



FOURTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS & EQUITY ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING

Keynote Address:

The Community Impact of Racial Disproportionality

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Summary of Keynote Address

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This goal of this keynote address was to explore the impact of racial disproportionality on communities, and to encourage participants to develop a new perspective about the cumulative, community-wide effects of interventions by the child welfare system.

Dr. Roberts began by reviewing the way that she uses terminology to talk about racial disparities and inequities in the child welfare system:

- The term overrepresentation is used to compare the percentage of children of one ethnicity in the system with their representation in the general population. Children of color compose most of the children in foster care, with African American and Native American children extremely overrepresented. In specific geographic areas, indigenous Alaskan and Latino children are also overrepresented.
- Racial disproportionality is distinct from overrepresentation in that it compares the representation of children from one group to another group. For example, African American children are four times as likely as White children to be placed in foster care. Then, if you look at a child's chances over his or her lifetime of being placed in foster care, within some communities Black children may be ten to twenty-five times more likely than White children to be placed, in part because they tend to spend more of their lives in poorer neighborhoods than White children do.
- Another aspect of racial disproportionality can be seen in differences in outcomes for children once they have been placed in foster care. By just about every measure, Black children fare worse than White children while they are in foster care, both in terms of the services they receive while in foster care, as well as the likelihood as to whether or not they will be reunified.

These findings do not truly capture the essence of racial differences in the child welfare system in the United States, but provide an important backdrop to Dorothy Roberts' recent work which has focused on the child welfare system's racial geography. In some neighborhoods in the

United States, as many as 1 in 10 children have been placed in foster care. In sociological literature, the idea that children are affected by the neighborhoods and communities they live in would be referred to as neighborhood effects. In fact, the impact of neighborhood characteristics and community social dynamics on children and families is perhaps as important as the individual characteristics of those families.

In social work practice, there is also increased attention given to community-based approaches to child welfare decision-making and service delivery. Very broadly, there are two main approaches. The first aims to integrate insights about the effects of communities into casework practice. The second focuses on building and strengthening neighborhoods to benefit children, based on the belief that practice alone would not be enough to overcome disadvantage in neighborhoods. Both approaches attempt to incorporate community knowledge and to acknowledge that communities affect children.

However, policy and research has not addressed the impact of the child welfare system on neighborhoods. Does concentrated involvement of the child welfare system have community-wide effects? Does this involvement in the neighborhood decrease child maltreatment in the neighborhood? What we usually ask, though, is if this intervention has had an effect on the parent's behavior. Further, what is the socio-political impact? In what ways are the social lives of the people in the neighborhood affected, both in their political involvement and in their relationships to each other as a result of this spatial concentration of child welfare supervision in disadvantaged neighborhoods?

In Chicago, for example, there are neighborhoods that are 90% Black, and they are the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. These are the neighborhoods with the highest rates of child welfare involvement, incarceration, and HIV infection, all concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods. This affects all children in the neighborhood, not just children in foster care.

As of the late 1960's, the approach to child welfare in this country is based upon the premise that child maltreatment is a result of pathological parents who do not know how to take care of children. Thus, the treatment is to address their individual problems, not the community's problems or the nation's problems. As a result, we tend to look at individual outcomes for children and we do not ask what the outcomes for the whole neighborhood might be.

How can the meaning of cultural competency change to take into account this idea of social work and child welfare practices affecting entire neighborhoods? We can see some parallels between child welfare and mass incarceration. The concept of coercive mobility looks at what happens when people have to move from their neighborhoods because someone told them they had to move. The impact on communities with large amounts of coercive mobility and the costs of placing large numbers of people from particular neighborhoods in prison are not limited to, but may result in, increased financial costs to the people left behind, the cost of disrupted social networks, and the political cost of losing votes from the community.

What many researchers have found is that some incarceration does reduce crime in the neighborhood, but that when half of the young men are under criminal justice supervision, it has the opposite effect and crime goes up.

Dorothy Roberts' recent study of 27 Black women, ages 24 to 56, intended to examine how child welfare agency involvement in their neighborhood affected their community, social networks, and collective efficacy, as well as their attitudes about government and self-governance. Some of the social effects that participants identified included interference with parental authority, family conflicts over placement, and distrust among neighbors. Furthermore, the child welfare system was also identified as the answer to problems that residents in other neighborhoods would never even consider. When asked if DCFS was too involved in Woodlawn, just enough, or not enough, most responded that DCFS was not involved enough. The main reason was financial, with DCFS as the only place left in the neighborhood to get help. On the one hand, participants stated that they wanted more involvement, but a different kind of involvement that is not tied to disrupting families.

If we accept the idea that racial disparities cause community-wide harm, then there must be community involvement in developing child welfare policies, programs, and practices, as well as more support for families to avoid system involvement.

Comments, questions, and discussion

Question: What can be done to avoid formal placement? Are there ways in which the child welfare system can shift practice from opening a case to avoiding opening a case? The school system is the number one reporter and it is the confluence of multiple systems that have an effect on placing children of color in the child welfare system.

Comment: There are a number of changes that may have positively affected outcomes for children which are also possibly adverse for reunification. Kinship placement and the push to get children adopted indicate that there might be a disparity between what we think of as a good outcome for the child versus what might be a good outcome for the family.

Response: Kinship care does account for a large share of the disparity in reunification outcomes between African American and White children. Some are not as concerned about this gap because children are placed with kin. However, the fact that the system has a different outcome for Black children should still be a concern. Why should that support hinge on terminating the rights of the parent or continued supervision of the family through kin care?

Question: Most social work schools have veered away from community methods. Fewer social workers are comfortable working at the macro level to address community issues and solve community-level problems. If what gets measured gets done, and we are looking at individual statistics and not the bigger picture, this dichotomy reflects a problem with how our research paradigms are stated and a practice issue within the educational paradigm.

Response: State standards are based upon evidence-based practice, but these practices are limited to what researchers are writing about child welfare. This answer hinges on what is being tested and the basic assumptions and questions of the research.

Comment: We can't fear the welfare department, we need to welcome them. They need to come in with a different attitude to help this community transform from a community of despair to a community of hope.

Question: How do you turn around a system that is patronizing and paternalistic, fosters dependency, and tears at the fabric of the community into something that is healthy, productive, and supportive of families and children? What is the role of child welfare system in that? What steps can this system do when we know it also involves all these other systems as well? We have to work with communities to figure out a way to get out of the Catch-22 that we are in now.

Closing Comment: Dorothy Roberts encouraged the audience to think about the impact on the community and people not involved with the child welfare system. What are the political costs when the rest of the neighborhoods, who do not know anything about the child welfare system, see only Black children in it?