
Executive Summary of Research Report Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System in King County, Washington

In Spring 2004, King County Superior Court Judge Patricia Clark, DCFS Regional Administrator Jacquelyn Buchanan, and Lyman Legters of Casey Family Programs convened a broad-based coalition committed to understanding and taking action to address the racial inequities in the King County child welfare system. The Coalition enlisted Wanda Hackett Enterprises, as the principal investigator and the University of Washington, Northwest Institute for Children and Families to conduct research to identify:

1. where disproportionality exists and to what extent and
2. factors that contribute to racial disproportionality.

In the first research phase, King County quantitative child welfare data was analyzed at thirteen decision points in the child welfare system from referrals accepted for CPS investigation, to the ways in which children leave the system and data on re-entry into care.

In the second qualitative research phase, six decision points were selected for the more in-depth study:

- Reporting
- Intake and investigation
- Reunification efforts: services
- Placement
- Dependency and termination of parental rights
- Pathways for exiting the system

Focus groups were shown the data and asked what they thought were possible reasons underpinning the disproportionality. Data was analyzed from 16 focus groups involving 90 participants. The focus group respondents provided a wide variety of perspectives and included youth who have been in foster care, fathers, foster parents, kinship care providers, representatives of the courts and legal system, social workers and mandated CPS reporters from medical, mental health, public health, and school settings.

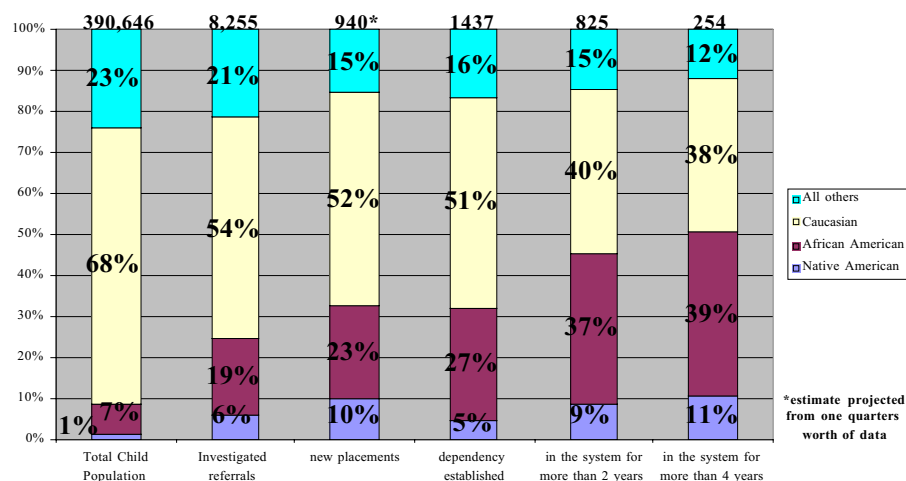
What the King County Data Showed

Children of color constitute one-third of the King County child population, but make up more than one half of all children currently in foster care in King County. Looking more closely at the data it is clear that African American and Native American families are the most significantly impacted. African American and Native American children are over-represented at nearly every decision point in the child welfare system.

- The racial disparity grows the longer these children stay in the system. African American and Native American children together make up:
 - o 8 percent of the child population in King County
 - o 25 percent of the children involved in referrals accepted for investigation
 - o 33 percent of all children removed from their homes and placed in care
 - o 50 percent of the children still in out-of-home care four years after placement

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Summary of children entering, or in the system



What factors contribute to disproportionality?

(Themes from the focus groups and the review of national research)

At the Decision to Report

- Lack of operational definitions of abuse and/or neglect or understanding of criteria to use to determine when to make a CPS report when the evidence is more subjective (lack of physical evidence) and dependent upon a personal judgement.
- “What people in the community know” about the family (e.g., parental behavior, family history of abuse/neglect, reporters’ past experiences, relationships and perceptions of the family) can influence reporter perceptions.
- Visibility of families who receive services or government benefits results in more CPS reports. National research has documented this “exposure bias” in referrals from medical settings, i.e., medical staff are more likely to test for drugs if a patient fits their stereotype of a drug-user, often including a racial profile. (Chasnoff, Landress et al, 1990)
- Language and cultural differences, socioeconomic status (e.g., medical coupons versus private insurance, etc.) is stigmatizing and can influence reporter perceptions.

At the Decision to Investigate

- King County data are consistent with statistics found nationally that show racial differences in rates of cases opened for investigation and rates of substantiation.
- Workers’ lack of cultural awareness can lead to disparities, for example respondents did not report the need for caution when conducting risk and safety assessments guided by past experiences or “gut feelings.”
- Respondents suggest that all workers may not utilize the risk and safety assessment tools as intended, e.g., using higher assignment of risk for physical abuse to trigger an investigation while there is physical evidence.
- A Washington State study found that families described as “non-compliant” were assigned higher risk tags, despite no other difference in risk factors. (English, 1995)

During Reunification Efforts

- The need for service providers who can work effectively with families of color was reported in almost every focus group.
- There are contradicting reports about the scarcity of services and culturally competent providers and the report of under-utilization of African American providers.

- There appears not to be a clear definition or established criteria to ensure services provided are culturally appropriate.
- King County respondents indicated differences in the referral and availability of services for children and parents or caregivers of color, which is congruent with national research findings.
- While the data is not readily accessible in King County, national literature finds a difference by race of families who are offered in-home services: the majority of African American children (50%) were placed in foster care, while the majority of Caucasian children (72%) received in home services (U.S. Children's Bureau, 1997)
- Families of color may be reticent to access services because of past experiences of less than positive treatment and/or unsuccessful outcomes and results.

At the Decision to Place and to File for Dependency or Termination of Parental Rights

Many of the concerns expressed by King County focus group participants are problems for all children in the child welfare system, regardless of race. However, these problems either affect children of color more or are exacerbated by the factors respondents believed underpin the disproportionality reported here and/or there are other unknown factors at play. Overall system concerns:

- Worker burnout and turnover resulting in less than optimal case management and attention to detail
- Conflicting requirements from multiple systems (like TANF, housing, child welfare)
- Not enough time to allow for parental recovery from addiction or stabilization of mental illness
- Compliance with court ordered safety and treatment plans become the criteria for decisions regarding the parent's ability to ensure the child's well-being vs. the current safety of the child

Children of color are more likely to be placed and remain in out-of-home care than Caucasian children.

- Some respondents believe that the decision-making process is objective and sufficiently evidence-based. Thus they conclude that the root causes of disproportionality lie in the families, not the system.
- Other respondents believe that child welfare professionals can be influenced by subjective factors which trigger biases, assumptions and stereotypes. Some stated that the child welfare system was designed to get children away (rescue children) from families.
- Respondents reported insufficient checks and balances to ensure fair and equitable processes are implemented for families across race throughout the child welfare system.
- Some respondents reported low expectations of African American and Native American families; a sense of hopelessness and belief families will fail to change is too often the mindset of professionals in the child welfare system.

There are a higher percentage of children of color in the foster care system than there are foster parents of color.

- Inconsistent and often inadequate levels of support/services for foster parents and for the children of color in their care (vs. reports of more services and worker contact when Caucasian children were in their care).
- Foster parents of color reported not being treated as professionals or colleagues, i.e., their input into the case planning was often ignored and their culture was de-valued.
- Word of mouth in the community about both current and past negative experiences of foster parents.
- Lack of criteria for or strategies to ensure culturally competent placement resources was reported.
- Respondents believed that there were inadequate processes in place to recruit culturally competent placement resources.

Native American children are less likely than Caucasian children to be placed with relatives. African American children are just as likely as Caucasian children to be placed with relatives.

- Respondents described a child welfare system designed for the nuclear family. Some workers, it was reported, assume there are not appropriate resources within extended families.
- National studies indicate that kinship caregivers (relatives) receive fewer services than do foster parents (Berrick, Barth et al, 1994.)

How Do Children Exit Out of the System

Native American, multi-racial, and African American children exiting the dependency system are less likely to be reunified, and more likely to be adopted or in guardianships than Caucasian children.

- Failure to consider fathers and their families, respondents reported, reduces placement resources and delays exit from the system.
- Cultural competence of placement providers was considered an important placement success factor.
- Length of stay in the system was believed to impact whether or not children of color are adopted.

African American and Native American children wait much longer than Caucasian children to be adopted. African American infants wait an average of nearly five years to be adopted, more than two years longer than Caucasian children placed as infants. Native American infants wait 18 months longer than Caucasian infants to be adopted.

Conclusions

There are many factors contributing to disproportionality:

1. Societal factors outside the reach of the child welfare system, including such phenomena as poverty, housing, community safety, racism expressed in the larger community and media, and the differential history of discrimination experienced by people of color in this country.
2. Factors associated with policy, funding, practice and contracting—all within the system and within the reach of the coalition.
3. Factors associated with individual attitudes, values, stereotypes, and racial biases of people involved in the child welfare system.

If members of the coalition start with the assumption that there is bias, then certain action steps for building an anti-racist system apply. A system can build in checks and balances to mitigate the high likelihood of racism by:

- Beginning to explore, as one child welfare professional suggested, issues of race without the need for blame
- Incorporating the voice of a broad cross-section of communities of color into child welfare policy, procedure and practice
- Providing educated judicial oversight
- Providing training to optimize supervisory oversight
- Requiring objective strength-based measures of family capacity (such as consistent use of risk and reunification assessments, the identification of family strengths and resources, etc.)
- Using alternate decision-making processes (such as family group conferencing)
- Developing strategies to support and recruit culturally competent placement resources (such as kinship care or culturally-based programs) that honor cultural ways of caring
- Developing the criteria for and strategies to identify culturally competent service providers
- Periodic evaluation of service provider outcomes to ensure contractual relationships are made with providers with demonstrated ability to engage families in achieving successful service outcomes
- Tracking services offered to kin, parents and children by race
- Hiring diverse staff
- Training all staff to be alert to decision-making bias
- Holding every child welfare professional accountable for reducing the disproportional representation of children and families of color in the child welfare system
- Monitoring the extent of disproportionality at each decision point on an ongoing basis

Next Steps

The King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality will lead an effort, across the child welfare system, to develop and implement interventions to impact disproportionality at targeted decision points.

For more information or a copy of the full report, please contact Catalyst for Kids at 206-695-3238 or marikoo@chs-wa.org.
