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DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES

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DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE CHILD
WELFARE SYSTEM: SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Estelita Abigael Hassler
Acacia Gretchen Lovett

June 2020

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ABSTRACT

African American children are detained at quadruple the rate in comparison to other ethnic groups within the child welfare system. This overrepresentation has been a controversial topic for decades. This study presents caseworkers' perceptions as to the reasons for the disproportionality.

The literature review revealed that African American families have unequal access to resources and opportunities and outcomes. That is, their length of stay in foster care is prolonged and the reunification process is also longer.

This qualitative study involved face-to-face interviews with 12 caseworkers with past and current experience in two California county child welfare agencies. The interview guide included open-ended questions.

The results of this study identified common themes such as racial bias, poverty, cultural insensitivity and incompetence, high caseloads and lack of cultural training, and their contribution to the disproportionality of African American children in child welfare.

This study identified the need for competency training of social workers to address their biases and to use the strengths-based approach to reduce the overrepresentation of children of color.

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DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this project to my son, Isaac who is my biggest inspiration. My siblings Eran, David, and Sheldon for being a support through it all. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this research to the African American families who have been impacted by the system yet remained resilient and self-determined to preserve their cultural heritage and to the social workers who have worked tirelessly to empower African American children and their families.

Acacia Lovett

This research is dedicated to God whose guidance and wisdom brought me thus far. To my sister, Anita, who supported and prayed with me when I often felt overwhelmed and discouraged. To my husband, Robert, who comforted me through difficult moments and encouraged me to persevere. Other family members and intimate friends who prayed for me every day and believed in me, thank you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: Problem Formulation	1
Introduction.....	1
Problem Statement	1
Purpose of the Study.....	3
Significance of the Project for Social Work	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
Introduction	9
Individual and Family Risk Factors.....	9
Community Risk Factors	11
Agency and Systemic Factors.....	12
Theories of Conceptualization.....	17
Summary.....	18
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	20
Introduction	20
Study Design.....	20
Sampling	21
Data Collection and Instruments	22
Procedures.....	23
Protection of Human Subjects.....	24
Data Analysis	24

Summary.....	25
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....	26
Introduction.....	26
Participant Demographics.....	26
Worker Factors.....	27
Social Worker Bias and Cultural Insensitivity.....	27
Difficulty Confronting Bias in the Workplace.....	32
Underdeveloped Relationship with African American Communities.....	34
Systemic Factors.....	36
Poverty.....	38
High Caseloads.....	41
Need for Workplace Training.....	43
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	48
Introduction.....	48
Worker Factors.....	48
Limitations.....	52
Recommendations for Social Work.....	53
Practice.....	54
Policies.....	54
Research.....	56
Conclusion.....	56
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	58
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT.....	61

REFERENCES.....	63
ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES	69

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Introduction

Problem Statement

African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system when compared to other ethnicities within the general population (childwelfare.gov). In 1995, 49% of total children in foster care were African American children despite constituting only 15% of the entire U.S. child population (Petit & Curtis, 1997). By 2014, that number had been slashed to 22.6% while making up 13.8% of the total child population (childwelfare.gov). Although it took two decades to reduce the disproportionality of African American children within the welfare system by half, innovative measures at the local and national level are needed to remedy the issue of overrepresentation of African American children in the foster system.

According to the National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services Delivered to Children and their Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994), 56% of African American children are served in foster care and 44% in their own homes. In contrast, only 28% of white children are in foster care while 72% receive services in their own homes. Moreover, the study revealed that 43% of white children who entered the foster system were out in less than three months as opposed to 16% of African American children who exited the system in three months or less. It could be

argued that these high differences in groups could be attributed to lack of cultural humility and equity or racial injustice.

There are many existing theories as to the reasons for the overrepresentation of African American children in the welfare system. Some critics place blame on poverty, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, racism, lack of family and social support, and yet others blame the laws and policies. There is no simple explanation for the high representation of African American children in the system. Rather than seeking the causes, focus should be placed on how to minimize the removal of children from their homes and helping these families rediscover their strengths.

The main goal of child removal is the safety and well-being of the child. However, studies indicate that children in substitute care fared less well than community samples of youths on a range of developmental outcomes (Maas & Engler, 1989). For example, Berzin (2008), compared youths who had experienced foster care at some point in their childhood with youths who had not, and found that youths who experienced placement had lower levels of educational attainment and higher rates of public assistance use, teen parenting, and criminal justice involvement. Thus, removing and placing African American children in foster care is more likely to expose them to greater risks as opposed to keeping them at home and empowering their families.

Rather than viewing Black families as poor, uneducated, and uncaring, the welfare system needs to tap into the vast resources and skills

inherited by the African American community. These resources can be used to engage the entire community to help develop programs specifically addressed to meet the needs of their own people and empower them to become self-sufficient in dealing with future obstacles.

There is not much research being done that specifically looks at the child welfare worker's perception of the problem regarding disproportionality in the child welfare system. This study may contribute to social work practice by providing insights into workers' perceptions on agencies' contributions to disproportionality and why removals are more common in the African American families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine child welfare professionals' perspectives of disproportionality of African American children and families in the child welfare system. It is hoped that the study will help shed light on the over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system and to inform potential remedies for this problem. The matter in question has been studied for over 40 years and there is still no panacea for this dilemma.

Children born in African American families are at a disadvantage the moment they are conceived. The economic and social discrimination of this minority group ensures the continuous cycle of poverty which is evidenced by poorly resourced neighborhoods. African Americans are expected to thrive and

succeed in a “white” America where they are denied access to the very basic skills and knowledge needed to triumph.

This study will address the agency factors that create and/or contribute to the disproportionality of African American children in the welfare system.

According to Lemon, D’Andrade and Austin (2005), agency infrastructure, institutional racism, organizational structure, limited availability of resources, and the child welfare agency’s disengagement from the community served are the bureaucratic processes that sustain the disproportional representation of African American children in the system. Changing these welfare agency characteristics will determine the outcomes for these children and their families.

Furthermore, there are many factors that may impact disproportionality including poverty in the African American communities and social worker’s biases. According to the United States Census (2013), 25.8 percent of African Americans are living in poverty, and 11.6 percent of Caucasians are living in poverty. African Americans are living in poverty at twice the rate of Caucasians (United States Census, 2013.). Danzer (2012) stated that poverty led to rising crime rates and drug problems that could be addressed with social services. The strong relationship between poverty and maltreatment, however, does not fully explain racial disparities. It is also possible that child welfare professionals knowingly or unknowingly allow personal biases to affect their decision making (Child Welfare Gateway, 2016).

There are many factors that impact the high removal rates of African American children, including social worker biases (Harris & Hatchet, 2007). Analyzing child welfare workers' biases may help to identify potential biases and improve services for African American families. This study can also help to provide child welfare workers with information regarding disproportionality and assessing their biases before working with African American families. This problem needs to be addressed because there is no formal policy given by agencies to work specifically with African American families. In contrast, in 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act was implemented as a federal law that promotes the stability and security of Indian tribes and families. In Minnesota, two legislators have proposed the Minnesota African American Family Preservation Act (Chronicle of Social Change, 2018). This act aims to promote the stability and security of African American families by establishing minimum standards to prevent unnecessary removal of African American children from their families. Future trainings and policy changes such as the Minnesota African American Family Act can ensure that these families and their culture are taking into consideration by the workers and that the families are treated equally.

This study used a qualitative design to examine the child welfare professionals' perceptions of disproportionality in the child welfare system. This study utilized open-ended questions to assess workers' perceptions of the disproportionate numbers of African American children in the child welfare system. We conducted face to face interviews with 12 current and former child

welfare professionals. They were asked for their perception as to why African American children were overrepresented and ways to combat the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system. This method allowed workers to explain the factors they viewed as contributing to the disproportionality among African American families in the child welfare system.

The research question asked how do child welfare professionals perceive the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system?

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The significance of this study is that the findings can contribute to social work's knowledge and understanding regarding the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system. It examines the child welfare system and its contributions to the overrepresentation of African American children. It is possible that personal biases affect child welfare professionals' decision making. In California alone, African American children are detained at quadruple the rate represented in the population (Harper, 2013).

On the policy level, the findings of this study may be used to affect policy change in the county agencies that have such a high number of African American children in the child welfare system. This study can further assist administrators, program managers, and policymakers explore solutions to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. This information can help to develop a more culturally competent practice. Therefore, study findings may help workers to better understand and effectively interact with people across cultures

through trainings and workshops. Finally, this study will serve as a catalyst for child welfare agency workers, policymakers, and administrators to alleviate the disproportionality of African American children in the system.

On a practice level, prevention and early intervention services has strengthened families and decreased the number of children entering care, regardless of race or ethnicity (Child Welfare Gateway, 2016.) Aspects of the Generalist Intervention model utilized during this study included engagement, assessment, and intervention. We engaged with child welfare workers by meeting and discussing with them what they believed were the causes of the problem. We assessed child welfare workers by getting their opinions on their contribution to the overrepresentation of African American children in the system and solutions for workers to help African American families. Lastly, in conducting this social work research, we developed possible interventions that may help address the disproportionality problem that is affecting child welfare agencies statewide and nationally. This study is relevant to child welfare because it gathered child welfare workers' perceptions of the excessive rates of African American children in the child welfare system.

The results would be used to educate other social work professionals in other institutions, such as special education, that are working with children that have high disproportionate rates. This study presented empirically supported evidence for professionals to better understand their contribution to the

overrepresentation of African American families and assist with future interventions and policy change to help African American families.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the child welfare system, racial disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation of a certain racial or ethnic group in comparison with their percentage in the child population. In 2008, African American children represented 15% of the children population, but 32% of them were in foster care (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). There are many contributing factors to the disproportionality of African American children in the welfare system. Whether it is racial bias, poverty, living in crime-infested neighborhoods or cultural incompetence among workers, these factors can be classified under one of the following categories: (1) individual and family risk factors, (2) agency and systemic factors and (3) community risk factors.

Individual and Family Risk Factors

Poverty, race, family size, family structure, and parents' employment status are some individual and family factors that contribute to the high disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system.

A study based in California examined the extent to which race and ethnicity contributed to the decision of removing African American children from their caregivers and placing them in foster care following allegations of maltreatment (Needell, Brookhart & Lee, 2002). This study included 137,300 children (50,066 white, 65,392 Hispanic and 21,842 Black). The authors

concluded that Black children in California, especially in Los Angeles County, were more likely than White or Hispanic children to be removed from their caregiver and placed in foster care rather than receiving formal in-home services, even when other factors (age, neighborhood poverty) were taken into account. Interesting to note are the following findings: (1) that children who come from zip codes in which at least 10 percent of families live in poverty were more likely to enter welfare care than those who came from affluent zip codes; and (2) that children with more than five siblings were more likely to enter foster care. Limitations to this study include the absence of Asian and Native American children and seven percent (8,172 children) of children who otherwise met study criteria were deleted from the study because they were missing address (zip code) data.

A second and prominent contributing factor to the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system is the absence or lack of the father's involvement in permanency planning. O'Donnell (2001) used an experimental design to compare social work team practices with 241 children in kinship placements. Over a 12-month period, social workers compiled data showing fathers' involvement in their child's welfare case. This data showed that of the 132 one-and multiple-father households, 70% had never participated in case planning activities and 67% had never had a discussion with the social worker about obtaining custody of their children. Only 14% had taken part in developing the written case plan. The author suggests that children who are

removed from their homes have a higher probability of reuniting with their families or placed with adoptive families sooner if their father became actively involved in their permanency planning. One limitation to this experiment is that it involved only African American fathers since African American children are the only ethnic groups overrepresented in the child welfare system. The sample size was too small to represent African American fathers and therefore it is impossible to determine if these permanency issues are unique to African Americans or common to all fathers. Nevertheless, these findings can be useful in providing direction for future research.

Community Risk Factors

Neighborhood poverty, cultural values and beliefs, unsafe environments, inadequate housing, and lack of appropriate social support systems are some community risk factors plaguing the African American population. African Americans are 15% of the population but have nearly double the rate of poverty (27% versus 15%) as compared to white Americans (Derezotes, Poertner, & Testa, 2005; Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). According to Sedlak and colleagues (2010), child maltreatment is five times more likely to occur in poor neighborhoods.

Several studies suggest that the disproportionality of African Americans is related less to race than to the impoverished and unsafe neighborhoods in which they live. Forty percent of African Americans live in unsafe environments – overcrowded homes or multi-unit dwellings that lack space or privacy (Kriz &

Skivenes, 2011; Marts, Lee, McRoy, & McCroskey 2008). The family not only contends with their poverty but also with the difficulties associated with the neighborhood poverty. These economically impoverished neighborhoods are likely to experience higher rates of crime, incarceration, female-headed households, unemployment, inadequate health and mental health services, unsafe housing, inferior schools, childcare, and adult supervision.

To compound these problems, parents are forced to keep their children indoors and off the streets to protect them from the ever-present dangers of gun violence only to expose them to another set of deadly risks: lead poisoning, rodent borne diseases and fire hazards resulting from substandard housing (Kokaliari, Roy & Tayloe; 2018). Other scholars suggest that children have the right to live in an environment free from abuse and neglect (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). African American children, however, seem to be growing up in a war zone (Kriz & Skivenes, 2011). Ironically, these poverty-stricken communities are recipients of intense surveillance from law enforcement and other public authorities, yet the surveillance does not necessarily improve living conditions.

Agency and Systemic Factors

Factors identified as potential contributors to the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system include high caseloads, cultural incompetence, cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings, lack of appropriate supervision, inadequate staffing, lack of training and experience, and

federal child welfare policies (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, Gourdine, Smith, 2003; Roberts, 2002; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). The agency's disengagement from the community served, organizational culture, agency infrastructure and limited availability of services were additional factors (Lemon, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2005).

In 2004, a study was conducted by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) in collaboration with Casey Family Programs to address the problem of disproportionality. DFPS was mandated to "determine whether enforcement actions were disproportionately initiated against any racial or ethnic group, in any area of the state, taking into account other relevant factors" (Texas Health and Human Services Commission, DFPS, 2006, p.1). African American children were not only overrepresented in the DFPS as the results revealed, but the level of disproportionality increased at each stage of the service delivery system.

Dettlaff and Rycraft (2010) conducted a study using a qualitative approach to identify contributing factors to the disproportionality of African American children from legal professionals' perspectives. The participants included judges, district and private attorneys working or associated with DFPS cases. Cultural bias, fearful agency climate, communication barriers, workforce issues, and ineffective service delivery were the five primary themes that emerged from the study as factors that contributed to disproportionality in the child welfare system. Racial bias has been a significant factor in the overrepresentation of African

American children in the child welfare system. For example, a district attorney in Dettlaff and Rycraft's (2010) study stated that caseworkers use their upbringing as benchmarks for appropriate parenting. Thus, when a caseworker observes scolding and/or parental annoyance, the caseworker files a mistreatment report and views these parents as dangerous and incompetent to raise a child. However, African American parents are more authoritarian, have stricter rules, and are more likely to use physical punishment than their white counterparts (Callahan Scaramella, Laird, & Sohr-Preston, 2011; Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2008). Physical punishment is a common practice amongst the African American community and is not considered child abuse but rather used to conserve the beliefs about authority and respect (Elliot and Urquiza, 2006).

Cultural differences often create communication barriers between the caseworker and African American families which leads to removal of children and increasing the high percentage of disproportionality. African American parents' lack of engagement skills and hostility toward the worker influences caseworker's risk assessment and decision-making regarding safety (Dettlaff and Rycraft, 2010). Although parents have a right to become angry when confronted about the allegation regarding their child(ren), caseworkers biased negative language used in affidavits is often used against parents. These same communication barriers result in less visits with the family which results in less communication and affects the level of service delivery provided to African American families.

The decision to remove African American children from their home stems from the fear of liability thereby impacting disproportionality within the child welfare system. Caseworkers often remove children out of fear that the children will be harmed or even killed instead of considering the best interest of the child (Dettlaff and Rycraft, 2010). A state attorney in Dettlaff and Rycraft's study stated that this fear results from the punitive nature of the child welfare agency, in which case workers often experience negative consequences when a child is harmed (2010). Fear of liability combined with racial bias and lack of experience disproportionately affects African American children.

Burnout, high turnover, and lack of cultural awareness are some workforce issues that lead caseworkers to irrational decision-making concerning the risk to and safety of children. Lack of a diverse workforce also contributes to the high disproportionality of African American children in the welfare system (Bell, Wells, & Merritt, 2009). Data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) II showed that between 2008 – 09, 58 percent of child welfare caseworkers were non-Hispanic white, 24 percent were Black, 15 percent were Hispanic, and 4 percent were another race or ethnicity (Dolan, Smith, Casanueva & Ringeisen., 2011).

Being African American or having training in cultural competence is not enough. Ortega and Coulborn Faller's (2010) study expressed concern that the workforce does not adequately understand the African American community because there are very few workers who are from the community. To truly

understand a community, one must be part of that community or come from the community. This does not negate the fact that African American families will still mistrust African American caseworkers, but the mistrust will be less as an African American caseworker who shares or understands the culture or language of a family may have a better comprehension of the family's background and needs.

Oftentimes the child welfare agency is neglectful and/or ineffective in delivery of services. One study explored the availability of services in three southern Black and Hispanic neighborhoods (Dorch, Bathman, Foster, Ingels, Lee, Miramontes, & Youngblood, 2010). This study discovered that one-half of the neighborhoods in one city and over one-quarter of the neighborhood in the other two cities had no access to welfare services and limited public transportation. Furthermore, participants in Dettlaff and Rycraft's (2010) study observed that services provided were not effective in meeting the needs of African American families. The services were not designed in mind with the cultural needs and background of African American families. One example is that of free parenting classes. The community had eight free parenting classes, but they were not sanctioned by the welfare system. Parents had to attend classes of one of two specific contract providers outside of their community. While this study identified contributing factors within the child welfare agency, one limitation was the sample size and the use of nonprobability sampling – its findings are limited in generalizability. In addition, the legal community needs to

examine their role in contributing to the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system.

Theories of Conceptualization

Systems theory is appropriate when examining disproportionality in the child welfare system. Systems theory is involved in analyzing how society adapts to its environment through adjustment in its structure (Teater, 2010). It is based on individual needs, rewards, and expectations of people living in the system. Implementing this theory can help to explain and treat the cause of certain behaviors. This theory can be applied to situations where systems connect and influence one another. For example, an African American child in child welfare, family environment influences their actions, and the way that they interact with others.

Conflict theory is also useful in examining disproportionality. This theory helps explain how power structures and power disparities impact people's lives (Chetkow-Yanoov, 1997). Power is unequally divided in every society and all societies perpetuate various forms of oppression and injustice through structural inequality, racial discrimination. Addressing disproportionality through conflict theory can help to aim towards fairness and understanding the gaps between the welfare system and how this system can negatively impact African American children.

Lastly, Bell and colleagues' (2009) study speaks to the importance of culturally competent practices for working in a system that has racial biases.

Practicing cultural competence means that social workers are providing attachment and bonds, increasing social skills, and improving self-esteem. Cultural competence for African American children involves acknowledging their current situation from all angles. Being culturally competent in child welfare is very important because this system is very diverse and as a social worker it is our responsibility to implement our core values including, dignity and worth of individual. As social workers, we have an obligation to the families that we are servicing and to help them to the best of our abilities. Being culturally competent can help workers to better understand and identify with the African American children and families who are affected by the welfare system. Understanding that regardless of race, there are still characteristics of the client that the social work can learn from. Coming from a place of cultural humility instead of educational knowledge can help to decrease the power differences between the worker and families.

Summary

Children of color are more likely to be removed from their caregiver instead of receiving in-home services when there is a substantiated case of mistreatment or abuse. There is also available evidence that proves that they are less likely to be reunified with their family after being removed and are subject to longer stays in foster care when compared to their white counterparts (Miller, 2008; Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-MacLeod, Newton, Ganger & Johnson 2004). This suggests that the child welfare system exacerbates rather than

addresses the overrepresentation of African American children in their system. The welfare agency conceals their contribution to the disproportionality by placing all the blame on parents' deficits (Roberts, 2004). Rather than pointing fingers on African American parenting skills, the welfare agency's goal should be to collaborate with this community toward establishing better policies and practices that will improve the services to African American families and their children who need help.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study examined the perceptions of child welfare professionals related to the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system. Qualitative, in-depth interviews were used in this study. This chapter described the study's design, sampling, data collection and interview instrument, the procedures, protections of human subjects, and qualitative data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine child welfare professionals' perceptions of disproportionality among African American children in child welfare. This study used a qualitative design to collect data, including face to face interviews with 12 former and current child welfare professionals. This study used open-ended questions to identify child welfare professionals' perspectives on the disparity of African American children in the child welfare system and to identify these professionals' recommendations for reducing the overrepresentation of African American in the child welfare system.

The qualitative design allowed child welfare professionals to verbalize their views and opinions on the reasons for the overrepresentation of African American children in the welfare system and how to address those issues to minimize the overrepresentation. The strength of this design allowed researchers to gain more knowledge and a deeper understanding from the

perspectives of child welfare professionals who work with families every day. This design allowed professionals the opportunity to provide deeper insight as to why this racial disparity exists. There is ample data that supported the overrepresentation of African American children in the welfare system. However, there was insufficient data that provided solutions to the above-mentioned problem. This study provided a better understanding of the issue and allowed child welfare personnel to analyze what needed to change in to reduce the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system.

The limitation of using this design was that researchers had a small sample size of few participants, which meant that the results would not be generalizable to every child welfare professional. The study was limited to participants from two Southern California counties. The study design allowed the researchers to develop a thick, rich description of experienced child welfare professionals' perceptions in two counties in California.

Sampling

This study used convenience and snowball sampling, in which the researchers connected with 12 former and current child welfare professionals, that they knew personally who were currently working at child welfare agencies, educational institutions, and non-profit agencies who had previously worked at a child welfare agency. The researchers also interviewed four former child welfare faculty members whom they were currently familiar with. Sampling criteria for the purpose of this study included child welfare professionals who previously or

currently worked for a child welfare agency for one year or longer. This study utilized snowball sampling because the researchers were unable to identify 12 child welfare professionals, representative to this study.

For this study to be diverse and representative of the population, the researchers interviewed an equal number of both male and female professionals. The researchers equally attempted to interview a representative sample of participants from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. This was to ensure that participants had had experiences in child welfare and were able to answer questions related to the study.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researchers conducted face to face interviews using an interview guide composed of 12 questions (Appendix A). This guide included basic demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, years of experience, area of expertise and education collected separately and prior to participants receiving the interview questions. The interview questions were open-ended to encourage interviewees to elaborate. The researchers pretested the questions by asking the questions to colleagues to ensure that the questions were not unambiguous and could provide open discussion.

The primary questions were geared towards gathering information that solicited the professionals' views on disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system. Some sample questions included: "What is your understanding of disproportionality among African American families in child

welfare? Have you examined your own biases? What is your agency doing to address disproportionality?" Other questions included, "How successful are these efforts?" and "If you had all the resources available, how would you address disproportionality among African American children in child welfare?" All participants were asked to describe in their own views and opinions what contributed to disproportionality among African American families in child welfare.

Procedures

For this study, researchers recruited child welfare professionals in Southern California. This was accomplished by reaching out and contacting former and current child welfare professionals that they knew personally. The rest of the participants were referred by these individuals. The professionals were interviewed between February 2020 and March 2020. Interviews were scheduled and held at participants' workplaces or in a public place away from workers' offices. Prior to the interviews, professionals were invited to participate via email or telephone. Participants were provided with an informed consent form and informed that this procedure was voluntary. Each participant was informed of the study and was asked to identify from personal experience any factors that contributed to the overrepresentation among African American children in child welfare. Each interview took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete and was administered by the researchers. Participants were given a \$30 gift card as appreciation for their willingness to participate in the research.

Protection of Human Subjects

The researchers took the necessary precautions to ensure the protection of all participants' privacy and confidentiality in this study. The researchers protected all information provided by the participants throughout this study. In efforts to maintain confidentiality, researchers provided interviewees with informed consent and audio consent forms. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and if at any time, and for any reason they felt the need to withdraw, they were encouraged to do so. After the participants were informed about the consent, they were asked to sign X on both the informed consent and audio tape consent form. Furthermore, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that it was being conducted with IRB approval. The researchers informed the participants the need for such research.

The researchers used pseudonyms to guarantee the participants' confidentiality. Participants were informed that they were not obligated to answer every question. To further protect participants, the researchers stored and filed information obtained through interviews under lock and key and digital records were stored on a secure server. After the study was completed, the researchers shredded physical documents and deleted digital files that were collected throughout the study.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the interviews, the data collected through audio recordings were transcribed using a professional transcription service. The

interviews were transcribed word for word and were reviewed by the researchers for accuracy. The researchers then read each transcript individually and used an open coding technique to identify patterns in the data and to label and describe these patterns. Next, the researchers compared their codes for each transcript, noting similarities and differences, and ultimately reaching consensus about the categories. The researchers compared transcripts to one another and to the entire data set. Finally, the researchers used axial coding to relate these categories to one another, creating broader themes.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology to be employed in this study. This study used a qualitative design as well as convenience and snowball sampling. Face-to-face interviews were carried out using an interview guide. The procedures used and the necessary measures to protect the subjects interviewed were outlined. Lastly, data analysis for qualitative research, as it relates to this study was explored.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Through convenience and snowball sampling, the researchers interviewed a total of 12 individuals from three agencies. All participants were interviewed in February and March 2020. All twelve individuals were currently or previously employed at a child welfare agency. In this chapter, the demographics of the research participants and the identified themes are detailed.

Participant Demographics

The sample for this study consisted of eight current social workers from child welfare agencies, one current medical social worker with a 12-year previous child welfare agency experience, and three professors who previously worked in child welfare ranging from five to 14 years of experience. The social workers from child welfare held various positions within the agency, including family maintenance, family reunification, investigative services, and permanent placement. Their years of experience ranged from six to 22 years. All interview participants earned an undergraduate degree, and ten of those interviewed had earned a graduate-level degree in social work. The ages of those interviewed ranged from 35-36 years old. The participants included six males and six females. Five of the interviewed social workers identified as African American,

four identified as Caucasian, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as Asian and one identified as multiracial.

The child welfare professionals reported receiving some diversity and cultural competency training in college. However, few participants received cultural competency training within a child welfare agency. Three participants stated that they received training in child welfare on disproportionality among African American children in the welfare system. However, nine participants stated that they had not received cultural awareness training on African American families in the child welfare system.

Participants' responses revealed a variety of perceived factors contributing to disproportionality. These factors fell into two categories: factors related to workers and factors related to systems. Worker factors included social worker bias and discrimination, as well as a lack of cultural competency and awareness. Systemic factors included high caseloads and a lack of workplace training that impacted the quality of work, as well as conditions related to poverty and limited community involvement in African American communities.

Worker Factors

Social Worker Bias and Cultural Insensitivity

Racial bias. Participants suggested that a great deal of disproportionality in child welfare is related to bias views of the social workers, mandated reporters, and other professionals who encounter African American children and families in the child welfare system. They suggested that social workers were not immune to

these biases and that social worker implicit bias plays a significant role in contributing to disproportionality. Dave explained, “There’s a huge implicit bias towards African Americans. It’s horrific. It’s affecting people’s work.” Sweeney went on to describe the ways biases contribute to the disproportionate referrals of African American families, using the example of police bias:

If you’re more likely to call in referrals on African American children, they’re more likely to have contact with the police. Whereas, the same family with the same dynamics, but of a different race, white, would possibly have no contact with police, not have previous referrals, and we would be making a different decision. (Sweeney)

Many workers described how biases among workers in the child welfare system negatively impacted African American families once they entered the system. Several participants described the troubling and culturally insensitive ways their colleagues approached African American families. These participants implied that these workers’ biases and poorly informed practices impaired their ability to help families. Kiki explained how worker bias towards women-heads of household negatively impacted African American families. She explained:

In African American families, the mom or the grandma is the head of the household. The grandmother or mother taking care of the children is seen as pushy or bossy when all they’re trying to do is be more confident and speak for the family. I don’t think workers

realize when they are talking with different groups of people, they need to talk a different way. You got to bring the language to them so they can relate to you. You meet them where they are. (Kiki)

Similarly, Ken expressed frustration at workers he perceived as taking an overly authoritative approach with African American men. He explained,

Like with African American families especially, dads would be really confrontational. Workers tend to, "I need to take more authority to get things in check." It doesn't help at all. They (African Americans) just get viewed as non-compliant, so they don't get reunified and all that stuff. (Ken)

Some participants viewed colleagues who used improper approaches as unintentional or uninformed, while others observed colleagues whose behavior they viewed as intentional and damaging. Lala described one colleague who stereotyped an African American client and claimed she was going to remove his children from his care. She elaborated:

There was a Caucasian social worker that I worked side by side with and we were under the same supervisor. She was given a case; she had that case for almost a year. She adamantly told me that the father was a gangbanger, and he was not gonna reunify

with his kids, and she was gonna take them, and they were going into the system. (Lala)

Cultural Insensitivity. In addition to racial bias, participants described many of their colleagues as lacking cultural sensitivity or humility towards African American clients. In social work, the term cultural humility is used to describe the social worker's ability to maintain another person's perspective in relation to aspects of cultural identity. Child welfare workers are randomly assigned cases regardless of their race or ethnic background. The interviewees of this study agreed that non-African American social workers show little cultural competence toward African American cases. Some participants identified the lack of cultural competency as a reason for disproportionality among African American children in the system. Tangi described her experience with a 6' 300-lb African American male screaming in her face, and how automatically she interpreted that behavior a threat. Lacking cultural competency, she deduced, "They're uncooperative. They are disgruntled. They are negative." She suggested that non-African American child social workers read, "Oh dang, how could those children be safe with "those people?" It's not that the child may or may not be safe. It's the perception of the worker and the display of the African American culture clashing. Tangi further explained:

A Caucasian social worker said it was very difficult – "the most difficult population for me to work with was African Americans

because they always give me some kind of attitude, or they always seem to be mad. There's no way that I can ever really connect.

(Tangi)

Because of the history of African Americans in this country, Ken claimed “social workers — especially those that do investigations, perceive reluctance or hesitancy among African Americans as noncompliance without really exploring” or understanding the culture of that ethnic group.

Historically and culturally, African American families have been known to use physical discipline to discipline their kids, and that is basically one of the allegations that social workers use to remove children from the home. Whereas physical discipline is viewed as inappropriate in other ethnic groups, African American families' most common discipline technique is the use of physical punishment, accompanied by loud screaming.

Finally, one participant's comments crystalized what the other participants seemed to be indicating: that there were so many points at which racial bias and cultural insensitivity could enter the process and contribute to disproportionality.

Coco explained:

I think that a lotta people don't understand that there are layers upon layers of bias and institutional stuff that factors into why we have the numbers we do. It's not just one level. Workers have biases as do their supervisor, as do their managers. [Also] It's

important to know that not everybody here is trained as social workers. We (social workers) are trained to work toward that self-awareness, to look for bias. I've had to have discussions with people about biases. Sometimes, within their own group [African Americans]. (Coco)

Difficulty Confronting Bias in the Workplace

Some participants commented that in terms of social workers' roles to reduce this issue, social workers should have an open and honest discussion with fellow social workers and supervisors to help bring awareness to their implicit biases so that their biases do not cloud their judgement when working with African American families. Of course, sometimes talking about it makes workers defensive. Coco suggested that when "working with a family, maybe during the CFT meeting, we can have a person of color at the meeting since no one else in the room looks like them." She continued: This is the text for the test chapter. This is the text for the test chapter.

I think there's a lot that needs to be done, and I think, typically, agencies look at the paper education part of this and not so much the dialogue part. The dialogue is a lot harder. Just hearing the discussion about implicit bias and how that looks and what it looks like and how to have those conversations and how to have them

with a respectful tone; that's a lot harder to do. I think it's an area we need to do better on if we're gonna see improvement in this area because we don't have control over the way people in the community perceive folks, but we do have control over what we do with it. (Coco)

Knowing that cultural bias, cultural insensitivity or failure to seek culturally responsive resources impacts the likelihood of African American families receiving appropriate services, more and more social workers must be willing to question and examine their personal unconscious but ever-present biases. Thus, Lala commented:

I've had talks with several social workers that are not of my race about their biases. We've had ongoing conversations. I think it should be an ongoing practice here, period, with conversations be it with your supervisors, the social workers recognizing your biases. I talk to my colleagues. (Lala)

Social workers interact regularly with people of all cultural backgrounds. Their ingrained personal principles will most likely conflict with those of their clients. There are steps social workers can take to minimize those biases in the workplace. Becoming personally aware is just a baby step. Acknowledging that everyone owns such biases is another step. Sweeny identified another step:

Being open to feedback, I think, is probably one of the biggest things that I've tried to do; checking myself with friends like, is this

something that I'm looking at a certain way because of my culture and my background and race? I think mostly, just being cognizant of that and addressing my stereotypes and catching myself when I'm having a stereotype. (Sweeney)

Because the social worker's code of ethics include respect for the dignity and worth of all persons, they would do well to deliberately exemplify those ethical principles at all times but more so when they are assigned as the social worker for African American families. Self-reflection, self-analysis, self-correction is the goal of every professional social worker. That final step, which is to put it in practice was expressed by Ken in this manner:

Definitely you've gotta understand your bias. I don't feel like with regard to African American families, I didn't have a specific bias with that, but I did have to curtail how I was working with them as opposed to. I really had to keep how much I used my authority in check because it is a sensitive tightrope walk with African American families. (Ken)

Underdeveloped Relationship with African American Communities

Most participants felt that social workers had a responsibility to reach out and to involve African American communities in the child welfare system. They noted that African American community organizations and leaders could serve as voices for the African American families, could help educate professionals on their culture, and could help reduce disproportionality. Amon stated, "Different

things that can be done like that cultural broker idea, someone from that person's community to be part of team-decision making." Dom suggested following the models used with other ethnic groups. He said,

It has to start with education in the same way in which we allow ICWA or Native American people to educate child welfare on their culture. You would, then, also benefit from allowing African Americans to educate child welfare on their culture in the same degree in which you see it with ICWA. (Dom)

One interviewee proposed another method to developing a working relationship with the African American communities. Lala commented:

We don't access the black churches enough. We went out into the community and connected with black churches so they could come in and mentor some of the kids because the kids didn't have mentors either. (Lala)

Some counties created Racial Disproportionality and Disparity committees where, says Lala, they:

"invited all the African American parents in the community to come to our room to talk about why they didn't trust us and what we needed to do and even connected African American families with African American therapists, or African American parenting teachers. We align them with services within their community that are gonna help them." (Lala)

Going the second, the third and even the fourth mile for the sake of reducing disproportionality, child welfare social workers play a big role. Rony explained in these words:

I thought of this idea, if just having a task force where social workers look like the community. Or having social workers that work in certain zip codes or certain apartment complexes, so the families are familiar, and the social workers are more familiar with the family. I think it will reduce stigma, the disproportionality, because if you are one, you know what they go through, and they trust you more. It's all about the trust. (Rony)

Systemic Factors

Several of the participants described the inherent failings of larger systems contributed to disproportionality in child welfare. Participants lamented pervasive racism, as well as structures that contributed to heightened poverty among African American communities, and the high caseloads in the child welfare systems that prevented workers from providing high quality services. Rony expressed frustration with the pervasive racism and stereotyping experienced by African American families in general, as well as within the child welfare system. He explained, "This system was created for the American people, to hold us African Americans down." Dom expanded on this notion,

lamenting the pervasiveness of individual biases that culminated in disproportionality. Dom explained:

The system is prejudiced. I'm just going to keep it simple. I think that there are a lot of preconceived notions about before the system even engages the family, I think there's a lot of preconceived notions about what they expect as far as it could just even be as far as just African Americans' participation and even getting their children back, what they're going to do, and I think there is a prejudice in how they engage with African American families based upon their either generalizations of African American people or the system's own ignorance of African Americans as a culture or a people. A lot of times, we'll say the system, but the system is really people. I think the system is just a reflection of people's own views and perceptions of a group of people. (Dom)

Dave elaborated on the historical nature of disproportionality, suggesting that it resulted from a long history of racist policies that negatively impacted African American communities. He described these system issues:

When you look back historically, there's lots of policies, many times racist - almost always racist policies that have contributed to high needs in certain communities. Because of that you're gonna see a disproportionate representation of people of color. It's a problem and it's something that requires a systemic change. It's not just

gonna be training a few workers here and there. You've got to change the whole system and start making an impact. It doesn't mean getting rid of it. It just means changing policies and practices that contribute to it. (Dave)

Poverty

Participants discussed generational poverty as a characteristic of African American communities, and that kids in poverty were simply more at risk of coming into the child welfare system. Kiki believes "that there's a lot of inner cities that have a large group of African Americans living in poverty. When you have a lot of those communities there's just violence and kids are probably removed at a higher rate."

Amon elaborated on poverty being one of the main reasons whether someone will get involved in the child welfare system. African Americans face a wide range of institutional obstacles that make earning a steady, livable income, as well as the possibility of escaping poverty, extremely difficult. African Americans are at higher risk to enter child welfare due to their income level. He described poverty as a main predictor for these families:

Poverty being one of the main predictors of whether or not someone's even gonna be involved with the child welfare system. Then African Americans being more susceptible to poverty because of racial bias, the extensive history of racism in our country. (Amon)

Dave explains certain policies that segregated communities due to race and income. Policies such as redlining contributed to institutional racism that prevented African American families from buying homes in certain neighborhoods and rejecting loans from creditworthy families based on their race. This resulted in higher poverty rates within the African American communities. He states that because of policies such as redlining that segregated these communities, African American families have been negatively impacted.

It's higher poverty. Think about all the policies such as redlining. These are all policies that contributed to having African American families growing up in segregated communities where, basically, their housing values were lower. You just created these pockets of poverty, and then the worst part is that you – not you, but the American people blame and say, “you see? African Americans are bad.” (Dave)

Similarly, Coco explains the comparison between race, privilege, and socioeconomic status and how families are targeted within the child welfare system based on these factors. Racism exists within the healthcare system; African American families are more likely than Caucasian families to be drug tested after giving birth. She stated:

If you're African American and you're of a lower socioeconomic status, you can be targeted just for being poor. If you come to the department's attention, if you have a positive toxicology report with a new baby that's born, if you are seen in a county facility, you will be drug tested. If you're someone like me (Caucasian), and you have your own health insurance, they don't automatically test you. Now, there's nothing saying that I'm not an alcoholic or that I don't abuse illegal or prescription drugs, but no one would ever know that because they don't look at that. (Coco)

Participants described socioeconomic status as a factor for higher rates of removal in the child welfare system. In the impoverished communities, there are higher rates of referrals, and removals and African American children are more likely to be removed from their families based on the neighborhood they live in.

Roni suggests:

You have this office that is in a predominantly higher economic status - a mostly Caucasian-dominated area. There's less referrals, less removals, less cases, less all of that - and when you move to the demographics comparable to a poor area like (county) then the rate is higher because the demographics with African Americans is much higher over there. (Roni)

High Caseloads

Understaffed and inexperienced child welfare workers contribute significantly to the disproportionality of African American children in the system. Some interviewees suggested that an ideal social worker's workload should consist of 10-15 cases. Lala explains that because of her high caseload, she was unable to properly service her clients. This impacted her ability to fully focus on client's and their individual needs. High caseloads result in burnout, and due to unrealistic expectation of workers they are unable to properly provide all the resources for the clients. She explains her experience with high caseloads:

I had a caseload of up to - my highest was 55, and that's pretty high. After three years, it stressed me out because I like to make sure I fully service everybody. I found myself working seven days a week, taking work home nonstop with no break. I was seriously thinking about leaving the county, but I had a good supervisor and she let me know that a facilitator's job was coming up. I interviewed and got the promotion. (Lala)

Many workers described that high caseloads lead to workers being over worked. This contributes to disproportionality because it is much easier to remove a child than to really work with the family and thoroughly assess the entire situation. If the caseloads were lower, workers would have more time to balance their cases and assess the families.

Rony explains that being understaffed with a high number of caseloads can put families at risk because workers are not following regular policies due to high caseloads. He stated:

We always have staffing issues. You know what I mean? That's high caseloads. A high number of referrals. You're basically asked to be two social workers in one. We're overworked. I think that adds a lot to disproportionality in itself because as an investigator it's much easier to remove a kid than to work with the family and alleviate the problems that exist. We are not carefully dealing with these families on a case by case basis. We're so understaffed that we don't even follow regular policies and procedures anymore.

(Roni)

Participants described that due to high referrals and cases, workers are quick to make decisions for families without properly assessing to hurry and close the case. This may contribute to disproportionality because workers have a limited time with families to make long lasting decisions that will impact their lives forever.

Manny explains the number of caseloads that workers have and how it impacts their clients.

[the social workers] must make these decisions about whether a kid is safe or not and they have maybe 60 referrals that they are doing

or 50 cases on the backend. It's very difficult to go in and use— there's this whole concept of fast and slow thinking and really, social work has to be done in this slow thinking mode. That takes effort and energy. When they have tons of referrals, workers tend to not do that. They can go in there and then they just make snap judgments because, "I gotta get this referral." (Manny)

Manny further explains that the high number of referrals contributes to disproportionality:

That is a whole lot more cases that people must make decisions on in terms of safety and risk. I would probably say they would say, "Oh, you shouldn't have more than three or four referrals in a week or something like that to do an in-depth investigation to make sure that the kids are safe. They probably have 12 easily." However, there are social workers with 50 cases. The high number of case referrals where a social worker carries the workload of two persons seems to contribute to disproportionality among African American children.

Need for Workplace Training

Most of the participants expressed the need for more cultural competency training in the workplace. To reduce the disproportionality among AA children in the welfare system begins with the training and education of the social workers. Although interviewees mentioned that some counties are engaging in some kinds

of training in building cultural competence, the trainings are not properly organized.

Tangi describes that the need for more cultural training will provide workers with awareness and give them knowledge to work with and better understand cultural differences among families. She stated:

More trainings. More cultural competency classes. This is one way to fight disparity and different types of cultures and brings awareness to social work. I don't think there's a fix-all pill. It's more so awareness. It's more so training. It's more so education. It's open-minded. When you get more workers that have that type of knowledge, that type of understanding, that type of compassion and competency of various cultures, that's when disparity will even out.

Tangi further stated the need for more interactive training to help to fight this disparity among African American families. She describes the different types of training that should be provided to workers:

I would have different trainings, and I don't mean just something you sit in a class and be bored with, but just interactive training with workers, showing scenarios, kind of what would you do. Like that television show. More trainings. More cultural competency classes. That's one of the ways to fight disparity and different types of cultures and bringing awareness to social work.

Few workers described ongoing cultural trainings to better understand families. Workers are not properly trained to work with African American families, or to address their needs and provide them with the proper resources.

Lala expressed that in the past, there was a racial disparity and disproportionality board that addressed this issue among the African American children in the system. She explains:

At CPS, there was racial disparity and disproportionality to address this issue.

The purpose of RDD was for all of us from different units and regions to come together. That included supervisors, social workers, to come together to discuss why we have racial disparity and disproportionality. Infuse cultural diversity as an ongoing cause people forget and then they don't practice it. (Lala)

Participants explained the need for specific training for working with African American families. Like the Indian Child Welfare Act, workers should be properly trained and provided with insight on the needs of African American families.

Ken explains the need for specific training among African American families:

I think there needs to be a specific training, not just for cultural humility, but a specific training for dealing with, it really could be for all cultures, but because all other cultures, there's no

disproportionality. I take that back. It just needs to just be specifically for working with African American families. There needs to be training and some type of oversight for accountability. (Ken)

Lala expresses the similarities between the Native Americans and African Americans and how they were historically discriminated against and why African Americans should be provided with a similar law like the Indian Child Welfare Act to combat this issue. She stated:

Our community is changing, and I think CPS needs to go back to the basics to what they were doing in the beginning with cultural diversity training and with RDD, even if you got to get a unit like ICWA. I find it very interesting because we were desecrated just like the Indians. They just brought us across the sea. They came and invaded their land but it's the same story. (Lala)

Dom explained that cultural competency training is not consistent and should be mandatory and more often to address this issue. He believes:

More extensive training, more often. A lot of times, most of your training that you get going into this job is usually front-end loaded when you first get here in induction and all that. Then obviously, you have trainings that are mandatory. I think it's every two years, but I think you may wanna make more of those trainings for as far as the cultural competency more mandatory more often, especially in Southern California. (Dom)

Manny commented on the diverse degrees among child welfare workers. Not all workers have a social work training background, and this can contribute to the disparity among African American families because they are not trained in the same way. He expresses:

There are only a few social workers that have their MSW degree.

The rest that work in child welfare are coming from different fields within the social and behavioral sciences: psychology, criminal justice. They are not trained in the same way. They're not trained from a culturally competent perspective. That's not their training.

Now, you have a bunch of people that are in the field and must do safety and risk assessments without the cultural piece. (Manny)

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined social workers' perceptions about the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system. Our findings suggest that child welfare professionals identify both worker and systemic factors that contribute to the disproportionality of African American families in child welfare. Worker factors include racial bias, cultural insensitivity, difficulty confronting bias in the workplace, and underdeveloped relationships with African American communities. Systemic factors include poverty, high caseloads, and need for workplace training. In this chapter, we discuss these themes and their relationship to the existing literature on disproportionality. We also note the study's limitations, and present recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research.

Worker Factors

Racial bias was a prominent theme that emerged in this study. Participants expressed that they had personally witnessed workers and other professionals display negative attitudes and behaviors in their language and interaction with the African American community. This finding is consistent with Dettlaft and Rycraft's study (2008) where members of the legal community reported that caseworkers' affidavits contained culturally biased negative language about African American families. These same caseworkers had raised

the standards for Black families whose children were in foster care while not doing the same for White families.

Furthermore, the interviewees reported that some of these professionals were unaware of their personal biases and therefore could not acknowledge that it (biases) impaired their ability to make informed decisions. They suggested that these biased judgments and assumptions have a devastating effect on the Black community.

Another theme from our study was workers' cultural insensitivity. Interviewees reported having first-hand experience of colleagues' lack of cultural sensitivity when making decisions regarding culturally appropriate services and reunifying African American children with their families. This finding is consistent with the literature which explained that historically, more emphasis was placed in fitting clients into available service categories rather than providing culturally sensitive services (Harper & McFadden, 2003). Although this previous belief is no longer the focus, Ahn (1994) acknowledged that some professionals despite being aware of the importance of cultural sensitivity have no knowledge on how to carry out these practices.

The study's findings also revealed that one possible reason for the high disproportionality of African American children in the system was the difficulty in confronting biases in the workplace. This finding is consistent with the literature that emphasized the importance of social workers reflecting on their biases (Miller & Garran, 2007).

For some workers it is a tedious task to develop a working relationship with African American families and the community because of fear, assumptions, and beliefs. Lemon, D'Andrade, & Austin (2008) confirmed that when social workers are disengaged from the community they serve, it affects both the quality and quantity of service delivery and sustains the disproportional representation of African American children in the system.

Systemic Factors

Participants expressed that poverty and inability to access basic resources was also a determinant factor in the overrepresentation of African American children in the system. This is consistent with Drake, Lee & Jonson-Reid's (2009) research that poverty is associated with an increased susceptibility to child maltreatment and by extension, involvement with child welfare. When the National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) reported that there were no significant differences in the rates of child maltreatment among Black and White parents, Sedlak & colleagues (2010) analyzed the NIS-4 study, and their findings proved that there are higher rates of child maltreatment among Black families as compared to White families. Based on those findings, it was supported that poverty is a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system.

When asked about reasons for disproportionality among African American children, some social workers stated that the high caseloads were a source of stress for them. This is consistent with Barrak, Nissly & Levin's findings (2001)

that excessive caseloads and workloads were commonly noted factors related to stress which compromise workers' performance and well-being. Moreover, their study reported that 66 percent of social workers quit their job because of the heavy caseload.

According to participants, this affects their ability to provide consistent levels of support and care to families. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) reported that large caseloads and excessive workloads in many jurisdictions can make it difficult for caseworkers to serve families effectively. They claimed that manageable caseloads could make a real difference in their ability to engage families, deliver quality services, stay with the agency, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes for children and families. Yamatani, Engel & Spjeldnes (2009) supports these workers' by stating that a quality child welfare workforce is essential to providing vital services to the nation's most vulnerable children.

Most of the participants suggested the need for cultural competency/humility training for social workers. Lack of ongoing, and consistent cultural training among social workers negatively impact African American families and contribute to this disparity. Cultural differences often create communication barriers between the caseworker and African American families which leads to removal of children and increasing the high percentage of disproportionality.

Workers' dedication and active participation is the process of mutual understanding and self-awareness in connection with others. To achieve personal and family well-being, social workers must be continuously informed about those important issues and activities.

Child welfare workers have the challenges to identify, appreciate and build on both children and parents' resources and strengths and even become agents of change that make them members of society. This is consistent with McPhatter's (1997) belief that culturally competent practitioners must be adept with childrearing practices, including methods of discipline, nurturing, and meeting physical and psychosocial needs of children.

A cultural humility perspective can be incorporated and encouraged only after identifying it. Likewise, the organization needs to recognize those barriers and obstacles that inhibit a cultural humility approach. Only after understanding the diverse make up and needs of the community being served and more cultural training for social workers can children services be held accountable.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, our small sample size is not representative of child welfare workers in the state of California or across the country. Similarly, our participants came primarily from two counties, and their beliefs are shaped by their experiences in these two locations. Workers from other agencies, counties, and regions of the country may have very different experiences. Second, we purposely recruited a racially diverse group of

participants, anticipating that these participants may be more interested in and attuned to issues of racial and ethnic disparity. Participants knew we were interested in this topic and may have provided more socially desirable responses as a result.

Recommendations for Social Work

The findings from this study have shed light on child welfare workers' perceptions on the issue of racial disproportionality. These findings suggest implications for child welfare professionals, supervisors, and administrators to combat disproportionality. The solutions offered can be implemented into all areas of social work practice when specifically working with African American families. One possible solution can be the improvement of social workers' cultural awareness among African American families. It is paramount that workers make every effort to understand the importance and function of culture amongst the African American population when providing services.

Social workers can increase their individual self-awareness and biases, they have an impact on African American families involved in the child welfare system. While the bias itself can be intentional or unintentional, it influences the outcomes of African American families. Everyone has biases and acknowledging those biases can help to ultimately change the way African Americans are treated within the system.

Practice

Having open discussions about social workers' individual biases with supervisors and colleagues can help address the issue of disproportionality of African American children in the system. Through these discussions social workers can hold each other accountable and acknowledge how their biases are impacting their decision making with African American families.

Resources, collateral agencies and a network of family and friends are essential to reunification within the child welfare system. Without these, the odds of reunification are low. Most of the child welfare professionals suggested a need for consistent and ongoing cultural competency training relating to African American children and families. It is imperative that more trainings be provided to social workers, supervisors, and administrators to better support and understand African American families. Coaching by and for supervisors would expand the transfers of training to practice. Expansion of training and cultural skills to teach this content would require dedicated funds. It is recommended that more funding be provided for cultural training to assist with social workers' understanding of families of color.

Policies

An effective family service plan can be comprised of parenting classes based on specific needs; anger management classes; mandatory drug treatment and a rehabilitation program; agreement to unannounced home visits from CPS

to include home inspection and participation in all family court conferences and hearings. When families fail to meet these timely demands and yet maintain a job, the system takes away their children and placed in foster care.

Policy changes relating to timeline would allow the families more time to complete court ordered services. It can be very difficult for families to complete all their services within a short time frame. While completing multiple services, families must work, and maintain stability to reunify with their children. Many families are unable to complete their services on time due to lack of resources in their community, long waiting lists, and lack of transportation.

As discussed in the findings, participants described socioeconomic status as a factor for higher removal rates in child welfare. African American families have been negatively impacted by the child welfare system due to their socioeconomic status and lack of resources to complete and follow through with service plan. Families are more likely to reunify if they are provided with more time to complete their services.

Additionally, when the Native Americans were facing similar injustices as the African Americans, laws were created to help the Native American families. The Indian Child Welfare Act allows Native American tribes to take responsibility for their child's well-being and safety. Similarly, African American families should be provided with a preservation act that aims to promote the stability and security of African American families to prevent unnecessary removal of African American children from their families.

It is recommended that a separate entity be established to work specifically with African American families and in collaboration with the child welfare system. They would team with the family and advocate for the family. They would be knowledgeable about the challenges that African American families face and have solutions for the families to succeed. They would advocate for equal treatment of families and provide the necessary tools and resources to keep black families together. As discussed in the findings, there is a long history of racist policies that have negatively impacted African American communities. This contributes to the disproportionate representation of people of color. This issue requires a systematic change and a policy like ICWA can be a step towards helping these African American families.

Research

Further research of social workers' perceptions of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system can play a vital role in learning more about African American children and their families. An understanding of what drives social workers' decision-making process in child welfare can help to enforce policies to combat this issue. Additional research among African American families and their perceptions of disproportionality could help to address this issue.

Conclusion

The overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system has been a national debate for many decades. Our findings suggest

there is no single factor that contributes to this disproportionality. Major contributing factors are structural or systemic biases, individual and family risk factors as well as workers' cultural incompetency. While it may not be possible to address all these factors, it is important that the agency and its workers improve awareness of these mitigating factors in their decision-making process when working with families and children of color.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself and your professional experience.
 - a. Job title, agency, length of time in role
 - b. Prior experience
 - c. Preparation and training for position? (ex. Degree, special training)
 - d. Your race/ethnicity and gender

This study is about the disparity and disproportionality Black/African Americans face in the child welfare system. Now I would like to ask some questions about that.

2. What is your understanding of disparity and disproportionality of Black/African American families in child welfare?
 - a. Nationwide?
 - b. California?
 - c. Here locally?
 - d. At your agency?
3. In California, for example, African American children are being removed from their homes at quadruple the rate of the general population. Why do you think this is happening?
 - a. How about locally?
 - b. What factors impact these rates?
4. What, if anything should be done about this issue?
 - a. Policy changes?
 - b. Agency practices?
 - c. Social workers' roles?
5. How would you describe the child welfare system's relationship to Black/African American families?
 - a. Nationally?
 - b. Locally?
 - c. At your agency?

6. What is your agency doing, to address disproportionality?
 - a. Training?
 - b. How successful are these efforts?
7. What can you do to address disproportionality?
 - a. Have you examined your own biases? Those of co-workers?
 - b. Have you changed your practices, efforts?
8. If you had all the resources available, how would you address this issue?

Developed by: Acacia Lovett and Estelita Hassler

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the child welfare professionals' perceptions of the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system. The study is being conducted by Masters of Social Work students Acacia Lovett and Estelita Hassler, under the supervision of Deirdre Lanesskog, Assistant Professor, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to examine child welfare professionals' perceptions of African American children disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions in face to face interviews. These questions will focus on perceptions of child welfare professionals, the child welfare system, and racial biases, if applicable.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in this study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain confidential and interviews will be audio recorded.

DURATION: It will take 30 to 45 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There will be minimal risk to participants, such as feeling uncomfortable discussing race and disparity, but no more than what one would experience in every day life.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog at 909-537-7222 (email: Deirdre.lanesskog@csusb.edu).

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This research study was completed in collaboration between Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett. Both research partners shared equal responsibility in the completion of this project. The sections were completed as follows:

1. Data Collection and Data Analysis: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
2. Written Report and Presentation of Findings:
 - a. Abstract: Estelita Hassler
 - b. Acknowledgements: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
 - c. Chapter One. Introduction: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
 - d. Chapter Two. Literature Review: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
 - e. Chapter Three. Methods: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
 - f. Chapter Four. Results: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett
 - g. Chapter Five. Discussion: Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett

Both Estelita Hassler and Acacia Lovett contributed to the formatting, editing and revision process throughout the preparation of this paper for submission.