

Kinformation Newsletter

Volume 3 Issue 2

**KINformation**

*Information and Commentary for Leaders of Kinship Foster Care*

**Published by**

*The Hilda R. Baker Kinship Institute for Program and Leadership Development*

***“DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM”***

***by Joseph A. Jaffe, J.D. and Ina I. Allicott, MPH***

**INTRODUCTION**

Children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and frequently experience disparate and inequitable service provision<sup>1</sup>. Each year, a disproportionate number of children of color are removed from their families and placed into the nation’s child welfare system<sup>2</sup>. The overrepresentation of children of color in child welfare and other social service systems is linked to social, class, and economic factors that must be addressed to ensure that the needs of all children are fairly and appropriately served.

A higher rate of poverty is among these factors contributing to the higher proportion of African American children entering and remaining in foster care. Families living in poverty have greater difficulty accessing housing, mental health, and other

---

<sup>1</sup> Children of Color in the Child Welfare System, *Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)*.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth McCoy, *Why Are There So Many Children of Color in Child Welfare?*

services needed to keep families stable and children safely at home. Bias or cultural misunderstandings and distrust between child welfare decision makers and the families they serve are also viewed as contributing to children's removal from their homes into foster care. African American children also stay in foster care longer because of difficulties in recruiting adoptive parents and a greater reliance on relatives to provide foster care who may be unwilling to terminate the parental rights of the child's parent---as required in adoption---or who need the financial subsidy they receive while the child is in foster care.<sup>3</sup>

Federal, state, and local governments; the child welfare system; and the communities they serve must ensure that all children, regardless of their cultural, ethnic or racial identity, receive services that address the full spectrum of their needs in a manner that reflects the cultural strengths of their families<sup>4</sup>.

## **OVERVIEW**

Four studies of the **National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect**, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, done in 1980, 1986, 1993 and 2005 have repeatedly shown that the actual incidence of child maltreatment among Black families is no greater than the incidence among other groups<sup>5</sup>. There are no significant or marginal race differences to the incidence of maltreatment. The average African American child is not at any greater risk for abuse and neglect than the average white child. African American children have a disproportionately higher rate

---

<sup>3</sup> African American Children In Foster Care, United States Government Accountability Office, Report to the Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, July 2007

<sup>4</sup> CWLA, *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Robert Hill, *Ibid.*

of maltreatment investigations when compared to whites<sup>6</sup>. When substantiation rates for abuse or neglect of white children are compared with rates for other racial groups, African American children are twice as likely to be substantiated as abused or neglected. African American children (56%) are twice more likely to be placed in foster care than whites (26%)<sup>7</sup>. For every 1,000 white children in the U.S. population, five were in foster care on September 30, 2000. Although white children represented 61% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 38% of the foster care population. For every 1,000 African American children in the U.S. population, 21 were in foster care on September 30, 2000. While African American children represented 15% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 40% of the foster care population<sup>8</sup>

Approximately 220,660 Black children were in foster care on September 30, 2000. According to the most recent estimates published by the Children's Bureau, there were approximately 542,000 children in foster care in the United States on September 30, 2001. Approximately 204,973 (38%) of these children in foster care were Black. Approximately 203,222 (37%) of these children in foster care were White. According to the most recent estimates published by the Children's Bureau, there were approximately 290,000 children entering foster care during Fiscal Year 2001. Approximately 81,118 (28%) of these children entering foster care were African American. Approximately 134,773 (46%) of these children entering foster care were White. Approximately 263,000 children exited foster care during Fiscal Year 2001. Approximately 79,308 (30%) of these children exiting foster care were African American. Approximately 117,377 (45%)

---

<sup>6</sup> CWLA, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hill, *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> CWLA, *Ibid.*

of these children exiting foster care were White.<sup>9</sup> African American children are less likely than white children to be reunited with their parents. African American children are more likely to remain in foster care for much longer periods than whites. White children and their families receive more services, more housing assistance and more mental health referrals<sup>10</sup>.

Not only are African American children most likely to enter the child welfare system, but they also fare the worst under the state's supervision. African American children have the greatest odds of being removed from their homes and the smallest chance of being reunited with their parents or being adopted. They spend the most time in foster care and receive the least helpful services<sup>11</sup>. At the end of Fiscal Year 2004, African American children made up 15% of the child population, 27% of the children who enter foster care, and 34% of those who remain in care.

The National Incidence Study findings suggest that different race/ethnicities receive differential attention somewhere during the process of referral, investigation, and service allocation, and that the differential representation of minorities in the child welfare population does not derive from inherent differences in the rates at which they are abused or neglected. The definition of racism describes perfectly the differential treatment of white and African American children by the child welfare system:

Racism is the “system of white privilege that is maintained by ideologies, institutions, and practices that place white people in a superior position and people of color in an inferior position, economically, socially and politically.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Family and Child Well-Being, 2007

<sup>10</sup> Robert Hill, *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Leroy Pelton, *Child Abuse and Neglect.*

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds.*

## RISK FACTORS

Recent research indicates that child maltreatment is a result of multiple risk factors (i.e. domestic violence, chaos in the family structure, unemployment, community violence, impoverished communities). Moreover, the child's age and developmental stage also play an important role in assessing risk factors<sup>13</sup>.

Increases in poverty and substance abuse have been identified as key factors influencing maltreatment. Child abuse in the poorest neighborhoods is *four times* that of affluent areas<sup>14</sup>. Parental income is the best predictor of children being removed from biological families and placed in foster care. It is no surprise that the majority of children in foster care come from single-parent, low-income households<sup>15</sup>.

“The incidence of child abuse and neglect is approximately *22 times higher* among families with incomes less than \$15,000 per year than among families with incomes of more than \$30,000 per year.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that physicians and other service providers are more likely to attribute a childhood injury in lower-income homes to abuse, while attributing the same injury to an accident in families with higher incomes. These biases against low-income families may account for some of the relationships between poverty and abuse<sup>17</sup>. Neglect is often a product of poverty, and as minority populations are disproportionately poor, minority children are disproportionately placed in out-of-home care due to neglect. Some suggest that neglect is more likely to be reported when

---

<sup>13</sup> Ruth McRoy, *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostelny and Nancy Dubrow, cited by Ruth McRoy, *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Lindsey, cited by Ruth McRoy, *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Sedlak and Diane Broadhurst, cited by Ruth McRoy, *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Ruth McRoy, *Ibid.*

people are poor. This is because poor people are more susceptible to public scrutiny, as many are receiving welfare or other assistance<sup>18</sup>.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

To combat the disparate outcomes and disproportionate representation of children and families of color in the child welfare system, strategies must be initiated to target institutional and practice biases that impact these outcomes. Agencies must be assertive in assessing their own policies, programs, practices and beliefs and to work actively to modify and develop innovative responses that improve the experiences and results for children and families of color.<sup>19</sup> The GAO report cites subsidized permanent legal guardianship and adoption as a means to reduce disproportionality by increasing the number of permanent homes available for African American children, as well as other children in foster care. Kinship foster care that results in subsidized legal guardianship can be seen as a way to keep the family together without terminating parental rights.<sup>20</sup>

### **A Second Chance, Inc.**

A Second Chance Inc.(ASCI), located in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania has been a pioneer in foster care since 1994, when the agency was founded by Dr. Sharon Lowe, exclusively to facilitate kinship foster care. The agency has developed rapidly over the past 13 years to its current state of nationally recognized proportion. ASCI, through Dr Lowe, is noted for its pioneering work in writing Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship (SPLC) legislation, and in sharing the kinship agenda with county, state, and federal levels; as well as its regionalizing efforts by opening the first ASCI regional office in the city of Philadelphia.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ruth McRoy, *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> CWLA, *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> GAO Report, *Ibid*

ASCI is recognized within Allegheny County for its innovative effort to provide the most comprehensive service system to kinship families and children active with the Allegheny County Children, Youth and Families Agency ( the governmental agency charged with responsibility of all dependent, abused and neglected children).

The generation of these programs, ideas, and service components evolved over the past 13 years as ASCI has evolved through the experience and identification of kinship foster care needs. At its current state, ASCI serves over 50% of all children in the foster care system within Allegheny County through the Child and Family Services Kinship Foster Care Program– serving approximately 800 kinship families representing 1200 kinship children.

Here at A Second Chance, Inc. this process of **Kinship Foster Care and Subsidized Permanent Legal Custodianship**, as it is called in Pennsylvania, has been in effect since 1994. ASCI has been providing unique Kinship Foster care for thousands of African American children and all children in the Pittsburgh, Allegheny County Pennsylvania area for 13 years. In the Fiscal Year 2006-2007, seventy-four (74) children achieved permanency through SPLC. During the present Fiscal Year, 2007-2008, twenty-five (25) children to date have achieved permanency through SPLC.

When Adoption is identified as a permanency goal, ASCI also combats disproportionality by providing a full range of Adoption Services as well. During the Fiscal Year 2006-2007, one hundred five (105) children achieved permanency through adoption at ASCI. During the present Fiscal Year, 2007-2008, twenty-one children to date have achieved permanency through Adoption.

To achieve permanency for these children, ASCI has enabled hundreds of them, over the years, to be placed with their kinship relatives and successfully enter a permanent legal custodial relationship or have been adopted by their kinship relatives. Subsidized permanent legal custodianship is less traumatic for children and reduces the number of placements and chances of their reentry into foster care

## **FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE<sup>21</sup>**

The Casey Family Programs have sponsored a collaboration called the Framework for Change. It is assumed that the public welfare system is responsible for assuring safety, permanence, and well being for all children served. In order to meet this obligation for children and families at risk of experiencing disproportionality and disparate outcomes, the Framework for Change consists of eight basic principles that must guide all policies, programs, practices, services and supports. Each principle is critical and should be reflected in all aspects of agency operation. These eight principles are as follows:

- 1.) The goal of the agency is to secure safety, permanence and maximum developmental outcomes for each child served irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, location, or family structure so that these attributes are not predictors of negative outcomes.
- 2.) The agency understands and respects the varying beliefs, values, and family practices of different cultural, racial and ethnic groups. Culturally relevant services and supports are family-oriented, family-driven, and strengths-based.

These services comprise the least intrusive intervention possible and are need-

---

<sup>21</sup> Casey Family Programs, *Framework for Change Breakthrough Series Collaborative. Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System.*

driven; they should be available in the communities and neighborhoods where families live.

- 3.) Parents, children, youth, kin and communities have strengths, resiliency, and their own natural supports, which are used in reducing risk factors. The public agency recognizes and honors the fact that children are inextricably connected to their families and communities (cultural and geographic).
- 4.) Improved outcomes for children and families of color are advanced by the open discussion of personal, organizational and institutional racism and the development of strategies to remedy the impact on families and children.
- 5.) Continuous assessment of policies and practices is necessary to assure that they do not further disadvantage children and families who experience social and economic vulnerability and physical and mental disabilities.
- 6.) Advocacy is required for a better alignment of resources, policies and practices with the needs of families to assure access to prevention, early intervention, diversion and permanency/reunification services.
- 7.) Shared leadership and collaborative efforts among courts, schools and other agencies necessary to improve the way in which the needs of children and families are met.
- 8.) Partnerships with the diverse communities are essential to reduce potential risks to children.

These eight key principles can be translated into practice through seven component areas of a child welfare agency's work. In order to eliminate disproportionality and disparities in outcomes, improvements in the overall system of

working with and supporting children and families will only occur when improvements in each of these seven components are achieved:

- 1.) Design agency mission, vision, values, policies and protocols that support anti-racist practice.
- 2.) Develop cross-system leadership to address issues related to disproportionality and disparity in outcomes for children and families of color in the child welfare system.
- 3.) Collaborate with key stakeholders to support families in the context of their communities so as to safely divert them away from the child welfare system, whenever possible.
- 4.) Agency partners with the community about child maltreatment, disproportionality, racism and culture to focus on how communities can develop strategies to build the protective capacity of neighborhoods and families.
- 5.) Train and educate the agency staff and stakeholders about institutional and structural racism and its impact on decision-making, policy and practice.
- 6.) Use cultural values, beliefs and practices of families and communities to shape family assessment, case planning, case service design and the case decision-making process.
- 7.) Develop and use data in partnership with families, communities, universities, staff, courts and other stakeholders to assess agency success at key decision

points in addressing disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system<sup>22</sup>.

## **ECONOMICS**

Another way to preserve more families is to prevent child maltreatment. An overwhelming body of research on the negative effects of poverty on children tells us that generous public support of child welfare would drastically reduce cases of child abuse and neglect. More importantly, it would serve what should be the purpose of the child welfare system----to provide for the well-being of children. The ingredients for a strong child welfare system are clear and simple:

- 1.) Reduce family poverty by increasing the minimum wage, instituting a guaranteed income, and enacting aggressive job creation policies.
- 2.) Establish a system of national health insurance that covers everyone.
- 3.) Provide high-quality subsidized child care, preschool education, and paid parental leaves for all families.
- 4.) Increase the supply of affordable housing<sup>23</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

If a system that separates thousands of children from their parents and is inherently disproportionate and disparate, can a program of change (Casey) as described herein provide an opportunity to build new approaches to the issue? The services of A Second Chance Inc., a Pittsburgh Pennsylvania based Kinship Foster Care Agency clearly combats disproportionality in the child welfare system by providing permanency for thousands of dependent, abused and neglected children. Bold action, innovative

---

<sup>22</sup> Casey, *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Ibid.*

leadership, the introduction and expansion of these types of programs will make a lasting difference<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> Casey, *Ibid.*

## References

- CWLA Statement: Children of Color in the Child Welfare System (2003).  
Washington DC: Child Welfare League America.
- Framework for Change. *Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Child and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System.* (2005). Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- GAO Report (2007) . *African American Children in Foster Care.*  
Washington DC: United States Government Accountability Office.
- Hill, R.B. (2006). *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update.* Seattle, WA: Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System.
- McRoy, R.G.(2007). *Why are there so many children of color in child welfare?*  
Texas: Child Welfare Report.
- McRoy, R.G. (2004). *The color of child welfare policy in K. Davis & T Bent-Goodley, Eds., pp.37-64,* Washington DC: Council on Social Work Education.
- Roberts, D. (2002). *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare.*  
New York, NY: Basics Civitas Books.
- Sprigner, C. (2006). Presentation from the Race and Child Welfare Summer Institute, Center on Race and Social Problems. *Current Challenges and Initiatives.*  
Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.
- Sturdivant, M. (2006). Powerpoint presentation from the Race and Child Welfare Summer Institute, Center on Race and Social Problems. *Policy and Practice: The influence on racial disparity in child welfare and implications for practice.*  
Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.
- Wulczyn, F. & Lery, B. (2007). *Racial Disparity in Foster Care Admissions.*  
Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

