Social workers' views about disproportionality among African American children in child welfare

Hortense Granderson

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SOCIAL WORKERS' VIEWS ABOUT DISPROPORTIONALITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE

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
Hortense Granderson
June 2008
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5/28/08 Date
ABSTRACT

In order to find ways to address disproportionality among African American children in child welfare, this qualitative study explored, through face to face in-depth interviews, the views of social workers about this situation in Riverside County.

Twenty-one social workers were interviewed within the Metro and West Corridor regions of Riverside County. The majority of the social workers interviewed stated that they understood there was a problem in the area of disproportionality and suggested solutions to solve this problem included the African American community becoming more responsible, policy changes in child welfare, and culturally competent social workers, supervisors, and administrators. It would benefit social workers, supervisors, administrators, and the community to aggressively seek better solutions to the problems that cause minority children to be removed from their homes and linger longer in the child welfare system.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Chang, for her guidance, encouragement, and support throughout this study. I would also like to thank the social workers that committed their participation to this project because without their participation, this study would not have happened.

Further, I would like to thank my current supervisor, Nancy Satterwhite, who has encouraged and supported me during this period of time, and my former supervisor and current assistant regional manager, Chris Rosselli, who has also supported and encouraged me over the past three years.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to Sidney E. Asher, Jr., significant other, Sidney E. Asher, III, son, Keontre, Amber, and Avery, grandchildren, other family members, friends, colleagues, and professors who supported me during my educational experience at California State University, San Bernardino.

Thanks to all of you for your continued support throughout the past three years which has resulted in a successful conclusion to this research project.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Racial disproportionality in public child welfare is a national problem. It affects all minority children of racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Racial disproportionality means that some racial and ethnic groups of children are overrepresented in the child welfare system in the United States. This study will focus on African American children because they are overrepresented in the child welfare system more than other minority children.

Children enter the child welfare system as a result of neglect, physical and sexual abuse, or emotional abuse. According to Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, and Zhou (2003) African Americans are investigated by child protective services at a higher rate than Caucasians for emotional maltreatment, neglect, fatalities, serious injury, and perpetrator use of alcohol or other drugs.

In Riverside County in 2002, over 80% of the referrals were processed for child abuse and maltreatment involving: African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native
Americans, and others (Needell, Webster, Cuccaro-Alamin, Armijo, Lee, Brookhart, Lery, Shaw, Dawson, 2003).

Courtney and Sykes (2003) revealed that African American children were over represented in large numbers in out of home care compared to other children in the child welfare system. During their study, two mechanisms were identified that contributed to disproportionality on an independent basis: the rate at which a racial and ethnic group of children came into the child welfare system, and the rate at which a racial and ethnic group of children left the child welfare system. However, it remained unclear, during this study, “why” some racial and ethnic groups of children remain in the child welfare system compared to other racial and ethnic groups of children. Many people are concerned and recognize that we have a problem in this area, but solutions to the problem of racial disproportionality are not easily identified. The causes of disproportionality among African American children will be examined throughout this paper.

Smith and Devore (2004) provided an overview of racial disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system that dates back to when African American children were excluded from the child
welfare system. When the child welfare movement surfaced in America beginning in the mid 19th century through the early 20th century, services were not provided to African American children. However, in the 1950's this practice changed and the number of children of color in the child welfare system increased.

Smith & Devore (2004) surmised that previous researchers and theorists found that the increase in the number of children in the child welfare system was due mainly for several reasons such as: 1) African American families moving north; 2) focus on national integration and the civil rights movement; and 3) poverty level decrease among white children and a shift in child welfare that focused on caring for poor minority children.

They further found that by the 1970s, African American children were considered the most over-represented group of children in the child welfare system. During this time, there were large numbers of minority children being brought into and remaining in the system for longer periods of time compared to White children. According to Smith and Devore (2004), racial and ethnic minority children were not placed in adoptive
homes compared to White children that were ready to be adopted.

Studying the problem of over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system is important because it will help all involved to identify and address the causes that allow this injustice to happen and continue over the years. The goal for all children in the system should be permanency within a loving, caring, and nurturing family.

The current social practice regarding the issue of disproportionality varies. Many social workers want to find permanency for all children in the child welfare system. However, there are some social workers that are racially biased and seek permanency for specific groups of children more so than other children. This behavior needs to change. As far as social workers are concerned, their biases about race and ethnicity should not come into play where permanency for children is of concern, as their primary goal should be: what is in the best interest of all children.

A policy that affects, constrains, or facilitates the issue of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system is permanency in a
loving, caring, and nurturing home for these children. The policy is affected if the children are placed, but not placed in a stable home. It is constrained if social workers are not diligent in finding the appropriate homes for African American children. Further, the policy is facilitated when the children are successfully placed in a loving, caring, and nurturing home. Thus, providing permanency through adoption or legal guardianship. The practice of long term foster care without a future goal should not be an option for African American children, or any other minority children. It will take the efforts of all social workers to work tirelessly in providing permanency for African American and other minority children.

On October 20, 1994, President Clinton signed into law the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA). MEPA was enacted to redress several social issues that had come to the attention of the United States Congress such as the record level number of children that had entered the public child welfare system; the fact that African American children were disproportionately represented in out-of-home placements; and that thousands of children were waiting a median of three years to five years in the
case of black children for adoptive homes Campbell (2000). The enactment of MEPA brought to the forefront again the discussions of African American children being over-represented in the child welfare system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore social workers’ views (attitudes and perceptions) as to why African American children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system in Riverside County and what affects disproportionality. Information in this area is limited in Riverside County and should be fully explored so that the number of African American children lingering in the child welfare system can be reduced to none. It is important to further understand the problem of racial disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system because social workers need to become more culturally sensitive, better understand diversity, and become more competent to help meet the needs of racial and ethnic minority children and their families in the child welfare system. By becoming more culturally competent, social workers will learn how to provide effective permanency planning
such as adoption or reunifying with parents for children of racial and ethnic minority groups. In order for this to happen, social workers must understand cultural and racial differences. Continued seminars and training to enhance knowledge of cultural histories of various racial and ethnic minority groups of people will help in making individual and personal commitments to advocate against cultural disparity and racism.

The Department of Public Social Services, Child Protective Services in Riverside County is committed to providing permanency for all children in the child welfare system. The Department has implemented the Family to Family program and the Wraparound process. Family to Family is designed to place children in homes within the communities from which they were removed, if they can not be returned to the care of their families. This program is being implemented throughout the regions and has been successful in many areas. However, African American children are not being returned to their communities as fast as other children within the child welfare system. The other process called Wraparound strives to keep children and adolescents with their birth families, relative caretakers, or in foster families by providing
intensive, comprehensive, integrated and creative
treatment, intervention, and support services rather than
placing them in institutional settings.

The Wraparound Process is new to Riverside County
Department of Children’s Services. However, the continued
need is to identify the reasons and causes for the
problem within Riverside County.

Qualitative research is a viable approach when
exploring the issues in depth of social workers’ views on
this topic. The research was conducted through twenty-one
participants that answered four open-ended,
semi-structured questions. There is little or no
information on social workers’ views (attitudes and
perceptions) towards disproportionality among African
American children in the child welfare system, due to
limited research and rigid welfare agency policies. It is
suggested that many social workers do not talk about this
topic because of repercussions and liability factors.
However, social workers need to be encouraged to speak
out about this problem, as it is their ethical duty to do
so, as they continue to advocate for children.

The open dialogue, which took place during the
interviews, contributed to the qualitative and subjective
nature of this study. It is hoped that the study enlightened and revealed actual attitudes and perceptions which may be indicative of actual social work practice methods. This study was designed to give social workers anonymity and a voice that is often silenced by agency liability, agency policy, and politics.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study explored social workers’ views (attitudes and perceptions) on the reasons and causes for disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. This study contributed to social work practice/policy/and research because it is the first study of its kind for Riverside County where information is readily available to understand the reasons and causes for disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system, according to social workers. The findings of the study contribute to social work practice because gathered information revealed that some practices of social workers in the child welfare system go directly against the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics because of discrimination
practices used by some social workers against families of racial and ethnic minority groups.

On an agency level, this study provided information to line staff and management that would be beneficial in making changes in current practices on racial disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County. Reinforcement of the Department’s mission statement and goals would be a good start for addressing this problem.

As far as social work research is concerned, this study adds to the limited shared information on the reasons and causes of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County. This study helps in re-evaluating program practices that are not being adhered to by social workers that are responsible for providing permanency, to include adoption and legal guardianship, for all children in the child welfare system. This study helps social workers understand that increased commitment to providing permanency will come through changes in attitudes and perceptions about racial and ethnic minority groups.
As a Title IV E student, this study is relevant to child welfare practice because of my commitment to work for and with children in the child welfare system.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter covers prior research conducted on social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) on disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in the United States. Previous research was reviewed on the reasons for this problem, how it came to be a problem, and the causes for this problem today.

Previous Studies on Disproportionality

Needell, Brookhart and Lee (2003) revealed that in California, African American children are at risk more than other children of being taken from their homes and placed in out of home care even when other factors such as age, reasons for maltreatment and neighborhood poverty are identified, compared to White and Hispanic children. The study also revealed that larger amounts of African American children (over 15 percent), compared to over 13 percent of White, and nearly 11 percent of Hispanic children enter foster care at later times, even though the families received family maintenance services.
Smith and Devore (2004) revealed that during the 1980s, children of racial and ethnic groups were discriminated against and treated differently than other children. They also revealed that African American children were over represented as well during this period of time in the child welfare system due to neglect and poverty correlations. Further, they revealed that African American children did not receive services while in the child welfare system such as medical, mental health care, appropriate living environment, comprehensive service planning, and stable permanent placements.

Hines, Lemon, Wyatt, and Merdinger (2004) reported that there is limited known research on reporting bias and differential treatment of children of color during the 1980s. They conducted a review of the literature on parent and family related risk factors and the child welfare system involvement; social factors relating to poverty, neighborhood effects and other community-related predictors of children of color being brought into and remaining in the child welfare system; biases when initially reporting as a result of race and class and how the children are subsequently treated within the child welfare system; and how child welfare policy initiatives
impact children of color. The literature revealed that there is no empirical evidence to support causality of studies that correlate identified risk factors and child maltreatment.

First, we will look at the authors’ view on parent-family related factors and child maltreatment. The study showed from data gathered indicated that risk factors associated with parental and family related factors and child maltreatment showed parents using drugs and alcohol, parents suffering from mental illness, incarcerated parents, and parents being involved in domestic violence. This is important to disproportionality because it lends to reasons why the children were initially removed from their parents.

Hines et al (2004) estimated from data collected that one-third to two-thirds of substantiated child maltreatment reports involved drug abusing parents. They also reported that data from the National Institute for Mental Health’s Epidemiological Catchment Area survey showed that a child with drug abusing parents is three times more likely to suffer abuse from the parents than other children. This problem could cause the child to remain in the system much longer than other children.
Second, the authors commented on the risk factor of parental mental illness by suggesting from the data collected that parents in the child welfare system more than likely suffered from mental health problems. They also commented that certain diagnoses of mood disorders, post traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism or other substance abuse disorders were common among parents involved in the child welfare system, as well as mothers being diagnosed with personality and anxiety disorders. They further commented that mental illness has been also identified as a predictor of children entering the child welfare system.

Third, Hines et al (2004) discussed the risk factor of parental incarceration and the child welfare system involvement. They reported that people of color are persons who are incarcerated disproportionately. Their research statistics for this category was gathered from previous research (Beck & Karber, 2001, Beck and Harrison, 2001, and the U.S. Census Bureau, 2001) which revealed that 38 percent of prisoners were White (compared to 69.1 percent of the general population); 45 percent of prisoners were Black (compared to 12.1 percent of the general population) and 17 percent of prisoners
were Hispanic (compared to 12.5 percent of the general population). They could not provide data on the number of children that were placed in the child welfare system as a result of their parents being incarcerated.

Fourth, another factor reviewed by Hines et al. (2004) suggested that poverty and characteristics of impoverished communities increased risks of children of color entering the child welfare system. They further reviewed information that suggested that cases of maltreatment have been disproportionately found among low income and poor families, as African American and Hispanic/Latino communities have higher rates of poverty than other ethnic groups. Information gathered by the researchers from the U.S. Census Bureau revealed in 1999 that over 50 percent of African American and Hispanic children live in poverty.

The final risk factor reviewed was bias in initial reporting and subsequent service delivery. Hines et al. (2004) found that their research suggested that race and class bias in initial reporting and subsequent working with African American children throughout the time in the child welfare system contributed to the children remaining the system for longer periods of time.
Specifically, they surmised that child welfare agencies substantiated reports at a higher rate depending on whose reporting, who’s the perpetrator, or family related characteristics. Research is lacking in the area of reporting characteristics and substantiation of child welfare cases.

Brooks and James (2003) revealed that stumbling blocks were still in place to halt or cancel progressive adoptions for other minority foster and African American children. Information is scarce in the adoption arena of African American children. Too few studies have focused on adoption of African American foster children. They further reported African American children continue to be disproportionately represented among children waiting to be adopted due to lack of prospective foster parents, the willingness of parents to adopt African American children, and unresolved cultural issues.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Three theories are used to guide this project; they are the multicultural, the systems theory, and ecological theory. Patti (2000) defines multicultural theory or competence as successful agencies working with effective
interventions' with the diverse population within the community. Through the multicultural theory, social workers and the agencies that employ social workers would begin to recognize the need for more and continued cultural awareness in the delivery of services to ethnic minority families. This theory emphasizes mutual learning between the clients and social workers. It is important for the social workers to be open to learning new things about various ethnic cultures, just as it is important for the ethnic minority families to learn from social workers. The multicultural perspective encourages social workers to become more competent in their ability to collaborate effectively with people of diverse cultures.

Patti (2000) emphasizes the systems theory as maintaining interactions on both the macro and micro levels, which guides the development of a holistic approach. Social workers must be familiar with their cultural biases and the dynamics of those biases in social work practice.

Systems theory is used to examine the small systems such as ethnic minority children and families and the services received, and the larger agencies and communities that are responsible for policies and
procedures that affect services delivered to ethnic minority children in placement and their families.

Disproportionality was examined from a macro level of the cultural perspective, whereas the minority ethnic children and their families are examined from the micro level of the cultural perspective.

The systems theory was used to address cultural diversity and competence in social work practice by recognizing and respecting differences in people within various cultures. This theory also examines racial discrimination, institutionalized racism, and other related ethnic issues.

Smith and Devore (2004) conveyed that the Ecological Theoretical perspective emphasizes the interactions between people whether they are individuals, families, or the community or other social systems. This perspective identifies with the person in environment context. This means that all persons, groups, organizations and other systems that the individual encounters are made up of the environment, thereby influencing relationships. This theory fits the racial ethnic groups involved within a complex child welfare system that is designed to protect
children from abuse and neglect. It helps social workers to understand

**Summary**

Social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) affect how they evaluate and process information. Social workers are expected to put their attitudes, values, and perceptions aside when working with clients of ethnic minority groups, including children and their families. For some social workers, attitudes affect processing and evaluating events. Therefore, it is important to understand the possible implications of social workers' perceptions and attitudes. Social workers with deep trenched attitudes towards children of color remaining in foster care long term will be influenced by their behavioral intentions. There is limited empirically based research on the reasons and causes of why African American children remain in the child welfare system. More research and hard work in disseminating this information is needed to remedy this problem.

This study builds new information for research purposes, related to Riverside County and the reasons and
causes of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system.

This qualitative research design best addresses the racial disproportionality problem. The control group was social workers who work with children in the child welfare system. My best data source was social workers. Data was obtained by conducting face to face interviews guided by four open and closed ended questions on this topic.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter contains an overview of the research methods that were implemented in the study. It includes the study's design, sampling methods, data collection and selected instruments, procedures for gathering the data, all efforts made to protect human subjects, and a detailed outline of an analysis of the data.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the outcomes of social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) on disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County. The objectives of the study are to (1) examine racial disproportionality from social workers points of view throughout Riverside County, (2) determine whether social workers are aware that this problem exists; (3) determine how culturally savvy social workers are when it comes to racial disproportionality, and (4) assess if social workers believe if minority children are offered and
receive the same services, such as mental health services, as non-minority children.

The most appropriate research design used for this study is a qualitative design for the purpose of providing an opportunity for disclosure during the interview process. Also, there is limited research on social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) on racial disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County. The qualitative interview design method was chosen because it is the most efficient way to gather data from social workers in Riverside County. This method is also being used due to time constraints. A quantitative format would discourage dialogue, as dialogue is very relevant to this study.

The limitations of this study include a small number of participants due to time constraints. The questions asked in the questionnaire allow the participants to obtain clarification on questions that may be confusing to them through face to face interviews. Other limitations of the study are the sample size and the time allotted to collect the data.
The research question is: What are social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) about disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County? The goal of this study is to understand the perceptions and attitudes of social workers towards disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system in Riverside County.

Sampling

The sampling from which data was collected came from twenty-one social workers at West Corridor and Metro region office locations of Riverside County's Child Protective Services. After permission was obtained from Riverside County Child Protective Services through the research review committee, face to face interviews were conducted with twenty-one social workers. The criteria used to select the participants include that they are social workers; and that they have a minimum of one year experience within the context of direct line practice.

Participants were selected from Riverside County's Child Protective Services and used for this sampling
because they are the people who work directly with minority children and their families.

Data Collection and Instruments

Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data for this study. The questionnaires were handed to the participant at the beginning of the face to face interview. Each participant had the opportunity to answer the questions. Demographic information such as (age, ethnicity, gender, formal education, position titles, length of employment, and training) were included. The sample of participants is diversified in age and ethnicity. These characteristics add to the range and spectrum of the data collected. The sample size of twenty-one and composition reflect an understanding of time restrictions as well as feasibility. Participants were asked questions pertaining to how social workers in Riverside County view racial disproportionality, do they recognize this as a problem, perceived reasons for disproportionality; how much training have they had on working with ethnic groups of children and families; what’s being done to address this issue, and are services offered?
A concern to take into consideration during this process is the strict adherence policies within agencies regarding the usage of human subjects as data. Most often this is within the context of "vulnerable populations." However, in this case it is in large part reflective of the political climate surrounding the subject matter of social workers' attitudes and perceptions of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. Therefore, there will be considerable consultation with supervisors and advisors in order to ensure compliance within University and agency ethics and research policies.

Procedures

Participation for this study was solicited by engaging my regional manager, who gave permission for me to contact the regional manager in the Metro region of Riverside County to ask for social workers' participation. When permission was granted, a cover memo was emailed to all potential participants informing them of the study and providing information on, and an incentive for, their participation. The incentive was ten dollars. Twenty-one participants were selected from two
offices. Those that showed interest in participating in the study were asked to select a date and time convenient to them to participate in the face to face interview before 2/29/08. Once they agreed to participate in the study and appointments were scheduled, an informed consent and the questionnaire were handed out at the interview. During the interview process, responses were recorded through note taking and audio taping of the interviews. The informed consent and survey questionnaire were collected at the end of the interview. The participants received ten dollars after the interview, along with a debriefing statement. The data collected from each interview was analyzed immediately and stored under lock and key.

Qualitative research was chosen as the method for this study. Because it facilitates and encourages in-depth responses through individual interviews, an ethnographic research method enabled workers to provide a richly textured quality of information. However, with the limited number of participants involved, the ability to generalize was diminished (Grinnell, 2001).
Protection of Human Subjects

Preventive measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants. The list of participants was kept in a locked desk drawer. Identifying information, such as names, addresses, and telephone numbers, was not asked on the questionnaires. Informed consent forms and questionnaires were assigned identification numbers. Participants in the study were assured that participation was voluntary and their answers would remain confidential. A debriefing statement form was also provided to participants. After the study is completed, the list of participants, forms, and questionnaires will be destroyed.

Confidentiality was strictly adhered to and ensured through the actual interview process, as well as the location of the interview. Proper data collection was critical due to the qualitative structure of this study.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed by utilizing a qualitative data analysis method. The study focused on data obtained through an interview process to find patterns and themes typical of ethnographic research. In
each interview, notes were taken, by the researcher, of social workers' responses to questions presented on disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. In addition, each interview was audio taped, reviewed, and transcribed.

The goal of the qualitative study was to describe the major categories or themes that emerged from the study and identify any relationships that may develop from the data collected.

Summary

In summary, a qualitative survey design was conducted to understand social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) on disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. This study allowed the social workers to engage in dialogue surrounding this issue.

The data collected for the study was obtained through self-administered questionnaires by a random sample from the Child Protective Services social workers in the West Corridor and Metro regions of Riverside County. Preventive measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.
Finally, the data was analyzed by using a qualitative data analysis method in order to assess the associations between racial disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system and social workers' views (attitudes and perceptions) in Riverside County.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Introduction

The qualitative study results are presented in the following order: a) demographics, and b) categories of patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews.

Demographics and Descriptive Characteristics for Entire Sample

The sample for this study consisted of twenty-one social workers from Riverside County Child Protective Services. The participants ranged in age from twenty-six to sixty-one years old with the mean age being forty-three years. The participants included 29 percent males and 71 percent females. The ethnicities of the participants were twenty-nine percent Caucasian, twenty-four percent Hispanic, thirty-three percent African American, five percent Asian, five percent Native American, and five percent Creole. The social workers from Child Protective Services held positions of Children’s Social Service Worker III, IV, and V and came from various departments and programs within the agency, including family maintenance, family reunification, and
planned permanent living arrangement. Their years of experience working for Child Protective Services ranged from one to sixteen and one-half years. The years of experience equaled a mean of 5.1 years.

The social workers that received diversity and cultural awareness training in college consisted of 95 percent of participants. Five percent of the participants reported that they had not received diversity and cultural awareness training in college. All of the participants reported that awareness training is needed about disproportionality among minority children. Fifty one percent of the participants stated they had received training in child welfare on disproportionality among African American children. However, forty-eight percent of participants stated they had not received awareness training about disproportionality among African American children in child welfare. The number of African American children on the participant’s caseloads ranged from zero to ten. Based on their individual caseloads, the participants reported that the concurrent plan for the African American children they serve included family reunification, family maintenance, legal guardianship, adoption, and planned permanent living arrangement.
The four categories presented are derived from the interview questions, which included: 1) meaning of disproportionality, 2) recognizing disproportionality, 3) reasons for disproportionality, and 4) addressing disproportionality.

The purpose of this research was to identify the views of social workers about disproportionality among African American children in child welfare. The emerging patterns reflect the social workers concerns regarding the multifaceted aspects of disproportionality among African American children and children of other minority ethnicities in the child welfare system.

Meaning of Disproportionality

Data revealed that the meaning of "disproportionality" appeared to be diverse (multidimensional) such as over-representation, under-representation, and lack of equality/services. However, the majority of data collected focused on over-representation. Below are examples.
Over-representation

One participant stated,

I believe it refers to the disproportionate number of African American children who are in the system based upon the demographics of the county. There are a greater disproportionate number of children that are not reflective of what the county’s composition is.

Another participant responded,

It means that they are over-represented in the system, but not necessarily served.

Yet, another participant commented,

It means that statistically, African American children constitute a smaller section of the population, however, within Child Protective Services, they are actually over-represented, meaning that there are more African American children than any other group, and that disproportionately above what they would be in the general population. Also, it means that once again, in a different way of saying it, the same thing that there is something going on where these children and families are not being helped and so they are not receiving maybe the services that they need.
On the other hand, a few participants viewed disproportionality as under-representation and lack of equality/services relative to the meaning of disproportionality. Below are examples.

**Under-representation**

For one participant,

Disproportionality means under-representation. The social worker stated, to me, I think it means that African American children are under-represented.

**Lack of Equality/Services**

One participant commented,

To me it means that there is a lack of equality. It could mean a lot of things. It could be a lack of services compared to other ethnic groups, or it could mean more children in the foster care system than other ethnic groups. So, disproportionality could mean a lot of things to whoever answers the question because it is based on your perspective and experience.

Another participant stated,

To me it means that there is an unequalness somewhere. Possibly that African American children in comparison to children that are not African
American, it's not an equal playing field. Possibly, there are more African American children maybe being serviced or not being serviced as compared to another race. That's what it means to me that it's just not equal.

Recognizing Disproportionality

In regards to a question on how participants recognize disproportionality among African American children in child welfare, the following major responses were identified: caseload sizes, geographical, rate of reunification, and services. Below are examples.

Caseloads

The majority of participants interviewed identified caseload sizes as a means of recognizing disproportionality among African American children in child welfare.

One participant reported,

I have recognized disproportionality within my case load. Actually, I have noticed it in not only among African American children, but also other ethnicities in children. It appears that particularly as you start getting past the Emergency
Response path and into actually detaining children and removing them from their homes, they stay out of the home for a longer period of time. It looks as if African American children tend to be longer in the system, tend to go to permanency, and reunification does not look as if it is always successful in comparison to other groups. So in my particular experience with child welfare, I have noticed that there appears to be the disproportionate number of cases, especially in the back end (Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) that seems to be children of African American heritage.

Another participant stated,

I do notice that in my own case load that I do tend to have a higher case load of minorities in general, not just African Americans. But I do notice that I do see that there are a lot of African American children that are in the foster care system and I never really thought about as to how far if they remain in the foster care system, if they're reunified with their parents, or they become adopted. But I guess, I'm like embarrassed to say
that I never thought about it until now, so I apologize.

Geographically

Some participants recognized disproportionality geographically in Riverside County.

Specifically, one social worker stated,

I do notice that there is a high disproportionality in our system, primarily in the Moreno Valley area is where we have a large amount. The reason why I recognize it is because when I go to schools, that’s where the majority of them are. They have the confidential notebooks and a lot of them are on them.

Another participant stated,

I recognize it when I go to the continuation schools mostly in the Moreno Valley area and the African American children attend those schools in high numbers.

Rate of Reunification

Some participants recognized disproportionality by the rate African American children reunified with their families.
One participant stated,

Some ways that I recognize disproportionality among African American children is that the rate of reunification seems to be not as high or not the same. I don’t know the actual stats but I know that a child may be five years old and if that child is African American, finding a permanent home for that child seems to be more difficult; finding family members or someone willing to adopt even if they are of a different ethnicity or other cultural group might be more difficult.

Another participant stated,

I recognize disproportionality when the parents are not completing their required court ordered activities in a timely manner due to having to spend time in jail for crimes committed and also because services are not readily available due to lack of services in the area they live, transportation problems accessing services, and waiting lists for substance abuse programs.

Services

Participants commented that a lot of services are lacking in the African American community.
One participant stated,

I recognize disproportionality by what services that are available based on the communities that they live in, in comparison to Hispanics and Whites in the communities that they are in and what services are available to them. I see that there is a difference sometimes of what is available. There may not be enough available in the communities where there are African American children in comparison to other races. And I just see the numbers based on the faces that we service.

Another participant stated,

What I recognized is that a lot of times, and I’ve always identified this early on, that it’s something at home. And we are not fixing it. I like what I do as far as the work that I do because I get a chance to work with the parents because a lot of times if the children are acting out, it’s an underlying issue. So, if we get the children treated, or they end up staying in the system for ever and we never identify with whose acting out because mom has drug issues and dad is absent from the home, and they are
crying out for help, so maybe if we fix the home, we won’t have a need to have so many kids in the system.

Reasons for Disproportionality

For the question of participants’ perceived reasons for disproportionality, the majority of responses identified: poverty, family structure, lack of cultural awareness and training, and discrimination. Below are examples of the responses.

Poverty

Participants identified poverty as a perceived reason for disproportionality, as many of the clients in the child welfare system live at or below the poverty level.

One participant commented,

To me, one of the main reasons is poverty and not having money creates all sorts of roadblocks in a person’s life such as transportation and housing, to just feeding and clothing themselves. So, if I don’t have any money coming in, how am I going to pay anybody any rent or compensate anybody for the help that I need to take care of my basis survival.
Another participant commented,

I think poverty is one reason.

Another participant stated,

Well, you could say because of poverty. There are more African American children that live below the poverty line, which is why they are more likely to be in the welfare system.

**Family Structure Issues**

Family structure was another major reason identified for disproportionality among African American children in child welfare.

One participant stated,

The primary reason, I think is the absence of black fathers in the homes. This was created in the welfare system starting with Lyndon Johnson who at the time I thought it was a great system, but I wasn’t aware that it created so many welfare cases and not only welfare cases, but maybe sort of a mentality at least at the time among the lower socioeconomic status people. I read data and hear from the media that there is a considerably higher proportion of absence of black fathers in black families.
Another participant stated,

I think that it has to do with a lot of maybe single parents out there and a lot of men, fathers not in the children’s lives, and the system in their lives as a result of the fathers not being there.

Yet, another social worker commented,

I have noticed that the parents of the children are only children themselves when they had them and now the mothers are children having children. So, the grandmother for a five year old child may only be forty-five years old because she had her child (not even that, thirty five or so). In one of my cases, I had a mother that was thirty four, a child who was seventeen who had a child. And it just seems like it’s a cycle and there is nobody to show them the right way to help them out in the system.

Another participant stated,

I think a reason for disproportionality is that some social workers do not understand the strong extended family networks that exist among African American families.
Lack of Cultural Awareness and Training

Some participants identified the lack of cultural awareness and training as a reason for disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system.

One participant commented,

I don't believe that some social workers are properly trained to address the issues in African American communities. I think they make assessments based on their beliefs as opposed to what is really happening. And I say that because I completed my masters and I went to school with many White social workers who did not believe that a culturally sensitive class was necessary. They did not feel that they had to be trained in that area, at all, even after we went through a series of exercises to show that training was necessary and needed.

Another participant stated,

I think a lack of cultural awareness is a problem, and training is needed.

Another participant responded,

I think possibly not receiving the training in cultural diversity, or just being aware of different
cultures because even in the African American communities there are different cultures, such as people from Jamaica, Trinidad. So becoming aware of the different cultures and receiving training or taking classes and making yourself aware of the differences need to be done so that you can be a little bit more aware and sensitive.

Another participant stated,
I think not being culturally aware about issues surrounding the families, or not realizing that to some people what's important to you is not a big deal to them. I think more training is needed for social workers.

**Discrimination**

Discrimination was identified as another reason for disproportionality among African American children in child welfare.

One participant stated,
One reason I think possibly could be in some cases, discrimination. Although I am of the belief that discrimination is at a minimum. That it is at the lowest it's been in many years, but I'm sure that there are some that goes on, that occur.
Another participant commented,

Maybe one of the reasons might be that African American people are discriminated against a lot. We are not being sensitive to their needs.

The minor responses to reasons for disproportionality were the system's view and substance abuse.

System's View

A few participants felt that the child welfare system needs to be revamped when it comes to minority children.

One participant stated,

I think another reason for disproportionality among African American children is that the system's view needs to be expanded when it comes to looking at all family members as resources. Sometimes the children come from families struggling with poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and sometimes drug and criminal activities with extended family members. Oftentimes those activities will prevent children from being placed with those family members and then cases close. So maybe there's a way to take into consideration some of the factors that sort of
eliminate folks as a possibility for placement and see if we can’t work with those families so that children aren’t lingering in foster care without a good solid long term plan.

Another participant stated,

Another reason for disproportionality among African American children is the conflict between our timeframes, our time limitations for reunification and those perceptions of the family members and how long their relatives should be given to get things together. So, sometimes other family members sort of hang back. And then what happens is that we have children hat are in foster care too long because no one is stepping forward until the very last minute when we are about to terminate parental rights and everybody goes, ‘Oh goodness, we’d better do something about this so the family doesn’t lose the children’.

Addressing Disproportionality

For the question of what social workers, supervisors, administrators, and the community can do to effectively address the problem of disproportionality,
among African American children in child welfare, the participants offered responses that included: training for social workers, training for supervisors, community and church involvement, system changes, and Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. Below are examples of the responses from participants.

Social Worker Training

The majority of participants interviewed identified more training in cultural sensitivity.

Specifically, one participant stated,

I think the social workers need to be educated about cultural differences and they need to be aware of those differences.

Another participant commented,

There needs to be more cultural awareness on the front end. I think there are more African American children picked up than other races.

Another social worker responded,

I really believe training is the key and it is something that is totally absent in my workplace. Whenever you get social workers in the field that are making decisions about families of a different culture, I believe they need to be culturally aware.
of what is going on in the interdynamics of that family and how our cultures deal with different things because there is a difference.

**Supervisor Trainings**

One participant responded that supervisors need to be trained more in cultural diversity.

Specifically, it was reported,

I think we need to have supervisors that are very well trained who can lead their people, their social workers, to be the role model for how to be more culturally sensitive. For example, I could go to a supervisor and ask her a culturally sensitive question and the supervisor will not know and that leaves me to guess for myself as to how to deal with a certain cultural situation. So in depth training for supervisors specific to cultural sensitivity would be good.

**Community and Church Involvement**

Participants felt that community churches need to promote values within the African American community and men need to be more responsible about their children in both creating and being there for their children.
One participant stated,

I believe the community needs to be more involved with reaching out to African American families and all people of low socioeconomic status providing them with awareness of the services that are available to them through media that they are going to access, or through things that they are going to access which may not be going to church.

Another participant reported,

I believe the community needs to be more involved with families in coming forward to adopt African American children that can not be returned to their parents

Another participant stated,

I think the African American churches should step forward and be more proactive with families like they used to be in the olden days.

System Changes

Some participants felt the child welfare system is too rigid and biased. They reported that some guidelines do not take into consideration cultural differences such as timelines for reunification due to lack of services.
One participant stated,

The system needs to change its policy of eliminating prospective relatives due to criminal history that happened a long, long time ago. Most people change their lives, but the system continues to punish them by not allowing children to live with relatives with criminal history.

Another participant reported,

Well, it’s definitely a team approach. I think it still goes down to the system that we work in that gives us these guidelines and doesn’t allow us as social workers to often times take into consideration the cultural aspects of children.

Team Decision Making

Some participants commented that more TDMs could address the problem of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system and could guard against children being placed into foster care.

One participant stated

I think TDM meetings, or meetings very similar to that, would be helpful and the people in the community get together and try to help out with the poverty issues and just try to help the families
stay together and be more involved for the sake of the children."

Another participant commented,

I think we should incorporate TDMs so every family that is identified as African American could participate in the TDM in order to address some of the causes of disproportionality.

Summary

The results of this study showed that disproportionality among African American children and other minorities exists within Riverside County. The majority of the social workers thought that more social worker and supervisor training in cultural awareness and sensitivity would be helpful. They also thought that more community involvement and access to services within the communities would be beneficial.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of this qualitative study, and some of the limitations and biases that are inherent within any qualitative study (that deals with the disproportionate number of African American children that linger in the child welfare system. Additionally, this chapter will present suggestions and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to solicit social workers' views about disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. Many concepts emerged from the interview data in this qualitative study. However, we will only focus on a few. All the social workers understood the meaning of disproportionality among minority children. However, one social worker also identified disproportionality as being related to services. The response by the social worker on this topic was "to me it means that there is a lack of
equality. It could be a lack of services compared to other ethnic groups, or it could mean more children in the foster care system than other ethnic groups.” An article in the Children’s Bureau Express (2003) also identified disproportionality as related to lack of services.

The majority of social workers viewed disproportionality among African American children as being over represented in the child welfare system compared to the number of African American children in the population. In Riverside County, the 2007 Children’s Services Division FACT sheet revealed that African American children represented only 5.8 percent of the county’s population. However, African American children in foster care represented 18 percent, three times the number which is disproportionate to the total population. The FACT Sheet also revealed that Latino children represented 42.2 percent of the population and 33 percent are in foster care. It should also be noted that compared to data from the 2006 Children’s Services Division FACT Sheet for Riverside County, the total number of African American children in the population increased in 2007 by .3 percent, and the total number of African American
children in foster care for that year decreased by .2 percent.

Hill (2003) referred to disproportionality as children that are over or underrepresented in the child welfare system relative to their proportions in their population.

When asked about reasons for disproportionality among African American children, many social workers stated that lack of cultural training and awareness was a major issue.

Green (2004) commented that child welfare staff is slow in understanding cultural differences and more training is needed.

Another reason identified for disproportionality was poverty. Social workers stated that many African American families live below the poverty level and when neglect and abuse occur, attention is drawn to them by child welfare.

Hines et al. (2004) commented that African American children spend more time living in poverty and can not seem to escape from poverty, compared to other racial/ethnic groups.
A report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2007) revealed that families living in poverty have greater difficulty accessing housing, mental health, and other services needed to keep families stable and children safely at home.

The GAO (2007) also reported that distrust due to bias or cultural misunderstandings between child welfare decision makers and the families they serve also are reasons children are removed from their homes and placed into foster care.

Also, a study conducted by Hill (2006) revealed that since there is a strong association between maltreatment and poverty, poor children are over-represented in the child welfare system.

Another identified reason for disproportionality was family structure issues. One social worker stated that the "absence of black fathers in the home is a primary reason." Another social worker stated that it had to do with single parenting, and the fathers are absent from the family. Children's Bureau Express (2003) validated the participants comments that family structure contribute to disproportionality among African American
families due to teenage pregnancy, absent fathers and a lack of relatives to provide care to the children.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (cited in Casey Family Services, 2006) children without responsible fathers face much greater risk of living in poverty, performing poorly in school, participating in criminal activity, and abusing illegal drugs.

All of the social workers felt that something needed to be done to reduce the number of minority children in child welfare. Some stated that African American communities and churches should become more involved such as promoting values within the African American community, more training to educate the African American parents, and more supportive services within the community.

Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings were identified as an practice on the part of social workers, administrators, and communities to help alleviate the problem of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, I was able to successfully explore the views that some social
workers have toward disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. Hill (2006) confirmed findings from a recent study that reports are received more readily on African American families for abuse and neglect of their children, and their children are more frequently removed from their homes with psychological consequences, compared to other children. In my study, some social workers believed that some African American children were removed from their homes due to biases by other social workers.

Hines et al. (2004) found that there are many interrelated factors that contribute to disproportionality among African American children in child welfare. Some of those factors are poverty, race, and class biases in reporting, and parent and family related risks factors.

Also, due to the qualitative nature of the study, I was able to provide a platform for social workers to express their feelings about disproportionality among African American children in child welfare and the impact of child welfare policy initiatives on the involvement of children of color in the child welfare system. Specifically, the enactment of the Multi-Ethnic Placement
Act (MEPA) of 1994, later amended to the Interethnic Adoption provisions (IEP) in 1996 was intended to reduce the amount of time children waited to be adopted. Hines, et al. (2004) revealed that if IEP was "implemented as it was supposed to be implemented children would spend less time in the system waiting for permanent placements."

An unanticipated result in the findings included a perspective from one social worker that many families could benefit more from same race social workers providing services to the same race children in the child welfare system. However, the social worker recognized that this is not always possible, and stated that she was in favor of more training on diversity for all social workers.

**Limitations**

One limitation took place during the recruitment phase of the study. Some social workers questioned the audio taping and appeared to be concerned about confidentiality. Some social workers were guarded when asked to participate in the study, committed to participate, then changed their minds later.
Another limitation encountered during the recruitment phase was low response, about 45 percent, to participate. I was able to overcome this limitation by contacting social workers by telephone, and making in person appearances to solicit their participation.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Further research in the area of social workers' views on disproportionality among African American children in child welfare can play a vital role in the area of learning more about minority children and their families. More research would also identify ways to address a problem that has been around for decades.

An understanding of what drives decisions made by social workers when making decisions to remove children from their homes is relevant when you examine the overall outcomes of children that are removed from their families. Enforced policies about returning children to their families in a more timely manner could help to eliminate this problem.

Also, an understanding of the implications of social workers' beliefs and value systems is crucial to the understanding of how social policy is carried out from
the first contact with a minority family. It was interesting and informative to listen and determine what motivates social workers to provide quality service to children of all races and ethnic groups. For example, the majority of social workers suggested a need for more training in the areas of cultural sensitivity relating to minority children and families. It's critical that more training be provided to social workers as well as supervisors, administrators, and the community at large.

There is also a need for more TDM meetings at the front end and throughout the child welfare process to make sure children are returned home to their families in a more timely manner.

Wraparound services would also be helpful to the children and families in efforts to maintain the children within the home.

Policy changes relating to timelines would allow the families more time to complete court ordered services. Many parents can not complete the court ordered services in a timely manner due to lack of services in their communities, transportation problems and long waiting lists.
Conclusions

Overall, the conclusion of my study focuses on the fact that disproportionality among African American children in child welfare is a social problem in Riverside County, as well as nationally. Social workers thought TDMs on the front end and throughout placement while children are in the child welfare system could empower families to identify other family members that would be willing to provide care for their children, as well as be supportive of the family. TDMs are being held in some regions in Riverside County to address detention issues related to infants and children, and placement issues for all children. The goal is for TDMs to be held in all the regions throughout Riverside County.

Overall, the social workers interviewed for this study were able to share their views toward disproportionality among African American children in child welfare. Each social worker recognized the need to gain more knowledge about this issue and address it whenever possible to reduce the number of minority children in the child welfare system.
APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHICS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Study of Social Workers’ Views on Disproportionality among African American Children in the Child Welfare System

Demographic Information

Please circle or fill in the blanks.

1. Gender
   (1) Male   (2) Female

2. Age________

3. What is your ethnicity?
   (1) African American (2) Asian   (3) Caucasian
   (4) Hispanic       (5) Native American   (6) Pacific Islander
   (7) Other

4. What was your last degree completed?
   (1) Bachelor   (2) Master   (3) Doctorate

   Specify the degree earned (i.e. Master of Social Work)

5. What is your social work position title?
   (1) CSSW III   (2) CSSW IV   (3) CSSW V

6. How long have you been employed as a social worker with Riverside County? _______

7. While earning your degree(s), did you take courses that emphasized diversity and/or awareness of cultural differences among the various ethnic groups? (1) Yes   (2) No

8. Do you think more awareness training is needed about over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system? (1) Yes   (2) No

9. Have you ever received awareness training on the disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system? (1) Yes   (2) No

10. How many African American children do you have on your caseload? _______.

11. Of the African American children on your caseload, what is the concurrent plan?
    (1) Reunification   (2) Adoption   (3) Legal Guardianship.

Interview Guide

1. What does the “phrase” disproportionality among African American children mean to you?

2. In what ways do you recognize disproportionality among African American children?

3. What do you think are reasons for disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system?

4. In your opinion, what do you think needs to be done by social workers, child welfare administrators, and the community to effectively address the issues of disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system?
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent

Study of Social Worker's Views on Disproportionality among African American Children in the Child Welfare System

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate cultural awareness/competency of social workers on the problem of disproportionality among African American Children in the child welfare system and the need for social worker awareness within Child Protective Services in Riverside County. This study is being conducted by Hortense “Tee” Granderson under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, Associate Professor, Social Work Department at California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Institutional Subcommittee, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked about your views on disproportionality and some demographic information. The interview process should take approximately 20 minutes. The interview will be audio taped upon your permission and the interviewer will take notes throughout the interview. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. You may receive the group results of this study upon completion in September 2008 from Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino or Riverside County Child Protective Services.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and withdraw any time during this study without penalty. You will also receive $10 upon completion of the interview and the signed informed consent form.

Direct benefits of participating in this study include bringing awareness of the problem to the forefront and exploring and understanding social workers’ views towards disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. Possible risks of participating in this study may include issues of stress and feeling uncomfortable answering questions that might lead to transference and projection. The debriefing statement given to you after the interview process will provide a referral to a counseling agency so that you may contact them, if you feel distressed.

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

By placing check marks in the boxes below, you acknowledge that you have been informed of, you understand the nature and purpose of the study, you freely consent to participate, and that you are 18 years of age. You also give permission to be audio taped during the interview process.

[ ] I have read the above statement and agree to participate in this study.
[ ] I give permission to be audio taped for this project. Date__________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
Debriefing Statement

The study you have just completed was designed to explore social workers' views on disproportionality among African American children in the child welfare system. Thank you for participating in this exploratory study and for not discussing the contents of the survey with other people.

If you feel uncomfortable as a result of participating in the study, you are advised to contact Riverside Crisis Counseling and Referrals, a 24 hour service at (951) 686-4357 or http://www.co.riverside.ca.us/help.asp.

If you would like the results of this study, they will be made available at California State University San Bernardino in the Pfau Library. The university phone number is (909) 537-5500.
REFERENCES


Children’s Bureau Express, (2003), Disproportionality in juvenile justice system may have roots in child welfare. *Children’s Bureau Express, 3*(10), 1-17.


Government Accountability Office, United States


