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A case study in public child welfare: county-level practices that address racial disparity in foster care placement

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ABSTRACT

Racial disproportionality has been a longstanding issue within child welfare. The continued overrepresentation of black children in the foster care system is troubling. The authors of this article conducted a case study of two counties in New York State that have steadily decreased the number of black children in foster care in an effort to identify what aspects of their child welfare practice impacted the decline. The case study employed document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with child removal decision makers. Utilizing a grounded theory approach to content organization and analysis, several themes emerged as noticeable factors. Some of the most salient themes included preventive services and resources, community collaborations, case practice development, family meetings, workforce diversity, the court system, and, the most unique, blind removal meetings. The themes found in this study present promising practices to assist in decreasing the racial disparity in child welfare removal decisions.

Introduction

The overrepresentation of black children in the child welfare system has been a persistent issue. Black children are more likely to be placed in foster care, experience a longer stay in foster care, wait for longer periods of time to reunify with their families, and endure slower exit rates than non-minority children (Hill, 2006; Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson, 2004; Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013). Over time, there has been a shift from *identifying and understanding* racial disproportionality as a problem through numerous meta-analytic reports and editorials (e.g. Austin, 2007; Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Hill, 2006) toward an emphasis on *addressing* this problem by offering strategic policy changes and action (Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, 2009).

Racial disproportionality and racial disparity are terms that are commonly used when discussing representation of certain racial and ethnic groups of children in

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the child welfare system. These terms are often used interchangeably, but due to their distinct implications, it is worth discussing key differences. In the context of this paper, *racial disproportionality* refers to when certain subgroups are over- or underrepresented in the child welfare system "at levels that are disproportionate to their numbers in the overall child and family population" (Courtney & Skyles, 2003, p.2). *Racial disparity* refers to the unequal treatment of certain subgroups due to their race (Dettlaff, 2015; Lery & Wulczyn, 2009), which potentially increases disproportionality. Unequal treatment often results from differential resource allocation, access and services between racial groups (Farrow, Notkin, Derezotes, & Miller, 2010; Font, Berger, & Slack, 2012; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Literature suggests that race impacts the types of services that families are referred to in the child welfare system (Lovato-Hermann, Dellor, Tam, Curry, & Freisthler, 2017). When compared to whites, black children and families in the child welfare system experience lower access to services and higher rates of placement instability (Garcia, Kim, & DeNard, 2016), as well as less engagement with caseworkers (Cheng & Lo, 2012).

Many states have become aware of this issue and put forth effort to address the disparity. This study focused on New York State and their prioritization within the last 10 years to illuminate the racial dispro-portionality through a statewide initiative called Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR). Fourteen out of 62 counties have actively engaged in efforts to reduce the high frequency of disparities for black children in out-of-home placement decisions (Office of Children and Family Services [OCFS], 2015). Through statewide data tracking, it is evident that at least two counties have been able to significantly reduce the disparity in their foster care system (OCFS, 2015). This study sought to investigate key factors that may have contributed to the decreases shown in those two counties. The research-ers conducted a comparative case study with both counties, utilizing three different data sources (in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis) to develop a description of the experiences and practices. The findings from the case study assist in highlighting the potential impact these practices may have on the reduction of foster care entry for black children.

Literature review

Explanatory factors for racial disproportionality and racial disparity

The occurrence of racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare can be explained in many ways. One explanation is the disproportionate needs of black children. Black children are often exposed to certain family situations and socioeconomic challenges (e.g. poverty, unemployment, homelessness,

parental incarceration, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and limited access to community resources) that place them at greater risk of child maltreatment (Boyd, 2015; Fluke, Jones Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010). This, in turn, could lead to a higher rate of child maltreatment, resulting in a disproportionate need for black children to access child welfare services (Boyd, 2015).

Another explanation emphasizes the role of human decision-making in racial disproportionality and disparity. Research indicates that disproportionality and disparity occur at various child welfare decision points. For example, black families and children are more likely to be reported for abuse and neglect, and their cases are more likely to be investigated and substantiated when compared to white families and children (e.g. Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Hill, 2007; Krase, 2013; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Explicit and implicit racial bias and discrimination of the people who are making case decisions (e.g. caseworkers, mandated reporters, community members), along with lack of cultural competence training, can perpetuate the disproportionality at each stage (i.e. reporting, investigation, substantiation, placement, and exits) in the child welfare system (Boyd, 2015; Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010).

At an agency level, the child welfare agencies' infrastructure, race of the caseworker, lack of resources for families of color, institutional racism, organizational culture, disconnection from the community, and quality of services are all factors that could explain racial disproportionality and disparity (Boyd, 2015; Font, 2013). Literature also suggests that a lack of agency policies and programs for the employees (e.g. trainings and workforce diversity) influences their racial biases, decision-making, and service provision (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2008; Fluke et al., 2010; Johnson, Antle, & Barbee, 2009; Rolock & Testa, 2005).

At the policy level, federal policies that do not take into account the unique needs of children of color, along with "race-neutral" policies, disproportionately affect African American families and result in their increased involvement in the child welfare system (Boyd, 2015). For example, federal legislation that emphasizes permanency and adoption disproportionately impacts black families, threatening family preservation when a chance for reunification may have existed had these families been afforded more resources, preventive services, or options for relative care placement (Roberts, 2002). Additionally, it has been posited that the child welfare system acts as a method of surveillance and policing of black families rather than addressing racism and the societal roots of the problem (Roberts, 2002, 2014). Scholars also argue that racism is embedded in the structure of society and institutions, unjustly impacting the child welfare laws and systems that reinforce the unequal treatment of black families (Denby & Curtis, 2013; Dixon, 2008; Roberts, 2002).

Though presented as distinct from each other, it has been noted that these explanations can coexist (Fluke et al., 2010). Utilizing several explanations at once may provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and can inform child welfare policy and practice decisions in a more comprehensive manner.

Approaches to address racial disproportionality and racial disparity

Awareness of this issue in the child welfare system has prompted responses on state and local levels. In the report *Places to Watch*, the Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare (2006) identifies the promising practices of 10 jurisdictions (state and county) used to address racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. These include paying increased attention to racial disparities (i.e. establishing a task force/committee, targeting specific child welfare decision points), developing and using data, partnering with the community, improving service delivery, developing policy interventions, engaging in ongoing evaluation, and obtaining external funding. In 2009, the Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare compared policy changes in 11 States across the U.S. and recommended legislation that would require child welfare agencies to adopt practices such as those mentioned in the *Places to Watch* report. Other recommendations from the Alliance for Race Equity in Child Welfare include: increasing public awareness, creating culturally competent recruitment policies and workforce development trainings, providing more specialized services and supports (i.e. Family Group Decision Making, Differential Response, recruiting diverse families to foster or adopt children, and kinship care), and implementing specific system strategies and assessments. Recently, Miller and Esenstad (2015) also showed that 13 states and 2 counties used strategies to reduce racial disparity that mirrored those identified in the *Places to Watch* report.

In 2011, a study completed at the county level found that characteristics, such as unemployment rates and child poverty, have significant impacts on racial disparity in the child welfare system (Kim, Chenot, & Ji, 2011). One way to explain this finding is that poverty is a significant risk factor for child maltreatment, conflated with and possibly surpassing the risk associated with race (Kim et al., 2011). There was no clear causal link between the variables in this study, and the authors suggest conducting further research that looks at racially specific poverty rates and how they impact disparity with the corresponding racial groups. Additionally, the authors encourage future research that focuses on the role of race in child welfare decision-making, stating that "there is need for an intervention/strategy that will accomplish disparity reduction overtime" (Kim et al., 2011, p. 1243).

County-level studies also highlight the need to consider unique social and geographic conditions from a community perspective. A qualitative study in

Texas used focus groups with community members, legal professionals, and child protective caseworkers and suggested the importance of examining agency- and community-level factors in discussions about racial disparity (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2008). A different local study conducted in a neighborhood in Chicago revealed that the awareness of child welfare agency involvement in the community negatively impacts social relationships and can interfere with parental authority, sometimes threatening parents' sense of autonomy (Roberts, 2008). It can also lead to more instability, psychological injury, and sense of disconnection for the children in foster care and can create distrust among neighbors, thus further impairing social relationships in the community (Roberts, 2008). Each neighborhood and community thus presents its own racial geography that must be put into its proper context.

Despite these recent developments, evidence of the efficacy of strategies to reduce racial disparity is still emerging. More empirical studies are needed to determine the range of strategies that have been implemented at the county level and to evaluate the efficacy of these strategies. Obtaining this information may lead to reductions in foster care entries and improvements in services and outcomes for black families. To understand potential strategies at the county level, this study examined two agencies in which the disproportionality of black children in the child welfare system has steadily decreased over the past several years. This study explored what types of strategies were implemented to reduce racial disparity in child removal decisions and presents the perspectives of employees at multiple levels in the organization. Understanding the perspective of caseworkers and child welfare professionals is crucial to advancing the work with racial disparity. Decision-making within child welfare has high stakes, and frontline workers are negotiating these decisions on a daily basis. It behooves scholars to listen to those who are working directly with families. Understanding their perception of what is working will inform future evaluation of the strategies with the goal of producing well supported and effective interventions that create consistent and comparable outcomes across racial groups.

Methods

The researchers employed qualitative methods in two counties in New York State. A multiple case study design was applied that is useful for identifying generalizable knowledge about how and why particular organizations, programs, or policies found success or failure (Goodrick, 2014). For the purposes of this study, a case study refers to the research inquiry that aims at the detailed development of a particular person, place, or group (Creswell, 2013). This is not to be mistaken with the actual maltreatment *case* that is investigated by child protective frontline workers. The guiding research question was, "*This County has been able to lower their rates of black children entering foster care. In your*

experience, during 2010–2014, what may have caused the decrease?" All of the interview questions that were developed centered around this guiding question and were also informed by the existing data from each county. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature. This study was based on a year-long project, from January 2016 to December 2016, which consisted of gaining the IRB approval, developing the data collection protocol, recruitment and sampling, conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups, and data analysis.

Case study sites

Two case study sites (hereafter referred to as County A and County B) were selected based on their data trends of racial disproportionality (Office of Children and Family Services, 2015). In New York State, 35 out of 62 counties have an overrepresentation of black children in their foster care system, and 14 of those counties have been engaged in work to reduce the rate of foster care entry of black children. Among the 14, both County A and B received a DMR pilot project grant in 2009, which was provided by the Office of Children and Family Services and Casey Family Programs. According to the OCFS Memorandum of Understanding, $40,000 was awarded to support activity planning, training, technical assistance, data collection, and implementation of strategies that reduce the overrepresentation of black children in out-of-home placement. In addition to the DMR project grant, County B was awarded an additional grant (Oncare Systems of Care) through SAMSHA, which focused on improving outcomes for at-risk youth in their child welfare system. According to the OCFS data (2015), both counties showed a noticeable decrease in the ratio of black children in out of home care. In County A, in 2010, black children were 15 times more likely to be placed in foster care compared to white children, whereas in 2013, the ratio decreased to 11 to 1. Likewise, in County B, in 2011, black children were 6 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care. Within the next year, 2012, the disparity ratio decreased by 50 percent, with black children 3 times more likely to be placed in foster care. The decrease in these two counties was the most noticeable and consistent among the other counties, which sparked the interest of the Office of Children and Family Services. In addition, the executive leadership in both counties showed interest in discussing their system-wide initiatives and progress.

Sampling and characteristics of study participants

Researchers employed a purposive, nonprobability sampling strategy to recruit participants into the study. This strategy focuses on selecting participants that have unique qualities and criteria that align with the objective of the study (Etikan, Abubakar Musa, & Sunusi Alkassim, 2016). In this instance, the criterion was that participants worked in one of the two

counties and had knowledge and experiences in organizational policy-making or case-level decision-making.

After leadership in each county sent out an invitation to their eligible staff and encouraged them to join the study, all participation occurred voluntarily. Commissioners and directors were interviewed, while assistant directors, supervisors and caseworkers were invited into focus groups. The years of child welfare experience among the directors ranged from 21 to 35 years, the assistant directors from 13 to 30 years, supervisors from 16 to 25 years, and caseworkers from 3 to 11 years. There were a total of 30 participants in this study. Nine of the 30 participants were male, and 21 were female. Ten of the participants were black, and 20 were white.

Data collection process

The interview questions and focus group facilitation prompts were informed by the county specific data provided by OCFS. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university to which the research team belongs. The principal investigator spoke with the Commissioners of each participating county to discuss the project and obtain consent. An administrator at the OCFS as well as the senior leadership from each participating county reviewed the data collection protocol (e.g. guiding questions, schedule, and recruitment logistics) and provided feedback and approval.

Subsequently, each commissioner mobilized their leadership team in order to recruit participants (i.e. assistant directors, supervisors, and caseworkers). The research team traveled to each county to conduct 60-minute in-depth, face-to-face interviews and 90-minute focus groups. In-depth interviews were completed with each commissioner and each director from their respective counties. Researchers selected commissioners and directors to be interviewed one-on-one in order to obtain high-level organizational information. The other categories of employees (assistant directors, supervisors, caseworkers) were assigned to focus groups. Focus groups were chosen as the format for data collection from these employees to foster group dynamics and stimulate in-depth conversations, which led to deep exploration of topics (Creswell, 2013). Researchers sought to gather detailed information from assistant directors, supervisors, and caseworkers. Each participant provided unique perspectives of the decision-making process. Commissioners provided insights into their agency structure and organizational policies; directors shared their experiences with implementing and overseeing programs; assistant directors provided information on how they support front line supervisory practices; supervisors offered perspectives on directly supporting caseworkers in their case practice and decisions; and caseworkers provided examples of their close relationships with families in crisis and managing the weight of decisions.

After each focus group, facilitators asked for volunteers to have an in-depth interview to discuss specific experiences in more detail. Four participants volunteered to be interviewed following their focus group. One participant who volunteered was a caseworker, two were supervisors and one was an assistant director. After the interviews and focus groups, the researchers conducted content analysis of training curriculum and community services/resources provided by each county.

Analysis

Strategies of rigor

An essential component to qualitative methods is ensuring the credibility of the research findings. Patton (1999) recommends that techniques be employed to enhance the quality of the analysis and show the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Literature strongly suggests that transferability, confirmability, and dependability be established within qualitative research (Patton, 1999; Shenton, 2004).

Transferability is often scrutinized in qualitative work due to the limitations in generalizability. Though, even with small numbers within a sample, those numbers are examples of a broader group, and so transferability should not be rejected (Stake, 2005). Within a child welfare context, the decision-making process is similar from agency to agency. Based on the judgment of the caseworker, presenting maltreatment, past history, and potential risk, a child is either removed from their home or left to remain in the home with supportive services. The findings from this study fit into processes that are already embedded within child welfare agencies. The biggest indicator of transferability is the reality that racial disproportionately is plaguing child welfare in almost every state (Summers, 2015), which behooves agencies to consider effective strategies. The strategies that are being described within these two counties have potential to be transferred to other agencies.

Confirmability refers to the assurance that the findings are a result of the experiences of the participants and not the preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation is often used to establish confirmability in qualitative research. Triangulation involves the utilization of three different data sources that are cross-checked for corroboration and consistency (Patton, 1999). This strategy also guards against the notion that the study findings are simply an artifact of a single method, single source or single investigator bias. In this study, researchers conducted content analyses, focus groups, and in-depth interviews in order to triangulate the data from each county. In addition, triangulation consists of involving a wide range of study participants so that varying viewpoints are offered and that information can be verified against each other (Shenton, 2004).

Analysis process

In total, there were eight in-depth interviews and six focus groups, consisting of over 700 minutes of audio collected and 84,000 words on 175 pages of transcriptions. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed as the first step of data analysis. All team members who led a focus group or an interview completed word-for-word transcriptions. All transcriptions were imported into ATLAS.ti for analysis. In an effort to strengthen the credibility of the findings, the principal investigator (PI) instructed each member of the research team to do an initial read of the data and then a re-read (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The team then made notes of significant themes that were emerging. Following these notes, team members completed a first round of grouping those themes into categories, which led to the identification of preliminary codes. The PI analyzed that first round of codes from three separate research team members for consistency and corroboration (Patton, 1999). In examining the codes, there was an iterative and recursive process of identifying commonalities and variations.

The analysis was completed utilizing ATLAS.ti's 3-prong coding system that included *preliminary coding, neighbor coding, and selective coding* (see Table 1). After the preliminary round of coding was completed by research team members, the PI created *Code Neighbors*. Code Neighboring is a process where ATLAS.ti groups codes, notates where they are found throughout the transcript and shows if they are similar to other codes, indicating a

Table 1. Analytic Strategy: Preliminary Coding, Neighbor Coding, and Selective Coding.

Steps	Description of Process
1. Transcription of audio-recordings	Researchers listened to audio recordings and transcribed them word for word.
2. Reading and Re-reading	Researchers completed an initial read of their transcripts and then did a re-read.
3. Initial Noting	Researchers began making initial notations of emergent themes relating to phenomena under study.
4. Preliminary Coding	Researcher examined notes and initial themes for patterns and categories that led to preliminary coding.
5. Neighbor Coding	Researcher began to group codes together due to consistency and familiarity.
6. Selective Coding	Researcher examined code neighbors in order to create overall themes that would drive the answer to the qualitative inquiry.

neighboring. Approximately 20 overall codes emerged from the analysis, and while studying those codes, more specific and targeted codes emerged through *Selective Coding* (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010). *Selective Coding*, a process that establishes the main phenomena of the analysis (Bohm, 2004), resulted in a final list of main themes that are described in the findings section.

Findings

Each theme below presents the factors that participants perceived as instrumental in lowering placement rates of black children. Some themes are shared between the two counties, and some are unique to a county. A summary of these findings is shown in Table 2.

Common themes from both counties

We discuss four themes that emerged under two different levels: two themes under a community level and another two themes under a case level. Community-level factors focus on the factors related to the ways that child welfare workers navigate community resources. Case-level factors focus on the factors that affect how each child removal case is prepared and discussed among people who are involved in the decision-making process. Both aspects are central to understanding multilevel factors related to reduced racial disparity rates.

Table 2. Findings.

Common themes for both counties
(1) Community-level
Theme 1: community resources and preventive services
- A variety of community services provided (e.g., comprehensive community resource manual)
- Prevention-focused services provided (e.g., family support, family connections)
Theme 2: community collaborations
- Collaborations across the system occurred (e.g., Juvenile Justice, Foster Care, Adoption, Parenting, Minority Affairs, Counseling, Mental Health, etc.)
- School-based initiatives implemented (e.g., partnership between families and schools)
(2) Case-level
Theme 1: case practice development
- Staff training provided (e.g., *Race Equity Learning Exchange, Knowing Who You Are*)
- Family Assessment Response (FAR) approach implemented
Theme 2: family meetings and alternative resources
- Family input and involvement sought to a greater degree (e.g., family meetings)
- Alternative family members sought (e.g., family recruitment)

Distinct themes for each county	
County A	County B
Blind removal	System of care
Workforce diversity	Court system

Community-level theme 1: community resources and preventive services

Both counties discussed a variety of community services available to children and families by which caseworkers can reduce risk and increase safety and, thus, reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. County A reported community services that included domestic violence, housing, employment, medical, daycare, community outreach, legal, financial, and emergency services. One caseworker commented:

> We have a lot of services…we do a pretty good job as an agency putting information out to our workers about what's available to our families and then connecting our families to those things before we're even getting to the point where we would have to do a removal.

County B has developed a comprehensive manual of different programs and services which caseworkers utilize as a resource guide. The 73-page manual details various community agencies that offer specific services to families and community members in need, including counseling, early childhood education, after school programs, behavioral health, financial support, insurance, legal and advocacy help, housing, vocational and continuing education, transportation, trainings, and emergency services. Caseworkers also mentioned other resources that exist in addition to the services listed in the manual, such as refugee services and community health centers.

Some of the aforementioned services focus on prevention, which was a common characteristic between the two counties. Preventive services are often provided to families by the court system and aim to offer support that prevents children from being removed from the home. Some preventive services were voluntary and others mandated, but all of them aim to prevent removal. "We need to nip this in the bud before 6 months, a year, 5 years down the road we get to the point where the children are no longer safe in their environment," noted one caseworker while discussing the importance of addressing current problems to prevent future removals. Another director linked preventive services with the decrease in the number of black children in foster care and commented:

> Our number of black children in foster care decreased dramatically over the years. So why is that? I think it's because we are providing better services to the family, we're giving them more preventive services…we're more into maintaining families and giving them the skills that they need.

Both counties utilize preventive services to stabilize families, to provide necessary resources and programs, and to improve skills to build capacity. Family Support for Student Success, Family Connections, Let's Go to Kindergarten, and Family Support Center are among some of the specific programs mentioned that aim to prevent removals.

Community-level theme 2: community collaborations

Collaborating with other systems in the community that impact children and families is a theme that was emphasized in both counties. In County A, there was a focus on the importance of giving a voice to each community agency and gathering them together to share ideas. For example, many community agencies (e.g. Department of Juvenile Justice, Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Office of Minority Affairs, Hispanic Counseling Center) come together to discuss potential solutions to the problem of racial disparity in foster care in large stakeholder meetings. Other events, such as community trainings, also bring community agencies together to directly address the racial disparity in foster care. Members of the clergy, school districts and numerous community organizations were brought together to brainstorm ways to reduce racial disproportionality within certain geographic locations. These collaborative partnerships have contributed to promoting community involvement and investment.

While County A focused on various community agencies partnering together to address racial disproportionality, County B focused on school-based initiatives. Programs such as Say Yes, Family Support for Student Success, and Promise Zone were identified as school-based initiatives. The purpose of these initiatives is to have families and schools partner together to try to match specific services and interventions to the needs of both the caregivers and the children in an effort to reduce risk and increase safety. Afterschool care, medical, behavioral, and mental health treatment programs are among the many services that school-based initiatives can offer to families.

Case-level theme 1: case practice development

One theme that emerged as a factor that influences the outcome of all casework is related to how each case is developed and managed by caseworkers. Study participants reported a number of factors that have helped their case development become more sensitive to the issue of race. For example, both counties prioritized staff development throughout the past five to seven years. Three trainings consistently came up during interviews and focus groups, including The *Race Equity Learning Exchange (RELE)* by Katib Waheed, *Knowing Who You Are* by Casey Family Programs, and *Bridges out of Poverty* by Denise Schaller, as particularly effective tools for casework development. The majority of the caseworkers in the study reported that they gathered valuable information from the trainings, but they also noted the importance of following up and holding everyone accountable to the training content. County A has put committees in place to follow up on trainings with caseworkers and supervisors in an effort to facilitate continual learning. A director of service stated:

> In terms of follow-up, we also have a workgroup for caseworkers and supervisors, and then we have a stakeholder's group/executive group where we meet monthly. That group discusses DMR and RELE (training). And with RELE, we created a third day follow-up to the 2-day training, we broke down the objectives into flow charts that outlined how we could make changes and reduce the inequity. We are now creating action plans, what we can change, time for change, and we are developing that with the active group.

In addition, both counties discussed a distinguishable review process for cases called Family Assessment Response (FAR). When a child abuse report is made and sent to the county, DSS (with a FAR program in place) can select to assign the case to a FAR track instead of pursuing a formal investigation track at CPS. This is also known as Differential Response (DR) in some areas. One of the key premises of the FAR approach, according to one director, is that "every parent has these skills (to become good parents)," and thus FAR caseworkers work with each family to enhance these skills and expand their resources to prevent child removal. Every new employee receives FAR training, which focuses on family engagement principles and working with the family to link them with appropriate services. The FAR approach allows caseworkers to use various styles of engagement, models, and principles that will help each family meet their unique needs and build the skills necessary to prevent children from being removed from the home and placed into foster care. Regarding the outcome, one director noted, "[FAR results in] less kids getting removed, less families getting trapped in the investigation process, more families that get helped and less recidivism."

Some of these trainings and preventive measures also seemed to be related to caseworkers' willingness to conduct assessments that minimize racial biases. Case workers are expected to make a removal decision based on level of risk; therefore, a thorough assessment of risk is critical. One caseworker states the importance of being thorough, "Crossing all T's and dotting all I's," to delve further into the case in determining whether a child should be removed or maintained in the home with supportive services. This willingness to be thorough, coupled with adopting less rigid thinking, is valued by some caseworkers.

> I think we tend to not think of things just so black and white…Just thinking out of the box and not focusing anything on race…I don't even think I look at what the race is when I get a case.

Examining the facts and circumstances of the case and identifying strengths and resources appears to be the focus for the caseworkers. This way, they make an assessment based upon the unique circumstances of each case rather than allow bias to cloud their judgment and guide their decision-making. These components were all part of the development of casework in both counties.

Case-level theme 2: family meetings and alternative resources

Another factor that emerged at a case level was greater involvement with families or alternative members in the case development process. Many caseworkers and directors in both counties indicate that there used to be more of a "quickness" to remove children or send them to foster care when there was not an immediate relative willing or able to take care of the children. However, this casework approach has changed: caseworkers are spending more effort and time on engaging in a thorough assessment that helps families identify alternative resources to prevent removal.

One of the formats that has allowed more active engagement with family members is through family meetings. Family meetings typically include the caseworker, the family, and the caseworker's supervisor, though others may also be included (e.g. other staff members, additional family members, pastors, or other family supports). The purpose of these meetings is for the family to have more input and involvement in their own case, thus generating more solutions. It also facilitates the chance for the family to provide insight into their own situation as well as identify alternative resources and "suitable others" that may be able to step in to prevent foster care placement. For example, caseworkers try to conduct a comprehensive assessment of family challenges and resources, not limited to mothers but also fathers, other relatives, teachers, friends, neighbors, and so on. Study participants noted that the family meetings and the engagement meetings are becoming more common practice to allow parents "the opportunity to give some other resources that maybe we haven't come up with on our own."

There was consensus across both counties that the number of children of color in foster care has decreased as a direct result of the increased focus on family meetings, family recruitment, and finding suitable others. One caseworker from County A passionately shared her belief that once family meetings were established, the number of children of color in foster care decreased "immediately"; she snapped her fingers and stated, "Like, faster! Then reunifications happened and it was amazing. What we were doing- it was crazy!" A supervisor from County B also commented on the connection between the recent push to find suitable others and the decrease in the number of foster care placements:

> But we also have, I think, a lower number of kids in care because we have a large number of relative placements. We tend to engage families more and investigate before kids come into care and finding those relatives so kids don't have to come into care.

Aside from the general talk about family meetings and family recruitment, Family Finding Units and KinGap were mentioned several times as specific examples of programs that aim to find suitable others instead of placing children

into foster care. Through these programs, children are able to stay with people they already know instead of being placed into foster care with a stranger.

Distinct themes of each county

In addition to the common themes described above, our analysis identified themes that were distinctive to each county. In the following section, two themes are discussed from each county.

County A

Blind removal meetings

Blind removal meetings are one of the key features of County A child welfare practice. Blind removal meetings were implemented to facilitate unbiased decision-making. It includes a decision-making process in which all personal and demographic information on a family is removed from the paperwork that is distributed during the meeting. Therefore, a caseworker that is investigating the case and his/her supervisor do not disclose personal or demographic information while they present the case to meeting participants. The removal decision is made without names, locations, race, ethnicity, or any information that describes the family beyond information about current and past allegations and risk factors. In this way, the discussion is focused on the issues related to safety and risk factors, such as mental health, substance abuse, stressors on the parents, and the number of kids in the family.

The data analysis shows that the blind removal process has increased staff awareness of institutionalized racism and implicit bias. An agency administrator explained that the blind removal approach has significant implications in the field of child welfare:

> This particular field is very, very subjective because it's a very emotional field. There's no one that doesn't have emotions around child welfare. And it's very hard to leave all your stuff at the door when you do this work. And I don't know that everyone is very good at it. So I just thought if you could take the subjectivity of race and neighborhood out of it maybe you might get different outcomes.

Other interviewees and focus group participants also shared several moments when they realized that their internal beliefs and biases could affect the foster care decision processes. One example is as follows:

> Once you hear certain towns, right away, automatically you think the worst of that particular community. And it's probably about six towns that I can think off the top of my head that they think is like, "Oh my God." So I think that the name and the address have a lot, and also the next part of it is the presentation of the [case]worker.

When this county started blind removal meetings, there was apprehension due to caseworkers feeling unsettled with the opinion that they could be

using racial bias in their work. Trainers were brought into the agency to help employees see their own bias and teach about how implicit bias is often an unconscious mental process (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Eventually employees were able to see the effect of blind removal meetings over time, and as a result, the majority of the study participants reported that the blind removal process has contributed to decreasing the number of children of color being removed. Moreover, the blind removal approach was reported to reinforce the values of self-examination and cultural diversity, which continues to be promoted through staff trainings.

Workforce diversity

Another aspect that was unique to County A was workforce diversity. County A has made earnest efforts to promote a racially and culturally diverse workforce to accommodate a community that has been growing in diversity. Executive leadership discussed organizational efforts to assess representation of diverse groups within the workforce as below:

> We see it even in our staff over the last 7 or 8 years; 85% of our promotions have been for minority workers, black and Latina. One-third of our entire staff has been promoted over the past 8 years. So I believe that disproportionality refers not only to child welfare, but it's in our society. And every opportunity that we have to address it in the agencies that we run, and the programs that we run, and among our colleagues, it's important for leaders to help their staff understand.

As of 2016, County A's workforce collectively speaks over 40 different languages, and the DSS brochures and program pamphlets are translated into six different languages.

Some caseworkers also echoed that workforce diversity impacts the cultural competence of the DSS services. Some of their comments reflect the benefits of having a diverse workforce, such as, "People often identify themselves with people that look like them" and, "When you have a more diverse workforce, the family is able to trust you more." However, at the same time, caseworkers further underscored that bilingual workers must exhibit appropriate attitude and skills in their working relationships with clients. Merely having multilingual speakers on staff is ineffective if the staff lacks empathy and has limited engagement skills. These insights from caseworkers demonstrate that while workforce diversity is a first step, adequate training for case work must follow to fully see the benefits.

County B

System of care

County B has a uniquely collaborative system of care and support for children and youth. In 2009, County B was awarded a $9 million, six-year

grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to develop a local system of care (Onondaga Systems of Care, 2017). Based on the grant, County B has been developing partnerships with major systems that serve children and youth, such as schools, mental health, juvenile justice, special education, foster care, and child welfare. The target population is children and youth (ages 5–21) with serious emotional and behavioral challenges, with a special focus on youth in residential care, multiple service systems, out-of-home placements, and the mental health system.

The System of Care has contributed to streamlining services provided by various agencies. As part of their efforts to integrate services, County B developed an access team, which comprises frontline workers who help clients navigate the system. Instead of having to go through multiple agencies and assessments, clients only need to make one phone call to reach the right places. One upper-level administrator explained how the phone call works:

> If you have a child that needs PINS [Persons in Need of Supervision], you call our access team. If you have a child that needs mental health services, call the access team. If you are in a crisis mode, call the access team.

As a result, the services have become easier for families to navigate. Furthermore, the administrator commented that the System of Care makes it easier for families to "not only engage with services but also remain in services when they needed it." In addition to collaborative governance and service delivery, some discussions also confirmed that the System of Care helped to promote family-driven and community-based approaches.

Court system

In County B, the characteristics of the leadership in the court system were identified as a major factor affecting racial disparity. Both supervisors and caseworkers pointed out that their family court judges have played a critical role in foster care placement outcomes. How judges rule, what their tendencies are, and what kind of values their decisions are based on can have significant impact on the final decisions. Given that these judiciary cultures are different county-to-county, County B judges were distinctively supportive. Some of the descriptions of the judges include, "Thinking outside the box," "social worky," "cooperative," and "remembering past cases and showing an interest." One focus group participant drew a comparison as follows:

> The judges we have right now are very committed to knowing more about why these families are coming in the way they are. Whereas, I know I've been to other counties and won't name them, but where they could care less and they're just there to say, "This is this, and this is this," you know? Making people's life decisions in the blink of an eye. But here I think the judges really get to hear about what exactly is really going on and take each case as a unique because each case is unique – it's a family – there are so many different aspects to each family. A

plan that works for this family might not work for that family. They're open to listening to it, I think, more than others.

These characteristics of judges not only have strengthened the relationship between the court system and social services but have also contributed to reducing foster care placements. Focus group participants pointed out that judges encourage alternative caregiving and relative placement as opposed to foster care placement. In addition, there has been a localized legal push for children to remain with family. This data from County B suggests that the actors in the legal system play a critical role in foster care decisions; therefore, the relationship between the court system and social services must be considered in the conversations concerning racial disparity in child removal decisions.

Discussion and implications

Findings from this study indicate that child welfare professionals recognize that a range of multilevel strategies must be employed to address racial disparity in removal decisions and disproportionality in foster care. Several similarities emerged in both counties. First, participants from both counties consistently reported the use of community and preventive services, along with community collaborations, as essential to decreasing the disproportionate numbers of black children entering foster care. Participants stated their belief that the addition of these services provides the help and resources for families to prevent removal. This finding resonates with existing literature that also suggests that effective engagement of families with child welfare services has potential to decrease removals (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Nelson, Landsman, & Deutelbaum, 1990). The need to create and cultivate a robust and effective array of community and social services is also supported by Lindsey (1994, p. 3) who argued that the safety of children should no longer be the sole responsibility of the parents; there are economic, community, social, and political factors that influence family outcomes, and many families are not able to meet certain needs of their children. Consistent across both counties were reports of community collaborations, and the emphasis of communities taking responsibility for ending disparity and strengthening families.

In addition, the development of casework practice has made a significant impact on racial disparity. Caseworkers indicated that they are putting more time, thought, and effort into alternatives to foster care. Leadership, middle managers, and caseworkers are discovering the importance of exhausting all services to mitigate risk before removing a child from their home. The discussion on prevention and alternative approaches that emerged from both counties is indicative of a philosophical shift toward preventing removals and maintaining families. Often the mission to protect children is

in competition with the goals of maintaining and preserving families, though scholars have examined differences in outcomes of children who are placed in foster care versus children who were maltreated but remained in the home (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Findings revealed that the children who exited foster care exhibited more behavior issues and higher levels of internalizing problems than those children who remained in the home (2006). Yet, unnecessarily separating children from their families has particularly harmed the autonomy of black homes (Roberts, 2002) and "devalued the relationships between black children and their families" (Roberts, 2014, p. 428). Therefore, the priority of providing training on implicit and racial bias and continuing to develop case practice is essential. This study suggests viable alternatives for black children rather than being removed (e.g. family finding strategies, kinship care) and support for the maintenance of black families (e.g. family and team meetings, in-home supportive services, realistic and collaborative case plans).

The role of workforce diversity on reducing racial disparity was reported to be significant. This study suggests that a diverse workforce has potential benefits to family outcomes. McBeath, Chuang, Bunger, and Blakeslee (2014) discovered differences in outcomes for families when caseworkers were working with clients who had similar ethnic backgrounds. For example, during the CPS investigative process, non-white caseworkers used more active strategies to assist clients who shared their same race/ethnicity. In light of those findings, the authors state that there are benefits to prioritizing racial and ethnic diversity in the human service workforce. They also encourage more research relating to similar and dissimilar racial dynamics in human service organizations. In addition, it is becoming increasingly important to consider familial and cultural norms in relation to child maltreatment and family dynamics (Gracia & Musitu, 2003; Korbin, 1980). With these findings, there are important implications for workforce recruitment, training, and human resource considerations.

This study also highlights the efforts in which practitioners have tried to think critically about who they are and how their own perspectives may affect case outcomes. Therefore, another strategy of convening blind removal meetings is worthy of attention. Although all child welfare decisions, particularly decisions regarding a child's removal from their parents, should be free of bias and made with as much objectivity as possible, incidences of racial bias in removal decisions and foster care entry have been reported (Hill, 2006; Roberts, 2008, 2014). The findings on blind removal meetings in this study show that there is room for child welfare professionals to examine their own biases and how they may contribute to racial disparity in their decision-making processes. As one participant indicated, the field of child welfare can be very emotional and subjective, and so an opportunity to engage in a blind removal process is significant and promising.

The blind removal model has vast implications for policy, practice and research. More evidence around blind removals would offer agencies some assurance that the adoption of this new model is beneficial, which would lend itself to a discussion about whether there is a need to statutorily require agencies to implement evidence-based strategies that address the decision-making processes that may lead to racial disproportionality.

The role that family court judges play in the removal and placement of children is paramount. This case study is a reminder that ultimately judges decide the fate of children and their placement in foster care (Roberts, 2002); therefore, any discussion of racial justice within child welfare should include the judiciary. Participants in this study reported favorable accounts of how the court system supported their goals of reducing racial disparity by encouraging family findings strategies, placement in kinship care, and provision of court order services instead of removal. The critical role of the court system affirms that child welfare agencies cannot take the charge of reducing disparity within foster care on their own, and there is a need for a deeper examination of the judiciary and the role that they play in removal decisions.

Lastly, the overall implications for policy and practice lie in that racial disproportionality will not improve without concerted strategies and community investment. The two case study sites in this study were able to initiate and implement strategies based on the new investments (e.g. DMR Grant and Oncare-Systems of Care Grant-SAMSHA). This finding provides evidence that counties need support in the form of financial resources, and a willingness to engage broadly with community partners in an open manner to adequately and consistently impact racial disparities within child welfare decisions. The breadth and consistency of the community engagement provide a platform for working across systems to impact disparity within the larger community. With many other counties still struggling to move the needle on this issue, there needs to be more targeting of funders or organizations who will invest in this issue.

Limitations

The findings of this study need to be interpreted and applied carefully as this study relies on cross-sectional data from participants who shared their perspectives on how their specific county has been able to impact their disproportionality rates. Although these internal staff members are the valuable source of primary data, given the nature of retrospective self-assessment, data integrity is only assured to the point which cross-referencing is available. Another limitation lies in the generalizability of the findings in this study. The participants were selected because they had a unique perspective of their day to day work in their organization, but the authors do not suggest that participant views are generalizable to the entire

agency or outside agencies. Additionally, authors did not design the interview and focus group protocol in a way that would definitively produce triangulation.

In addition, because the cases were selected after positive racial disparity outcomes were observed, the insights from each case are limited to what worked in the local context within a particular time frame from an internal perspective. Whether these measures could have been equally successful and effective in other counties, however, is not confirmed. In other words, it is feasible that some of the non-performing counties use the exact same measures but still show different outcomes. In this regard, it is important to remember that the findings were specific to each county and were dependent on retrospective recall of participants. Some scholars consider the establishment of dependability a lofty ideal (Shenton, 2004), believing that such descriptive data in qualitative research are *static* and *frozen*. Therefore, the methods used in this study can certainly be viewed as a *"prototype model"* (2004, p. 71) for future qualitative inquiry, but the methods do not alone ensure that the findings would be similar in another setting.

It is also important to note that there is a wide range of possible explanations within each county for the decrease in the ratios of black children in the foster care system that may not have been realized or offered by study participants. This inquiry was mainly qualitative except for county-level data, which showed the decrease in disparity ratios that served as the determinants for the study (Office of Children and Family Services, 2015). Therefore, the inclusion of quantitative data (state foster care entry rates across participating counties and other counties) is limited in this study. However, this presents clear direction for future research opportunities. Creating a mixed methods research design that covers racial disparity from as many angles as possible would be an additional contribution.

Summarily, this study's findings have the potential to be transferred considering the similarities that exist in the agency environments and decision-making processes in the child welfare system. Future research must continue to examine the effectiveness of the strategies that attempt to reduce disparity in child welfare outcomes. Continuing to research and evaluate the impact of the strategies from this study could create a cadre of evidence-based interventions that significantly impact disparity in removal decisions and disproportionality within foster care.

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