Overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system: Differential treatment in risk assessment by public child welfare workers

Rebecca Sheree Owens

Courtney Marques Roushion

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OVERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT
IN RISK ASSESSMENT BY PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

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
Rebecca Sheree Owens
Courtney Marques Roushion
June 2006
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Date 6/5/06
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify salient factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system. This study seeks to examine whether or not public child welfare workers are biased in their assessments of African Americans, and if years of experience influence their judgment. By understanding some of the salient factors that contribute to these disproportionate numbers, Child Welfare Services can begin to revamp their programs and services to ensure that they are more culturally sensitive and equitable.

This study utilized a quantitative research design, which involved distributing three separate vignettes to three groups of public child welfare workers. The three surveys contained a vignette and survey of risk assessment of an African American, Hispanic or Caucasian family. The findings for this study revealed that public child welfare workers assessed the African American family at a higher level of risk for neglect than the Hispanic and Caucasian families. The results also yielded that years of experience in the field of child welfare had no impact on the public child welfare workers' assessment of risk for African Americans.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge Brian Thomson (LMFT) for his guidance and expertise in the area of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. We wish to acknowledge Sally Richter (LCSW) and Olga Granillo (SSP) for all of their support and input in this study. In addition, Dr. Janet Chang for assisting us in constructing this study and providing us with additional resources to help further our knowledge. Finally, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to family members and friends that consistently encouraged us through our academic journey.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the many children of color that are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. It is our hope that our study will help shed light on this imperative crisis and aid in bringing fairness and equity to all children, regardless of race or ethnicity.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The over-representation of African-Americans in the child welfare system is a national issue of concern. For the purpose of this study, over-representation and disproportionality indicates "the percentage of children of color in the child welfare system is greater than the corresponding percentage in the overall U.S. population" (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2004). According to the National Data Analysis System, African-American children make up 15% of the total population under the age of 18, but represent 40% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2004). Child Welfare Agencies are being faced with the challenge of understanding why African American children are being over represented in child welfare services. Though this is not a new phenomenon, in recent years this problem has come to the forefront of child welfare agencies across the nation.

The outcomes for African Americans are discouraging and there is no empirical research to explain why this pattern continues to occur. For example, African American
males over the age of two are less likely to be adopted as compared to white males of a similar age (Child Welfare Services Stakeholders, 2003). African-American children also reach permanency less, have lower chances of reunification and are represented in the juvenile justice system in disproportionally high numbers (CWS Stakeholders, 2003). It is vital to understand the cause of these issues, so that agencies are able to provide the necessary tools to reduce risk factors and subsequently decrease the number of African American children in child welfare services.

Policy Context

Currently, there is a policy that negatively impacts African-Americans in the child welfare system. The Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 was intended to work on behalf of the child to ensure that all children are safe and receive permanency in their lives. However, African American children are negatively impacted because the time frames for services are very strict and children tend to stay in the system longer than other ethnic groups (Karpilow & Reed, 2002). This law could cause more African American children to be orphaned because their
parents were unable to fulfill the mandated requirements in the allotted time (Morton, 1999).

In contrast, the Multi-ethnic Placement Act of 1994, seeks to try and reduce the amount of time that African American children spend in foster care by eliminating race/ethnicity as a factor when placing children with adoptive families. There is a shortage of adoptive families, especially African American adoptive families, within San Bernardino County (Brian Thomson, personal contact, May 2005). MEPA gives African American children, who are unable to reunify with their parents, a chance at permanency in their lives.

In California, the child welfare agencies are working to investigate factors contributing to racial disproportionality, which falls under the issue of ‘Fairness and Equity.’ Fairness and Equity is a guiding principle of Child Welfare agencies that was implemented to ensure that everyone who comes into contact with the agency receives fair, unbiased services regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so forth. However, the fact that there are significantly higher numbers of African Americans who come into contact
with child protective services shows that there is a lapse in fair and equitable services for this population.

**Practice Context**

On a micro level the implications of this issue are vital to direct services being provided to African American children by social workers. Since services to these children will come from a micro level, there is a need to eliminate or reduce bias within the agency and, in turn, provide adequate and thorough services for this population. The services child welfare workers provide are essential in helping children recover and overcome the issues that brought them into the system, as well as, address the trauma that is experienced as a result of being placed in the system.

An approach public child welfare workers should be taking when dealing with African American clients would involve cultural competency. Cultural competent practice requires that public child welfare workers familiarize themselves with the background and norms of the African American culture, which will reduce the likelihood of CPS involvement due to the workers ignorance of the culture. However, the literature suggests that not all public child welfare workers are practicing in a culturally
competent manner, and allow personal bias to influence the decision making process (Chand, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to examine whether or not public child welfare workers are biased in their assessments of African Americans, and if years of experience influence their judgment. By understanding some of the salient factors that contribute to these disproportionate numbers, Child Welfare Services can begin to revamp their programs and services to ensure that they are more culturally sensitive and equitable. Racial disproportionality should be a concern for all agencies, but it is definitely a concern for San Bernardino County. One of the dilemmas that the agency has recognized is that they have little to no control over the referrals that they receive. However, it is the intent of this study to identify any internal bias that exists amongst public child welfare workers. Should the findings show a bias on the part of Child welfare service staff, then the agency will be able to address the staff with the findings and make the necessary changes to reduce their role in this problem.
This overrepresentation of African American children in the system raises questions as to why this dilemma exists. More research is needed to address the possible causes and to discover ways to prevent this problem from worsening over time. This study seeks to explore whether child welfare workers' handling these referrals have a bias attitude towards African American families therefore, assessing their children at higher risk than other ethnic groups.

Investigating public child welfare workers' prejudicial behavior towards African Americans may help to understand possible reasons as to why so many African American children are placed in foster care. It is important to address this matter, and not ignore the reality that some workers may possess personal bias. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand if this problem exists within the system, so agencies can work to improve their approach when working with African Americans. Hopefully, this change will help to ensure that all children are fairly and appropriately being served, regardless of race, by public child welfare workers within CPS. This study will identify whether public child welfare workers are perpetuating ignorance and racial
bias in their assessment of African American families. Should this be the case, this study will allow for the necessary changes to be implemented, as well as holding accountable those individuals who allow their personal views to impede their professional judgment.

The Child Welfare Department in San Bernardino is greatly interested in researching these issues and eager to know if public child welfare workers within their agency assess African American families differently than other ethnic groups. If the results from this study indicate a major difference in risk assessment between these groups, the agency can address their workers and collaborate to find ways to resolve this inappropriate behavior on the part of their staff. Additionally, this current problem impacts the African-American population as a whole because they are being directly affected.

Due to limited research regarding factors leading to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system, the most suitable research design for this study is a quantitative, cross-sectional survey. A vignette will be created to help construct a situation involving risk and an instrument will be produced to assess risk. The vignette and instrument are being
created to specifically target any bias that may exist amongst public child welfare workers. The questions selected for the survey will indirectly measure bias, using a scale that determines their perceptions of the severity of risk identified in the vignette.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The findings from this study will provide information about public child welfare workers and their possible bias practice towards African-American clients. This area has not been widely researched. This study may also uncover the unjust treatment administered in social service agencies and stimulate an interest in effective strategies to eliminate this problem. With the potential results of the study, African Americans can become aware of the issue and advocate for themselves in order to gain fair and equitable services. This study will contribute directly to the child welfare practice because the issue being addressed deals specifically with current problems facing child welfare agencies. The results of this study may influence a change in service delivery within the County of San Bernardino, should there be evidence to support bias inside the agency.
When looking at social work policy, this study may help identify changes that may be required in current policy. The findings will allow for other policies to be created that deal specifically with inappropriate actions on the part of public child welfare workers when dealing with African American families. In San Bernardino County the findings of this research will give the agency the knowledge that it needs to identify the problem and address it with their employees.

Overall, this study will greatly contribute to the body of knowledge within the social work field by providing data on a controversial issue concerning the overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare. When employing the generalist intervention process, the assessment phase of intervention will be addressed by this study. The research hypotheses for this study are:

(1) public child welfare workers are more likely to assess African American children at a higher level of risk as compared to other ethnic groups

(2) public child welfare workers with more years of experience will assess African Americans at a lower level of risk than workers with less experience. The research question is: "How do public child welfare workers assess risk for child abuse
and neglect among African Americans as compared to other ethnic groups?"
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter 2 deals with the literature pertinent to the issue of overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare services. The literature seeks to examine contributing factors to the issue, as well as the scope and magnitude of racial disproportionality within child welfare. This chapter is divided into several sections that will address: historical context of African Americans and Social Services, possible salient factors contributing to overrepresentation, issues with cultural competence and assessment by social workers, and theories guiding conceptualization of the problem.

Historical Context of African Americans in Child Welfare Services

Billingsley (1992) states “the dominant child welfare institutions of the country openly excluded Black Children” (p. 213). Even after being included within CWS, racism and segregation has often denied African-American families access to legitimate services and have set the stage for differential treatment in the system (Close,
1983). The literature suggests that African Americans have experienced institutional discrimination not only in social services, but also in other areas including housing, employment, education and health (Amin & Oppenheim, 1992, p. 112). Unfortunately, this population has had to endure oppressive conditions in America, due to the racist mentality that once dominated our society.

It is possible that since all social workers come from the general public, some may possess racial bias and view African Americans in a negative context (Brian Thomson, personal contact, May 2005).

Morton (2000) examined the historical experiences that uncover institutional inequalities against African Americans within the Child Welfare System. She indicates that from the mid-nineteenth century through the Great Depression, African American children were excluded from 276 of the 353 orphanages across the country. In the 1960’s significant numbers of African Americans began to receive admittance into the private orphanages, but were less likely than whites to receive psychiatric treatment. African Americans were more likely to be placed into public correctional facilities, which were harsher and less therapeutic (Morton, 2000).
Once private agencies began to provide services for African Americans, the agencies were unlikely to find "appropriate" families to adopt African American children (Jackson-White & Dozier, 1997). The inability of the agencies to place these children was mainly due to a lack of experience in servicing this population as well as a lack of understanding of the traditional roles the elderly and single play as caregivers in the African American Community (Jackson-White & Dozier, 1997). The policies of the adoption agencies discriminated against both single parents and individuals over the age of 40, reducing the pool of available families that could adopt African American children (Jackson-White & Dozier). Jackson-White and Dozier (1997), state that as a result "African American children suffered from the child welfare system's inability to work in their best interests and became its victims" (p. 4).

Possible Causes for African American Overrepresentation in the Child Welfare System

Poverty and family structure are two factors that may contribute to the placement of African American children into the child welfare system. Amin and
Oppenheim (1992) stated: "Poverty is not even-handed. The chances of experiencing poverty are far higher for people from ethnic minorities than for white people" (p. 1). Due to economic disparity, African American parents are viewed as incompetent but, in reality, have simply fallen prey to "social inequality" (Jones, 1994). According to the 1997 U.S. Census Bureau, 52% percent of African American children were living in mother headed, single parent homes. These single parent homes are believed to be at greater risk for child maltreatment (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

Nichols-Casebolt (2001) took an in-depth look at the growing rise of poverty in African American single-families. She indicated that the reason for increased poverty was due to the inability of African American males to find and maintain employment. The article suggests that social workers need to make an effort to aid African American males in obtaining employment, as well as, advocate for more jobs to be created within African American communities. While Nichols-Casebolt brings to light to a significant issue, there are more factors that contribute to poverty in African American families than the unemployment of the
African American males. It is also important to determine how poverty may create vulnerability to involvement by child welfare service. These two variables, poverty and family structure, should not be discounted, but they do not entirely justify the high numbers of African American children in foster care services.

There are no empirical studies as to why African Americans are being over represented in the child welfare system. Current literature has used existing data to speculate as to salient factors contributing to racial disproportionality. Though there may be some correlation between poverty and involvement with child welfare services, Morton stated that it is also necessary to determine the other factors that may be being overlooked, such as bias within the agencies that serve these children (1999). Morton (1999) looked at the link between poverty and child maltreatment, which is often considered to have a causal relationship. African Americans tend to have lower income households and could subsequently have more factors contributing to child maltreatment (Morton, 1999). Morton also offers that it is this preconceived notion that has guided and justified the high numbers of African Americans in child welfare (1999).
Brown and Bailey-Etta (1997) examined out-of-home care for African American children in the child welfare system. They examined both societal and familial factors that may contribute to racial disproportionality. The literature discussed how the "overburdened and under funded" child welfare service agencies placed African American children at greater risk for negative outcomes due to the systems' inability to provide quality services (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997). There is a close link between the number of African American children in out-of-home care and social support systems available to families of these children (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997). Racism, poverty, lack of social support, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, incarceration and violence were among the many social, political and economic factors that place African American children at greater risk of needing out-of-home care (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997).

According to the California Center for Research of Women and Families, there are four main ideas that suggest "Why There Are More African American Children in the Foster Care System," but there are no empirical studies to support three of the four factors. The CCRWF believes that possible racial bias within assessment
instruments used in Children’s Services has possibly contributed to the vast amount of African American children placed in foster care. This organization expressed that unconscious and conscious stereotyping, biases, and beliefs about African Americans, amongst individuals servicing this population, may be another contributing factor. Additionally, CCRWF considers that the lack of investigations concerning the over reporting of African American children and the under reporting of other ethnic groups has perhaps assisted in perpetuating this crisis.

The final salient factor determined by the CCRWF, is the harmful effects public policies, such as the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA), have on this population. Literature supports that African American children are negatively impacted by ASFA because the time frames for services are very strict and these children tend to stay in the system longer than other ethnic groups (Karpilow & Reed, 2002). This law could cause more African American children to be orphaned because their parents were unable to fulfill the mandated requirements in the allotted time (Morton, 1999).
Issues Surrounding Culture/Competency and Assessment

When considering the outcomes for African American children, the outcomes are less successful in all areas. The African American child reaches permanency less often, is less likely to reunify with parents, stays in the system for longer periods of time, and is placed in group care more frequently when compared to other ethnic groups (CWS Stakeholders, 2003). These outcomes bring awareness to possible bias within the child welfare system.

The literature on bias amongst social workers when assessing risk for African-American families is currently unavailable. Fortunately, there is literature on a quantitative study, which investigated the racial bias in child welfare assessments of attachment (Surbeck, 2003, p. 11). The researcher reviewed 249 child welfare assessments and discovered Caucasian caseworkers were found to give African American mothers a less positive assessment than Caucasian mothers. The explanation for this behavior remains unknown, but the findings confirm that differential treatment exists within the system. More studies are needed that investigate social worker’s perception of African American families and what social
workers consider to be major risk factors when assessing this population. This information will provide insight and clarity as to why social workers assess African Americans at a higher risk level than other ethnic groups.

Singh (1992) suggested that social workers might intervene in African American families unnecessarily, due to misunderstanding this population and viewing their culture and lifestyle as inherently problematic and in need of correcting. Due to cultural differences, social workers may misinterpret certain behaviors as being abusive. However, such behaviors, like spanking, are cultural norms amongst African-Americans (Ellis, 1978).

Chand (2000) indicates that some social workers may routinely assume that African-Americans are too strict and are known to beat their children, which is a stereotypical belief and harmful to African American children and their families. Social work professionals who are bias towards African Americans may be unjust in their assessment of this population due to a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Cultural factors that govern familial care of African Americans should also be considered when
attempting to understand foster care options in the African American community. Throughout centuries extended families have acted as foster care systems within the African American community. At present this continues to be a common practice. African American children were not initially included in the development of the formal child welfare system, and almost always relied on social support networks within their communities (Brown, & Bailey-Etta, 1997). It is vital to understand the cultural norms and historical practices of the culture to ensure that value sensitive and culturally competent services are being provided.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization Of Racial Disproportionality

The major theoretical principle behind culturally sensitivity practice is valuable in understanding the discrepancies in theory and practice. Cultural sensitivity was designed to encourage professionals to enhance their knowledge of the client's culture. If public child welfare workers use cultural sensitivity in practice, there is less likelihood for personal bias. In order to be culturally sensitive, public child welfare workers must understand that a family's culture and
social context can greatly impact how they deal with problems. For this reason, it is important for the public child welfare worker to assess clients based on the cultural elements and work within the family’s frame of reference.

Child Welfare Agencies should always be operating in a culturally competent and unbiased manner. This study will identify whether or not agencies are following the culturally sensitive principles that guide their practice. Strengths Based Perspective will provide an alternative approach for dealing with African American families because public child welfare workers will be able to assess African Americans from a more positive frame of reference. Public child welfare workers can then build on the strengths of the African American family, rather than focusing solely on the deficits.

Structural racism is a concept that possibly contributes to racial disproportionality in child welfare. Roberts (1992) defines structural racism as “social inequality, which makes families of color more vulnerable to state intervention and child welfare policies that rely too heavily on child removal instead of family support.”
The term institutional inequality is a notion that will guide the basis of this study. It expresses the idea that some organizations display differential treatment amongst the populations in which they serve. This study will investigate whether public child welfare workers are contributing to the existence of institutional inequality within San Bernardino County Department of Children Services.

Summary

As previously stated, there are currently no empirical studies relevant to factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African Americans within the child welfare system. However, there are several pieces of literature that analyze data on the issue and seek to hypothesize possible factors contributing to racial disproportionality. It is the intent of this study to determine one possible salient factor: racial bias amongst public child welfare workers. The research question is as follows: "How do public child welfare workers assess risk for child abuse and neglect among African Americans?"
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter 3 covers an outline of the research methods utilized in this study concerning possible salient factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system. This section will thoroughly discuss the study's design, the sampling methods, the data collection and instruments, the procedures, the protection of the human subjects, and the data analysis.

Study Design

This study seeks to examine whether or not public child welfare workers are biased in their assessments of African Americans, and if level of experience on the job influences their judgment. This study attempts to explain how racial bias amongst public child welfare workers contributes the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was utilized to identify racial bias amongst public child welfare workers towards African Americans. This research design allowed for the
comparison of risk assessment of various ethnic groups by public child welfare workers. This study involved distributing three separate vignettes to three groups of public child welfare workers. The three surveys contained a vignette and survey of risk assessment of an African American, Hispanic or Caucasian family. The participants were asked to read their particular vignette and then answer the corresponding questions concerning their perception of risk and safety for the family. The sample population included 90 participants that were either Intake Specialist or Intake Workers employed within the San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services. Purposive sampling was the sampling method utilized for this study.

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of standardized instruments concerning racial bias. Since there are no current instruments pertinent to this topic, an instrument was created for the purposes of this study. The validity and reliability of this instrument are unknown. As a result, the validity and reliability may suffer, due to the inability to test the instrument extensively. Another limitation of this study is that the study uses a convenience sample, which will impact the
generalizability of the findings. Since the sample comprised comes from the agency in which they are employed, the responses of the participants may be untruthful, or there may be discussion amongst participants as to the content of the instrument, which may impact the results of the study.

Sampling

The sample population that participated in this study was comprised of Intake Specialist and Intake workers within the San Bernardino County CPS. Since this research project directly investigates public child welfare workers, purposive sampling was utilized. The only criteria for the sample was that all participates must be an Intake Specialist or Intake Worker within the Department of Children’s Services in San Bernardino County. Gender, age, level of education and years of experience were factors that varied amongst the participants. Based on the available resources within the agency, the sample size included 47 participates from various offices within the San Bernardino County. These participates were divided into three groups and asked to complete a risk assessment concerning a scenario
regarding either an African American, Hispanic, or Caucasian family.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data from this study was collected from the surveys given to the participants. This study involved distributing three separate vignettes to three groups of public child welfare workers. The three surveys contained a vignette and survey of risk assessment of an African American, Hispanic or Caucasian family. Each vignette revolved around allegations concerning general neglect and physical abuse. The participants were asked to read their particular vignette and then answer the corresponding questions concerning their perception of risk and safety for the family. The independent variable for this study is the social worker's view of the ethnicity of clients, while the dependent variable is the level of risk reported. Independent and dependent variables were measured at the nominal and ordinal levels.

The demographic variables are gender, age, level of education, and years of experience. The variables regarding the perception of the clients were measured
through questions asking the participants to describe their perception of the father and mother prior to contact. The variables concerning response time asked the participants in what time frame would they respond to the referral. The variables pertaining to risk assessment asked the participants their perception of the physical abuse and general neglect involved within the vignette and their perception of services the family should receive. Finally, the variable regarding the greatest concern asked participants their greatest concern about the vignette.

For the purposes of this study, the investigators created an instrument that measured public child welfare workers perception of risk and safety, as well as their perception of the family mentioned in the instrument. With the help of Brian Thomson, the investigators created the instrument that was utilized in this study. It was pre-tested for accuracy by public child welfare workers from Los Angeles County, who were not included in the actual sample. A limitation of the instrument is that reliability and validity is not known, because the instrument was created for the purpose of this particular study. A possible strength of the instrument is that the
questions were created to specifically measure racial bias amongst public child welfare workers. Additionally, others who are interested in addressing the issue of racial disproportionality can use this instrument in the future.

**Procedures**

The data collection procedures for this study involved distributing three separate vignettes to three groups of public child welfare workers. The three surveys contained a vignette and survey of risk assessment of an African American, Hispanic or Caucasian family. The participants were asked to read their particular vignette and then answer the corresponding questions concerning their perception of risk and safety for the family. Prior to the distribution of the survey, Brian Thomson, the Research Manager for San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services, contacted supervisors from each of the County’s regional offices. The supervisors were instructed to enlist the participation of all employees relevant to the study. Data collection took place in all of the regions of San Bernardino County Department of Children’s Services.
A packet containing an informed consent form (Appendix A), along with the survey (Appendix B), and debriefing statement (Appendix C) was given to each participant. Participants were informed that all information given is confidential and that their identity will remain anonymous. Discontinuing participation and refusal to participate was allowed and the participants were given the necessary information should they wish to learn the outcome of the study.

A completed questionnaire was given to Brian Thomson, for approval prior to the data collection process. This step was completed November 4, 2005. The investigators of this survey collected the data, and the supervisors in each region encouraged participation. The data-gathering period of this study occurred between Februarys 23, 2006 and March 31, 2006. The results of the study were available after June 17, 2006.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of the participants in this study remained strictly confidential and anonymous. Since the participants were asked to reveal their names, a code number was assigned to the packet in which they complete.
The list indicating the participants and the corresponding codes will only be accessible to the researchers and destroyed upon the completion of all data collection and analysis. All participants received a letter of informed consent, stating the purpose of the study and explaining that the participation in the study is completely voluntary. If the participant's desired, they had the option of marking an X on the informed consent, rather than signing their name. Additionally, participants received a debriefing statement and the name of the research supervisor should they have concerns following their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

The quantitative procedures used to answer the research questions were primarily descriptive statistics of the sample population. Descriptive statistics in this study was comprised of frequency distribution, measures of central tendency, and variability. Respondents were asked questions concerning demographics, their perception about the clients, response time to the referral, needed services, and greatest concern about the family portrayed in the vignette. Additionally, the participants were
asked to assess the level of risk in terms of physical abuse and general neglect based on the information given. A series of chi-square test and a simple ANOVA were utilized to assess association among variables.

Summary

As previously stated, the proposed study seeks to examine public child welfare workers racial bias towards African Americans when conducting a risk assessment. The findings of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding salient factors of racial disproportionality of African Americans in child welfare services. The data collection and analysis process was handled with great consideration and the protection of the participants will be of utmost importance throughout the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify salient factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system. Chapter 4 will present the univariate findings, which includes relevant frequencies and descriptive statistics. Additionally, this section covers the bivariate results pertinent to this study.

Presentation of the Findings

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents that participated in this study. There are a total of 47 public child welfare worker respondents in this study sample. There were 39 females and 8 male respondents in this study. The age of the respondents' ranges from 22 to 65 years and the mean age of the respondents were 40.9 years. Caucasians/White totaled 44.7% of the sample population and over one-fourth of the sample were African Americans. Hispanics comprised 21.3% of the respondents and 8.5% were classified as “other.” The majority of the respondents were Masters level,
public child welfare workers (63.8%), while 10.6% had only received a high school diploma. The average years of experiences in child welfare was 8.34 years. The majority of the respondents were intake workers (76.6%) and 23.4% of the respondents were intake specialist.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate of Arts Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 or higher</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake Specialist</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake/ ER Social Worker</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>76.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33
Table 2 outlines the respondents' status of response to the vignette, as well as, the respondents' perception of the father and mother described in the vignette. The majority of the respondents' would act in response to the referral within 10 days (55.3%) and 42.6% of the respondents would respond to the referral within three days. Most respondents (48.9%) did not specify their perception of the father prior to contact and marked "other" as their response. However, 31.9% perceived the father as "negligent." Respondents were unable to specify their perception of the mother prior to contact and responded "other" (36.2%). Other respondents perceived the mother to be "inappropriate" (27.7%), "negligent" (31.9%), and "appropriate" (2.1%).
Table 2. Respondents' Perception of Parents and Response Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response Time Frame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluated Out (EVO)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT (within 3 days)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 day</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negligent</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negligent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates the respondents' assessments of overall risk for abuse and neglect. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents assessed the level for risk of abuse as moderate, while 23.4% of the respondents assessed the level for risk of abuse as low. Over 63% of the respondents assessed the level for risk of neglect as moderate and 23.4% assessed for risk of neglect at a low level.
Table 3. Respondents Assessment of Risk for Abuse and Neglect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of Abuse</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Risk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of Neglect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A series of chi-square test were conducted to assess an association between the ethnicity of family and level of risk for abuse and neglect. Hypothesis 1 states: public child welfare workers are more likely to assess African American children at a higher level of risk as compared to other ethnic groups. The chi square test conducted for this hypothesis compared the ethnicity of the family and assessment of risk neglect. The results revealed that African American’s were assessed at a higher level of risk for neglect than Hispanic and Caucasians ($\chi^2 = 9.94$, df = 4, $p = .041$). When assessing for risk of physical abuse among the families, African Americans were assessed at a higher levels of risk as
compared to Hispanic and Caucasian families. The results were approaching statistical significance.

Hypothesis 2 states: public child welfare workers with more years of experience of experience will assess African Americans at a lower level of risk than workers with less experience. The chi-square test revealed no statistical significance between years of experience and assessment of risk for neglect regarding the African American population. When evaluating years of experience and assessment of risk for abuse among African Americans, chi-square revealed no statistical significance.

Summary

Chapter 4 addressed the univariate and bivariate findings of the study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were highlighted, as well as the respondents' perception of the parents in the vignette, and the time frame for response to the hypothetical case. The chi-square analysis was presented and each hypothesis was evaluated to determine statistical significance of the findings.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of this study and implications that the findings may have on social work practice, policy and research. The chapter will also address the findings in relation to existing literature and limitations to this study.

Discussion

Although the sample size for the study was much smaller than anticipated, it is interesting to know that the findings did reveal statistical significance when evaluating public child welfare workers and their heightened assessment for risk of neglect for the African American family. It should also be noted that many of the workers rated the “perception of the parents prior to contact” as “other,” which may indicate that workers’ were unwilling to pre-judge the family prior to contact.

When examining years of experience in child welfare, 8.9 years was the average for the respondents. There was one respondent with 40 years of experience in child welfare, which may have skewed the results.
The study’s findings revealed that public child welfare workers assessed African Americans at a higher level of risk for neglect than Hispanic and Caucasians. These findings are supported by the California Center for Research on Women and Families, which states that public child welfare workers need to “acknowledge conscious and unconscious stereotypes, biases, and beliefs about African Americans that result in a higher level of scrutiny” (Karpilow & Reed, 2002, p. 27).

The results approached, but did not reach statistical significance when assessing higher levels of risk for abuse in African Americans. These findings may suggest that there is bias amongst public child welfare workers when assessing risk among African American families. This finding is consistent with Chand’s study that social workers are more apt to believe that black parents are too authoritative and “beat their children as a matter of course” (Chand, 2000, p. 72).

When determining whether years of experience in child welfare impacts a worker’s assessment for risk of abuse and neglect for African Americans, the results of the chi-square test revealed no statistical significance. This finding may indicate the likelihood that experience
is not a factor in a public child welfare worker’s assessment of African Americans. Therefore, it is possible that workers do not become more culturally competent as their experience in the field progresses.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study is the small number of respondents. The sample size was significantly smaller than anticipated and may have contributed to the lack of significance of one of the hypotheses. The small sample size also makes it difficult to generalize these findings to all public child welfare workers.

The issue of racial disproportionality is at the forefront of child welfare and can sometimes be a controversial topic. Some respondents may have declined to participate for fear that their responses could jeopardize their employment with the agency. There was also a limited amount of time between the distribution of the survey and the collection date. It was necessary that a letter from the agency’s director was attached to the survey and the letter took longer to obtain than anticipated.
Many of the respondents, whom received the survey, were Intake Workers. Intake Workers spend a lot of their time out of the office and may not have had time to respond to and return the survey. The other respondents were Intake Specialists and are fewer in number, which may have also hindered the sample size.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This study is one of many in the area of racial disproportionality within the child welfare system. However, it is likely that the results of this study will bring about more training of public child welfare workers in the area of cultural competency and racism. Policy makers need to be more sensitive to the issues affecting African American families in the child welfare system and create legislation and inter-agency policies, which are both fair and culturally sensitive.

Policies such as the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) should be reformed to be more culturally sensitive. As it stands, these policies do not take into consideration the cultural factors affecting African Americans in the child welfare system. Literature suggests that culture is an
important factor to consider when placing a child and attempting to reunify African American families (Jackson-White & Dozier, 1997). By neglecting the cultural element pertinent to placing and reunifying African American children with their families, will prolong the process and impede the likelihood of them exiting the child welfare system.

Recommendations for research in the area of racial disproportionality are that there should be more empirical studies that address this crucial issue. Empirical research can help to guide future studies and will ultimately help bring about changes in the area of child welfare. Should researchers decide to sample public child welfare workers for future studies, it would be beneficial to have a larger sample size so that the findings can be generalized to a greater population.

Conclusions

The study’s findings regarding assessment of risk for neglect indicate among diverse ethnic groups that public child welfare workers possess unconscious or conscious bias, which is evident in their assessment of African Americans. When it comes to public child welfare
workers’ assessment of risk for abuse, the statistics show that the findings were approaching statistical significance, and a larger sample size may have shown more statistical significance for the hypothesis.

The findings concerning years of experience and assessment of risk for African Americans did not prove to be statistically significant. These findings may allude to the fact that work experience in the field of child welfare does not impact racial bias.

It is likely that there will be future studies, which addresses the salient factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare. However, this study was able to identify one of many possible factors attributing to this issue. It is critical to note that agencies should be more proactive in their approach to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system.
APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to examine risk assessment across ethnic groups by public child welfare workers, and how experience of the worker can influence risk assessment. Rebecca Owens and Courtney Roushion are conducting this study, under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, Associate Professor Of Social Work at the California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

Please read the vignette that is attached to the survey. After reading the vignette, please answer the following questions that relate risk assessment of the case scenario as described in the vignette. There are also demographic questions that we would like you to answer so that we are able to get an idea of characteristics of the study’s participants. The survey should take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in a group form only. You may receive the group results of this study upon completion at September 15, 2006 at the following location: Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions and withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When you have completed the survey, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure validity of the study, we ask that you not discuss this study with other workers or participants. There are neither benefits nor risks for the participants of this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang (909) 537-5184 or (909) 537-5501.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ Please place a check mark here

DATE: ______________

□
APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE
Survey Questionnaire

A Study Examining Factors Influencing Risk Assessment
By Public Child Welfare Workers

PART I: BACKGROUND

In this section, you will be asked a series of demographic questions. Please write or circle your answers. All of your answers will remain confidential.

A1. What is your gender?
   1. Male
   2. Female

A2. Current age: ____________________________ years old

A3. What is your ethnicity?
   1. African American
   2. Asian/Pacific Islander
   3. Hispanic
   4. Native-American
   5. White
   6. Other (Please specify) ____________________________________________

A4. What is your highest level of education?
   1. High School Diploma
   2. Associate of Arts Degree
   3. Bachelor Degree
   4. Master Degree
   5. Doctorate Degree

A5. Years of experience in child welfare: ____________________________ years

A6. What is your job title?
   1. Intake Specialist
   2. Intake/ER Social Worker
PART II: SAMPLE VINGETTE (#1)

Please read the following scenario CAREFULLY. After reading the scenario, please answer the following questions. Answer the questions as though you have complete control over the outcome of the case as described in the scenario.

REPORT DATE: 10/25/05

REPORTING PARTY: Anonymous Neighbor

VICTIMS(s): Dante Williams AGE: 4 ETHNICITY: Black SEX: Male
La Shaun Williams AGE: 10 mths ETHNICITY: Black SEX: Female

ALLEGATION(s): General Neglect and Physical Abuse

ALLEGED PERPERTRATOR (s): De Marcus Williams AGE: 26
Shante Williams AGE: 24

RELATION TO VICTIMS (s): Mother and Father

NARRATIVE:

On 10/25/05, De Marcus Williams (26) and his wife Shante Williams (24) were reported to the Child Abuse hotline for allegations of general neglect and physical abuse. The caller alleges that there are small children present in the home: Dante (4) and La Shaun Williams (10 months) and that the home is filthy. Caller stated that there is trash on the floor, minimum food in the refrigerator and the kitchen is filthy with dirty dishes everywhere. The caller alleges that the mother yells at the four-year-old and does not spend time playing with or holding the baby. Caller states that the baby stays in the playpen for several hours. The father, De Marucus, has a history of alcohol abuse and it is unknown if he currently drinks. The caller stated that the mother often spanks the four-year-old. When asked if the caller observed any marks or bruises on the child she stated: “No but, I think she hits him too hard.” The caller stated that she is concerned for the safety of the children and that the parents do not seem to take good enough care of the children.
PART II: SAMPLE VINGETTE (#2)

Please read the following scenario CAREFULLY. After reading the scenario, please answer the following questions. Answer the questions as though you have complete control over the outcome of the case as described in the scenario.

REPORT DATE: 10/25/05

REPORTING PARTY: Anonymous Neighbor

VICTIMS(s): Kyle Smith   AGE: 4   ETHNICITY: White   SEX: Male
Megan Smith   AGE: 10 mths   ETHNICITY: White   SEX: Female

ALLEGATION(s): General Neglect and Physical Abuse

ALLEGED PERPERTRATOR(s): Steve Smith   AGE: 26
Laurie Smith   AGE: 24

RELATION TO VICTIMS(s): Mother and Father

NARRATIVE:

On 10/25/05, Steve Smith (26) and his wife Laurie Smith (24) were reported to the Child Abuse hotline for allegations of general neglect and physical abuse. The caller alleges that there are small children present in the home: Kyle (4) and Meagan Smith (10 months) and that the home is filthy. Caller stated that there is trash on the floor, minimum food in the refrigerator and the kitchen is filthy with dirty dishes everywhere. The caller alleges that the mother yells at the 4-year-old and does not spend time playing with or holding the baby. Caller states that the baby stays in the playpen for several hours. The alleged father, Steve, has a history of alcohol abuse and it is unknown if he currently drinks. The caller stated that the mother often spanks the 4-year-old. When asked if the caller observed any marks or bruises on the child she stated: “No but, I think she hits him too hard.” The caller stated that she is concerned for the safety of the children and that the parents do not seem to take good enough care of the children.
PART II: SAMPLE VINGETTE (#3)

Please read the following scenario CAREFULLY. After reading the scenario, please answer the following questions. Answer the questions as though you have complete control over the outcome of the case as described in the scenario.

REPORT DATE: 10/25/05

REPORTING PARTY: Anonymous Neighbor

VICTIMS(s): Jose Rodriguez  AGE: 4  ETHNICITY: Hispanic  SEX: Male
Rosa Rodriguez  AGE: 10 mths  ETHNICITY: Hispanic  SEX: Female

ALLEGATION(s): General Neglect and Physical Abuse

ALLEGED PERPERTRATOR(s): Juan Rodriguez  AGE: 26
Maria Rodriguez  AGE: 24

RELATION TO VICTIMS(s): Mother and Father

NARRATIVE:

On 10/25/05, Juan Rodriguez (26) and his wife Maria Rodriguez (24) were reported to the Child Abuse hotline for allegations of general neglect and physical abuse. The caller alleges that there are small children present in the home: Jose (4) and Rosa Rodriguez (10 months) and that the home is filthy. Caller stated that there is trash on the floor, minimum food in the refrigerator and the kitchen is filthy with dirty dishes everywhere. The caller alleges that the mother yells at the four-year-old and does not spend time playing with or holding the baby. Caller states that the baby stays in the playpen for several hours. The father, Juan, has a history of alcohol abuse and it is unknown if he currently drinks. The caller stated that the mother often spanks the four-year-old. When asked if the caller observed any marks or bruises on the child she stated: “No but, I think she hits him too hard.” The caller stated that she is concerned for the safety of the children and that the parents do not seem to take good enough care of the children.
A7. In what time frame would you respond to this case?
1. Evaluated Out (EVO)
2. Immediately
3. TT (within 3-days)
4. 10 days

A8. How would you describe your perception of the father prior to contact?
Circle all that apply.
1. Abusive
2. Inappropriate
3. Appropriate
4. Negligent
5. Nurturing
6. Unfit
7. Other (Please Specify): ________________________________

A9. How would you describe your perception of the mother prior to contact?
Circle all that apply.
1. Abusive
2. Inappropriate
3. Appropriate
4. Negligent
5. Nurturing
6. Unfit
7. Other (Please Specify): ________________________________
PART III: ASSESSMENT

As the worker assigned to the case, you make initial face-to-face contact with the family. When you arrive at the home you find all of the allegations in the referral to be substantiated.

The family lived in a small 1-bedroom apartment. The living room of the house was cluttered, and there was minimal furniture. The kitchen was also messy, with several dishes in the sink. The mother showed you the food supply and you noted that the food supply was minimal, but mother did have formula for baby and some food for the family. You notice that the mother did not respond to the 10-month old baby when she cried and the baby stayed in the playpen during the entire contact. The 4-year-old had a visible bruise on his right forearm, but the bruise did not appear to be new. The mother acknowledged that she does “spank the 4-year-old sometimes.” You interviewed the father about allegations of alcohol abuse and father seemed very defensive. Father stated that he “has a beer when he feels like it,” but denied that he is an alcoholic.

Answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Thank you for your participation.

A10. How would you assess the level of risk of neglect for these children?
1. No Risk
2. Low
3. Moderate
4. High

A11. How would you assess the level of risk of physical abuse for these children?
1. No Risk
2. Low
3. Moderate
4. High

A12. If you were to visit the home and found all allegations to be substantiated, what type of services should the family receive?
1. No CPS Involvement
2. Voluntary Family Maintenance Services
3. Court Ordered Family Maintenance Services
4. Court Ordered Family Reunification Services (removal of children)
A13. What is your greatest concern regarding this case?

1. The condition of the house
2. Minimal amount of food
3. Corporal punishment of 4-year-old child
4. Attachment issues with 10-month-old infant
5. History of substance abuse
6. Age of the parents
7. Overall safety and well being of the children
8. Other (Please Specify): ___________________________________________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Study of Risk Assessment by Public Child Welfare Workers

This study you have just completed was designed to examine the risk assessment process for public child welfare workers, more specifically, Intake Workers and Intake Specialists. In this study two issues were being investigated: How the experience of workers impacts risk assessment, and how does public child welfare workers assess for risk in child abuse and neglect cases by ethnic groups. We are looking to examine what factors influence a worker's perception of risk.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of survey with other workers. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184 or (909) 537-5501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino at the end of Summer 2006.
REFERENCES


ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:
   Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion

2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   a. Introduction and Literature
      Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion
   b. Methods
      Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion
   c. Results
      Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion
   d. Discussion
      Team Effort: Rebecca Owens & Courtney Roushion