

Title: *Discrimination, disproportionality, and disparity: Black families' experiences of structural and systemic bias in child welfare.*

Authors: Wright, Akin, Byers, McCall, Alford

Background and Purpose:

Though the child welfare system has acquired data to support the knowledge of persistent racial disparities for decades (Dettlaff, 2021), few actions have been taken to mend the brokenness in the system and correct policies, procedures, and perspectives that perpetuate racial injustices. A midwestern state study showed racial disparities for Black children were prevalent in placement stability and permanency even when accounting for other factors such as age, type of maltreatment, and trauma (Authors, 2020). To uncover structural contributors of racial disparities, we applied the Center for Study of Social Policy's (CSSP's) Institutional Analysis, which strives to detect mismatches between what institution do and what works for families (Weber & Morrison, 2021). The focus of inquiry was: (1) How does it come about that Black families with young children experience low and slow reunification rates?; and, (2) How does the child welfare system, prevention services, and other partners support bonding and well-being of Black families with young children?

Method

With guidance provided by a small council of Black community leaders and a steering committee of agency administrators and parent partners, we executed a qualitative study that involved 58 participants in focus groups and interviews. Participants included Black parents with lived experience of foster care, relative and non-relative caregivers, and professionals working in and alongside child welfare in frontline, administrative, court, and community-based positions. Data were also collected from 15 case records of Black children in foster care. Interview/focus group data were transcribed and analyzed in Dedoose. Rigor and trustworthiness were enhanced through peer debriefing, detailed audit trails, team coding, and review by the Black community council.

Results

Analyses summarized seven primary themes as: (1) The system's response to Black parents' trauma and loss was indifferent, lacking in compassion and empathy, and hyper-judgmental; (2) Anti-Blackness, power, and privilege were used in favor of White foster parents and to the detriment of Black birth parents; (3) The system was widely and deeply structured to prioritize and promote child-saving over supporting and preserving Black families; (4) The most pervasive and problematic response to Black families' needs, including non-safety needs based in material and financial hardship, was removal of children, rather than provision of resources and supports; (5) Services were not organized to be engaging, supportive, strengths-oriented, culturally-relevant, and individualized for Black families; (6) Services were designed to be "color blind," not accounting for Black families' culture, community history/context, historical racism, ongoing oppression, and cumulative disadvantage; (7) The court and legal system harmed Black families by not assuring quality legal representation and authentic parental engagement in court processes.

Conclusions

Title: *Discrimination, disproportionality, and disparity: Black families' experiences of structural and systemic bias in child welfare.*

Authors: Wright, Akin, Byers, McCall, Alford

This study contributes to the literature by confirming prior institutional analyses of CSSP and showing that child welfare institutions have systematically marginalized, culturally oppressed, and harmed Black families under the guise of protecting children. These patterns of discrimination and oppression were revealed through eight standardizing methods, showing that they are enacted in numerous and structural ways. Thus, solutions for eliminating racial disproportionality and disparities must be comparably multidimensional, structural, and systemic.