is also hoped that this study generates the will and provides useful suggestions for child welfare services to better engage and better serve men. Regardless of whether families remain intact or whether men become sole or joint custodial parents, better service to men is justified in and of itself, and it can only benefit children and their families.
References


End Notes:

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i These were: