



Minnesota

In November 2000, the University of Minnesota and its School of Social Work, along with the Center for Advanced Practice in Child Welfare at UM, sponsored a forum on the disproportionality of African American children in out of home care. The proceedings of the forum were subsequently published under the title, "Breaking the Silence: A Candid Discussion on the Disproportionality of African American Children in Out-of-Home - Placement."

The only research findings specific to Minnesota contained in the document were summarized by Nancy Rodenborg, a Professor of Social Work at Augsburg College. Rodenborg's findings emphasized the mismatch between support services available to families through the child welfare system and the services needed to help impoverished African American families. Rodenborg found that "at the best, only about one-fourth of the poor children in this sample and their poverty related needs were matched with a service through public child welfare." "In contrast, about 80% of the children whose caregivers needed mental or behavioral health services received it." African Americans were the ethnic group most negatively affected by this mismatch between services available to child welfare families and services most needed by the families because they were more frequently in poverty than were Caucasian children."

However, Rodenborg also found that African American families needing mental health services were less likely to be referred for these services than Caucasian families. In other words, Rodenborg's Minnesota study found both a discriminatory pattern in the provision of mental health services to African American families and a lack of poverty related services needed by African American families.

Rodenborg's study also found a relationship between both poverty and race, considered independently, and longer lengths of stay in foster care. An African American child's length of stay in out of home care was directly related to parents' income; but even when controlling for poverty, African American children remained in foster care much longer than Caucasian children.

This study does not make recommendations for practice changes, but the implications of these findings seem clear, i.e., change the mix of services available through the child welfare system to better meet the needs of African American families. Rodenborg describes the mismatch between child welfare services and the needs of African American families as "indirect institutional discrimination."

I spoke recently with Susan Wells, a scholar at the Center for Advanced Child Welfare Practice at UM. Susan Wells told me that these research findings have not been translated into public policy initiatives. Instead, the Minnesota legislature has funded additional ongoing tracking of racial disproportionality by county.

Colorado

Marian Bussey and Cathryn Potter with the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver have issued a very thorough and scholarly report titled "Minority Over - Representation in Child Welfare Services: Child Protection and Youth in Conflict Cases 1995 -2000." This report describes, but does not explain, a reduction in racial disproportionality in Colorado during the late 1990s, a period when CPS cases openings were declining for all ethnic groups in the state. This report does not link the reduction in disproportionality to agency initiatives.

Despite this encouraging trend, the report found that rates of court involvement for African American and Native American families with cases in the child welfare system were 2-3 times higher than for Caucasian families, and that out of home care was far more likely to be the first service provided these families compared to Caucasian families. "Percentages of children having at least one out of home care placement during their first CPS case are approximately twice as high for American Indian and African American children as for White children," e.g., more than a quarter of American Indian and African American children had at least one out of home placement compared to 11.5% of Hispanic and 8.9% of White children.

The Colorado study also found that while African American children and American Indian children were 2-3 times more likely to be placed out of the home than White children, children of any ethnicity living in extreme poverty were 44 times more likely to be placed compared to children from non - poor homes.

The Colorado study also found higher disproportionality rates for American Indian children than for African American children and a less encouraging trend in out of home placement data for American Indian children, i.e., a leveling off in the number of Indian children entering out of home care in the late 90s vs. a reduction of entries for other ethnic groups.

The Colorado study also found similar disproportionality patterns in services provided to families referred for CPS concerns and families receiving services due to "youth in conflict", i.e., fewer in - home services and more out of home placements (as the initial agency service) for African American and American Indian children / youth compared to their White peers.

A program manager for the public child welfare department in Colorado informed me via e - mail that racial disproportionality has not been significantly reduced in Colorado apart from the reduction described in Bussey and Potter's report. These authors do not

speculate regarding the possible causes of the reduction in disproportionality in the late 1990s in Colorado.

North Carolina

In 2001, the Jordan Institute for Families published a lengthy study of African American disproportionality in child welfare services in North Carolina. This study found a significant reduction in the percentage of children entering out of home care who were African American in 1999 -2000 compared to 1995-6, e.g., 41% of children placed out of the home in 99 -00 were African American compared to 49% in 95 -96. African American children constitute about 27% of the 0 -19 population in North Carolina.

The Jordan Institute study also found that the disparity in length of stay in out of home care between African American and White children was greatly reduced during the late 90s in North Carolina.

The Jordan Institute study does not discuss the possible causes of these positive trends. It does, however, contain recommendations for practice initiatives which fall into three categories, (a) "Joining with Black Families," which affirms the importance of cultural competence for child welfare staff (b) "Paying attention to who gets services" which refers to the finding that "Whites are roughly twice as likely as Blacks to receive either prevention or reunification services," and (c) "Recruiting African American adoptive families." The last recommendation emphasizes the importance of adapting public agency policies and procedures for adoptive applicants to "the needs and cultural context" of African American families. This is a theme which Zena Ogelsby talks about with great eloquence.

Illinois

The Race Matters Consortium in Illinois is described in one of their reports as "a national multi - system initiative to prevent and reduce racial and ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system." The research arm of the Consortium is located at the University of Illinois, Urbana / Champagne.

Race Matters has a coordinating committee, three ongoing work groups and a large coordinating group which meets by teleconference every 4 -6 weeks.

The staff person for Race Matters is Dennette Derezotes at the University of Illinois, Urbana / Champagne. I have talked with D. Derezotes on a couple of occasions and have exchanged e - mails with her. According to Derezotes, Illinois' child welfare system has reduced African American disproportionality in recent years, but she has not given me the exact percentages which describe this reduction. It is important to note that the number of children in out of home care in Illinois on any one day has declined from 52,000 in 1996 to 22,000 in 2003, a huge reduction which suggests Illinois former "outlier" child welfare status in out of home care numbers. Since 76% of children in out of home care in Illinois are African American, this means that at least 24,000

fewer African American children are in out of home care on any one day at the present time compared to the mid- 1990s.

Derezotes credits subsidized guardianship as the main policy initiative responsible for the reduction in numbers of children in out of home care. The truth is probably more complex. Illinois' child welfare system also utilized a performance based contracting system which put public and private agencies in competition in moving children out of the child welfare system. This system included performance targets for all public and private agencies and strong financial incentives to reduce placements.

In addition, Illinois reduced financial support for kinship care after discovering that more generous financial support of kinship care was related to longer lengths of stay in out of home care. It appears that some parents and extended families had come to view the child welfare system as a more generous welfare system, and were therefore reluctant to terminate child welfare involvement. Derezotes emphasis on subsidized guardianship as important in reducing out of home care numbers makes sense given this context.

I view Illinois as "sui generis" because of its extreme out of home care statistics (numbers of children in placement, the longest lengths of stay in the country and low reunification rates) prior to 1997. This state's strategies for reducing disproportionality have had a permanent planning focus, i.e., completing permanent plans and reducing length of stay for children of all ethnic groups.

Summary

I began this review of a few states' disproportionality initiatives with an assumption that no state's child welfare system has had much success in reducing disproportionality. However, a more accurate way of summing up the situation is that researchers and policy analysts are uncertain about the causes of reduced disproportionality in states where reductions have occurred, e.g., Colorado, North Carolina and (allegedly) Illinois. The possibility must be considered that paying careful attention to disproportionality has had a positive effect and that the economic boom of the late 90s contributed to a decline in disproportionality.

Some major themes stand out in these reports, especially regarding services provided to African American families, i.e., discriminatory patterns of service delivery and a mismatch between available services and needed services. The studies from Colorado and North Carolina also found that the child welfare systems in these states were more likely to place African American children out of the home and give African American families fewer in - home services than Caucasian families.

All of these states have had difficulty exiting African American children (and American Indian children in Colorado) from their child welfare systems; and each of these studies finds that both poverty (especially extreme poverty) and racial discrimination contribute independently and in combination to disproportionality.

These reports have few recommendations but the implications of their findings seem straightforward, i.e., change the child welfare service mix to better meet the poverty related needs of African American and Native American families, make sure that these services are equitably provided to parents of various ethnicities, emphasize cultural competence in the delivery of services, and move heaven and earth to find good permanent homes for African American and American Indian children who cannot be reunited with their birth parents.