

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 Santa Clara County's CWS, while Asian American/Pacific Islander and White children are underrepresented. African Americans represent 4 percent of the general child population in the county, and are 13.6 percent of children in supervised foster care. Hispanic/Latino children represent 30 percent of the general child population in Santa Clara County and constitute 55.3 percent of the child welfare cases. Native Americans are approximately 0.5 percent of Santa Clara County's population and represent 0.6 percent of children in the CWS. Asian American/Pacific Islander children represent 21 percent of the general county child population and 5.4 percent of children in the CWS; Whites constitute 45 percent of the general child population and 25.0 percent of the child welfare population (Needell et al., 2003; U.S. 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 few studies have systematically investigated the factors associated with this disproportionality. In an effort to better understand the factors related to the disproportionate number of children of color in the CWS in Santa Clara County, the Department of Family and Children 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.

The 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 May 2001. Data for Phase 1 were gathered from three sources: research literature at the national, state and county levels; Santa Clara County's management information system (CWS/CMS); and focus group discussions with professionals in Santa Clara County who provide child welfare services, as well as parents, caregivers and youth who are recipients of CWS services. Four central themes emerged from Phase 1 findings (please see Phase 1 Final Report for a complete description of the findings from which these themes were generated).

Conclusions from Phase 1 indicated that more research was needed that focused on the actual experiences of children in care and the individual and family-related

characteristics that are associated with these experiences. Phase 1 results also indicated that CWS/CMS data alone would not provide the information needed to address these research aims. Thus, Phase 2, which concluded in August 2002 focused on characteristics of children and families of color in the CWS and experiences they had as they wended their way through the system. The methodology for Phase 2 included extensive, in-depth case record reviews with a sample of 403 closed child welfare case records, enabling us to collect information on the individual child and family, as well as system-related characteristics not included in the CWS/CMS database. The case record review data provided extensive information on decisions at key points in the system and children's progress through the system, as well as services ordered for children at the time of case disposition and at subsequent hearings. In addition, a parallel descriptive analysis of 1720 closed cases within the CWS/CMS database allowed us to examine the entire histories of children as they progressed through the CWS and to conduct analyses that were not possible with the CWS/CMS cross-sectional dataset that we used in Phase 1. Key informant interviews with managers and supervisors in the county's DFCS at key decision points in the system provided additional information pertaining to cultural and environmental aspects of the agency. (Please see Phase 2 Final Report for a complete description of the study methods and findings).

The current report provides findings from Phase 3 that was originally to be conducted from September 2002 to August 31, 2003. However, due to contractual changes involving the Scope of Work, the CWRT was not able to begin work until the end of January 2003. Thus, the research involved in Phase 3 was conducted over a shorter seven-month time period. This third phase of the research project focused on agency practice and ways in which current practice interacts with child, family and cultural characteristics of different racial/ethnic groups. Phase 3 of the study addressed three overall aims: 1) to assess identified key practices for children and families of color in Santa Clara County's CWS, 2) to examine the influence of the court system on service recommendations for children and families and, 3) to conduct a statewide comparative analysis of identified key practices that may affect the disproportionate representation of children of color in the CWS.

The primary methodology for Phase 3 included semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups with DFCS supervisors and managers, social workers and parents involved in the CWS; a qualitative and quantitative comparison of child welfare practices and outcomes between the DFCS South County and Main County offices; a reanalysis of cases from Phase 2 with successful outcomes and an analysis of factors that contributed to those positive outcomes; a supplemental data collection for our case record review sample so as to include information on court ordered changes to the social worker recommendations at the jurisdictional/dispositional hearing; and, a statewide survey of county child welfare directors, managers or supervisors in California counties and quantitative analyses using a statewide database consisting of county-level characteristics.

Overall Conclusions

Results from Phase 2 indicated that different racial/ethnic groups experience unique pathways through the CWS (Hines et al., 2002). At every point in the system, various child welfare practices and services impact children and families. Phase 2 results indicated that children and families of color in Santa Clara County's CWS tend to be recommended services that are traditional and formal in nature and that do not appear to meet the wide range of needs experienced by these highly diverse racial/ethnic family groups. Indeed, children and families of color in the CWS represent a high risk group who are often impacted by myriad psychosocial challenges yet services recommended for these families tend to be limited to a one-size-fits all approach.

Moreover, there exists relatively little empirical evidence that traditional child welfare services are effective in maintaining or reunifying children and improving family functioning. Even less research has been conducted on the impact of child welfare practices for children and families of color. Yet because children and families of color are disproportionately represented in the CWS, the effectiveness of child welfare practices for these groups is of particular interest. Research suggests that children and families of color tend to have longer stays in the CWS, that they receive fewer and less comprehensive services, and have poorer case outcomes than White children and families (Close, 1983; Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell, & Park, 1996). This bleak outlook for children and families of color in the CWS creates an urgent need to understand child welfare practices and services that result in enhanced outcomes for these families. It is especially important to identify the types of individual and contextual factors that hinder or support the effectiveness of these practices.

Phases 1 and 2 of this study focused on examining reasons for the racial/ethnic disproportionality in the County's CWS and identifying the decision points where it occurs. *The primary goal of Phase 3 was to assess key practices for children and families of color in the CWS at both the county and state levels in order to provide information that might help generate strategies aimed at reducing ethnic/racial disparities and develop more effective services and supports for children and families of color.*

In order to develop a context for examining practices in Santa Clara County's CWS, we first conducted analyses to assess types of practices and case characteristics associated with successful outcomes for children and families across different racial/ethnic groups. Using data from our Phase 2 Case Record Review sample and defining successful outcomes according to US DHHS guidelines (i.e., safety, permanency, and family and child well-being), results indicated that there were minimal ethnic differences in successful outcomes. It is important to note that major ethnic differences do exist in Santa Clara County's CWS. Phase 1 and 2 confirmed that certain ethnic groups are over-represented (i.e., Latinos, African Americans) while others are under-represented (i.e., Asian American/Pacific Islanders) in the county's CWS. Phase 2 results also indicated that there are significant ethnic differences in demographic, system-related, and psychosocial characteristics and that many of these variations appear at early

choice points in the system. Phase 3 results suggest that when success is defined according to DHHS guidelines, ethnic differences at the conclusion of the case are not evident. One interpretation for this finding might be that while there is a clear disproportion of ethnic groups in the system, once in the system, children as a whole, regardless of race/ethnicity, are generally faring the same. Phase 2 results found that children and families of color in Santa Clara County's CWS are receiving a "one-size fits all" approach to services (Hines et al., 2002). Although this may seem equitable and logistically efficient, it appears ultimately ineffective in serving a diverse group of children and families.

While little research exists that empirically supports policies, programs and practices that attempt to reduce ethnic/racial disproportionality, some programs and practices appear promising and merit further exploration. In general, these practices aim to reduce the need for out-of-home placement and increase family and community participation in decision making.

In our analysis of Santa Clara County child welfare practices, results based on focus group and interview data indicated that in-home services, family conferencing, and team decision making (TDM) were viewed by participants as ways to improve decision-making with families from diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Participants noted that both formal and informal collaborative relationships with other services delivery systems, such as domestic violence and substance abuse treatment systems, are critical for successful interventions with children and families. Furthermore, participants recognized the importance of training and cross-training to enhance the capacity of helping professionals in child welfare and other systems to better address the needs of children and families of color.

It is interesting that most practices and contextual factors mentioned by social workers had both positive and negative aspects. Many of the practices and contextual factors that negatively impact children and families of color were actually barriers to successful implementation of the practices that social workers felt have a positive impact on children and families of color. Although practices such as orientation of new clients; family and team decision-making; preventive services; substance abuse services; cultural competency; collaboration with other agencies and systems; a strength-based approach; and the use of relative placements were described as having a positive impact on children and families of color, certain negative practices and contexts impeded their effective implementation. For instance, having to screen out large numbers of inappropriate referrals; inconsistency in decision-making practices; a shortage of services, particularly substance abuse and preventive services; lack of client access to services; difficult protocols for placing children with kin; gaps in cultural competency; time limits; and agency-level factors such as heavy caseloads, staff shortages, substantial amounts of paperwork, lack of access to information about resources; and confusion about the agency's overall mission and key policies all impeded implementation of the best practices. These findings suggest that in addition to building on current positive practices for children and families of color, CWS stakeholders should also actively work both internally and in collaboration with partners to reduce barriers to these best practices.

Our analysis comparing South County and the Main Office enabled us to examine contextual factors that may have an impact on child welfare practices, in this case, small vs. large and urban vs. rural. Results indicate that children in South County appear to have better outcomes, i.e., they have fewer number of unique placement homes in the current episode, have a shorter average stay per placement, a shorter length of time in out-of-home placement, and are younger at time of case closure. Study participants described South County as “a small county or rural area.” This geographic difference, and factors related to an organizational culture that emphasize a commitment to maintaining and reunifying families, the practice of providing an orientation to the child welfare system, as well as the finding that fewer workers are assigned during the course of the case may all be related to these positive outcomes for children in South County. It is interesting to note, however that our multivariate analyses that examined case characteristics and system-related factors related to reunification indicated that when taking other factors into account, geographical location was not a significant predictor of reunification. Rather, fewer workers, shorter case duration, and fewer placements were the strongest predictors. More research on factors related to agency culture and geographical location as they impact child welfare practice and outcomes for children and families of color is clearly warranted.

Research indicates that the court system is likely to have an impact on the practices that are provided to children and families in the CWS. In our analysis conducted to determine the extent to which court orders changed social worker recommendations at the jurisdictional/dispositional hearing, results indicated that the court made changes to the initial social worker in approximately half of the cases. Results further indicated that that ethnicity was not related to whether or not a change occurred. These results do not necessarily indicate that the system and courts treat children and families from different ethnicities the same, but rather that when the judge decides to make a change from the social worker recommendations, these changes appear to occur equally across ethnic groups. It was the opinion of members of the Court Officer Unit focus group that ethnicity does not contribute to decisions in court, but rather it is circumstances that drive the case.

Findings from qualitative analysis exploring the relationship between the child welfare and court system painted suggested that the collaboration between the child welfare system and courts is problematic. Agency-wide focus group participants felt that the child welfare and court system have different perspectives on the needs and circumstances of children and families in the CWS and that the court system may have unrealistic expectations of families. More research in this area is needed, as is further investigation of ways in which relationships between court personnel and child welfare workers have an impact on the experiences of children and families of color involved in the CWS.

Results from our statewide survey indicate that certain types of practices are considered by county child welfare personnel to be effective with diverse populations, and that these practices are related to disproportionate representations of children of

color in county child welfare systems. Descriptive results revealed four overall types of practices considered to be most effective with children and families of color, as well as various specific practices within these types of practices including: 1) beginning choice point practices, which included family group conferencing or other team decision-making practices, voluntary family maintenance or other prevention/family preservation services, and risk assessment tools or systems, 2) continuing care/ending choice point practices, which included, placement related practices, the Family to Family Initiative, and intensive and collaborative interventions for high-risk children, 3) both beginning and continuing/ending choice point practices, which included, community-based services, and strength based assessments, and 4) organizational or structural practices which included, cultural competency of staff, collaboration with American Indian tribes and vertical case management.

Similar to findings on practices identified within Santa Clara County's DFCS, practices at the statewide level were described as effective with children and families of color because they are inclusive, collaborative, culturally appropriate and involve client's communities. Although the research literature does not provide convincing evidence of the effectiveness of these practices, the fact that respondents reported these practices as those that are most effective with children and families of color suggests that they may serve as promising models for children and families of color and that more rigorous evaluations of these practices are needed.

Phase 3 also attempted to assess how the practices identified through the statewide survey might affect differential representation of children of color in the CWS. Our analyses uncovered significant associations between practice types, practices and practice characteristics and disproportionate representation. It is interesting that different patterns of association were found for Latinos, African Americans and Asian American/Pacific Islanders.

Specifically, beginning choice point practices were found to have a beneficial effect on Latino overrepresentation. In particular, family group conferencing or other team decision-making interventions predicted lower levels of Latino overrepresentation. However, Latino overrepresentation was greater, not less, when interventions were implemented targeting areas with high concentrations of distressed families. Latino overrepresentation was also greater when clients, foster families, out-of-home placement providers, and other service systems were involved in the development of the practice. As such, it appears that practices may be developed because stakeholders perceive Latino overrepresentation and initiate programs in response.

In contrast to Latinos, targeting practices to at-risk areas for African American populations was beneficial in reducing overrepresentation, as well as targeting of very young children. Less overrepresentation was linked also to whether foster families and clients and contract agencies initiated an intervention, and whether it focused on improving psychosocial outcomes of birth families. The findings suggest a picture almost the reverse of that found for Latinos. Additionally, there appear to be lower levels of African American overrepresentation than expected when key community stakeholders

help to initiate the interventions that focus on high-risk areas and populations. When interventions have a goal of strengthening the well being of birth families, then implementation is associated with less African American overrepresentation. Yet when counties implemented Family-to-Family initiatives greater African American overrepresentation resulted. Again, the implementation of Family to Family programs may be used reactively, in response to high perceived levels of overrepresentation.

As with Latinos, targeting of high need areas was less beneficial for Asian American/Pacific Islander children than not engaging in this kind of intervention. Involving clients and service systems in initiation, again more common for interventions targeting high need areas, was also relatively unsuccessful. On the other hand, management and worker support for a practice was associated with greater success.

While researchers have described the existence of ethnic/racial disparities in every aspect of the CWS, little attention has been given to ways to address the existing disproportionality. It is our hope that the information contained in Phase 3 of the Children of Color Study will help in the development of more effective programs and practices for families and children of color at both the county and state level. Overall, our findings from Phase 3 suggest that efforts to address racial and ethnic disparities in the child welfare system should involve a more concentrated focus on child and family well-being, involving the creation of family-centered and community-based services that are inclusive and collaborative and specifically designed to meet the needs of the diverse cultural and ethnic groups in the child welfare population.

Recommendations for the CWS

Based on Phase 3 findings, we make recommendations/suggestions in the following areas:

1) Tracking successful case outcomes for families and children of color:

- In order to better assess whether safety, permanency, and family and child well-being are maintained and enhanced, records should include more complete and measurable information. We acknowledge that child welfare case records were not originally intended for research. Yet, if the agencies responsible for providing effective services wish to evaluate the performance of their programs more reliably and validly, improving information collection and tracking should be considered.
- The creation of a case summary check-out form used at case closure would be one way to track child outcomes. The check-out form would indicate the child and family's status in major areas of psychosocial well-being (i.e., health, education, and finances), in addition to the existing case outcomes. Given the amount of missing data assessing these domains describing case and child status, and the relative scarcity of information

recorded in the last two court hearings, this form would enable measurement and evaluation of "successful cases and outcomes" in a more consistent objective manner.

- The amount of missing data and the manner in which information is assessed also implies the need for more reliable and valid methods of recording of information.
- It was difficult to assess the successful cases and outcomes in Santa Clara County's CWS. Are the proportions of children reunified with their families or of those adopted high or low? And compared to what? Implementing better record keeping and data collection over time on key characteristics, based on an agreed-upon operational definition would better address the question of effectiveness and performance. Implementing these practices across counties and across states would also facilitate evaluation.

2) Identifying promising practices within Santa Clara's CWS for families and children of color:

- The findings from the qualitative component of this study affirm the value of many efforts that are already in place, such as culturally specific ER response units and family resource centers, and other that are in the process of implementation including efforts to reduce caseloads, initiation of team decision making, and participation in the Family-to-Family initiative.
- Practices that are inclusive, collaborative, culturally appropriate and involve client's communities appear to be best suited to meeting the needs of children and families of color. Although the research literature does not provide convincing evidence of the effectiveness of these practices, the fact that respondents reported these practices as those that are most effective with children and families of color suggests that they may serve as promising models for children and families of color and that more rigorous evaluations of these practices are needed.
- The findings also point to opportunities to further strengthen services for children and families of color. Recommendations related to training, institutionalizing group orientation for clients, and other suggestions from study participants could be used to inform practice and planning.
- It would be beneficial for a team of managers, line staff, family representatives, and community members to review the recommendations suggested by focus group and interview participants to identify and prioritize possible practices for adoption based on their feasibility and utility for children and families of color.

3) Identifying promising practices for families and children of color based on a comparison between South County and the Main Office:

- Future research should include a larger subsample from South County and include methods to understand the reasons behind these location differences. Also, a larger South County Office location sample may enable more detailed comparisons by ethnicity.
- Practices, such as providing a group orientation to families that may assist them in navigating through the system may be easily strengthened in South County Offices and adapted to other regions of Santa Clara County, as recommended by study participants. This practice may be particularly helpful to low-income families and families of color that may be intimidated by or unfamiliar with child welfare and related systems.
- Other practices, such as vertical case management, may hold promise for other regions of Santa Clara County, though the success of this practice may be linked to the “small county” dynamic described by South County study participants. Some participants in focus groups that took place at the main office mentioned this model as promising while others asserted that specialized expertise in different areas of social work was an advantage in providing quality services that are informed by “the most current information.”
- Further examination of ways in which the culture of commitment to maintaining and reunifying families is created, communicated, and continued merits attention. In addition, an exploration of how this culture might be adapted to other parts of the county would be beneficial.

4) Identifying factors related to the Court System that may have an impact on practices for families and children of color in the CWS:

- Although the quantitative and qualitative information described many of the circumstances related to whether or not recommendations may be upheld by the court, it is very difficult to ascertain the degree to which each circumstances influences a court ordered change. More examination of this area is needed, as is further investigation of ways in which relationships between court personnel and child welfare workers have an impact on the experiences of children and families of color involved in the CWS.

- Better and more exhaustive record keeping may not be the solution, as many informal and undocumented actions in the negotiation process occur regularly, and are confidential, thus making much of the data unavailable for research and evaluation purposes.
- Assessing other factors such as courtroom environment, stakeholder characteristics, and other judicial issues would be advantageous in future research.

5) Identifying promising practices for families and children of color based on statewide data:

- County directors and child welfare administrators identified practices with similar characteristics as those identified within Santa Clara County, i.e., those that are inclusive, collaborative, culturally appropriate and involve client's communities appear to be best suited to meeting the needs of children and families of color. However, further research and evaluation is necessary to determine which practices most effectively meet the needs of individual racial/ethnic groups.
- While multivariate analyses suggest that certain practices do predict levels of over and underrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system, additional research to determine the mechanisms through which these practices impact this disproportionate representation is needed.
- Additional explorations into the relationship between practices, disproportionate representation of children of color in the child welfare system and county characteristics would also help shed light on the process through which certain practices impact children and families of color.