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SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DISPARITY IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY AND
DISPARITY
IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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
Nelyda Rodriguez

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Disproportionality and disparity within the United States child welfare system continue to be a problem affecting ethnic minority children and families. This study examined the opinions of social workers on racial disparity in the child welfare system through a qualitative approach. The information on the perceptions of seven child social workers was gathered through open-ended interview questions. The study's findings reveal a range of viewpoints on the factors that contribute to the disproportionality in child welfare, including historical reasons, systemic issues, bias among social workers and society, training, education and cultural humility, and communication between social workers and supervisors. The data obtained from this study shed light on the methods social workers themselves feel to be most useful in combating this issue. The study provided further information in understanding the complicated issue of disproportionality in the child welfare system, specifically in the county.

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I would like to acknowledge my coworkers who encourage me and supported me through my journey of pursuing my social work career. I also want to thank the schools of social work at California State University, San Bernardino for helping me through my degree program and allowing me to complete the program besides the life challenges.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family and many friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my husband and my children who gave me the strength and encouragement to accomplish my goal. I will always be grateful for all they have done, especially for my daughter Natalie Magana-Rodriguez who helped me in any possible way in my times of study.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother who taught me to never give up and keep a positive spirit and whose exemplary advice I will always try to follow.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Disproportionality among ethnic minority children is an ongoing national issue in the child welfare system. The overrepresentation of ethnic minority children in the child welfare system is a complex topic that needs further research.

The meaning of disproportionality is a difference in the number of children in the United States general population in contrast to the number of children of a similar group in the child welfare system (Hill, 2006). On the other hand, disparity is defined as the unfairness in services to a group of ethnic minority minors in the child welfare system (Hill, 2006). The definition of disproportionality and disparity is also observed in discrimination as providing different treatment to the same group of individuals (Myers et al., 2012).

The difference is shown in the number of minors in the child welfare system compared to the number of children in the general population compared to the number of children in the foster care system. In 2018, 23 percent of the estimated 437,283 children in the foster care system were African American, compared to 14 percent of African American minors in the general United States population (National Kids Count, 2018). The issue of disproportionality also occurs with Native American children in foster care. In 2018, the National Kids Count reported 1 percent of Native American minors in the general United States

population compare to 2 percent of Native American children in the child welfare system (National Kids Count, 2018).

The issue of disproportionality is also statewide. In California, children of color, including Native American children, participate in a higher percentage in the foster care system than white non-Hispanic minors (Shaw et al., 2008). The total figure of African American minors in California in 2018 was reported as 5 percent, whereas 20 percent of African American minors were reported in the out-of-home care system (National Kids Count, 2018). In 2018, Native American children were reported as 1 percent in California's foster care system, and yet only .5 percent was reported as the total population of Native American children (National Kids Count, 2018). The overrepresentation of children of color compared to the general children population continues to this date.

On the other hand, the difference in the total number of non-Hispanic, white children in the foster care system is not significantly different compared to California's total children population. In 2018, 26 percent non-Hispanic, white was reported for the whole child population in 2018 California, and 20 percent of non-Hispanic, white children were reported in the foster care system.

Ethnicity plays a significant role in the decision-making process for children entering foster care. It has been found that families of color experience more substantiated child maltreatment cases than other families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). The number of child maltreatment cases is not equal for all racial and ethnic groups (Lovato-Hermann et al., 2017). This has

been an ongoing problem, and various theories strive to clarify the causes of ethnic minority children's disproportionality in the child welfare system in the United States. Poverty, racial bias, and discrimination shown by social workers, system factors in the child welfare system such as lack of resources, and the region's characteristic are some aspects of disproportionality (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

The current conditions of disproportionality in the child welfare system are linked to historical events and policy changes over time. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act changed the child welfare practice emphasis from family preservation to the separation of families (Harp & Bunting, 2020). The change in policy from prevention and reunification to foster care and adoption significantly influenced the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system. Child welfare agencies investigate reported allegations of any source of abuse. Child welfare agencies throughout the states were established to safeguard the safety of the children and the preservation of families, and they are not equally applied (Harp & Bunting, 2020). Various studies indicate that maltreatment reports for African American children are likely to be more than White children (Miller, 2008; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). The system and policies are significant influencers of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system (Harp & Bunting, 2020).

Overrepresenting ethnic minority children in the child welfare system, which occurs more for African American children, results in adverse effects for

children and families. Studies have revealed the harmful effects of children and parents when separated. The trauma from separation is one lasting negative effect of the child welfare interference (Dettlaff et al., 2020). African American women in the United States experience prenatal drug screening and higher child welfare involvement at disproportionate rates. In turn, they have a difficult to impossible process of reunification (Children's Bureau 2016; Summers 2015). The result of racial disproportionality in child welfare is the lack of cultural service delivery to families and children (Tilbury et al., 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather country-specific information from child welfare workers on their perceptions of the reasons for disproportionality and disparity. There is limited county-based information on this issue. Additional research is essential to reduce disproportionality statistics affecting ethnic minority children, specifically African American children. The point of disproportionality is complicated as various reasons are connected to disproportionality. One of the factors that have been noted in multiple studies is the social worker's bias. It has been found that racial discrimination from welfare social workers is one factor that affects the disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. In addition to the social challenges, child welfare workers are in a position where race may be considered in their decision making for services to ethnic minority children (Katz & Connolly, 2017). There is a need to find more specific information to address the issue of disproportionality.

Understanding the social workers' views and attitudes on disproportionality and disparity help gain insight into this persistent problem.

Qualitative research was conducted to obtain social workers' perceptions of disproportionality within the child welfare system. The study was exploratory as it provided a further understanding of disproportionality and added information to the existing knowledge of this problem that affects ethnic minority children. More studies are being conducted on this complex problem. As noted by a study done by Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016), to better address disproportionality and disparity, agencies should look at its information on this issue to find the best solution.

Significance of the Study in Social Work

The initiative for conducting this research is to find specific data in the child welfare agency and understand the child welfare workers' view on disproportionality. Previous research points out the child welfare workers' bias as one factor in the child welfare system's disproportionality. This study brought awareness of the child welfare workers' perceptions of disproportionality and disparity, and ways to address this ongoing issue can be determined from the results.

As noted in previous research, racial bias and discrimination are factors of disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare system. This research has critical effects on social work practice at the individual and system levels. At the individual level, this study provided awareness to the child welfare workers of

continual identification of the issue of disproportionality and disparity with ethnic minority children and become culturally sensitive in the decision-making process when working with children and families involved in child maltreatment cases. Equally, the outcome of this research applies to the system level as it provided awareness to the child welfare agency on the issue and may assist in providing the tools and resources to social workers. Social workers should continue and support the goal of cultural humility and ethical principles of respecting everyone's differences, and cultural, and ethnic diversity (National Association of Social Worker, 2017).

The unequal representation of ethnic minority children involved in child welfare due to maltreatment still occurs, negatively impacting children and families lives. The social worker's understanding and identification of cultural bias aids in delivering equal services to families in child welfare cases. The social workers in the child welfare system must follow the ethical principle of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity to provide the best service delivery to children and families. As a result, the following research question is to be analyzed:

What are the child social workers' perceptions about reasons for disproportionality and disparity among ethnic minority children and families in the child welfare system?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter involves a review of other research done on disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. The areas reviewed are factors of disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system, gaps in the literature, and theories guiding conceptualization.

Factors of Disproportionality and Disparity

Various theories aim to explain the reasons for racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system (Fluke et al., 2011). Prior research on disproportionality shows four areas connected to the racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. One is family risks; the other concept is poverty and community risks. The third area is bias in the reporting process and throughout the life of the case in the child welfare system. The last concept is child welfare regulations (Hines et al., 2004). In other studies, family circumstances, social and financial difficulties were found to affect the higher number of child maltreatment in African Americans (Boyd, 2014; Fluke et al., 2011). Although various theories are connected to racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system, the research gives more attention to three areas. These areas are child welfare involvement due to social factors, racial

bias within the child welfare system, and unequal service delivery from the child welfare system (Fluke et al., 2011).

Social Factors

One area covered in many research studies concerning disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system is poverty. Statistics on poverty are higher for ethnic minority children unequally represented in the child welfare system (Bass et al., 2004). The relation of child maltreatment and poverty is further supported by recent research (Drake et al., 2011; Freisthler et al., 2007; Sedlak et al., 2010). Poverty is an indicator concerning the disproportionality of ethnic minority children in the child welfare system; research shows that higher poverty rates are noted for African American and Hispanic/Latino communities (Hines et al., 2004).

In a study done in the Oregon's child welfare system, poverty was linked to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system (Miller et al., 2012). Some participants' views on the study conducted in Oregon's child welfare system were toward poverty or other elements outside of the child welfare system being the causes of racial disproportionality (Miller et al., 2012). The participants supporting the idea of poverty as being the main cause of racial disproportionality was seen from white child welfare workers, community collaborators, and other organizations with control in the decision-making process (Miller et al., 2012). These findings show the lack of awareness from child welfare professionals, and further research on the perceptions of child welfare staff is essential. Similar

results may indicate the need to bring awareness of other factors linked to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system.

Impact of Child Welfare Workers on Disproportionality

Another factor that has been widely observed to affect the unequal representation in the child welfare system is the social workers' bias in the decision-making process.

Although poverty and other factors contribute to the disproportion of higher child maltreatment cases reported for ethnic minority children, there is evidence that shows that child social workers have limited control of their own biases. The limited management of child social workers' tendencies affects their decisions and actions when investigating child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). In a study conducted in King County, the racial bias between workers and professionals from other entities resulted in cultural misinterpretation (Harris & Hackett, 2008).

The decisions made by child social workers affect the service delivery process, and this affects the outcome and welfare of children and families involved in child maltreatment allegations. The child welfare department from the state of Michigan was observed to have negatively affected children and families in the African American community by not providing court advocate services when required by law (Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, 2009).

Cultural bias in the social worker's decisions is a factor for the disparate representation in child welfare (Duarte & Summers, 2013). Ethnic minority

children and families face adverse outcomes and obtain fewer services than other groups (Courtney et al., 1996). Social worker's bias is a concerning factor within the child welfare organizations in the United States, and further research can assist in the intervention of racial disproportionality and disparity. This research gives more information on the level of awareness from child social workers on disproportionality and difference within the child welfare department. The information obtained from this study provides insight into the department's needs and determine if ongoing cultural training should be provided.

Inequitable Service Delivery from the Child Welfare System

The service delivery in the child welfare system is another aspect link to disproportionality and disparity. The disproportionate number of African American families involved in the child welfare system may be due to the insufficient services that do not meet the families (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2008). Additionally, the limited opportunities for available benefits within the community for ethnic minority families not considered in child welfare case planning are leading causes of disproportionality (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2008). A study of the child welfare system in Michigan found deficiencies in the department's procedures, practices, and resources available for African American families (Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, 2009). The difference in service delivery for ethnic minority children in child welfare was also observed in a study done in 2011 by the Child Welfare Information Gateway organization. Services to white children were provided to stay in their homes; however, minors from families of color were

removed and positioned in out-of-home care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

The differences in service delivery within child welfare are viewed from different areas. In the out of home care, the services are additional for relative care providers than non-relative care providers. In a study that looks at the grandparents caring for their grandchildren, it was found that relative caretakers receive less financial support than non-related caretakers (Park, 2005). Another area that shows differences in service delivery is in the mental health services to foster children. The urgency for mental health services for foster children is more significant. Disparities in the mental health services to foster children were found in a previous study proving that minimal opportunity to mental health services was given to African American children and families compared to other ethnic groups (Garland et al., 2003). The difference in services to ethnic minority children is associated to racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system.

Gaps in the Literature

One area that needs further research is the child welfare worker's awareness of racial disproportionality and disparity within their department. The culture from child welfare agencies is different due to the demographics and additional research specific to the area, and the agency is needed. Further research is needed on how other entities are addressing the issue of disproportionality. The collaboration from other departments, such as mental

health, is essential to decrease the overrepresentation of ethnic minority children in the child welfare system. In ways of addressing the issue, there is limited research on evaluating the applicability and effectiveness of various interventions set to address the disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

One of the theories in understanding disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system is the ecological theory. The ecological theory provides an understanding of an individual's and social development. The issue of disproportionality in the child welfare system is observed from the system level to the individual level. At the system level, various social factors such as poverty are well mentioned in multiple studies due to the racial disparity and disproportionality in the child welfare system. At the individual level, social worker's bias and service delivery are noted as factors that contribute to the child welfare's disproportionality. The ecological theory relates to the research of disproportionality as it shows the connections of children, families, the community, and social systems.

Summary

A single factor cannot be observed as the leading cause of disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. Various studies point out to social factors, child welfare worker's bias in the decision-making, and unequal services delivery as the sources for the disproportionality and disparity in

the child welfare system. Further research at the local level specific to the child welfare department is needed to understand the level of awareness from child welfare workers on disproportionality and disparity.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study explored the social workers' perceptions of disproportionality and disparity among ethnic minority children from the child welfare system. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the child welfare department in addressing the disproportionality of ethnic minority children within the child welfare system was made possible by studying the perspectives of child social workers. The areas covered in this section include the researcher's methods, the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subject protection, and data analysis.

Study Design

The study design in this research was a qualitative approach to obtain insight on the child's social workers' opinions and understanding of the area of disproportionality and disparity of ethnic minority children in the child welfare system. The information on the perceptions of child social workers was gathered through open-ended interview questions.

Qualitative research involved studying the participant's views, perceptions, and attitudes. Through qualitative research, the perceptions of child welfare workers on disproportionality were explored. There are various studies on disproportionality and disparity in child welfare; however, there is limited County

specific research in this area. This study provided additional information on how child social workers view disproportionality and how this can be addressed at the agency level. The perceptions of child social workers with many years of experience, and workers who may be new to the field added valuable information to this study as it showed the department's needs.

One of this study's limitations is that the results cannot generalize to child social workers due to the small sample size. Also, the child social workers did not provide a detailed response to the questions due to their commitment to the department. The availability from the child social workers to participate in the study was limited due to their work schedule and the fact of qualitative interviews as time consuming.

Sampling

A snowball process was used to recruit the subjects by having this researcher recruit from their social worker network and having the participants recruit other social workers from child welfare department. The data was collected from face-to-face interviews with at least seven social workers. The primary condition in selecting the participants was that they are child welfare workers. The importance of choosing child welfare workers is their direct involvement with ethnic minority children and families.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data was obtained by conducting virtual face-to-face interviews with child social workers and providing a self-administered questionnaire. The

questionnaires included a set of questions to get demographic information and open-ended interview questions. The demographic questions consisted of the number of years of experience in the child welfare area, age, gender, and ethnicity. Fifteen open-ended questions allowed participants to provide information on child social worker's perception on racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system; the reasons they perceived of influencing disproportionality; training and experience they have in working with ethnic minority children and families; their competences of providing culturally diverse services to ethnic minority families; ways of addressing disproportionality within their agency and resources and services being provided to reduce disproportionality of ethnic minority families in the child welfare system. The questions were created to gain insight from child social workers on racial disproportionality and disparity. The questions were presented and further reviewed with the instructor, and it was further reviewed with my research supervisor to assert the reliability of this instrument used in this research. The strength from using these questions is that the participants have the opportunity to provide detailed information on the area of disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare department. On the other hand, one of the limitations is that it was time intensive and that participants were not able to respond to all of the questions in detail.

Procedures

The data was gathered through the recruitment of known child social workers' contacts and asking them to participate in the study. The participants who agreed to participate were then scheduled for a virtual interview meeting based on their availability and the interview time was from 30 to 60 minutes. The informed consent and questionnaire were provided via email at the time of the interview appointment. The responses from the participants were recorded through a virtual meeting and note-taking. A copy of the informed consent was obtained at the end of the interview, and the data acquired was secured.

Protection of Human Subjects

The study protocol was approved by the California State University San Bernardino IRB. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were protected for this study by applying preventive methods. Their personal information, such as names, addresses, and contact information, were not asked in the interviews. The informed consent and questionnaires had a random number assigned for identification purposes. The participants were guaranteed their responses remaining confidential, and they were reminded of their voluntary participation. In the interview process, confidentiality was applied by ensuring that the meeting is conducted in a private setting.

Data Analysis

The data was obtained from each interview and evaluated by applying a qualitative data analysis process. Qualitative research allows gathering comprehensive information from one-on-one interviews. The information gathered from the demographic questions was explained by using descriptive statistics. The interviews were recorded, the information was examined, and formatted in Microsoft Word software. The major topics that rose from social workers' responses on disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare was identified and codes were assigned. The codes were then filtered and reorganized. The information from the major areas were compared to identify any connection that may evolve from the data. The process in the data analysis was thoroughly documented.

Summary

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study to learn from child social workers' attitudes and perceptions of disproportionality with ethnic minority children within the child welfare system. The child social workers had the opportunity to report detailed information on the area of disproportionality. Through various open-ended interview questions, the participants were able to provide information on their perceptions on racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. A snowball process was used to recruit the participants. A private virtual meeting was scheduled for each participant. During the interview, informed consent and interview questions were provided. They

were informed of their responses being confidential and of their voluntary participation in the study. The confidentiality of the participants was ensured as personal information was not asked.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

A summary of the racial disproportionality studied from the child welfare social workers' perspective is presented in this chapter. In this section, a detail report of the data gathering as well as a thematic analysis is described. The interviews were conducted via virtual face-to-face interviews from September 2, 2022, to October 10, 2022. A complete data review process was established after gathering all data from each participant. The transcriptions were created multiple times, annotated, and conceptualized to perform a thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews are historical reasons, systemic issues, bias among social workers and society, training, education and cultural humility, and communication between social workers and supervisors. The participant's demographics, findings to the research questions, and summary is presented in this chapter.

Participant Demographics

The sample size is comprised of seven social workers currently employed in child welfare. Specific demographic questions were asked including years of experience, age, gender, and ethnicity. The participants' years of experience ranged from 0 to 20 years. More than half had between six to twenty years of experience compared to the remaining group which had zero to six years of experience. The average amount of time a social worker reported working

particularly in child welfare was about eight years. Among the participants only one was in the age bracket of 25 to 30, while the remaining 6 were between 30 to 50 years old. The sample size had a higher percentage of females (86.0%) than males (14.0%). Regarding ethnicity, there were 43.0% African Americans/Black, 28.5% Hispanic-Americans/Latinos, Mexicans, and 28.5% White/Caucasian (See Table 1).

Table 1: Participant's Demographics (N=7)

Demographic Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Years of experience		
0-5 Years	2	29.0%
6-20 Years	5	71.0%
Age		
25-30 Years	1	14.0%
30-50 Years	6	86.0%
Gender		
Male	1	14.0%
Female	6	86.0%
Ethnicity Identification		
White/Caucasian	2	28.5%
African America/Black	3	43.0%
Hispanic/Mexican	2	28.5%

Findings to the Research Questions

The purpose of the interview questions was to examine the social workers' opinions on the reasons for disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. There were fifteen open-ended questions, and each question received a response from the seven different participants. The information gathered from the interviews underwent a thorough thematic examination (see Table 2). Six important topics emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data.

Historical Reasons

The social workers were interviewed and asked on their thoughts on whether racial disproportionality exist and is a problem in the child welfare system and what can be done to reduce racial disproportionality. The majority of the participants brought up the impacts of historical racism that have played a significant role in the disproportionality of children and families of color in the child welfare system. Children of color historically have been disproportionately affected by practices like forced assimilation, forcible separation from their family, and enslavement, especially Black children. These policies' effects are still being felt today, and they are part of the reason why children and families are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

One participant expressed, that "...the way our lands were colonized, historically what we learned in the books, and the philosophy of manifest destiny (Participant 1)" are reasons for the presence of racial disproportionality. Another

participant mentioned that racial disproportionality is happening "...because of racial history within the United States (Participant 3)." Other participant believes that "...it is as a result of historical injustices that have permeated the African-American community over the last sixty years (Participant 5)."

Systemic Issues

When participants were asked on their thoughts on whether racial disproportionality is a problem in the child welfare system, and what more they thought should be done to reduce racial disproportionality, responses revealed that the racial disparity is built in at the systemic level. The participants discussed how the system catering to one group more than others is a cause of the overrepresentation of children from different backgrounds in the child welfare system. Families face a hurdle in the system that prevents them from getting help and resources equally. The government intervention is cited as being necessary to address disproportionality.

Participant 1 stated that "...it's a systemic issue, we tend to favor a certain group versus others (Participant 1)." "As a system, we make it complicated for service delivery and access to resources (Participant 1)." Another participant expressed that "...we have such a broken system" and "...the need of the government stepping more to address it (Participant 2)." On a bigger scale, participant 3 mentioned that racial disproportionality "...needs to be advocated for within the systems, the State and Federal level."

Bias Among Social Workers and Society

The next theme that resulted from the interviews is bias. The participants were asked on why racial disproportionality exists and the role of social workers in creating racial disproportionality. The participants explained that bias among social workers and society significantly influence racial disproportionality.

In relation to Social Workers' bias, one participant reported that "...we have the bias based on those cultural beliefs or upbringings (Participant 3)." Another participant shared in reference to social workers to "...make sure that their biases are not affecting their recommendation and decisions (Participant 4)." The majority of the participants agreed that social workers must be conscious of their preconceptions and confront their own presumptions. The core value of social justice in the field of social work includes addressing the bias of the social workers.

When the participants were asked on the role the community play in racial disproportionality, participants identified societal biases as another source of bias related to disproportionality. Participant 2 reported that "...it has to do with stereotypes, biases, racism..." and "...how law enforcement and the public responds to reports of child abuse." Participant 2 also indicated that there is "...an obligation to say something. Depending on what you see what the color of their skin is, their income level, you are more willing to say something or not." This participant indicate that people will have a unique perception on similar or same situations depending upon the race of the individuals involved. Thus,

making it so that the ideas common place in society about said racial group will always be a contributing factor leading social workers away from an objective conclusion. As stated by Participant 4 "...the community plays a part by being the reporters of child abuse and neglect and they have the role of monitoring their own biases." Participant 7 expressed that "...the school play a part in it too, for calling in on African American kids, even Hispanic kids."

Training

The next theme that arose was the agency's current and continuous training of all levels of staff involved in child welfare as an area that has been successful in and call for more training to be given to professionals in child welfare. Social workers, managers, administrators, and other professionals working in the child welfare system must have the necessary skills, knowledge, and competences to interact with families from different backgrounds. The participants concurred that leaders and social workers should receive regular training on how to prevent creating unfavorable associations when working with families. It was suggested that staff personnel receive training, that policies be regularly reviewed, and that training procedures from other counties be used.

Social workers reported that there is a need for "...training social workers and supervisors on not having a negative connotation (Participant 1)." Another participant shared that when the "...county does a lot more training on it, is a way of trying to address racial disproportionality (Participant 2)." A view from other practices was mentioned by other participant where it was explained that

“Counties such as Santa Cruz County that is making it mandatory for all social workers to attend a cultural responsive academy training (Participant 5).”

Participant 6 reported that “...making sure that staff are trained and reviewing policy on regular basis.”

Education and Cultural Humility

The next theme evolved from the participants responding to the role families in general play in reducing racial disproportionality. The education within families and cultural humility were identified as key functions in racial disproportionality.

The participants mentioned that “...families have the power to have conversations with their children (Participant 1).” Other participant reported that “...if families are teaching their children to be biased or racist, then it affects society as a whole (Participant 2).” It was also expressed by another participant that “...whether your racism is very real in your family, that gets passed on through generations (Participant 3).”

When the participants were asked on the role social workers’ cultural competency has in racial disproportionality, it was found that cultural humility was considered to be crucial in addition to having cultural competence.

One participant mentioned that “...cultural humility is being in the learner’s seat...” and that “...the role of social workers play in racial disproportionality is the fact that we believe that we are so competent (Participant 1).” Another participant reported that “I don’t believe in cultural competency because nobody

can have cultural competence (Participant 5).” Other participant indicated that “...social workers and the higher ups have to be educated (Participant 2).” Participant 4 indicated that “...if workers are not culturally competent, you’re going to see more racial disproportionality (Participant 4).”

Communication Between Social Workers and Supervisors

The last theme derived from interview response patterns from the question on efforts from supervisor to reduce racial disproportionality. The majority of the respondents mentioned the input and conversations from supervisors are important to reduce racial disproportionality. The participants stressed the role of supervisors in reducing racial disparities in child welfare and ensuring that services are offered fairly and in a culturally competent way, as well as in training and supporting their workers. To guarantee that all families are treated fairly and equally, regardless of race or ethnicity, supervisors play a role in identifying and resolving unconscious prejudices and preconceptions among employees.

One respondent indicated that “everything is a conversation, supervisor is fair and open to see the strengths of families and willing to listen (Participant 1).” Another respondent shared that there is a “great communication, trying to see the root of the issue, looking at person’s cultural background, and think from their point of view (Participant 2).” The other participant reported that “within the questions that the supervisor asks, if it comes up as a concern, then we should say something (Participant 3).” It was also suggested that managers' encouragement of staff to participate in trainings that can aid in minimizing

disparity within the child welfare system. A respondent indicated the following “my supervisor she kind of just encourages us to sign up for training aside from what is mandatory such as the cultural responsiveness academy (Participant 6).”

Table 2: Study of Major Themes in Open Ended Questions

Themes	Description
Theme 1	<p>Historical Reasons</p> <p>Historical injustices, racial discrimination, and land colonization were identified as factors that contribute to the existence of racial disproportionality.</p>
Theme 2	<p>Systemic Issues</p> <p>Racial disproportionality in child welfare is identified at the macro level as a result of systemic and structural factors.</p>
Theme 3	<p>Bias Among Social Workers and Society</p> <p>Biases in society and among social workers were mentioned as playing a significant part in racial disproportionality.</p>
Theme 4	<p>Training</p> <p>The ongoing and existing training to all levels of staff within child welfare were mentioned as provided by the agency and as an area that has been effective and additional training to be provided to child welfare staff.</p>
Theme 5	<p>Education and Cultural Humility</p> <p>Certain social workers identify a lack of cultural humility rather than cultural competence from social workers and the need of education in cultural awareness. Social workers felt that families have a critical role in teaching children on racism and bias.</p>
Theme 6	<p>Communication Between Social Workers and Supervisors</p> <p>A number of social workers found that open communication by supervisors is an effort to reduce racial disproportionality.</p>

Summary

In this chapter, the information compiled from social workers, the demographics of the participants, and the themes that resulted from the responses to the interview questions were presented. These components were acquired via categorizing interviews into tables and thematically analyzing the results.

The participants shared historical reasons, systemic issues, bias among social workers and society, training, education and cultural humility, and communication between social workers and supervisors all play a role in the disproportionate number of children in the child welfare system. Policies and practices that have resulted in social and economic disadvantages have disproportionately affected families, which can contribute to greater rates of child welfare participation. Racism in the child welfare system is not only the result of overt discrimination. Social workers' preconceived notions and prejudices regarding families of race may influence how they view and treat families. Because of these prejudices, children of race are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and experience greater gaps in outcomes. Many approaches can be taken to lessen the racial disparity in the child welfare system. Promoting equality and inclusion in child welfare organizations through policies and practices is a crucial tactic for overcoming racism's historical and systemic roots.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Expert social professionals were surveyed for their thoughts on the causes of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. Participant data, combined with previous studies, illuminated the nature of the problem and suggested solutions that could be implemented immediately. Overall, the results of the study indicate that reducing racial disparities in the child welfare system is difficult and calls for a number of strategies to ensure that all children are treated fairly.

Discussion

The following section outlines how the results offered a better understanding of how social workers perceive the issue of overrepresentation and racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. The study contributed to the understanding of racial disparity, utilizing the perspective of social workers. Each main theme historical reasons, systemic issues, bias among social workers and society, training, education and cultural humility, and communication between social workers and supervisors will be discussed with an emphasis on the implications of the theme.

Participants attributed an overrepresentation of minority children and families in the child welfare system to historical racism, which was the first subject to emerge from the interviews. This underlines the need to deal with the effects of systematic racism on marginalized groups. These results line up with previous research showing that historical and structural racism contribute to differences in children's involvement with the welfare system.

The historical ramifications as observed in other studies were noted by many participants as a contributing factor to the disproportionality in the child welfare system. As noted by Harp and Bunting (2020) that the historical occurrences and long-term policy changes are responsible for the existing conditions of disproportionality in the child welfare system. Organizations should evaluate their systems to identify injustices and disparities and then implement strategies that benefit their own communities.

Another key subject that participants have raised regarding disproportionality in the child welfare system includes bias among social workers and society. Participants in the discussion of biases revealed that many employees have a prejudice towards families. The result of bias among social workers is not entirely favorable toward families. This aligns with the study done by Hines (2004) that found that the child welfare workers have bias during the reporting procedure and for the duration of the case. Additionally, the results are supported with studies done by Boyd (2014), and Fluke (2011) where they found that racial discrimination exists within the child welfare system, and that the

system provides services inequitably. It is clear from this study and the literature already in existence that personal biases do play a role in the overrepresentation of some groups in child welfare. Social workers in child welfare and others in the community deliberately or unknowingly, allow personal prejudices to influence their judgment and this results in certain groups being over represented in the child welfare. Using various cultural responsiveness training programs to promote awareness and understanding of how biases may affect decision-making is one intervention to address the bias of social workers.

The necessity of continuous training for all child protection workers was another common thread from participants. Having this understanding is crucial when interacting with families from different backgrounds. Social workers should continue to get cultural training, which includes understanding the cultural background of families and children of ethnic minorities who are involved in the child welfare system. Culturally-trained social workers are more equipped to understand and tolerate the cultural differences that exist among distinct groups of people. In order to comprehend the family's cultural ideas, values, and practices, social workers may also carry out cultural evaluations. This can aid in locating any obstacles resulting from culture that might apply to the situation. Participants in this study proposed that continuing education programs be offered with a bias-awareness theme that emphasizes learning about the cultural ideas, values, and practices of the family. Every year, all child welfare workers should be required to complete the cultural responsiveness training.

Another theme that emerged is the need for family education and cultural humility. Social workers need to be educated in cultural awareness, according to some participants, who point out that there is a lack of cultural humility and that it is not possible to get competence. The respondents also felt that families have a key role in teaching children on racism and bias. Hines (2004) found that racial inequality in the child welfare system is linked to the community, and family factors. If the prejudice perpetuated by previous generations in families is not addressed, it will continue to result in disparity. Community resources for talking about racism and bias. Communities should provide materials for families to use when talking to their children about racism and bias in order to address the need for families to teach children about these issues.

The system favoring one group over another and the barriers that families encounter from receiving assistance and resource are areas that resulted from this study. There is a need for legislation to address the differences and injustices that children from families of racial or ethnic minorities experience in the child welfare system. Social workers can promote awareness of these problems and highlight the need for reform.

The value of supervisor discussions and feedback in minimizing racial disparities in child welfare was another subject identified in this study. This shows how important it is for managers to be sensitive to different cultures while serving their employees. These results are in line with previous research that has

highlighted the importance of strong leadership and oversight in the fight to eliminate inequalities in the child protection system.

Another area identified in the study's finding is communication between social workers and supervisors. The participants found that communication about racial disproportionality will help agency staff members better understand the families they are working with. Participants said they believed that if child welfare could start making racial dialogues acceptable once more, it would assist better meet the needs of families.

Approaches to the Problem of Racial Disproportionality

The following is a summary of action to take in light of the results of the study:

- Provide and enforce mandated, on-going training for child welfare social workers that focusses on cultural competency, racial awareness, and reducing racial disproportionality. It is important to assess the results of the trainings to make sure they are having the desired effect.
- Social workers and their superiors should be encouraged to have frank and open discussions on racial disproportionality. Meetings, seminars, and workshops on the subject could be part of this.
- Encourage communities and child welfare organizations to embrace racial conversations in the sake of better understanding multicultural families. Cultural mediators, mutual-help groups, and local non-profits might all play a role in making this happen.

- More transparency and accountability, community engagement, and the use of data-driven decision making are just some of the ways in which the child welfare system can be made more just and equitable.
- Ensure that agency policies, practices, and outcomes are effective in eliminating racial disproportionality and fostering equality in the child welfare system, agencies by conducting regular evaluations of these elements.

In order to ensure that all families are treated fairly and equally, child welfare organizations and communities should cooperate to implement these suggestions. These suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive, and it is possible that more measures will be required to effectively handle this multifaceted problem.

Limitations

The size of the sample is a limitation of the study. Findings may not be transferable to the greater community of child welfare social workers due to the study's small sample size. The spectrum of concerns connected to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system may not have been captured by the viewpoints and experiences of the participants who did take part in the study.

The small sample size also casts doubt on the validity and consistency of the data. Fewer people taking part means less likelihood of getting a representative sample of child welfare social workers' thoughts and feelings. One practical limitation of research in this area is the difficulty in recruiting volunteers

due to their work schedules. It may be more difficult to conduct studies with bigger and more representative samples due to difficulties in locating and recruiting people, which may reduce the capacity to draw conclusions about the issues being studied.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Research, and Policy

Social workers should continue to get cultural training, which includes understanding the cultural background of families and children of ethnic minorities who are involved in the child welfare system. Culturally trained social workers are more equipped to understand and tolerate the cultural differences that exist among distinct groups of people. In order to comprehend the family's cultural ideas, values, and practices, social workers may also carry out cultural evaluations. This can aid in locating any obstacles resulting from culture that might apply to the situation. Participants in this study proposed that continuing education programs be offered with a bias-awareness theme that emphasizes learning about the cultural ideas, values, and practices of the family.

The child welfare departments need to be aware of the causes of racial disparity in the child welfare system such as historical reasons, systemic issues, bias among social workers and society, training, education and cultural humility, and communication between social workers and implement ways to address it. The departments should also encourage social workers to discuss issues related to racial disparities.

The inequities that exist between ethnic minority children and families in the child welfare system can be better understood with further research. Additional research is required to determine how social workers from child welfare organizations from different counties and community partners like schools, law enforcement, hospitals, and mental health providers view disproportionality. This would aid in understanding how people perceive racial disparity and how to prevent it on a bigger scale. Further studies are required to investigate how communities and families view disproportionality, as well as to determine whether these groups are aware of it and its potential causes.

The discrepancies and injustices that face children from ethnic minority families in the child welfare system should be addressed through legislation, which social workers should also advocate for. Social workers can use their expertise to educate the public and lawmakers about these issues and point out the need for reform that mandates child welfare organizations to look at the disproportionate representation of children within their systems.

The programs within the child welfare system that address the particular needs of children and families from racial and ethnic minorities should receive more funding. This may entail funding programs that place a focus on early detection and prevention as well as culturally appropriate services like language translation and interpreting.

Initiatives and policies intended to address the disproportionality in the welfare system should be closely monitored and their effectiveness should be

evaluated. This may include collecting data on outcomes for families and children of ethnic minorities and routinely evaluating programs and policies to ensure they are meeting the needs of the people they serve.

Conclusion

The data collected show that there were substantial variations in opinions on the causes of disproportionality in child welfare. The sample size and the locations of the participants are limitations of this study, notwithstanding the usefulness of the results. The results indicated that the personal and social bias tend to impact the perception on issues in the child welfare system. The interviews highlighted that the same issues taking place in the child welfare system will be approached differently depending on their racial background as well as the social context concerning their racial/ethnic background. Therefore, social workers have to compensate for their internal biases along with social perceptions that may come and act as a determining factor in the treatment that the family may be receiving from the child welfare system. Findings like these need to be replicated in bigger and more diverse samples, and the efficacy of specific measures to eliminate racial disproportionality in the child welfare system should be investigated in future studies.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS ON
DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DISPARITY

in the Child Welfare System

Number of years of experience in the child welfare area:

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

What is your understanding of what racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is?

What are your thoughts on whether racial disproportionality is a problem in the child welfare system?

What are your thoughts on why racial disproportionality exists?

What role do families play in racial disproportionality?

What role does community play in racial disproportionality?

What role does the agency play in racial disproportionality?

What role do social workers play in racial disproportionality?

What do you think has been effective in reducing racial disproportionality?

What more do you think should be done to reduce racial disproportionality?

What role do you think social worker cultural competency has in racial disproportionality?

What efforts does your supervisor make to reduce racial disproportionality?

What efforts does your agency make to reduce racial disproportionality?

Please describe any specific training have you have received from your agency or other sources on racial disproportionality in the Public Child Welfare system.

Please describe any specific training have you have received from your agency or other sources on working with ethnic minority families.

What are any other thoughts you may have on why racial disproportionality exists and how it can be addressed?

Thank you for your participation in this interview!

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the social workers' perceptions about disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system. The study is being conducted by Nelyda Rodriguez, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Smith, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the social workers' perceptions about disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be interviewed via video conferencing and asked questions on the reasons they perceived of influencing disproportionality and some demographics.

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

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 30 to 40 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Laurie Smith at (909) 537- 3837.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2022.

.....
I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO
I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Your continued participation in this interview indicates your consent

Date

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

June 15, 2022

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2021-136

Dr. Laurie Smith and Nelyda Rodriguez
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Dr. Laurie Smith and Nelyda Rodriguez:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS ON DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DISPARITY IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.

Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.

Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.

Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2021-136 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,
Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

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