



# “Just Did The Best That I Could Do”: CPS Social Workers’ Perceptions of Self-Efficacy in Legal Aspects

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## Abstract

Child protective services (CPS) social workers assess safety and risk needs during abuse and neglect investigations to determine if legal interventions are needed. However, only 60% of abuse and neglect cases have safety and risk assessed during the investigatory process in North Carolina. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of self-efficacy among rural North Carolina CPS social workers in child abuse and neglect investigations. Understanding CPS social workers’ perceptions of self-efficacy and factors that may influence their self-efficacy is vital to improving job satisfaction, retention, and the legal and investigative processes relating to child abuse and neglect. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit nine CPS social workers in rural counties in North Carolina. Through a process of open, axial, and selective coding, we conclude that a CPS social worker’s self-efficacy is impacted by factors relating to leadership and legal teams, longevity, previous social work experience, and paperwork and caseload demands.

**Keywords** Child welfare · Legal aspects · Self-efficacy · Social work

## Introduction

Self-efficacy is often defined as an individual’s belief in their capacity to “mobilize their motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to control given events” (Ozer & Bandura, 1990, p. 472). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate perseverance and effort when faced with challenging situations resulting from their sense of mastery and control (Bandura, 1977; Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2010). In turn, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely

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to report job satisfaction, higher job performance, less job burnout, and higher overall well-being (Bandura, 1977; Cherry et al., 2014; Pinguart et al., 2003; Siu et al., 2007). Studies suggest that individuals with high self-efficacy apply more problem-focused coping strategies than those with low self-efficacy, who tend to employ emotion-focused coping strategies that correlate to more physical and psychological stress. Self-efficacy is germane to the profession of child protective services (CPS) and other similar professions, but it is not often used to understand the CPS social worker's use of legal aspects skills when investigating child abuse and neglect cases.

According to Barbee et al. (2018), the responsibilities of CPS social workers require those in the field to have thorough skill development to execute the requirements of a professional role successfully through specialized training, which enhances the CPS social worker's self-efficacy in completing the required tasks and duties. This imperative supports Bandura's (1977) explanation of self-efficacy and strategy for obtaining these skills. Berlanda et al. (2018) add that sufficient self-efficacy can be instrumental in CPS social workers identifying as qualified professionals in the field and becoming positive community members. Therefore, preparation for competent CPS practice regarding legal aspects requires developing unique skills related to self-efficacy.

Berlanda et al. (2017) also expanded what is known about the relationship between self-efficacy and social worker tenure in CPS. The researchers identified trust and respect, work demands, challenging cases, and employment contract concerns as the four main categories contributing to job dissatisfaction and self-efficacy. In complex cases, trust and respect were relevant themes. Berlanda et al. (2018) further postulated that CPS social workers with longer employment tenure could cope better by using problem-solving techniques, while less experienced CPS social workers felt isolated and were more likely to quit their positions sooner.

A few studies examined associations between self-efficacy, job retention, and environmental factors among child welfare workers. For example, in a study by Jones and Okamura (2000), the authors concluded that high self-efficacy scores among newly hired child welfare workers correlated with longer retention periods. Similarly, Dickinson and Painter (2009) reported that child welfare workers who remained in the field for extended periods felt more efficacious and they were positively impacting their clients' lives. Collins-Camargo's (2007) study is the only one directly linking child welfare workers' self-efficacy to case outcomes. Specifically, Collins-Camargo (2007) reported the association of self-efficacy with job performance, timeliness of investigations, and open cases.

Environmental factors ranging from supervisor support, high caseloads, and staff shortages have been associated with self-efficacy and may reduce child welfare workers' sense of control. Chaen and Scannapieco (2010) suggest that supervisory support was essential to retaining child welfare workers with low self-efficacy. Therefore, studies suggest child welfare workers' self-efficacy is associated with job retention, satisfaction, performance, and one's feelings of support.

There is a need to understand better how workplace culture and environmental factors impact CPS social workers' self-efficacy in rural communities. Currently, there is no available literature that specifically highlights the factors that influence a CPS social workers' self-efficacy with legal aspects skills in rural communities.

Gaining a better understanding of the factors influencing CPS social workers’ self-efficacy is critical to improving the legal outcomes and processes relating to investigating child abuse and neglect. Particularly, as it relates to rural CPS social workers, given the sparse research regarding this process and the higher rates of maltreatment reports in rural communities (Gross et al., 2022; Maguire-Jack & Kim, 2021).

## Rural CPS

According to the most recent census data, North Carolina has the largest rural population in the east coast (United States Census Bureau, 2022). In the primarily rural state of North Carolina, each of the 100 counties has an office to support child abuse and neglect investigations by trained CPS social workers (Gupta-Kagan, 2020; Kobrick, 2017; Tilbury, 2019). Of these counties, 70 are classified as rural (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, n.d). CPS social workers in rural counties face unique challenges as their resources, such as access to an attorney, are limited when compared to CPS social workers in urban communities (Maguire-Jack & Kim, 2021). While it is known that rural social workers in general face unique challenges, the availability of literature regarding rural CPS social workers is sparse (Gross et al., 2022). This additional information is needed as CPS agencies in rural communities receive a higher number of maltreatment reports when compared to urban communities (Maguire-Jack & Kim, 2021). Current literature thoroughly describes the need to understand CPS social workers’ intricate legal work, including advanced skills such as interviewing, filing court reports, and testifying. The expertise and recommendations of CPS social workers greatly influence judges and attorneys who determine legal matters for children who are alleged to have been harmed (Gupta-Kagan, 2020). Therefore, quality training is essential for CPS social workers to execute their legal responsibilities competently.

## Required legal training

Training in child welfare differs from state to state but the primary purpose of the training is similar—train CPS social workers to effectively conduct assessments of maltreatment (Douglas et al., 2015). In North Carolina, CPS social workers must participate in several training courses to aid their development (North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Training topics include *North Carolina Pre-Service* and *Legal Aspects of Child Welfare in North Carolina*. These courses include foundational guidelines that CPS social workers must follow when engaging with families during an abuse and neglect investigation and detail the process of legal interventions. The legal aspects skills taught in these courses include interviewing skills, gathering evidence, assessing for risk and safety, and filing court documents (North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). While the CPS social worker must take *North Carolina Pre-Service* training before completing any assessment of harm, the *Legal Aspects of Child Welfare* course is not required before investigations. Still, it is needed within the first year of employment.

In addition, there are no refresher trainings or follow-up to determine the CPS social worker's self-efficacy with the legal skills that they acquired in the trainings.

### **CPS social workers' role in investigations**

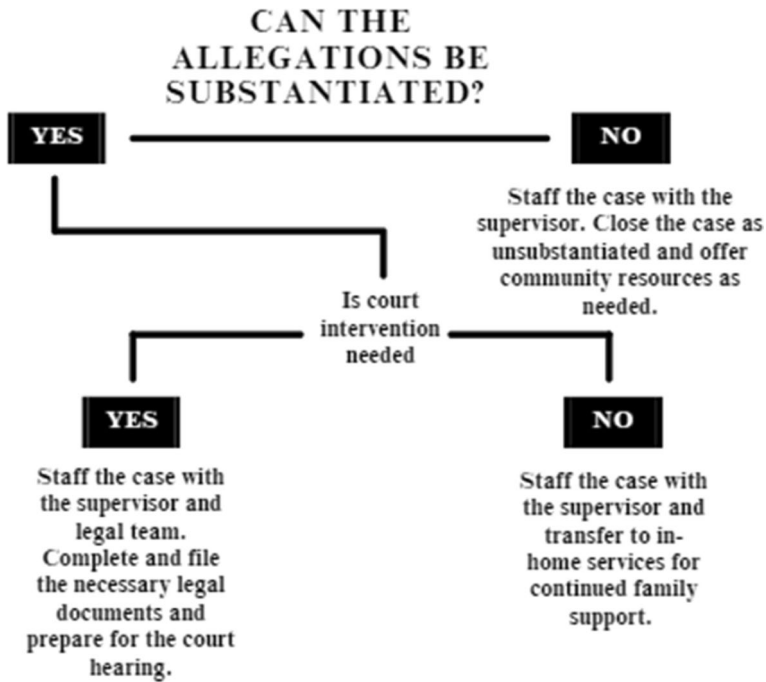
When a CPS agency is notified that a child is alleged to be harmed, the report of the allegation is screened, and if the screening decision is to accept the report, a CPS social worker is assigned to investigate the allegations and is responsible for gathering evidence that supports or disproves the allegations (Tilbury, 2019). Assessing safety and risk and evidence gathering are just some of the skills CPS social workers use in their decision-making processes (Whittaker, 2018). A potential outcome is that a child can receive adequate remediation services for identified needs, which preclude legal intervention, extensive support services, and removal from home (Tilbury, 2019). The burden of proof in each state differs; therefore, the assessment outcomes vary (Kahn et al., 2017). In North Carolina, CPS social workers must present clear and convincing evidence to the court that abuse or neglect occurred (North Carolina General Assembly, n.d). During this process, if the allegations are substantiated, CPS social workers may recommend remediation services or more determinant actions.

### **Making a CPS investigative decision and recommendation**

A CPS social worker's case decision is not always predicated on the evidence made available during the investigation (Lauritzen et al., 2018). Caseload demands and the CPS social worker's bias can influence perspectives of the best functional outcomes for a family (Gupta-Kagan, 2022). Although many substantiated cases culminate in court interventions, there are instances where children and families receive supportive services without court involvement (Gupta-Kagan, 2020). As outlined in Fig. 1, the CPS agency can offer continued support to the family without court intervention. In such cases, court-instituted checks and balances are not in place. Gupta-Kagan (2020) argues that children placed temporarily with family should have court oversight. Alternatively, CPS social workers could choose temporary safety providers instead of court-enforced removals, which creates another oversight concern (Gupta-Kagan, 2020). Instead, court intervention should be avoided whenever possible to decrease further trauma for the children involved (Ferguson, 2017; Fluke et al., 2016; Simmons-Horton, 2020; Wilderman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, investigation diligence is essential but can be negatively impacted by caseload demands.

### **CPS caseloads**

In 2021, a total of 2,934,311 children in the USA were found in need of a child abuse or neglect assessment and assigned a CPS social worker (Williams et al., 2023). Of this, 18% of these cases were substantiated for child abuse or neglect which is lower than the substantiation rate in North Carolina (Williams et al., 2023). As of 2021, 20% of the 92,925 children who were assigned a CPS social worker in North



**Fig. 1** Making a case decision. *Note.* This figure depicts the decision making-process for CPS cases in North Carolina

Carolina were found to be abused or neglected (Williams et al., 2023). In North Carolina, the CPS system is overburdened with cases of maltreatment which increases the caseload demands for CPS social workers (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). These demands can impair a CPS social workers’ ability to effectively use their legal skills during an investigation. For instance, available data shows that approximately 60% of the cases in CPS have safety and risk assessed during the investigation instead of 100% of cases (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). In child welfare, safety is defined as immediate abuse or neglect, while risk refers to abuse and neglect that might occur in the future (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Available research suggests that many rural counties lack the resources and staffing support needed to complete tasks related to CPS and other social work services (Lee, 2016). In time, this can have an influence on the CPS social worker’s self-efficacy with legal aspects in rural communities.

Understanding CPS social workers’ perceptions of self-efficacy and factors that may influence their self-efficacy is vital to job satisfaction, retention, and the legal and investigative processes relating to child abuse and neglect. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to explore: How do rural North Carolina CPS social workers perceive the influence of self-efficacy on their investigative roles and responsibilities? After discussing our qualitative approach, we present findings highlighting this important training consideration.

## Methodology

All procedures performed in this basic qualitative study were in accordance with the ethical standards and approval of a university institutional research board.

### Recruitment

This study used a purposive sampling approach, an intentional selection of participants based on a set of criteria (Ames et al., 2019). In addition, the snowball method was used to extend the sample until data saturation was reached and no new information was learned from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldana, 2016). CPS social workers identified others meeting the participation criterion and referred them to the study. Eligibility criteria for participation included (1) being a CPS social worker employed in a rural county, (2) having experience conducting abuse and neglect investigations, and (3) reporting experience with legal aspects of investigation. To recruit participants, we sent flyers to 69 rural counties via email to Department of Social Services listservs in North Carolina. Directors, program administrators, and the training staff also received emails asking permission to disseminate the recruitment information to CPS social workers. Lastly, flyers were distributed to the National Association of Social Workers online networking platform to recruit participants. The recruitment flyer included information about the study and instructions for participating.

### Data Collection

All interested participants completed pre-screening questions and, if eligible, were scheduled for an interview virtually conducted by the first author using GoToMeeting software (Appendix). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Our semi-structured interview guide consisted of demographic and 14 open-ended questions exploring the perceptions of self-efficacy among CPS social workers and their experiences relating to child abuse and neglect investigations. Sample interview questions were as follows: (1) *Describe when and how you address safety and risk during child abuse and neglect investigation.* (2) *What legal aspects training have you had?* (3) *Tell me about when you did not feel confident completing legal aspects during a CPS investigation.* Respondents were assigned a pseudonym and compensated with a \$25 gift card for their time and participation. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 min. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed for data analysis.

### Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis, which refers to arranging data into themes based on congruent conclusions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To begin the analysis, we reviewed transcriptions of each interview and cleaned them to ensure data were captured verbatim. The first author used NVivo data analysis software to begin thematic content

analysis consisting of line-by-line coding, categorizing, and finding common ideas across interviews. Specifically, we used open, axial, and selective coding processes to organize and reorganize the data until categories and themes emerged (Alhassan et al., 2019). Examples of axial categories included “*role of supervisor*” and “*legal team responsibilities*.” Expanding and contracting categories led to the identification of broader themes. Our research team discussed categories and themes until we reached a consensus. Furthermore, we kept an audit trail, interview notes, and analytic memos to ensure the reliability of our process and interpretations. Thematic saturation was reached with nine participants before discontinuing recruitment. The many strategies that can be used to provide credibility include member checking, triangulation, debriefing, reflexivity, and prolonged engagement and observation (Korstjen & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). We used a combination of these methods, such as documenting reflexively in a research journal, prolonging engagement in the field, member checking with participants, debriefing among team members, and writing in rich detail for readers.

## Findings

A total of 16 CPS social workers expressed interest in participating in the study. However, after completing the pre-screening questions, one potential participant did not qualify, three cancelled after consenting due to caseload demands, one expressed interest but did not consent to continue, and two declined to continue due to concerns about confidentiality even after being reassured that confidence will be upheld. A total of nine participants employed in rural counties continued with the study. As outlined in Table 1, of the nine CPS social workers interviewed, eight self-identified as female and one as male. Among the five Black and four White respondents, 56% had 1 to 5 years of CPS experience, and 22% had 11 to 15 years of experience. Only one person had over 15 years of experience. Most respondents earned a master’s degree as their highest education level (Table 1).

**Table 1** Participant demographic information

Participant pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Race	Years of experience	Highest education
Jennifer	18–29	Female	White	1–5	Bachelor’s
Rhonda	40–49	Female	Black	11–15	Bachelor’s
Kassie	50+	Female	White	15+	Master’s
Brenda	50+	Female	White	11–15	Bachelor’s
Leslie	40–49	Female	Black	1–5	Master’s
Sonya	30–39	Female	Black	1–5	Master’s
Mary	50+	Female	Black	1–5	Master’s
Donovan	50+	Male	White	1–5	Bachelor’s
Alice	30–39	Female	Black	1–5	Master’s

## Factors Impacting CPS Self-Efficacy

The following themes emerged from the thematic analysis to describe self-efficacy in CPS investigative work. Self-efficacy is influenced by (1) leadership and supervision, (2) length of service, (3) previous social work experience, and (4) paperwork demands. Each of these themes is described in turn below.

### Theme 1: Leadership and Supervision

Participants described their working relationships with leadership and the legal team as imperative to the overall application of their CPS skills. The following quotes illustrate the impact of these relationships. Jennifer stated, *“My supervisor was very supportive. So, I mean, anytime that I was kind of unsure of what to do next, or if I wasn’t really sure if I was doing the right thing, or asking the right questions, or, you know, if the information I was getting really rose to the level of concern, ... I would call her.”* Rhonda’s experience was similar. Inherent in her comment was the complexity of managing investigations and appreciation she felt for support from leadership. She recalled, *“my supervisor, at that time, she would come in the field with you. If I had a difficult case, and it was a doozy, I’d text her and say, ‘This is a lot.’ She’s going to stop what she was doing... [and] notify our attorney. It made it so much easier. They were there.”* Kassie’s sentiment summed up the importance of leadership in building self-efficacy. When asked about her investigative experiences, she noted, *“You’re only as competent and confident as you are by the tone set by your management.”*

Despite a few positive narratives about having support, most participants described contrasting experiences, feeling isolated and unsupported when legal matters were of concern in their cases. For example, Leslie’s supervisor discouraged her from attending training that would expand her legal knowledge. Recognizing the importance, she decided to go it alone. About that experience, she described, *“... I felt alone. I didn’t feel like I had much support at that time. But I just, you know, just did the best that I could do.”* Efforts to do one’s best when faced with difficult legal matters were not only a problem for Leslie; Mary recounted similar circumstances when she stated, *“There wasn’t a lot of guidance. We were just kind of thrown in there, so I wasn’t confident. That was because of the supervisor. She just kind of threw me in there, and I’m like, ‘Okay.’”* Evident in these responses was not only disappointment about the lack of supervision but a perseverance to do the best possible with limited support. Kassie identified her confidence as coming from within because she has had different supervisors over the years and has no confidence in them.

### Theme 2: Length of Service

Each participant had over one year of experience at the time of the interview. Because of this longevity, they felt an increasing feeling of self-efficacy. The participants expressed that over time, they gained confidence in their ability to complete assessments, draw conclusions, testify in court, and make informed



recommendations about appropriate actions for children who have been harmed. Rhonda proudly described her improvement over time by stating *"I've learned to do cases as if they're going to court. And I never had that approach when I was a younger social worker."* She became more proficient in preparing to present her cases for court much more fluidly than when she was a *"young social worker."* Brenda agreed that *"confidence in yourself... comes with experience."* Sonya says one becomes more confident because you *"learn what to look for [and] what information is the best to gather."* Alice attributes the boost in confidence to being a part of the CPS system for 3 years. From observing how things work, she feels *"more confident in making my decisions."*

### **Theme 3: Prior Social Work Experience**

Previous social work practice in mental health or with children in settings outside of child welfare increased self-efficacy with CPS skills. Participants could use non-CPS-related experiences to navigate novel and challenging situations in investigative assessments. For Brenda, her last two jobs in mental health and juvenile justice gave her the confidence to approach her casework in CPS. Brenda stated, *"I feel like I'm confident [and] I think it's just [my] experiences through the years."* Donovan also brought his experience working with children to his CPS work. He noted his proficiency in investigating client needs, risks, and dependencies, assets he brought to the job. The same was true for Alice, who appreciates her ability to survive in a turbulent CPS system. Her adaptation skills are credited to previous work in behavioral health. She shared, *"I was one of the ones who kind of got thrown out there and, you know, you sink or swim with it. I appreciate it. But I also have field experience."* Unlike the others, starting out, Sonya's belief in her skills was not so readily available. She recalled, *"Oh, yeah, within my first year of working, oh my God, my confidence was not high at all! And that's because I had no experience in social work at all."*

### **Theme 4: Paperwork and Caseload Demands**

When asked to describe the factors that influence their self-efficacy with legal aspects, the participants began to talk about the caseload demands and the significant amount of paperwork that is needed when making a case decision. When completing legal aspects within their job duties, participants experienced high volumes of paperwork. This paperwork was often redundant or out of touch with the tasks needed for efficient CPS work, creating an elevated demand for time and effort in managing the caseload. Further complicating this demand, seasoned CPS social workers were given more complex cases. Sonya expressed strong feelings when she noted the unfairness that comes along with being a seasoned and skilled CPS worker:

*New social workers shouldn't be thrown into these complex cases. But at the same time, if you put it all on your seasoned workers, it absolutely does burn them out because then that means they're constantly receiving the complex*

*cases. And in a way, that's actually kind of unfair. Just because I had the experience, I'm getting thrown these cases. And at what point will your new social workers learn how to handle those cases? I think there should be some guidance for a new social worker through complex cases.*

In addition to heavy caseload and mentoring burdens, Kassie explained the mounting challenges that emerge in a dynamic CPS system when people in charge do not understand the impact of changing processing procedures:

*And the obstacle is this. There are people who are not in the field anymore, who do not realize the changing environments and how much work is required, as opposed to what they require with the policy. So, every time a child is hurt, they add an initial to a page, change a sheet, or add or take something out. The real difficulty is that policy and red tape roll from the top down, and they are not feet on the ground. Although I understand that there has to be a structured way of doing [things], there's got to be a better way than people just sitting at a roundtable, talking about it, and rolling it out to the people on the ground.*

What may seem to be relatively innocuous shifts in policy manifest as complications for social workers attempting to become proficient in their work particularly when attempting to complete legal skills. Brenda expressed a sense of hopelessness when she stated, “*Yeah, it can be paperwork, definitely, especially when you wait for someone else to get it to you. So yeah, paperwork is a mess, but I don't know if there is a solution for it.*” Leslie believes no one is responsible for this system barrier affecting work efficiency. Administrators erect additional paperwork challenges instead of identifying solutions for CPS proficiency. She explains, “*The only thing I received in that nature is a whole lot of paperwork. And nobody's ever really talked about it. They just say here is this, here is this, and here is the new this.*” This failure to address paperwork problems leaves workers feeling defeated. Leslie believes, “*You're just supposed to kind of take it and, I guess, absorb it all.*” According to Sonya, excessive and inconsistent paperwork policies reduce work productivity, misallocate excessive time to paperwork processing, and hinder CPS social workers from completing essential tasks needed to investigate allegations of child abuse effectively. The situation is puzzling to Mary, who asserted, “*I don't understand why the state and the federal government can't get on the same sheet of music, so we're not touching all this paperwork so many times and repeating ourselves.*”

## Discussion

As identified by the participants, CPS social workers working in rural communities face challenges related to their self-efficacy with legal aspects. These challenges are exacerbated when they are faced with complex cases that require legal knowledge and supervisory support. With limited access to training opportunities, newer CPS social workers are often not given more complex cases. This ultimately creates a strain on the seasoned CPS social worker as they must manage their caseload and accept the responsibility of managing difficult cases. While there is a supervisor

assigned to assist in these instances, their effectiveness in leadership directly influences self-efficacy with legal aspects.

Participants provided thorough insight regarding the important role of leadership in building their confidence in the CPS process. Despite their commitment to protecting children, they are overwhelmed with organization-level inefficiencies that interfere with their developing proficiency and self-efficacy with legal aspects. CPS social workers must be able to trust agency leadership since the organization's culture influences their intentions to remain in the position (Berlanda et al., 2017, 2018; Guzman et al., 2020). CPS workers can be highly committed to serving clients without having the same commitment to an organization. If workers' harmonious passion, motivation, and morale are depleted, voluntary turnover of competent CPS workers may ensue (Scales & Brown, 2020). As described by participants, the supervisor's role is critical to CPS social worker's self-efficacy. With supportive and knowledgeable leadership, the CPS social worker can navigate some of the challenges and difficulties of legal assessment. With leadership support, CPS social workers can obtain the direct training they need to have high self-efficacy. Scales and Brown (2020) recommend building trust with CPS workers and showing appreciation for their efforts while providing them with the necessary tools to complete their job tasks effectively is essential.

Morale can be boosted by face-to-face supervision, allowing CPS workers to discuss and address inefficient processes that interfere with productivity. CPS workers passionate about protecting children and their families may be more motivated by organizational commitment and leadership support than lucrative salaries (Scales & Brown, 2020). Therefore, investment in qualified supervisors with supportive leadership skills should be prioritized in planning for North Carolina CPS agencies.

Available literature provides an understanding of the high turnover in the CPS profession. The professional experience of CPS social workers in this study ranged from over 1 to 15 years. However, many CPS social workers vacate their positions for various reasons within the first year of employment (Curry, 2019; de Guzman et al., 2020). Such turnover affects the job demands and morale of all retained employees who must inherit reassigned caseloads (Curry, 2019). This loss of staff preempts worker capacity and competency building over time. Berlanda et al. (2017) found that self-efficacy in CPS duties increases with longevity in one's position. Our findings were similar; CPS social workers reported increased self-efficacy over time. In one study, CPS social workers who completed Title IV-E training in a BSW or MSW education program had lower turnover when compared to those who did not (de Guzman et al., 2020). This finding supports the assertion that more prolonged engagement with the CPS system, even before formal employment, benefits the worker and provides them the guidance and confidence needed to manage complex legal assessments and court-related tasks.

The participants highlighted that their self-efficacy was, in part, a result of their previous social work experiences. A challenge in many rural communities is the ability to recruit and hire individuals with a social work degree or previous social work experience in a similar field (Kim & Hopkins, 2017). To combat this challenge, CPS agencies in rural communities must be proactive in their training efforts for inexperienced workers. This can include legal aspects training designed

specifically for supervisors. The participants described the important role of the supervisor in the legal aspects process with some participants acknowledging that their confidence was influenced by their supervisor. Likely, with supervisor directed training, the supervisors will enhance their ability to support CPS social workers who have little to no experience in social work.

There is a multitude of available literature that demonstrates a connection between paperwork, caseload demands, and burnout (de Guzman et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2017; Fluke et al., 2016; Lauritzen et al., 2018). The findings in this study are consistent with previous studies, specifically in the accounts of CPS social workers about how inefficient paperwork policies and caseload demands impact their sense of self-efficacy to the point of feeling defeated. While the literature suggests peer training is effective (Berlanda et al., 2018), seasoned CPS social workers described feeling lower self-efficacy when made to testify or continue working in a case reassigned from another worker. These narratives are consistent with the perspectives of CPS workers in a study by Lauritzen et al. (2018), who postulated that caseload demands aid in the CPS social worker's determination of continued efforts. Still, paperwork and case overburden is a concern because of risks for burnout and staff turnover. Kim et al. (2019) suggests implementing a team approach to manage large caseloads which includes having specialized teams and assigning work by regions. While this approach might prove to be beneficial, rural counties might struggle with this aspect considering their limited abilities to hire workers who have the skills needed for specialized teams and their larger geographical coverage (Kim & Hopkins, 2017; Orsi et al., 2021).

While the perspectives provided herein were from CPS social workers in rural counties, their descriptions of their self-efficacy with legal aspects can be applied to similar roles in child welfare and other professions. These positions include but are not limited to Permanency Planning (formerly known as Foster Care) social workers, Adult Protective Services social workers, and Child Support Agents. Future research is needed to explore the complexities of self-efficacy with legal aspects within these professions.

## Limitations

This study had few challenges. Having a more diverse participant pool may have unveiled more varied perspectives. Current workforce data shows that in the USA, women make up over 90% of the workforce and of this, 14% identify as African American (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). North Carolina demographics differ from the national data as 43% of the workforce identify as African American (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). All nine participants had over 1 year of experience with CPS social work investigations. The perceptions of CPS social workers with less than a year of experience may have provided different insights into self-efficacy for new employees.

Another limitation of this study was the setting of the interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were held virtually. While this was the safest way to communicate with participants without masks distorting the interview, three participants had an issue with their microphone connecting to the system, which may have been a barrier to participation.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of self-efficacy among rural North Carolina CPS social workers in child abuse and neglect investigations. Understanding CPS social workers’ perceptions of self-efficacy and factors that may influence their self-efficacy is essential to improving job satisfaction, retention, and the legal and investigative processes relating to child abuse and neglect. This study highlighted the factors that impact social workers’ self-efficacy in CPS investigations. These components include support from the leadership, the length of time the CPS social worker has been in the position, the CPS social worker’s prior work experiences, and the extensive paperwork and case-load demands. This study illustrated that by incorporating some system-level changes, CPS social worker’s self-efficacy with legal aspects during the investigation of child abuse and neglect can be enhanced. Investments in quality supervisor roles, employee recognition, encouragement, and attention to efficient processes can reduce the threat of competent and motivated CPS workers voluntarily leaving the organization. This study adds to the growing area of research in CPS worker self-efficacy. Future studies should explore task-specific self-efficacy in legal assessment and decision-making, which can inform case processing and reveal disparities in case outcomes.

## Appendix. Interview guide

### Pre-screening Questions

1. Are you a CPS social worker currently employed with a Department of Social Services in a rural county?
2. Do you have experience completing child abuse and neglect investigations?
3. Do you have experience with legal aspects?

### Demographic Questions

1. How long have you been conducting CPS investigations?
2. What degree(s) do you hold?
3. What is our gender?
4. What is your race?
5. What is your age range? (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50+)

## Interview Questions

1. Describe when and how you address safety and risk during the investigation of child abuse and neglect?
2. Describe what it means to you to complete legal aspects and how it is completed in your county.
3. What legal aspects training do you have? Please describe this training and when you received it.
4. How do you feel your legal aspects training has prepared you to conduct investigations for child abuse and neglect?
5. How would you describe your self-efficacy or confidence with gathering evidence, completing court documents, and testifying during the investigation?
6. What are your experiences with gathering evidence during the investigation of child abuse or neglect?
7. Describe the types of evidence you collect during a CPS investigation.
8. At what point during your investigation do you decide that you have gathered sufficient evidence to either close the case as unsubstantiated, move forward with case management, or move forward with a petition?
  - a. How do you know you have reached this point?
  - b. Describe your self-efficacy or confidence when completing this process.
9. Tell me about a time when you did not feel confident in completing legal aspects during a CPS investigation.
  - a. What caused you to not feel confident?
  - b. What could have been done differently or implemented to help you feel confident?
10. Tell me about a time when you felt confident in completing legal aspects during a CPS investigation.
  - a. What helped with your confidence?
11. Describe the impact of your confidence with completing legal aspects and your intention to stay or quit the position.
12. If you could develop or change legal aspects training, what topics would you consider to be important?
13. What are some things that your county can implement to help increase self-efficacy with legal aspects?
  - a. What resources does your county lack that you feel you need to help increase self-efficacy in this area?
14. What other information regarding your confidence or self-efficacy with legal aspects would you like to share that we did not discuss?

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Declarations

**Consent** Informed consent was received from each participant in this study.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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