The goal of my research is to understand how to better support families involved in child welfare systems. Over the six years I worked with families involved with Child Protective Services, I discovered that almost one-third of children who reunify re-enter the child welfare system because of recurrences of abuse or neglect. This recognition that families involved in child welfare systems require ongoing support fueled my decision to conduct research on best practices to support families and connect these findings with social work practice and policy.

Many families involved in child welfare systems present with complex needs: multiple, competing needs such as mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, and economic vulnerability, among other issues. To better understand how abuse, neglect, and parental separation impact families, I joined an international research team to investigate promising lines of inquiry and innovative interventions by comparing child welfare systems in three countries (Muñoz-Guzman, Fischer, Chia, & LaBrenz, 2015). One specific intervention model I analyzed was Skogsdungen—a group home where infants and young children lived with their biological parents, which allowed families with complex needs to receive intensive support and services while living together. This project culminated with a report and presentation that informed government officials in Chile of recommendations based on successful models (such as Skogsdungen) that had been adopted in Europe. These findings highlighted the importance of supporting families with complex needs to secure long-term wellbeing.

To better understand why it was so detrimental for children to be separated from their parents and experience adverse events, I collaborated with Dr. Heather Holloway and Dr. Beth Gerlach on a project titled “Integration of ACE-informed care into medical practice: A needs assessment of healthcare providers in the Austin area.” Our team assessed practices of healthcare professionals related to discussing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) with families. As part of the team, I created an abstract with our preliminary findings that was accepted and presented at the 2018 Society for Social Work Research Annual Conference. Through this project, I found that exposure to adverse experiences such as neglect or abuse in childhood can produce chemical changes in a person’s brain, which in turn impacts development and long-term physical and mental health outcomes.

Given the changes that abuse and neglect can produce, I collaborated on a project that evaluated interventions to support families with children who have been exposed to maltreatment. This project—the Quality and Improvement Control Adoption and Guardianship grant with Dr. Rowena Fong and Dr. Monica Faulkner—targeted adoptive and guardianship families of children who were not able to reunify. As part of the Texas evaluation team, I was trained in the Pathways to Permanence 2 intervention, helped create and evaluate fidelity measures, and observed sessions with potential adoptive families. Pathways to Permanence 2 explored the grief and loss children face when they are permanently separated from their biological parents, and the impact this can have on their development. This project led to the acceptance of a symposium presentation at the 2018 Annual Society for Social Work Research conference. As I collected data on the adoptive families’ experiences, I became aware of the long-term impacts on children and youth that result from permanent separation from their biological parents.

One intervention that aims to support families involved in child welfare systems so that they can remain together is Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). I conducted a study that examined the effectiveness of FGDM in improving outcomes for families involved with child welfare. The results from this study were presented at multiple conferences and resulted in a peer-reviewed journal article (LaBrenz & Fong, 2016). Afterward, I led a project that examined the impact of privatization—
contracting out child welfare services—on outcomes for families. Through this project, I identified the importance of including agency strategies such as privatization and other contextual factors in evaluating post-reunification success for families.

As a mixed methods researcher, my work highlighted the importance of supporting families with complex needs so that they can nurture their children and break the cycle of maltreatment. This led to my decision to focus my dissertation on post-reunification success of infants and young children with their biological parents. Despite the high rates of foster care re-entry after reunification, few prior studies have examined the well-being of the child and family as they transition out of the child welfare system, or the overall post-reunification success. Therefore, my dissertation fills a gap in previous literature by identifying factors of post-reunification success in three articles. The first article uses a hierarchical linear model to examine how state agency protocols such as privatization interact with family needs to impact post-reunification success. This enhances our understanding of agency protocols that impact outcomes for families involved in child welfare. The second piece of my dissertation utilizes a systematic review to identify specific interventions that increased successful reunification for families of young children in foster care. The last article uses latent class analysis plus a multilevel survival analysis to analyze profiles of families and to examine the effectiveness of specific interventions in supporting them as they reunite. Together, these articles contribute to our understanding of post-reunification success.

In parallel to my dissertation, I am currently working with a research team at the Texas Institute of Child and Family Wellbeing to design a study to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention to increase child and family well-being post-reunification. The intervention creates partnerships between birth and foster families to increase family networks and supports for children in foster care. We are in the process of submitting a federal grant proposal to secure funding for the study. This project provided me an opportunity to write multiple sections of a federal grant proposal and allowed me to use the preliminary findings from my dissertation to help target interventions to families most at risk of post-reunification challenges.

In the future, I will continue to expand my research on innovative interventions to support families involved in child welfare systems. Specifically, I plan to evaluate the effectiveness of promising practices and evidence-based practices such as Family Group Decision Making, Triple P Parenting, and Recovery Coaches in increasing post-reunification success. In addition, I will evaluate the impact of agency and state strategies such as privatization or community interventions on post-reunification success. Given the importance of investing in families to prevent re-entry into foster care, I will strive to secure external funding (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Jacobs Foundation, The Children’s Bureau, and partnerships with public child welfare systems) for my research. Moreover, my experience writing a grant that is in the process of being submitted to the Administration for Children and Families gives me confidence in my ability to seek out opportunities and secure funding for my research.

Ultimately, my research aims to better understand how to support families involved in child welfare systems. The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare recognizes that ensuring healthy development for all youth and stopping family violence are two grand challenges for our profession. As a social worker, former practitioner, and current researcher, I ultimately hope to address these grand challenges by conducting research on innovative interventions that help reduce recurrences of child maltreatment, empower families to break the cycle of child abuse and neglect, and install a family culture of stability and nurture.