



**CULTURAL AWARENESS AND BIAS:
REDUCING DISPROPORTIONALITY
AND DISPARITY**



CULTURAL AWARENESS AND BIAS: REDUCING DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DISPARITY

WHY IT MATTERS

Research has long shown the overrepresentation of certain racial and ethnic populations – particularly African-Americans and Native Americans – in the child welfare system when compared with their representation in the general population.¹

In the context of the advocate role, cultural competence is the ability to work effectively with people from a variety of backgrounds. This entails being aware and respectful of different cultural norms, values, traditions and parenting styles.

Not only are there more children and youth of color in foster care, but they are more likely to remain in care for longer periods of time, re-enter care and age out of care without permanency.

There are a number of causes that have been suggested for these racial disparities. Researchers reviewed 10 years of findings on this topic and identified four possible explanations:²

- Disproportionate and disparate needs of children and families of color, particularly due to higher rates of poverty
- Racial bias and discrimination exhibited by individuals (e.g., caseworkers, mandated and other reporters)
- Child welfare system factors (e.g., lack of resources for families of color, caseworker characteristics)
- Geographic context, such as the region, State, or neighborhood

What hasn't been found to contribute to these disproportionate numbers is a relationship between race and the incidence of child maltreatment after controlling for poverty and other risk factors. However, the incidence of child abuse has been associated with poverty, single parenthood, and other related factors. The poverty experienced by families and children of color may increase their exposure to social service systems as they seek housing or financial assistance. These systems are employed by mandated reporters and this may contribute to the increase in reports. This type of bias is referred to as visibility or exposure bias.³

This relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement is not the sole contributor to disproportionate numbers of children and youth of color in foster care. Personal bias of child welfare professionals and others involved with a case or family may knowingly or unknowingly affect their decision

making. A study in Texas found that race, risk and income all influence case decisions, and even in instances in which white families were assessed to have more substantiated cases, they were also less likely to have their children removed from their care when compared to African-American families with fewer substantiated cases.⁴

In the context of the advocate role, cultural competence is the ability to work effectively with people from a variety of backgrounds. This entails being aware and respectful of different cultural norms, values, traditions and parenting styles. Advocates and programs can help reduce bias by identifying their own cultural biases, calling out bias when they see it happening and learning how to assess individuals by their own strengths and challenges regardless of their racial and ethnic differences.

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

A review of the Michigan child welfare system identified several institutional features that negatively impact child and families of color, including limited access to court appointed special advocates.⁵

ACTIONS

- **Participate in training and education** to learn more about how cultural bias influences important decisions for children and families of color (see the following *Bright Spot* for an example of how one program addresses this).
- **Explore your own culture and identify similarities to and differences from groups that are different from yours.** When working with children and families whose racial or ethnic identity is different from yours, try to understand and see them through a lens of "cultural sensitivity".

- **Remember that strengths don't look the same in every family.** Family structures, rules, roles, customs, boundaries, communication styles, problem-solving approaches, parental techniques and values may be based on cultural norms and/or accepted community standards.
- **Participate in diligent recruitment efforts for more resource families with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds to the children and families in your community.** One of the best ways to reduce disparate outcomes is to identify placements for children that match their racial or ethnic identity.

Placement with kin or with foster families in or near the children's own neighborhood will help ease the trauma of being placed out-of-home by providing them with familiar cultural experiences and relationships.

- **Inquire about the policies of your program regarding the support of equity for all children and families.** Does your program pay attention to cultural competence training and technical assistance? Is there a way to measure racial equity? What outreach strategies are in place to recruit more volunteers of color?
- **Explore preventative and early intervention services** that strengthen families and decrease the number of children entering or re-entering care, regardless of race or ethnicity. Work with child welfare agencies, courts and other groups to identify targeted prevention efforts that include a strong cultural competence component.
- **Identify programs in your community that provide culturally competent services.** Because services are often not easily accessible or available to families of color, their case plans may be negatively affected, which can cause more adverse involvement with the child welfare system. Arm yourself with information about programs that are culturally competent and would be good matches for the families you serve.
- **Consider the child's placement location.** Placement with kin or with foster families in or near the children's own neighborhood will help ease the trauma of being placed out-of-home by providing them with familiar cultural experiences and relationships. Placement with kin helps to preserve community, family and cultural ties and should be the first placement consideration.
- **Learn about "customary adoption" for Native American children.** Customary adoption refers to the Native American custom of adoption within a Tribe; parental rights are not terminated, and the child grows up knowing his or her biological parents and other family members.⁶
- **Ensure that reunification services include strengths-based cultural competence components** in terms of the service provider, accessibility and coordination with other demands such as child care and employment.

BRIGHT SPOT

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI) PROGRAM CASA FOR CHILDREN FOR MULTNOMAH, WASHINGTON, AND COLUMBIA COUNTIES

In 2013, CASA for Children for Multnomah, Washington and Columbia Counties made a commitment to address issues of and surrounding disproportionality and equity and completed a *Coalition of Communities of Color* self-assessment designed to

“help leaders gain an evidence-based snapshot of practices and policies related to racial equity in their organizations. The open source tool is designed for organizations both large and small, including school districts, nonprofits, corporations, foundations and others.”⁷

The results of the self-assessment helped staff identify strengths and gaps in the program’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

After completing the assessment and evaluating their results, the program developed a “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” committee. All on the committee are

welcome to participate, including CASA employees, volunteers, board members and community partners. Over the last three years, the committee has grown into a group of 12–15 members. The group meets once a month after office hours and the work-plan they developed is supported by a Meyer Memorial Trust grant.

An important part of what the program does is train community partners and their advocates about these issues. With grant support, the program was able to use the *Knowing Who You Are* curriculum to modify the training and deliver it to over 490 advocates to date. The training has been well received and advocates write about cultural and race issues as they pertain to individual children in their court reports.

The program is looking forward to expanding the training opportunities and including Indian Child Welfare (ICW) issues and concerns with an additional plan to make sure that there are advocates available who can serve as “ICW specialists.”

For more information, contact training@casaforchildren.org

SELECTED RESOURCES

Name	Description
The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, Reducing racial and disparities and disproportionality in child welfare⁸	<p>The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare has reviewed a number of strategies aimed at reducing racial disproportionality and disparity and has assigned them scientific ratings based on the research evidence supporting them.</p>
Denver Indian Family Resource Center (DIFRC)⁹	<p>This center has served American-Indian children and families in the Denver area who are involved or at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system. They use the Family Preservation Model, combining both direct practice and system change interventions. The direct service component features trauma-informed and family-focused case management, culturally competent assessments and referrals for supports and services.</p>
National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, Disproportionality Diagnostic Tool¹⁰	<p>The <i>Disproportionality Diagnostic Tool</i> allows users to identify gaps, areas for improvement and agency strengths that can support equitable representation.</p>
Texas Center for Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities¹¹	<p>This resource is housed on the <i>Texas Health and Human Services</i> website and includes information on a number of topics that, while specific to Texas, can be adapted for other locations.</p>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Summers, A. (2015). *Disproportionality rates for children of color in foster care (fiscal year 2013)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncjfcj.org/Dispro-TAB-2013>
- 2 Fluke, J., Harden, B.J., Jenkins, M., & Ruehrdanz, A. (2011). *A research synthesis on child welfare disproportionality and disparities*. Retrieved from: https://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/alliance/Disparities-and-Disproportionality-in-Child-Welfare_An-Analysis-of-the-Research-December-2011.pdf
- 3 Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016). *Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare*. Available at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/racial-disproportionality>
- 4 Dettlaff, A.J., Rivaux, S.L., Baumann, D.J., Fluke, J.D., Rycraft, J.R., & James, J. (2011). Disentangling substantiation: The influence of race, income, and risk on the substantiation decision in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1630-1637.
- 5 Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016). *Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare*. Available at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/racial-disproportionality>
- 6 For more information about customary adoption visit the *National Indian Child Welfare Association* at <http://www.nicwa.org/adoption/>
- 7 <http://www.coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/research-data-tools/ccorgassessment>
- 8 <http://www.cebc4cw.org/topic/reducing-racial-disparity-and-disproportionality-in-child-welfare/>
- 9 http://difrc.org/?gclid=EAlalQobChMIhaiwiMiA2glVDHt-Ch34mQT1EAAYASAAEgJuFPD_BwE
- 10 <https://aphsa.org/AASD/NAPCWA/Resources.aspx>
- 11 <https://hhs.texas.gov/about-hhs/communications-events/meetings-events/center-elimination-disproportionality-disparities>