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racial disproportionality in washington state

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dr. Marian S. Harris and Dr. Wanda Hackett concluded in a study to address disproportionality, "as long as disproportionality is viewed as an individual or personal issue of African Americans and Native American children or other children of color, the solutions to Disproportionality will not be focused in the public domain of the child welfare system, a system that created and has continued to perpetuate disproportionality" (2008, p. 202).

Race is a significant factor that impacts the decision to place a child in foster care.

The United States child welfare system is currently facing a crisis involving race and poor outcomes for children and families. This crisis has resulted in the disproportionate number of children of color entering the system and encountering extreme difficulty exiting the system. Dr. Marian S. Harris and Dr. Wanda Hackett concluded in a study to address disproportionality, "as long as disproportionality is viewed as an individual or personal issue of African Americans and Native American children or other children of color, the solutions to Disproportionality will not be focused in the public domain of the child welfare system, a system that created and has continued to perpetuate disproportionality" (2008, p. 202). Data has repeatedly shown that children of color and their families are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system in America. For example, according to the U.S. Census (2000), African American children comprised 15% of the total U.S. child population under the age of 18; however, African American children accounted for 37% of the total number of children placed in foster care. Although racial disproportionality is most severe and dramatic for African American children, Native American children also experience higher rates of disproportionality in foster care than other races or ethnicities. In 2004 Native American children represented less than 1 percent of the total child population in the United States; however, 2 percent of children in foster care were Native American. Hispanic/Latino children are 19 percent of the child population and 17% of the children in foster care.

Race is a significant factor that impacts the decision to place a child in foster care. Research has shown children of color, when compared to White children, are more likely to be removed from the care and custody of birth parents and placed in foster care, to stay in foster care longer, and to receive fewer services, and have less contact with child welfare caseworkers while they are in care (Barth, 1997; Child Welfare Watch, 1998; Harris & Skyles, 2005; Harris & Hackett, 2008). Children of color have continuously suffered for decades from the racism that exists in the child welfare system. For example, Latino children are often removed from Spanish-speaking birth parents and placed in foster homes where English is the only language spoken. A judge in Texas threatened a young Latina birth mother by stating that he would remove her child and place the child with the child's father unless she agreed to speak only English in her home (Verhovek, 1995). Native American children have also been adversely affected by racism in the child welfare system. The Child Welfare League of America and the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs launched a major campaign for adoption of Native American children by White families. Although Congress tried to prevent this decimation of Native American families and communities, through passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Child Welfare League of America opposed the law; finally, in 2001 the Executive director of the Child Welfare League of American apologized to the Native American community (Bilchik, 2001). However, racist attitudes and practices continue to prevail in child welfare and other systems across the country. For example, a juvenile prosecutor stated, "I don't think there's anything in any of these cases that points to something positive about Indian culture, except the culture of drugs and the culture of poverty and the culture of abuse" (Rood, 2003, p. A1).

There are four key decision points at the front-end of the child welfare system i.e. Child Protective Services (CPS): (a) referral of a case to the system; (b) investigation of a referral; (c) substantiation of the referral; and (d) removal of a child from the home (Lemon, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2005). Research suggests that cases involving children of color may be opened for investigation at a higher rate than cases involving white children; in one study with 12 sites across five states, cases involving African American children had an investigation rate of 90%, compared to White children, 53% for Hispanic children and 67% for children of "Other" ethnicities (Lemon, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2005). Mandatory reporters make up a large proportion of referrals to CPS and have been found to increase disparities among African American and Native American children being involved in the system. Chand, proposed that disproportionately high reporting rates were due not to racial prejudice but to 'exposure bias' (2000). Because children from African American and Native American families are more likely to be poor, they are more likely to be exposed to mandated reporters as they turn to the public social service system for support in times of need. Problems that other families could keep private become public as a family receives (TANF), seeks medical care from a public clinic, or lives in public housing. "This exposure bias also called visibility bias has been well documented in child welfare referrals from medical settings. Though several studies have shown the prevalence of addiction is the same for all races and social classes, hospitals serving poor families are more likely to conduct routine drug screening on women giving birth and on newborns, thereby increasing the likelihood of entry into the child welfare system served by such hospitals" (Cahn & Harris, p. 6). Although White and Black women tested are equally likely to test positive for drugs, African American women were 10 times more likely to be reported to CPS after delivery (Karp, 2001; Drug Policy Alliance, 2005). Research has shown that "exposure bias" is evident at each decision point in the child welfare system.

There has also been research that has examined poverty and child welfare. In a recent study Harris and Hackett (2008) shared that there is an often-cited link (external to the child welfare system itself) and that link is between poverty, child welfare, and race. According to Sedlak and Broadhurst (1996), children living below the poverty level were 16 to 41 times more likely to be referred for abuse and neglect. Researchers have tried to justify their findings stating that children of color are more likely to be poor; poor children are more likely to be victims of abuse; and therefore, children of color are more likely to be abused and enter the child welfare system because of it (Harris & Hackett, 2008). However, these conclusions have not been supported by statistics. Prior work (Morton, 1999; Sedlak and Schutz, 2001; Sedlak and Schutz, 2005) point out that multiple waves of the National Incidence Studies show that *despite their representation in the ranks of the poor, there is no higher rate of abuse in African American or Native American families*. While national studies have shown that alcohol and drug abuse have been the major cause of child neglect among African Americans, Bowser and Jones (2004) found no higher incidence of abuse and neglect in African American and Native American families. Despite a lack of differences in rates of abuse, research consistently shows racial differences in rates of cases opened for investigation and in rates of substantiation. In 2004, Rodenberg found that even when poverty is controlled, "children of color and their families were less likely to receive services to ameliorate the impact of poverty such as housing and employment support, than White families" (Harris & Hackett, 2008, p. 202).

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Researchers have tried to justify their findings stating that children of color are more likely to be poor; poor children are more likely to be victims of abuse; and therefore, children of color are more likely to be abused and enter the child welfare system because of it (Harris & Hackett, 2008). However, these conclusions have not been supported by statistics. Prior work (Morton, 1999; Sedlak and Schutz, 2001; Sedlak and Schutz, 2005) point out that multiple waves of the National Incidence Studies show that *despite their representation in the ranks of the poor, there is no higher rate of abuse in African American or Native American families*.

Children removed from home because of neglect returned home at a slower rate than those moved for other reasons (Harris & Courtney, 2003).

In regards to service participation, it has been found that African American or Native American parents may have negative past experiences, may have heard stories from others about negative experiences, or may have no familiarity at all with service delivery systems which lead to hopelessness, frustration, and greater likelihood of resignation and defeat than for others who have reason to believe the system will work in their favor (Cahn & Harris, 2005).

While the role of Child Protective Services (CPS) is to act in the best interest of the child, it is just as important that families are provided with the necessary services and support to reunify with their children. Yet this is also an area where disparity exists. Racial inequity in service availability and service delivery is the strongest contributing factor implicated in the disproportional numbers of children of color in placement in child welfare (Harris & Hackett, 2008). A study in Minnesota found that the odds of reunification for an African American child are 1.19 times the odds of reunification for a White child, given identical reasons cited for placement (Johnson, Clark, Pedersen, & Pichotta, 2007). Children removed from home because of neglect returned home at a slower rate than those moved for other reasons (Harris & Courtney, 2003). In the research study conducted by Harris and Courtney findings revealed that African American children were reunified at a slower rate than other children; children from two-parent families were returned home faster than those from single parent families, regardless of gender of the single parent, African American children from two-parent families were estimated to go home at a significantly slower rate than Caucasian and Hispanic two-parent families; Hispanic children from two-parent families were estimated to return home at a rate that is over one-fifth faster than other groups. In regards to service participation, it has been found that African American or Native American parents may have negative past experiences, may have heard stories from others about negative experiences, or may have no familiarity at all with service delivery systems which lead to hopelessness, frustration, and greater likelihood of resignation and defeat than for others who have reason to believe the system will work in their favor (Cahn & Harris, 2005).

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