

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

While child abuse and neglect appears to affect children of all racial and ethnic origins (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1998; Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996), an analysis of national, California and Santa Clara County data on the ethnicities of children in out of home placement reveals that, compared to their presence in the general population, there is a disproportionate involvement of children of color in the public child welfare system (CWS). In Santa Clara County, in particular, when compared to the general population, African American, Hispanic/Latino and Native American children are overrepresented in the CWS, while Asian American/Pacific Islander and White children are underrepresented. African Americans represent 4% of the general child population in the county, and are 14.7% of children in the CWS. Hispanic/Latino children represent 30% of the general child population in Santa Clara County and constitute 53.5% of the child welfare cases. Native Americans are approximately 0.5% of Santa Clara County's population and represent 1.0% of children in the CWS. Asian American/Pacific Islander children represent 21% of the general county child population and 5.1% of children in the CWS; Whites constitute 45% of the general child population and 25.8% of the child welfare population (Needell et al., 2002, US Bureau of the Census, 2000).

The disproportionate involvement of children of color in the CWS has long been an issue of concern for CWS workers, clients, researchers and government and community groups; yet no research to date (with the exception of this study) has systematically investigated the factors associated with this disproportionality. In an effort to understand better the factors related to the disproportionate number of children of color in the CWS in Santa Clara County, the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) contracted with the Child Welfare Research Team (CWRT) in the College of Social Work at San José State University to conduct a three-year study on this topic. An advisory group, consisting of administrators and representatives from various racial/ethnic groups was convened to help guide the development of the project.

The primary overall question posed by DFCS was: What are the primary reasons why children of color are disproportionately represented in Santa Clara County's Child Welfare System? In order to address the complexity of this question, the CWRT elected to employ a multiphase/multimethod approach, beginning with an initial exploratory phase that was completed in April 2001.

This report provides findings from Phase 2 that ran from September 2001 to August 31, 2002. Specifically, in this second phase of the study, the Child Welfare Research Team (CWRT) addressed two of the four themes that emerged from Phase 1 (see Section II of the current report for a review of all four themes presented at the end of Phase 1). The overarching themes guiding the current Phase 2 report are as follows: 1) little is known about specific pathways through the CWS and ways in which these

pathways differ for various racial/ethnic groups, and 2) various racial/ethnic groups may receive different treatment at key decision making points in the system.

The primary methodology for Phase 2 involved extensive, in-depth reviews of 403 closed child welfare case records, a parallel descriptive analysis of 1720 closed cases within the CWS/CMS database, and key informant interviews with managers and supervisors in the county's Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS).

## **Overall Conclusions**

Combining results from our overall sample of 1720 closed cases, the in-depth record review of 403 child welfare cases and interviews with 8 key informants in managerial positions in DFCS, the following overall conclusions can be drawn:

1. *Descriptive narratives presented in Section IX of this report indicate that the families belonging to each of the four racial/ethnic groups present unique and diverse profiles.*
  - African American families are largely headed by young, single, isolated, poor mothers who suffer from substance abuse and have experienced criminal involvement and domestic violence. At the same time, their reported rate of mental health problems is low.
  - White families are made up of mothers who are also single, but who are better educated than average and who are less likely to be on welfare. While substance abuse, mental health problems and domestic violence are prevalent within this group, white mothers tend to have a lower than average rate of involvement in the criminal justice system.
  - Latino families are predominantly poor, with a higher than average number of children. Many Latina mothers (18.4%) are non-English speaking and approximately 26% are foreign born. Latina mothers are more often living without a spouse, have low levels of education and experience problems including substance abuse, and criminal activity, as well as domestic violence. Like African American mothers, their reported rates of mental health problems are low. For the immigrant Latino families, issues related to immigration, legal status and the ability to secure employment may also have an impact on their welfare, but were undetectable with the available data.
  - Asian/Pacific Islander families who are assigned to involuntary child welfare services, are also often non-English speaking and most likely to be foreign born. Most Asian/Pacific Islander mothers in this group are older, have fewer children than average, have less education than average and are married and living with a spouse. Mental health problems and involvement in the mental health system rather than substance abuse or criminality characterize this group. This finding is notable as available research indicates that elevated

rates of mental health problems are uncharacteristic of immigrant populations. In addition, rates of physical abuse are higher than average for this group and Asian American/Pacific Islander fathers are comparatively more often reported as the perpetrators of abuse.

2. *Families within each of the four racial/ethnic groups are extremely vulnerable.*

- The characteristics that emerged in our narrative descriptions as key characteristics of each of the four racial/ethnic groups have been associated in the research literature as risk factors for child abuse and neglect. These characteristics have also been associated with increased serious behavioral and adjustment problems in children and adolescents.
- Comments by key informants underscored the relationship between characteristics including poverty, lack of education, insufficient job skills, as well as involvement with drugs and violence, and bias on the part of workers, as contributing to the overrepresentation of African American and Latino children in the CWS.
- While Asian American/Pacific Islander families have traditionally been underrepresented in the CWS, our results suggest that Asian American/Pacific Islander families with certain characteristics are emerging as a high-risk group. More information and careful monitoring of this group is clearly warranted.
- Identifying vulnerable families is an important piece of the puzzle in explaining involvement and retention in the CWS. Understanding family characteristics that represent risk factors can help systems design interventions that offset the potential for CWS involvement and prolonged involvement.

3. *Once in the Child Welfare System, children in each of the four racial/ethnic groups follow different pathways and experience different outcomes.*

- African American children are younger than average when they enter the system, have higher than average rates of being assigned to family reunification services and are initially placed with a relative. African American children experience more court hearings, have a higher than average rate of being removed from their families, longer than average stays in each out-of-home placement and a longer average total case duration than children in other groups. At case closure, African American children are less likely to be reunified with their families and most frequently in permanent placement.
- White children are older than average on entry to the CWS and though they are also most often assigned to family reunification services and placed with a relative, they tend to have a shorter than average stay in each out of home placement and a lower than average total case length. At case closure, White children are most likely to be in family maintenance services.

- Likewise, Latino children are also most often assigned to family reunification services and placed with a relative at initial placement. They experience shorter than average stays in each out-of-home placement, have a shorter total length of time in out-of-home placement and a shorter total case length. Results also indicate that Latino children experience a relatively high number of unique placement homes, suggesting that they experience multiple transitions as they wend their way through the system. For Latino children, their most common status at case closure is permanent placement, suggesting that many Latino children are not reunified with their family of origin. Similar to African American families, they experience a lower than average rate of family maintenance services.
  - Asian American/Pacific Islander children also tend to be assigned to family reunification services, but receive family maintenance services at a higher rate than other groups. Rather than being placed with relatives, their initial placement is likely to be in a family foster home. Asian American/Pacific Islander children appear to have lengthier than average stays in each out-of-home placement and longer than average total time in out-of-home placement, as well as a longer than average total case length. The most frequently occurring final out-of-home placement for Asian American/Pacific Islander children tends to be a family foster home, and they are more likely to have their case closed with permanent placement services.
  - Once in the CWS, African American and Latino children tend not to return to their families. This finding was underscored by focus group results in Phase 1 of our study, as well as by comments from key informants during the current phase. Key informants stated that worker bias, poverty, as well as immigration status were key barriers to exiting the system. In addition, key informants suggested that individual bias on the part of workers might be instrumental at both the front end of the system and in decisions that are made once the child enters the system, in prolonging stays of children of color.
4. *The services ordered for families of color are generally limited to a one-size-fits-all approach and to a small array of available services. The reliance on traditional formal services does not appear to meet the needs of these highly diverse ethnic/racial family groups.*
- Parenting education, substance abuse treatment and counseling (both individual and group) were the most commonly ordered services at the jurisdictional/dispositional hearing. These results suggest that workers are offering the same services for all families, regardless of their needs and rely heavily on traditional, formal services.
  - Results also indicate that services are not distributed uniformly across racial/ethnic groups and do not necessarily match their specific needs. In spite of high rates of substance abuse problems and criminal involvement, African American parents were most often ordered to receive parent education only.

White families appear to receive more of the available services including parenting education services, individual and group counseling and substance abuse treatment services. In addition to parenting education services, Latino families receive slightly higher than average rates of substance abuse services. However, it is not clear whether these provided services are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Neither African American nor Latino families appear to receive mental health services. Asian American families appear to receive mental health services at a higher rate than other groups, but again it is not clear whether they are meeting the unique needs of this culturally distinct group.

- The paucity of services ordered indicates that children and families of color are not provided with sufficient preventive and supportive services and that traditional CWS may not meet the particular needs of these unique and diverse groups. These findings also corroborate those of a national forum on children and families of color in the CWS (CWLA, 2002). In addition, research has indicated that individual, group and couples counseling, as well as parenting training have shown only minimal success in teaching parents better skills and reducing the likelihood of further abuse in families marked by serious and chronic abuse (Albee & Gullota, 1997; McLoyd, 1998).
- There is a need for preventive and early intervention services for vulnerable families of color. For example, home visitation services may be exceptionally helpful in addressing the needs of vulnerable, at-risk families from diverse racial/ethnic groups. Research has indicated that programs of home visitation that promote positive health-related behaviors in mothers of young children, competent care of their children and linkage with needed health care and human services, reduce rates of criminality, problems related to substance abuse and child abuse and neglect among young, unmarried, isolated poor mothers (Olds et al., 1997, 1998). Studies that follow children of mothers involved in such home visitation programs, into adolescence have found these youth have fewer serious behavioral and adjustment problems than youth whose mothers did not participate in home visitation programs. Indeed, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect has recommended that home-visitation services be made available to all parents of young children as a means of preventing child abuse and neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 1991).
- The use of more non-traditional, culturally sensitive services that are conducted in the client's primary Language are clearly warranted. Key informants underscored this point. A paucity of social services, particularly multi-lingual services, was cited as a significant barrier for many families of color. Interviewees discussed the shortage of substance abuse treatment programs, particularly those geared for women with children and people whose primary language is not English. Multi-lingual and culturally appropriate domestic violence services, parenting classes, and other social services were considered in need of development.

- The form of mandated services is also an important issue. As one key informant noted, “if a Latino parent is court ordered to therapy, this may be seen as ‘being crazy, while attending a psychoeducational group is (viewed as) less of a problem.”
  - The scarcity of accessible services was perceived as “discrimination against the poor who have to rely on free treatment” by more than one informant.
  - In addition, key informants noted that recognition of the extended family system is critical, particularly in relation to working with many communities of color. “Thinking of family as a mother-father-child configuration is common but problematic...it is just not how children are really raised.”
  - More research and evaluation of interventions and programs targeted to children and families of color is necessary. Rather than implementing untested interventions, it would be more efficacious to begin with programs that have been tested, replicated and found to work with families from unique and diverse racial/ethnic groups.
5. *There is a need to involve multiple social service systems in a comprehensive and coordinated effort to meet the needs of children and families of color.*
- Results from Phase 2 indicate that the problems experienced by families across the different racial/ethnic groups span multiple systems including: mental health, juvenile justice, adult criminal justice, substance abuse, and welfare.
  - Statistics presented in the literature review section of this report also indicate that families of color are involved in systems other than child welfare in high numbers. Prevention and intervention efforts should involve a deliberate and organized coordination of these multiple systems.

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