6-2016

THE DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Ehizele Angel Usigbe
California State University - San Bernardino, usigbeeh@gmail.com

Sheila Maria Mendoza
California State University - San Bernardino, sheila_mendoza@outlook.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Graduate Studies at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
THE DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

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
Sheila Marie Mendoza
Ehizele Angel Usigbe
June 2016
THE DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

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

by
Sheila Marie Mendoza
Ehizele Angel Usigbe
June 2016

Approved by:

Dr. Zoila Gordon, Faculty Supervisor, Social Work
Dr. Janet Chang, M.S.W. Research Coordinator
ABSTRACT

African American communities have been subject to institutional and societal inequalities for much of our nation’s history. A review of the literature has shown that these families have unequal access to resources and opportunities, especially in the comparison to the rest of the population. These factors may contribute to African American children having higher rates of substantiated cases of abuse and neglect, as well as the amount of time that these children spend in the foster care system. A qualitative study was conducted in the form of focus groups. The study examined the African American community’s perspective of the child welfare system and the social workers they may have come in contact with in the scope of their possible child welfare experience. Common themes that emerged included a lack of understanding of both the system and services provided, a sense of mistrust between the community and government agencies, and the need for more resources specifically for the African American community. Proposed solutions to alleviate the disproportionality problems in child welfare included social workers teaming with families, mentorships between African Americans, and collaborations with other agencies.
Acknowledgements

Sheila Marie Mendoza

I would like to take this time to thank many special mentors, family, friends, and participants who have significantly impacted the way I will practice social work. To Dr. Gordon, thank you for your supervision of our research, constant support, and inspiration. You have pushed us to find the root of this injustice, and now it is something I will be passionate about for the rest of my career in child welfare. To Susan Culbertson, who believed in our research and recommended that we present at the Summer Institute 2016. To Professor Jeannine Meza, my academic advisor, who greatly influenced my micro practice skills and supported me through the ups and downs of graduate school. I would especially like to thank my family, who supports me and pushes. I am proud to be the first person in my family to receive a Master’s degree, and I could not have done without their constant strength and support. To my close group of friends, who believe that education is the key to success, and motivate me to keep going. I would also like to take the time to thank our participants for engaging in these difficult discussions and providing me with advice on how to become a great social worker. This discussion will have a lasting impact on me which I will forever carry in my heart and in my practice. Lastly, but most importantly, I would like to thank God for his constant presence in my life. This graduate program has challenged me and helped me grow tremendously over the last two years.
These words alone cannot begin to describe how thankful I am for the opportunity I have been given.

**Ehizele Angel Usigbe**

First and foremost, I’d like to thank God for continuing to bless me and provide me with so many opportunities for growth in these past two years. Without His presence in my life, I would not be able to gotten through this past year. I would like to thank Dr. Gordon for all of her patience, guidance and feedback on this research project. It was truly appreciated and I am glad you were my research advisor. I would also like to thank Professor Meza for her guidance in both my professional and personal life. I appreciate you so much and our talks have helped keep me sane over the past two years. I am both a better social worker and a better person because of your teaching and mentoring. I would like to thank all of our participants for taking the time and having the courage to share their worldview with us. Thank you for helping us see inside a problem that many are not aware of. Most importantly, I’d like to thank my parents for all always being there when I need them, being great role models, and loving me unconditionally. You taught me the importance of seeking a higher education and being the best version of myself. “Laborer no beget laborer”.

DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate this research to the participants and staff at Ecclesia Christian Fellowship in San Bernardino, CA for being so welcoming and open to discussing this difficult topic. This church is particularly special because they strive to increase the quality of living in the African American community through their outreach and service programs. They provide a safe place for African American families across San Bernardino to receive access to community resources and a source of community support. A special thank you to Vanessa Richardson, Family Life Administrative Assistant at Ecclesia Christian Fellowship. Ms. Richardson helped us to coordinate focus groups by personally recruiting parishioners on our behalf. Without her, our research could not be possible.

Our goal is that our work will begin to open the minds of not only child welfare social workers, but all professionals that work with this population and to assist with raising awareness of the unequal opportunities and access to resources for African American families in the United States.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. iv

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1
  Problem Statement ........................................................................................................ 1
  Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................... 4
  Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice .................................................... 6

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................ 8
  Introduction ................................................................................................................... 8
  Historical Disadvantages contribute to the Disproportionality ................................... 8
  Poverty Contributes to the Disproportionality ............................................................... 10
  Social Worker Racial Biases ......................................................................................... 12
  Systemic Biases ........................................................................................................... 14
  Community Level Impacts .......................................................................................... 15
  Theories Guiding Conceptualization .......................................................................... 18
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 20

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS ....................................................................................... 22
  Introduction ................................................................................................................... 22
  Study Design ................................................................................................................ 22
  Sampling ....................................................................................................................... 23
  Data Collection and Instruments ............................................................................... 24
  Procedures .................................................................................................................... 24
Protection of Human Subjects ............................................................................. 26
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................ 26
Summary .................................................................................................................. 27

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS ...................................................................................... 28
Introduction .............................................................................................................. 28
Demographics .......................................................................................................... 28
Themes ...................................................................................................................... 30
Summary of Main Findings ...................................................................................... 35

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION ................................................................................. 36
Introduction .............................................................................................................. 36
Discussion ................................................................................................................ 36
Limitations ............................................................................................................... 40
Recommendations for Social Work Practice ........................................................ 42
Recommendations for Policy ................................................................................... 44
Recommendations for Research ............................................................................. 45
Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 46

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE ....................................................................... 47
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONS ...................................................... 49
APPENDIX C: RAW DATA AND ANALYSIS ........................................................ 52
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT ................................................................. 54
APPENDIX E: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT ............................................................ 56
APPENDIX F: AGENCY APPROVALS ................................................................. 58
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 61
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Age Frequency Chart................................................................. 29

Table 2. Lack of Understanding of Child Welfare System and Services Provided................................................................. 30

Table 3. Systemic Biases/Discrimination.................................................. 32

Table 4. A Sense of Community Responsibility ......................................... 33

Table 5. Mistrust between Community and Government Agencies ............. 34
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the child welfare system, social workers strive to help all families achieve a sense of safety, permanency and well-being. This goal is stated similarly throughout all California child welfare agencies; however African American children and families tend to have more negative experiences in the child welfare system compared to children and families of other races. These differing experiences within child welfare span across all socioeconomic boundaries, with race being the seemingly deciding factor for the difference. It is of importance for both social workers and the child welfare system to seek ways to increase the positive experiences that these families have when interacting with the system.

Problem Statement

According to Child Welfare Information Gateway, there is more than double the amount of African American children in foster care than in the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). In California alone, African American children are detained at quadruple the rate represented in the population (Harper, 2013). Disproportionality in the child welfare system is not a new concept. In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was enacted due to the high rates of Native American children being removed from their homes (Lidot, Orrantia, & Choca, 2012). The enactment of ICWA helped reduce the rate
of Native American children being removed. However, both Native American children and African American children are still disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, with the rates of African American children being especially high. Not only is this population more likely to enter the foster care system, they are also less likely to successfully reunify with their families or transition out of the foster care system. According to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2008), the rates of African American youth who exited foster care decreased from 29% to 24% in 2004 and 2013, respectively. However, even with this slight reduction, the problem continues to be significant.

While ICWA laws have helped social workers follow a set of rules and policies when working with Native American children to ensure that the family and community interests are taken into high consideration, rates of African American children being detained are extremely alarming and there is no federal mandate to protect their interests or their communities. There are many studies which look at why such a high disparity exists in the child welfare system. Issues such as racial and historical discrimination, as well as socioeconomic factors are especially high in these studies (Jones, 2012; Copper, 2013; Alexander, 2010). However, there are very few studies that look at this problem from the community’s perception. This study intends to examine the African American community’s perceptions of the child welfare system and the social workers in child welfare.
It is of special importance to study how communities perceive the child welfare system. The community’s perception of social workers will affect not only how they react to the system as a whole, but how they act with individual workers. Their perceptions of the system can lead to behavior that is more likely to have their children detained. It is also important to get their voice as social workers who adhere to the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. It is know that the client’s voice and experiences are particularly vital. While these ethics should be followed at all times, the ones relating to service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person and competence are especially important when looking at this issue. According to the NASW (2008), social workers are to use their knowledge and skills when working with clients, to fight for “vulnerable and oppressed individuals”, to be cognizant of diversity among clients and to continually be knowledgeable about the populations they work with. Being informed of the community’s perception will help social workers be in compliance with the code of ethics and ensure they are meeting the needs of the community that they serve. Finding out the community’s opinions will also help county agencies when developing policies for working with African American populations. This knowledge can lead to the development of policies that will help decrease the high rates of African American families that are involved in the child welfare system, as none exist at this time.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how African American community members perceive social workers and the child welfare system as a whole. As noted above, the high rates of disproportionality in the child welfare system need to be addressed and receiving community input can create a dialogue between child welfare agencies and the communities that they serve. This can also aid in giving a new perspective on the issue and lead to policy change in child welfare. Child welfare social workers need to be aware of what is causing this disproportionality. Many factors may impact disproportionality including poverty, and possibly even social worker biases. Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, and Leary (2013) studied how poverty affects the "black/white gap" in the foster care system. They found that "poverty…is associated with a narrower gap rather than a wider gap….due to the fact that the relationship between poverty and placement rates depends on race" (Wulczyn et al, 2013). These findings show that while poverty may play a role, it is not the primary reason for the disproportionality.

If poverty is not playing a major role in the detention of African American children, social worker biases also need to be analyzed. Input received from community members regarding the child welfare system and the social workers has the ability to shed new light on the previous studies conducted on disproportionality. The findings of this study will help social workers to become more aware of their potential biases as well as how to with African American
families and effectively meet their needs. This can also help with future trainings of social workers by providing them with information regarding disproportionality and to make sure that workers analyze their biases before working with families.

This issue needs to be addressed because there is no formal policy or cultural competency guidelines given by either the NASW or county agencies in working specifically with African American families. For Native American children, ICWA was established in order to make sure that both family and community needs were being met and that their culture stays intact. However, the same has not been done for African American families, a similarly vulnerable population facing historical discrimination. While a federal mandate may never happen for these families, it is important for the system at a county and state level to establish policies that ensure these families and their culture are at the forefront of workers minds, and that each family is treated equally.

This study will be conducted with a qualitative research method utilizing focus groups. This method will be beneficial in getting individual community members opinions in a safe environment. This method will also allow for members to state specifically what they feel is contributing to the disproportionality of African American families in the child welfare system and give social workers something concrete to look at when addressing the problems community members bring up. The small group setting will also facilitate confidentiality and a focus group will allow participants to be with members of a similar culture, therefore feeling less judged and more likely to discuss these
personal matters. Focus groups are used to discuss matters that are especially concerning to a population or subset, and this study looks specifically at the African American community.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

This study is needed because there is not much research being done that specifically looks at the community’s perception of the problem regarding disproportionality in the child welfare system. These results will contribute to social work practice by giving social workers more information on the community’s wants and needs, as well as getting a perspective as to why these removals are more prominent in African American communities. This study will also affect policy change for county agencies that have a high number of African American children in their system by taking the information and developing a more culturally competent practice. Working with these families that will look like a decrease in the rate of removal of these children, and that these children and their families will have more successful outcomes. This study will help guide social work research by providing a stepping stone for further research to be completed that looks at the community’s perspective on a wider platform, possibly even looking at communities statewide and nationally to see if the concerns shared via this research is replicated and what social workers can do to alleviate the problem.
Many aspects of the generalist intervention model will be informed by our study, including the engagement, assessment and intervention stages. We will be engaging with community members by going out into their community to ask them what they believe is the cause of the problem. We will be assessing community needs, getting their opinion on how to remedy this disproportionality, and solutions for social workers to help them better the African American community. Finally, by providing this information as part of social work research, we are creating possible interventions that may help remedy the disproportionality problem affecting child welfare organizations across the United States. This study is directly relevant to child welfare because it will be gathering community member's perceptions of the disproportionate rates of African American children in the child welfare system.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

African American children are being removed from their biological families at quadruple the rates of the general population (Harper, 2013). The root of this problem has been debated by many experts who seem to be in conflict about the reasons why African American children are removed and fail to reunify with their biological families. Certainly, African Americans have faced discrimination and hardships both historically and currently. This literature review will examine the various factors which may contribute to the disproportionality. This includes: historical discrimination, poverty, social worker racial biases and systemic biases. Additionally, this literature review examines the effects of child welfare involvement within African American communities.

Historical Disadvantages contribute to the Disproportionality

After the Civil War, African Americans were freed from slavery, and they acquired various civil rights. While legally African Americans were free, societal perceptions of African Americans remained. Thus, African Americans continued to be “socially exiled” (Danzer, 2012). African Americans were segregated from employment and educational opportunities. They were coerced into living “in the poorest, most dilapidated neighborhoods, some of which remain the most notorious inner city African American neighborhoods in contemporary America”
(Danzer, 2012, P.18). During this time, White America wanted African Americans to be unsuccessful and unhopeful. They were purposefully removed from any resources which would lead to their advancement (Danzer, 2012). Unfortunately, many of these former perceptions of African Americans exist in America currently. These historical perceptions have created century long biases in American society.

Copper (2013) suggests that while African American children are more at risk of abuse and neglect, they are also facing discriminatory influences due to an oppressive history. Additionally, Copper (2013) studied the disproportionality with a systems thinking approach. Copper (2013) accordingly examined how historical discrimination can lead to increased rates of child abuse and neglect among African Americans. This study displayed this idea through a cause and effect pattern (Copper, 2013). Specifically, Copper (2013) suggested that historical discrimination can lead to poor education and jobs for African Americans. This can lead to poor parenting skills, poor education, and poor career outcomes, which inevitably is passed down through multiple generations (Copper, 2013). Ultimately, historical discrimination has increased negative environmental risks for African Americans which leads to the increased removal of their children.
Poverty Contributes to the Disproportionality

According to the United States Census (2013), 25.8% of African Americans are living in poverty while 11.6% of Caucasians are living in poverty. In comparison, 13.2% African Americans are living in the United States while 77.4% of Caucasians are living in the United States. African Americans are living in poverty at twice the rate of Caucasians (United States Census, 2013).

The disproportionality among income of African Americans is identical to the disproportionality of African Americans in the child welfare system. Danzer (2012) noted that high poverty rates among African Americans began when they were historically segregated. He states that historically the “concentration of poverty led to rising crimes rates, domestic violence, drug problems, and other social ills that might normally be somewhat addressed through public services” (Danzer, 2012, P. 19). Inner city African Americans were detached from mainstream society, resources, and protective mechanisms that might offer some assistance. This has led a lack of advancement across many aspects of the lives of African Americans including child welfare.

Poverty amongst African Americans is very prevalent and can impact the removal rates of African American children, according to Alexander (2010). Poverty increases risk because it increases the amount of stress on individual families. It also speaks to systemic inequalities among African Americans. Poverty rates are higher for African Americans than for any other race in America (Alexander, 2010). This, however, is a separate injustice which has its own
contributing factors to the problem. Unfortunately, African Americans are more likely to be gang affiliated, serve jail time, receive government assistance, live in poverty and enter the child welfare system (Alexander, 2010). It is no coincidence that African Americans continue to be overrepresented among multiple agencies and various systems; it is a clear injustice. Alexander (2010) suggests that poverty and the reasons for poverty influence the risk for involvement with the law and child welfare (Alexander, 2010). Continuing to have a large percentage of African Americans in poverty can lead to a larger percentage entering into the child welfare system. Lastly, the rates of African Americans living in poverty are about the same as the rates of African Americans involved in child welfare. Therefore, one may conclude that poverty is the main and only reason for children in the child welfare system. However, complex racial disparity factors also contribute to the disproportionate rates of African American living in poverty.

According to Maren (2014), living in poverty increases daily stress among the household. An increase in daily stress can lead to more fighting in the house as well as general neglect of the child (Maren, 2014). Domestic violence is just cause for an allegation of emotional abuse. Additionally, the general neglect may stem from the lack of ability to afford a babysitter, the absence of a parent who is working long hours, or the lack of ability to provide food and housing. Maren (2014) shows that child maltreatment is increased when poverty is prevailing and many other factors contribute to the increased risk to the child. Because African
Americans are living in high rates of poverty, they are therefore subjected to a high risk of child maltreatment. Additionally, foster youth often fail to complete their high school diploma and only about 3% will receive a college education. Many former foster youth find themselves unable to find a job, and their unemployment rates are about 20% higher than that of the general public (Okpych and Courtney, 2014). Foster youth have poor outcomes, thus, placing a high percentage African Americans in foster care increases poor outcomes for African American youth. This leads to generational cycles of unemployment and poverty among African Americans. Cross (2008), however, opposes this idea by saying

One school of thought has been that there is a disproportionate need and that due to poverty, substance abuse, and family disruptions over time in communities of color, children from these groups come into the child welfare system in greater numbers. It turns out that this idea is mostly myth (Cross, 2008, p. 11).

Cross (2008) believes that child maltreatment is found in all races at about the same rate as African Americans regardless of poverty rates.

Social Worker Racial Biases

Hines (2004) found that the following factors influence the disproportionality: 1) parent and family related risk factors and child welfare involvement 2) social factors related to poverty, neighborhood effects, and other community related 3) race and socioeconomic biases in initial reporting and
subsequent processing of child in the child welfare system and 4) the impact of recent child welfare policy initiatives on minority children (Hines, 2004). Thus, a combination of factors contributes to the disproportionality of African Americans. This complex combination of risk factors can continue to create challenges in the child welfare system. Howell (2010) examined 87 child welfare social workers. Each participant was given 24 vignettes with hypothetical maltreatment cases and a 45 item scale to measure biases of race and drug users (Howell, 2010). This study found that social workers did have biases against specific races, but that those biases did not affect their decision to remove a child or reunify a family (Howell, 2010). When examining biases, it is important to measure both subtle biases and more direct biases. Social workers may consciously skew their answers to identify with their legal and ethical obligations. It is difficult to not only identify biases, but also to be certain that those unintended biases directly affect African Americans.

Lee et al. (2015) suggests that the subjectivity of the child welfare system as well as implicit biases lead to the overrepresentation of African American children at all stages of involvement in the child welfare system. African American families are over reported for alleged maltreatment (Lee et al., 2015). This suggests that other professionals also possess an implicit racial bias as they are the ones mostly likely to call the child abuse hotline. Additionally, social workers are more likely to substantiate abuse and remove a child in cases which involve neglect which is disproportionately involving African American families.
(Lee et al., 2015). On the other hand, more cases are substantiated for physical and sexual abuse disproportionately for Caucasian families (Lee et al., 2015). This concludes that Caucasian children are removed for more severe abuse and African American children are removed for less severe abuse suggesting that African American families are victims of a subjective system and biased social worker. Lastly, African American children are more likely to enter foster care and less likely to receive proper treatment services (Lee et al., 2015). African Americans are underserved and lack resources, and the child welfare system is no exception to this societal norm. They continue to be underserved and lack access to essential resources.

Systemic Biases

Ikuenobe (2011) studied subtle forms of racism and found that racism was "manifested in even positive behaviors that the commonplace views may not identify as racism" (Ikuenobe, 2011, P.172). Therefore, it is possible that the child welfare system, a positive commonplace, can display these subtle forms of racism as well. While they are compassionate in their mission, it is possible that this system is failing the African American community. Furthermore, Choate and Engstrom (2014) believe that the standards for removing children are too ambiguous. Following this logic, each family is then subjected to the discretion of the particular social worker assigned to the case. Without a definite standard of removal and reunification, this leaves room for inconsistencies and systemic biases (Choate and Engstrom, 2014). If both ideas are true, then vulnerable
populations such as African Americans are targeted by the inherent inconsistencies in the child welfare system.

Mumpower and McClelland (2014) applied the Signal Detection Theory (SDT) to analyze national and state level child welfare data. The SDT examined various response biases and found many discrepancies when analyzing African American cases. They found that African Americans had “higher rates of referrals and the system is less accurate for them” in comparison to Caucasians or Hispanics (Mumpower and McClellands, 2014, P. 121). In fact, the SDT data tool found that referrals leading to unsubstantiated findings is higher for African Americans (Mumpower and McClellands, 2014). Conversely, referrals which are substantiated are much higher for African Americans as well. Ultimately, this analysis showed that the child welfare system is treating African Americans differently than other races across the child welfare system. The reasons for this seem to be unjustified in terms of this objective measure.

Community Level Impacts

There are very few studies which look at the perspective of the African American community. Danzer (2012) mentions that “in inner city African American communities, the police, social service providers, and other public systems were [historically] often corrupt, abusive, and discriminatory that they are historically distrusted by inner city African Americans” (Danzer, 2012, P.19).

This distrust has been embedded through the generations and certainly continues to exist today. This distrust can impede social worker investigations as
they are less likely to be compliant with someone they inherently distrust. While Danzer (2012) is accurate in many findings, it seems that these findings are largely speculated rather than factual accounts from community members. Cross (2008) acknowledges that this problem is deep rooted and highly complex; thus, multiple solutions are necessary. Certainly, this is an injustice for African American families and regardless of how or why this injustice occurred, it can be agreed upon that this is unfair for African Americans. Cross (2008), however, has a solution focused model which focuses solely on reconciliation between the child welfare system and the African American community. This solution combines both the limitations of the system as well as the needs of the African American communities (Cross, 2008). The four steps in order for this process to be successful for community members is “truth telling, acknowledging, restoring, and relating” (Cross, 2008). Truth telling involves identifying the past and present oppression as a result of systemic biases and acknowledging involves bringing about a new understanding and policies to protect vulnerable populations (Cross, 2008). Restoring and relating require that dominant and more privileged cultures begin to work in conjunction with the African American community (Cross, 2008). This solution can reconcile the trauma the African American community has faced as a whole. However, any individuals may continue to feel hurt by the system. Therefore, a strategic plan needs to be put in place in order to address and acknowledge the feelings of each individual.
Certainly the child welfare system is having a significant impact on African American families, and it is important to examine the perceptions of the African American community. Roberts (2008) conducted a qualitative study which focused on the community level effects of systemic racism in child welfare. The study interviewed 25 African American women in a predominantly African American neighborhood in Chicago, IL (Roberts, 2014). Of the 25 community members interviewed, 14 of them had involvement with their local child protective services office (Roberts, 2014). When the members were examined for their awareness of child welfare involvement in their neighborhood, 17 respondents reported that they believed child welfare involvement to affect at least half of their neighborhood (Roberts, 2014). In fact, many reported that their neighborhood had about 60-90% involvement with the child welfare system (Roberts, 2014). Conversely, only 9 of the 25 members believed that child welfare played a helpful role in local families (Roberts, 2014). This shows that less than half of this community believes the child welfare system to be a helpful agency when working with African Americans. The neighborhood in this study identified significant effects of child welfare involvement to the community such as: damage to social relationships and parental authority, damage to children’s ability to form social relationships, and distrust among neighbors (Roberts, 2008). Child welfare involvement is perceived by community members as doing more damage than instilling positive outcomes. This damage may break up a family's
support network and further damage that particular family. From the perspective on the African American community, the child welfare system is failing them.

**Theories Guiding Conceptualization**

The National Association of Social Workers (2001) operationally defined cultural competency as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situation” (NASW, 2001). Collins (2011) discusses the impacts of culturally competent skills when working specifically with African Americans. Education about a culture can alleviate some of the inherent biases and stereotypes. As a social worker, it is essential to consider the person first before associating them with racial stereotypes. This involves getting to know the client personally. While cultural competence is important and can have significant impact on vulnerable, racial populations, it is also important to acknowledge that social workers cannot possibly know everything about each race and culture. Instead, social workers must simultaneously practice cultural humility. This means that social workers must approach everyone from a place of inquiry. Ortega and Coulborn (2011) further explore this idea of cultural humility. The authors’ state that current culturally competent practices should be improved upon. Additionally, they believe that:
Current concerns focus on the unintentional over-emphasis on shared group characteristics, undervaluing unique differences of individuals served, and privileging worker expertise about the client’s culture, thereby exacerbating the power imbalance between them (Ortega and Coulborn, 2011, P.27)

Regardless if the race of the social work matches that of the client, there are still characteristics of that specific client which the social worker can learn about. Coming from a place of humility and inquiry rather than absolute knowledge can help decrease various power differences between the social worker and client.

Bell et al. (2009) speaks to the importance of culturally competent practices as well as empirically based practices for working in a system that has racial biases (Bell et al., 2009). This study connects the similarities between mental health fields and the child welfare system. Cultural competence can be generalized to any social service agency including child welfare. Practicing cultural competence means that social workers are “rebuilding and supporting the village, providing access to health care, improving bonds, attachment and connectedness, improving self-esteem, increasing social skills, and minimizing the residual effects of trauma.” (Bell et al., 2009, P. 1206). Cultural competence for African American communities involves practicing trauma informed practice and acknowledging their current situation.
Trauma informed practice is a lens from which social workers are to always consider the trauma which a client has faced within their practice. It is known that African Americans have faced historical trauma and that current racism creates some trauma as well. Danzer (2012) states that “white racism creates socio-environmental conditions that increase rates of social problems that are either traumatic in nature, or are at least traumatic risk factor” (Danzer, 2012). Certainly, African Americans have faced trauma as a whole. However, they may have faced individual trauma as well. Living in a low income neighborhood results in increased crime exposure. Also, child welfare involvement can cause trauma and damage to the family. Using trauma informed practice does not mean that the social worker is specifically treating the client’s trauma. Instead, it requires the social worker to be sensitive to the specific behaviors which are caused by trauma (Knight, 2015). The social worker can then validate and normalize the client’s specific experiences. Additionally, the working relationship itself can be used to indirectly address the long term effects of past trauma (Knight, 2015).

Summary

The disproportionality of African Americans is extremely complex and many factors contribute to this problem. It seems that the disproportionality is a symptom of a greater problem which is racism in the United States. When working with vulnerable populations such as African Americans it is essential to use cultural humility as well as trauma informed practice. Combining both
practices can help social workers alleviate some of their inherent biases and form better working relationships with the clients.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methods used for this study. This section will examine the study’s design, data collection, instrument, procedures, protection of human subjects and qualitative data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the African American community’s perception of the disproportionality of African American youth in the child welfare system. This study utilized a focus group method with open ended questions in order to facilitate discussion between community members specifically in regards to reasons children are removed versus offered services, social workers’ level of cultural competence, prior child welfare history, and similar questions regarding the child welfare system.

This study used a qualitative design utilizing focus groups. Multiple focus groups with a variety of African American community members were held. Each group had 6-8 participants ranging in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. A qualitative design allowed subjective views to be given on the topic and a focus group allowed participants to share their thoughts and views from those within their same community. A quantitative design would not have been as effective, since it would not allow participants to fully explain their experiences and
perceptions of social workers. One of the limitations of using a qualitative design included having a smaller sample size, which meant that the results may not be generalizable to the entire African American community. Another limitation of using a focus group was in regards to privacy and confidentiality. Researchers required participants to maintain confidentiality as well as give participants a definition of confidentiality. However, researchers cannot guarantee participant’s responses and opinions stated during the focus group will remain confidential because there is no control over other participant’s behavior. This study examined the African American community’s perception of the disproportionality of African American youth in the child welfare system.

Sampling

This study used a non-probability method of voluntary sampling. The study was advertised in places where African American community members are more likely to congregate including local, predominantly African American churches, and utilizing California State University, San Bernardino’s African American population by offering extra credit to African American students willing to participate in a focus group. The only sampling criterion for participation was that participants must identify as Black and/or African American and be 18 years old or older. Researchers attempted to use quota sampling so that there was a diverse range of age and genders; however given the possibly controversial topic and specific sampling criteria, this was not entirely possible. This study aimed to include the responses of a total of 12-24 individuals, half female and half male,
ranging in age from 18-65 years old and older. This sample was chosen because this is the specific community that is being studied.

Data Collection and Instruments

This study conducted focus groups using an interview guide with seven questions (Appendix A). During the focus group, open-ended questions were verbally given to the focus groups as a discussion topic. A demographics survey which included participant’s age, ethnicity, gender, family status, education, income and prior child welfare experience was given to participants via paper survey prior to the start of the focus group. Ethnicity, gender, and income were measured nominally, while age and income were measured at a ratio level.

The research instrument used for this study was created in consultation with the research supervisor and CSUSB faculty. This was pretested by asking the questions to the researcher’s family and friends in order to ensure the questions were comprehensible and fostered open discussion. The interview guide covered the topics of social worker interaction with families, poverty and child welfare correlations, the participant’s views on social workers, and the child welfare system as a whole. This guide was newly created due to lack of instruments used to survey this community.

Procedures

Data for this study was gathered in the form of focus groups. The focus groups were comprised of self-reported African American community members in
San Bernardino County. The data collection took place at Ecclesia Christian Fellowship, a local, predominantly African American church between January 2016 and March 2016. A plan to collect data from California State University, San Bernardino was not feasible, as the Department of Psychology did not respond to requests regarding surveying their students. Participation from Ecclesia Christian Fellowship members was solicited by making an announcement during general meeting times. The announcement invited those who were interested to stay after the meeting and participate in the focus group. After the announcement was made, we met with participants in a meeting room on the church grounds. Each participant signed an informed consent form and agreed to have the focus group audio recorded. After each person signed the informed consent form, a short, paper survey gathering the demographic information was distributed and collected. After all paperwork was completed, we began recording the content of the focus group. The focus group began with asking respondents the questions found on the interview guide (Appendix A). Prior to asking about the disproportionate rates in the child welfare system, statistical information regarding the racial makeup of the foster care system was given to respondents. Researchers then asked for the group's initial thoughts about these facts. The researchers facilitated a discussion about how involvement with the child welfare system impacts African American families and communities. The focus group discussions averaged about one hour and at the end of the discussion, a debriefing statement was given to each participant.
Protection of Human Subjects

The researchers provided appropriate measures which justified the protection of participants’ privacy and confidentiality in this study. All participants were part of the focus group on a voluntary basis. Participants were reminded that they have the option to remove themselves from the group at any time and for any reason. Participants were presented with an informed consent form as well as an audio consent form. On both forms, their consent was demonstrated by placing an ‘X’ in the signature line of both the consent form and the audio form. Using an ‘X’ ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, anonymity, confidentiality, audio recording, and voluntary participation. In addition, each participant was informed about the identity of the researchers, the supervisor of this study, and Institutional Review Board approval. Only the researchers and the supervisor of this project had access to the audio recording and transcripts. Upon conclusion of this research project, all data, including the audio recording and demographic information was properly destroyed.

Data Analysis

This study applied qualitative data analysis techniques in which focus groups were used to gather data. The information and data gathered from the various focus groups were audio taped and transcribed. The researchers employed descriptive statistics including frequency distribution, measures of central tendency including mean, median mode, and measures of variability.
including standard deviations. This allowed the researchers to analyze the potential impact the demographic factors have on the data. Specifically, the researchers examined the percentage of participants who had involvement with the child welfare system.

The researchers identified major themes in the transcript. After identifying major themes in the transcript, the researchers coded the significant findings. By coding each time the theme occurs in the transcript, the researchers were able to see which themes are most important to the community. We also closely examined the perceptions of those who have direct involvement with the child welfare system versus those who have not have direct involvement with the child welfare system.

Summary

In conclusion, this chapter presented the methods to be utilized in this study. This study utilized a qualitative design with focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of African Americans in the community. The focus groups examined the experiences they possess as well as the impact those experiences have on their families and communities. The researchers used appropriate means of recruiting participants and acquiring data. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was upheld by the researchers in order to protect the identity of the participants. To analyze the data, the researcher transcribed information, used descriptive statistics, and frequency distribution.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the key findings of this study regarding the community’s perception of social workers in the child welfare system and the child welfare system itself. Demographic information from focus group participants will be presented followed by a qualitative analysis of themes found during the various focus groups. The four most prominent themes included a lack of understanding of the child welfare system and services, feelings of discrimination, feelings of mistrust between the African American community and government agencies, and a sense of community responsibility. Finally, a summary of the main findings will be presented.

Demographics

This research study gathered data from Ecclesia Christian Fellowship in San Bernardino, CA. This church has a large African American population that was able to be utilized for the purpose of this study. An attempt to utilize California State University, San Bernardino’s Psychology students was not feasible, as there was no response from the department.

For this study, a total of three focus groups were held within a two week period and there were a total of 17 participants. Five males and twelve females
participated in the focus groups. Sixteen of the participants identified as either African American or Black, and one identified as other, but did not specify their racial identity. In addition, two of the African American/Black participants identified as mixed race. One identified as Black and White, while the other identified as Black and Hispanic. One participant identified as Hispanic/Latino. The respondent that identified as Hispanic/Latino did not contribute to the focus group. The age of respondents was diverse, ranging from 30 years of age to 65 years of age and older (See Table 1). Of the 17 participants, seven stated in their demographics survey that they had prior history with a child welfare agency. All of the participants identified as Christian when asked about their religious preference.

Table 1. Age Frequency Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-49 yrs old</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64 yrs old</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 yrs old and over</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes

The first major theme, displayed below in Table 2, was a lack of understanding. This theme was identified 35 times throughout all three focus groups. The following seven quotes show statements made by respondents illustrating that they do not understand child welfare services or the child welfare system as a whole.

Table 2. Lack of Understanding of Child Welfare System and Services Provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I know some counties won't give you all the information because they want to place the child and so you don't really find out the truth until you actually bring them into your home and there goes your seven day notice because you didn't tell me this up front” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I haven't been in the system in a minute, but um when I was in the system they act like they owned everything (chuckles to self). They get attitudes. Very long line…I don’t know what else to say. Sometimes they be sentimental to your situations and stuff. One time I went down there and they told me I couldn't get nothing. I'm on social security, disability. They think that's enough, that's not enough. I can't even get food stamps. So I'm just making it with my kids and that’s it. Coming up to the church and get food to eat. But the Word of God, that's all I need. But I would like to get food stamps. That’s a whole lot of help. Could be a whole lot better” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;They even went so far as to charge me for my father who owed child support so um the chain continues. But it wasn't I'm stopping the chain. My father's name came up because I'm a junior and they said I owe $50,000 and I said wrong” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Not enough of them ...then you hear about child abuse and children going back to the very parents that have neglected or abused them and then they're dead... social workers have too many clients and not enough time...it's just not enough of them” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I believe that the system is set up where it's bleeding so profusely that they need more children in the system. The more children they’ve got - just like with my daughter. The more kids she got, the more money she made. The system is the same way, the more kids we can get the more the government taxpayers money, the more we can get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There are programs out there and there’s a bunch of people that need them. There’s not enough people to help them distribute it. Or you gotta pay people. There are no qualified people to make the program work”(Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus Group Quotes

money” (Focus Group, March 2016).

“It would even be good to not stop when they turn 18. To do follow ups even til they’re 21 or permanently. This way it’s not just something that you get, we’re stopping the back door of the problem. We’re not just looking at you as a number or a check but as a human yourself. I think that would help a lot along with everyone else’s thoughts” (Focus Group, March 2016).

The second theme that emerged from focus group discussion was a feeling of systemic biases and/or discrimination contributing the high rates of African American children in the child welfare system. This theme was identified 27 times throughout the three focus groups. Table 3 below illustrates some examples of this.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I remember my first foster home I went to, because I was black, and her other foster child was Hispanic, I couldn't go. So I can remember watching her get dressed and dolling the little girl up and everything but couldn't go&quot; (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Unfortunately the media feeds them with negativity. You’re not gonna get a good news story about a kid who’s done good in the system or did something good at school. It’s only about the gunshots, or the fights or the robbery. It’s all about the negativity and that’s all you hear&quot; (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It’s a slave owner’s mentality, keep them separated, don’t teach them to read…” “I feel like they just think that like we just can’t be helped like we&quot; (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A majority of them are African American. It makes you wonder doing a study of the group homes within San Bernardino County, over 80% of them were African American. There are Latinos, the smallest percentage were White. So is that to say that whites don’t have problems? I can’t swallow that. It’s hard for me to swallow that. DO they have more leeway? I believe so. But that’s my opinion” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They want to break up black families” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When you were asking your question on race we don’t see enough. And I know it’s out there, but we don’t see anyone more of color that is not in the system or we don’t know of people who have issues when it comes to CPS who are not colored. And I’m not too sure but I feel like we get too many hoops thrown at us and when it comes to whites they get too many passes. I don’t know it just seems that way because we come in contact with so many who are minorities who went through it&quot; (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They just want to take those [African American] children” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third theme that was prominent during our focus groups was that the community itself needed to take more responsibility for their own members. This was identified 26 times during the focus groups. Some common thoughts are shared in Table 4 below.

Table 4. A Sense of Community Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It’s not ownership, not enough checks and balances, and then everyone suffers and we suffer as a community because we’re stuck having to take the load. Especially as a church experiencing these loads so much, [just] trying to show that there’s another side to this that’s bigger than you and I and you’ve just gotta trust what we’re saying because we’ve seen the other side” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td>“Black families are not caring about their children and their education. Spanish people they look after their children and education, making sure they stay in school. Black people ain’t doing that. They come into the PTA’s. Only 2 black families at that school board meeting” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There is too much that we have to take care personally or as a community wise that we’re not addressing or that we’re not even doing” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td>“When you look at other cultures, they do try to help to some extent whereas we don’t as a cultural people. We really increase the problem, it goes on and starts at home then they go to drugs then they get laid off and the opportunities are so bad but…… then they try to do as hard as they can for their children” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think the more support that a person has the better the chances are. All of this goes back to support, connections,and resources” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td>“Our people we haven’t established that I’s okay to not be okay. We get so caught up on our pride and to look a certain way. And in our neighborhood we get caught up on we have to look a certain way I have to talk a certain way. It’s survival in the jungle type things. It becomes so hard for when people actually get out of here that they don’t want to come back and repair the community that they left. It’s almost as though they don’t want to identify that they originated from that place. I think it contributes to the double of the statistic because nobody sees someone that made it. Nobody can actually realize that there is hope. They only see that negative cycle-like he said earlier. Unfortunately they don’t see better” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They just want to take those [African American] children” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 illustrates the fourth theme that emerged, which was a sense of mistrust between the African American community and government agencies, including child welfare agencies. Included here are thoughts that focus group respondents had regarding these feelings of mistrust.

Table 5. Mistrust between Community and Government Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Well personal experience with the Department of Social Services, I accused a social worker of being a “family destroyer” because my situation was that my wife at the time was not wife but I had one child and I went to a different state to look for a better lifestyle to improve my standard of living and uh when I got there nothing worked out. So I came back in the between time a social worker convinced her that she should sue me for child support so I always had gainful employment when I returned home and I left her with my family she uh really didn’t have a whole lot to do with it they didn’t give her a lot of information they just told her it was the best thing that needed to be done” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td>“The child is being abused. He takes pictures because he visits her. He sees different evidence of abuse. He’s like “look at my child, why are they allowing this to happen”. But they won’t give the child to him and they won’t give the child to his mom. And I was like how does that happen. It’s unbelievable but they said no. There’s different situations and circumstances…” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It depends on the worker, my mom, she was a good guy. So you had those like her who care about people. Then you have those that it’s a paycheck. When they’re going home, they’re going to a husband that they’re not getting along well in the marriage. What I’m saying is they have personal issues and some of them take those personal issues on with them to their job. SO not everybody is created equal. Happens on all jobs, happens in the church. Depends on your level of expertise, your professionalism” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
<td>“They live in Rancho or Redlands then they come here and they have no concept of what goes on here every single day. Living here interacting with the people, only like a tiny percentage because they live here but they live on the really nice side where they’re isolated from life” (Focus Group, March 2016).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Main Findings

These four themes show a vast array of reasons that the community feels influence the disproportionate rates of African American children in the child welfare system. The focus group was not only able to identify different factors that may contribute to this disparity, but they were also able to develop possible solutions, which will be discussed in Chapter 5. These focus groups gave respondents an opportunity to share why they feel child welfare involvement is so prevalent in their communities. Their input and feedback are essential to slowly beginning to fix this problem.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The results of this study reflected the factors discussed in the literature review. Briefly, these include a lack of understanding by the African American community, systemic biases, community responsibility, mistrust between the community and government agencies, poor parenting skills, and a lack of resources. The reasons why these themes have emerged will be discussed in this section. Additionally, the community offered innovative solutions as to how to the child welfare system can remedy the disproportionality.

Discussion

The first theme which emerged was that the African American community had a lack of understanding about the child welfare system, policies, and practices. This lack of understanding of the system can lead to disproportionality. If African Americans lack knowledge about their rights and the process of the child welfare system, then it is unlikely that they can successfully reunify with their children. Certainly, if this is a parent’s first time involved and they do not know anyone who has been involved in the child welfare system, then this theme would also emerge. It is likely that this is why this theme was popular in the analysis of this research. Much of the misunderstanding comes from the false information and perceptions which are on in the media. The child welfare
reputation is more negatively portrayed in the media than positively portrayed which is not specific to any race.

The second theme which emerged was the presence of systemic biases within the child welfare system. The community feels as though the child welfare system is setup to “break up African American families” (anonymous participant, personal communication, March 13, 2016). Additionally, they believe that society have a “slave owners mentality” which forces African Americans to be unsuccessful within the system (anonymous participant, personal communication, March 13, 2016). Historically, government agencies did intentionally segregate African Americans and many policies and strong biases were intentionally in place to keep African Americans away from advancement. It is possible, that these biases, while more subtle now, have continued to influence the child welfare system, policies, and practices. While this topic is controversial and uncomfortable, it is important to begin the conversation by admitting that it is possible the system itself has biases which affect vulnerable populations such as the African American community. By acknowledging these biases, the change can be made.

The third theme emerged was a sense of responsibility by the African American community for the African American community. Some compared the African American community itself to the ‘crabs in a barrel’ saying which means that they continue to bring each other down (anonymous participant, personal communication, March 13, 2016). Instead of helping each other to be successful,
they are influencing a lack of success. Similarly, social workers would hold clients accountable and responsible for their own actions and that can certainly be said for the community. However, it is difficult to be successful in a system which contains biases against a race. Furthermore, African Americans do face many obstacles which would breed failure. However, the African American community acknowledges that they could do more to bring about advancement for the African American community. If the child welfare system and the African American community can both acknowledge their part in the injustices, future collaboration can influence significant change and new understandings can begin.

The fourth theme emerged was a mistrust between African Americans and government agencies. This mistrust certainly stems from historical discrimination and segregation. Additionally, there is recent controversy over government agencies such as police officers and the African American community. In fact, the Black Lives Matter movement came about because of the racial discrimination present today. The media has influenced this movement by consistently portraying African Americans in a negative light. Thus, I believe there is an increased and open mistrust between government agencies and the African American community right now then previous years. Moreover, generational cycles of beliefs are passed down through families. Since historical discrimination was not too long ago in this nation, the fear and mistrust is certainly prevalent among families today.
The fifth theme which emerged was that there is poor parenting among African American families. This can be paired with the community’s sense of responsibility for each other. Participants believed that generational cycles of poor parenting leads to increased single parent households, and an increased amount of young mothers. Both of these factors increase the risk to the children. Perhaps, this theme is specific to the San Bernardino city community as it has higher rates of low income communities. In low income communities, there is increased crimes’ leading to more incarceration. This separate generational cycle of crime and prison can attribute to poor parenting practices. San Bernardino city is home to many low income families which means they could be working more and not able to afford proper child care, thus leading to poor parenting. This is a skill which the child welfare system can partner with African American families to teach positive parenting.

The sixth theme which emerged was that there is a lack of resources specifically for the African American community. By a lack of resources, the community referred to financial resources as well as organizational resources. They believe there are not enough mental health services, educational services, employment services, and nonprofit organizations that are specifically for African American families. In the child welfare system, social workers are knowledgeable about the various resources and can provide that to the families they encounter. It is the responsibility of the agency they are referred to have vast cultural competence so as to be inclusive of and accommodating of African American
families. Organizational resources to exist even without the referral of a child welfare social worker. However, they seem to be not reaching African American families.

The findings did support the research questions and new factors emerged which were not considered before. Further research could be done on each of these themes to determine the root and cause of the problem, and additionally solutions to each problem. What was discovered is that this injustice is complex and intertwined with many other agencies, society in general, and the unfortunate history of this nation. Each theme itself, has its own set of complexities which contribute to the overall problem. It is possible that each sub-problem be addressed in order to elicit the advancement of the African American community.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that all of the participants identified as Christian. Additionally, Ecclesia Christian Fellowship is a predominantly African American parish community. This community is located on Date Street, a well-known low income and high crime area which is also predominantly African American. Ecclesia Christian Fellowship has already implemented some of these solutions into their church community. Ecclesia Christian Fellowship provides the community with a positive atmosphere where African American mentors exist. Additionally, they serve as an advocate for the local community and are committed to increasing the quality of this community. They often hold service
events to address the needs of the community and they collaborate with other agencies to bring outside resources into their community.

While the participants were all Christian, middle aged, and had a higher education than the average African American, this is a community who has come together to serve other African Americans who find themselves underprivileged and underserved. A survey on African Americans found that eight of ten participants believed that religion was important to them. In addition, 72% of African Americans identified with a Christian religion (Sahgal and Smith, 2009). Certainly Christianity is an important cultural aspect of the African American population. Thus, this partnership between the study participants and the greater African American community allows this research to be generalized to the African American population. However, to improve the quality of the research study, using participants who find themselves more so underprivileged and underserved would provide more accuracy.

A second limitation is that all of the participants were members or attendees of this one particular church. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the rest of the African-American community, as all participants came from the same local neighborhood. Efforts to increase sampling size by utilizing students from California State University, San Bernardino’s Psychology Department would have negated this limitation, however there was no response from the department.
Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Listening and understanding the voice of the community can help social workers better understand the circumstances of African Americans. The participants offered practical solutions for social workers. The solutions offered by African American community can be implemented into all areas of social work practice when specifically working with the African American community. Those solutions include:

1. Teaming with families and the importance of rapport in the social worker to client relationship.

2. Collaboration with other agencies such as churches and local organization to provide resources that are beneficial to African American families.

3. Mentorship relationships between African Americans. If the social worker also identifies as African American, this could be strength in the working relationship. Additionally, if the social worker is not African American then they can link them to someone in the community who can serve as mentor. Many county agencies have begun to develop Parent and Youth Partner programs, which gives social workers the opportunity to refer clients to individuals who have prior child welfare experience and can work with the client and family members to navigate the system, as well as provide support.
4. The improvement of individual social workers cultural humility.

Certainly this study has shown that African Americans are facing many challenges, acknowledging those challenges and making an effort to ask African Americans about their perception can increase the quality of social work practice with African Americans.

Additionally, social workers can increase their individual self-awareness and biases, they may have an impact on individual communities as well. Racial biases do exist and continue to separate the African American community from resources. This exists among workers and can even exist among African American social workers. While the bias itself can be intentional or unintentional, it has an effect on the African American community. Everyone has biases, and acknowledging those biases, even if it may be difficult to admit, can help to ultimately change the way African Americans are treated.

The study itself is an example of cultural humility. It is acknowledging that as social workers, we do not know everything about the African American community. Additionally, it is going to the community and asking them about their needs. While this study looked at the community as a whole, it can certainly be applied to individuals. It is important to find out the exact needs of the family and find out the barriers to overcoming those needs. Social workers can then advocate for the needs of African Americans which do not currently have solutions.

In child welfare, resources, collateral agencies, and a network of family and friends are essential to reunification. Without one of those, the odds of
reunification are low. The community feels as though there is lack of resources tailored to African Americans, therefore, how can child welfare agencies expect African Americans to be equally as successful as other races? Unfortunately, many of the barriers are rooted in biases of other interrelated systems. African Americans are facing high rates of poverty similar to the rate of African American children in the child welfare system. Certainly, poverty among individual families becomes poverty among neighborhoods as they gravitate to low income housing. Low income neighborhoods have higher instances of poor performing schools and increased crime rates. Therefore, children in African American neighborhoods find themselves at a disadvantage. If parents also grew up in a similar environment, and their grandparents also grew up that way, then it can be difficult to get out of that situation and environment. No one has spoken to them about all of the possible opportunities because the environment is not set up for their success. When a child welfare social worker gets involved with a family, they can be the person who shows them a different way of life while simultaneously advocating for more resources.

Recommendations for Policy

When the Native American population was facing similar injustices, new laws were enacted to help preserve Native American families. The Indian Child Welfare Act allows Native American tribes to take responsibility for the child’s well-being, permanency, and safety. While African Americans do not have the
same deep connections to a tribe or influence, a similar law or policy should be established to preserve African American families.

Additionally, it seems possible for a third party organization run by African Americans to emerge and work specifically with African American families in the child welfare system. If a family identifies as African American, this organization becomes a part of their case plan. This organization would team with the family, advocate for the family, and mentor the family. This organization would be knowledgeable about the challenges African Americans face and have practical solutions available to the family which can ensure their fair chance at advancement and success. They can ensure that African Americans are treated fairly and serve as an added support system of the family. This combines many of the solutions offered by the African American community. This organization would team with the family and serve as a supportive partner. Additionally, it allows the African American community to take more responsibility of African American children. Increased supports can increase the safety of the child, thus increase reunification rates.

Recommendations for Research

In order to improve this research study, future researchers should expand their participant range beyond that of a church. While the Christian perspective is certainly valuable for reasons stated above, it can be better generalized to the African American population and further solutions can be established. Additionally, having more perspectives of people who have been directly involved...
with the child welfare system could give future research more insight on the experiences of African Americans who have gone through the process. Lastly, using a wider range of ages can change the results of the study as well.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the African American community finds themselves misunderstood, underserved, and underprivileged. Moreover, the African American population find themselves involved at disproportionate rates in other systems such as welfare and the justice department. The causes of this are highly complex and deeply rooted in society. Much of the general population is in denial about the injustices and inequalities faced by the African American community. Certainly, African Americans are not inherently bad and they certainly do not deserve to be treated differently. This community has not been given their fair chance at the ‘American Dream’ because of racial discrimination.

Much of this can be attributed to historical discrimination and systemic racial biases. However, these biases are often implicitly practiced through individuals. Drawing awareness to this injustice can decrease the biases among social workers. More work needs to be done by society as a whole in order to repair the damage done to this community. However, the child welfare system can be a leader in the success of clients and ultimately change the way society interacts with the African American population.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Focus Group Interview Guide

1. What are your perceptions of CPS social workers?

2. How have you or someone you knows interactions with social workers gone in the past?

3. How have you seen the child welfare system involved in your neighborhood and community?

4. What impacts would you say the child welfare system has on African American neighborhoods?

5. Do you believe that African American children are removed at the same rate as other races?

6. In California, African American children are being removed from their homes at quadruple the rate of the general population. Why do you believe this problem exists?

7. What improvements can social workers and child welfare agencies make in regards to working with African American families?

Created by Researchers for the purpose of this project.
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONS
1. What is your gender?
   Male
   Female

2. What is your age?
   18-29 years old
   30-49 years old
   50-64 years old
   65 years and over

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   some high school
   high school graduate
   some college
   trade/technical/vocational training
   college graduate
   some postgraduate work
   post graduate degree

4. What is your religious preference?
   Christian
   Mormon
   Muslim
   Jewish
   Roman Catholic
   Seventh-Day Adventist
   Other: ________

5. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
   Hispanic/Latino White/ Caucasian
   Asian/Pacific Islander
   Black/African American
   Other: ________

6. Do you identify with two or more races? If so, what?
   Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino
   Black/African American and White/Caucasian
   Black/African American, Asian/ Pacific Islander
   Other:

6. What is your total household income before taxes, from all sources for 2016?
   • Less than $19,999
   • $20,000 to $39,999
   • $40,000 to $59,999
   • $60,000 to $79,999
   • $80,000 to $99,999
   • Over 100,000
7. Are you currently employed full-time, part-time, not employed, or retired?
   full time
   part time
   student
   retired
   not employed

8. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?
   1  6
   2  7
   3  8
   4  9
   5  10 or more

9. Are there any children under the age of eighteen years currently living in your household?
   Yes
   No

10. What is your marital status?
   single/never been married
    married
    separated
    divorced
    widowed

11. Do you have any history with any child welfare agency?
   Yes
   No
APPENDIX C

RAW DATA AND ANALYSIS
### Themes Emerged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LU 35</td>
<td>Lack of understanding of the system and services</td>
<td>SB 27</td>
<td>Systemic biases/discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCG 24</td>
<td>Mistrust between community and government agencies</td>
<td>Po 13</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR 18</td>
<td>Lack of resources specifically for community</td>
<td>PE 2</td>
<td>Poor education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB 4</td>
<td>Social Worker racial bias</td>
<td>HD 13</td>
<td>Historical discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LN 3</td>
<td>Lack of neighborly concern/support from AA community</td>
<td>CD 3</td>
<td>Cultural forms of discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP 19</td>
<td>Poor Parenting Skills</td>
<td>CR 26</td>
<td>Community responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Solutions Offered by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Solutions Offered</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Solutions Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TF</td>
<td>Teaming with families, the importance of rapport</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Collaboration with other agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIP</td>
<td>Trauma informed practice</td>
<td>ISW</td>
<td>Improve individual social workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Agency accountability</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Lower Caseload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>Mentoring between African Americans to help them be more successful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the African-American community’s perception of the disproportionality of African-American youth in the child welfare system. The study is being conducted by Masters of Social Work students, Eihzele Udegbe and Sheila Mercier, under the supervision of Dr. Zolta Gordon from California State University, San Bernardino, School of Social Work. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the community’s perception of African American youth being disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions in a focus group style. These questions will focus on perceptions of social workers, the child welfare system and prior child welfare experience, if applicable.

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

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 60 to 90 minutes to complete the focus group.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

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

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Zolta Gordon at 909-537-7222.

RESULTS: Please contact Dr. Zolta Gordon (email: zgordon@calstate.edu) or the Pitzer Library at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2015.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here ___________________________ Date ___________________________

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393
APPENDIX E

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The study you have just completed was designed to investigate community perceptions of the disproportionality of minority youth in the child welfare system. We are interested in studying community perceptions of their interactions with social workers and whether this plays a role in the high rates. This is to inform you that no deception is involved in this study.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Zolla Gordon (email: zgordon@csusb.edu), Sheila Mendoza (email: mends319@coyote.csusb.edu) or Zele Usigbe (email: usigbee@coyote.csusb.edu). If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Zolla Gordon (email: zgordon@csusb.edu) or the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2016.

Thank you for your participation!
November 23, 2015

California State University San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, CA 92407

Dear Dr. Laurie Smith,

Ecclesia Christian Fellowship supports Sheila Mendoza and Zele Utibe's studies of The Disproportionality of African Americans in the child welfare system. We hope our efforts will generate the information needed to accomplish their project. If there are any questions feel free to contact me at the office (909) 881-5551 ext. 218.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Pastor Brian Williams
Executive Director of Family Life & Outreach
Dear Social Work IRB Subcommittee Members,

I am writing to indicate approval of Ms. Zale Usigbe’s request to use the Psychology Department’s SONA System to recruit participants from Psychology and HD classes for her MSW research. I also approve her use of the Psychology participant pool including the awarding of extra credit to participants for the purposes of this project. As per our Department policy, Zale will need to submit a proposal to the Psychology IRB Subcommittee and receive their approval to conduct the research.

I have discussed Zale’s proposal with the Psychology Subcommittee members and they correctly point out that our Department’s participant pool policy requires that any use of the participant pool that involves awarding extra credit to participants is limited to faculty and students in the Psychology Department or to non-psychology faculty/students who are collaborating with a Psychology faculty member. The reason for this policy, of course, is to prevent depletion of the participant pool. As with any policy, however, we believe that exceptions should be granted as appropriate. Clearly, Zale’s research makes minimal demands on our participant pool and would not interfere with the participant needs of our other researchers.

Zale’s research into perceptions regarding the disproportionate number of African American youth in the child welfare system is both interesting and important and I wish her success with her focus groups.

Warmest Regards,

[Signature]

Robert Ricco
Professor and Department Chair
REFERENCES


A review and emerging themes. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*(6), 507-527.

Howell, M. (2010). Intake decision-making in child protective services:
Exploring the influence of decision-factors, race, and substance abuse. Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences, 71(2-A), 715.


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: Sheila Mendoza and Ehizele Usigbe
2. Data Entry and Analysis: Ehizele Usigbe
3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings
   a. Introduction: Ehizele Usigbe
   b. Literature Review: Sheila Mendoza
   c. Methods: Sheila Mendoza and Ehizele Usigbe
   d. Results: Ehizele Usigbe
   e. Discussion: Sheila Mendoza and Ehizele Usigbe
4. Supplemental Materials
   a. Informed Consent: Ehizele Usigbe
   b. Debriefing Statement: Ehizele Usigbe
   c. Audio Consent Form: Ehizele Usigbe
   d. Contacts with the Ecclesia, flyer for church: Sheila Mendoza
   e. IRB Application: Ehizele Usigbe and Sheila Mendoza
   f. Creation of Interview Guide and Demographic Questions- Ehizele Usigbe
5. Formatting: Ehizele Usigbe