



SIXTH ANNUAL
SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS AND EQUITY ISSUES
IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Presentation/Discussion

Racial/Ethnic Disparity in the California Child Welfare System: Data Update

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Summary
April 16, 2008

Dr. Needell is the Principal Investigator for the CWS/CMS Dynamic Report System at UC Berkeley's Center for Social Services Research (CSSR), the statewide data source for federal and state measures of California's child welfare system. The findings presented in her talk, as well as additional supporting data, can be accessed through the CSSR website: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare. The Report System allows for data to be organized by county or aggregated at the state level, in addition to sorting by other critical parameters and variables (e.g., time frames, ethnicity, age, etc.). The CSSR website also contains presentations and other resources, including the PowerPoint presented at the symposium.

Dr. Needell began her talk by providing definitions and examples of disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system:

- **Disproportionality**: When a group is represented at a higher or lower proportion than it is represented in the population.
 - For example, census data shows that about 6% of the child population in California are African American. However, 15% of the children reported to child welfare are African American. Therefore, African American children are reported at a disproportionate rate that is about 2.5 times greater than their representation in the population.

With respect to age, Dr. Needell stated that infants are more likely than other age groups to be reported to the child welfare system and to have a substantiated allegation, regardless of race. However, almost 17% of Black children in their first year of life are reported to California's child welfare system.

- Disparity: A comparison of one group (e.g., regarding disproportionality, services, outcomes) to another group.
 - In order to measure disparity, Dr. Needell first devised a disproportionality ratio. For example, 6.3% of California's child population are African American and 27.7% of the children in foster care are African American. The disproportionality ratio is calculated by dividing the percent of children in the foster care system by the percentage in California's child population. In this example, 27.7% is divided by 6.3%, to arrive at a disproportionality ratio of 4.4. This value illustrates that African American children are 4.4 times more likely to be in care than their percentage in the child population.

Similarly, for White children, the disproportionality ratio is calculated by dividing 25.9% (the number of White children in care) by 33.1% (the percentage of White children in California's child population), yielding a value of .78. In other words, Dr. Needell explained, White children are .78 times as likely to be in care as they are to be in the underlying population of White children.

Dr. Needell devised a disparity index by dividing one disproportionality ratio by another. In the example of the African American and White children, the disparity index was calculated by dividing the disproportionality ratio for the African American children by that of the White children (4.4 divided by .78). The resulting disparity index of 5.64 means that African American children are 5.64 times more likely to be in foster care than White children.

Disproportionality and Disparity in California's Child Welfare System

In 1999, there were over 100,000 children in foster care in California, and now there are less than 80,000 children. Dr. Needell stated that the decline in total caseload was due to a decrease in the number of White children in the California child welfare system, as well as a much steeper decrease in the number of African American children in care.

Dr. Needell attributes this decline in large part to an increase in exits from care through adoption and guardianship. In particular, KinGap, California's kinship-guardianship program, led to an increase in exits from the child welfare system. With regards to disparity, however, African American children are still much more likely to come into the foster care system, yet much less likely to leave, even with KinGap.

From 1998 through 2007, about 27,000 children per year entered foster care in California for the first time, indicating that the number of children who enter foster care in California over the past ten years has remained relatively constant. However, the racial composition of children in care has changed over time. California data shows that there is an increase in the total number of Hispanic children who are entering care each year while the total number of White and African American children entering foster care each year has slightly declined.

Dr. Needell commented that there are problems with the data for Native American children that affect the measurement of disproportionality and disparity for this population. The problems arise from differences in how the data is categorized across agencies. The California Department of Finance labels children with one Native American parent as “mixed race.” However, within child welfare, a child with one Native American parent would be considered, or eligible to be considered, as a Native American. Due to the Department of Finance’s categorization, the total population of Native Americans is extremely deflated. Dr. Needell expressed the need to resolve this problem so that accurate disproportionality ratios and disparity indices can be calculated for this population.

Dr. Needell also noted that Asian/Pacific Islander children are under-represented at every step of the child welfare system, expressing concern for the underserved needs of the Asian/Pacific Islander community.

Longitudinal Data

The CSSR also collects longitudinal data in California, making it possible to follow children all the way through the child welfare system. For example, the population that entered care for the first time in 2000 can be tracked for six full years. Such data reveals that about three months after entering California’s child welfare system, roughly 20% of children successfully exited the system through reunification.

Dr. Needell explained that legal permanency is defined as a child exiting the child welfare system through reunification, adoption or guardianship. Considering this definition, 85% of the children who entered care in California in 2000 exited to permanency within six years: 56% reunified, 20% were adopted, and 9% exited to guardianship.

This data can also be examined by race. Six years after entry, 88% of White children exited to permanency, contrasted with 79% of African American children. Dr. Needell noted that it is also interesting to compare racial groups by permanency type. For example, African American children are more likely to have exited to permanency through guardianship than White children. California also has a ten percentage point difference in reunification rates benefitting White children over African American children. With respect to adoption, however, African American children in California are only 1% less likely to be adopted as White children. California’s data compares favorably with other states in this particular measure.

Dr. Needell explained that White children who have been in kinship care demonstrate the highest degree of permanency. On the other hand, the least amount of legal permanency is exhibited by African American children who have been in non-kin care. Dr. Needell noted that exits to guardianship in California are largely attributed to relative caregivers participating in the Kin-Gap program. African American families are considerably more likely to have utilized Kin-Gap and provided guardianship for African American children than White families.

National Data and Trends in Child Welfare

The GAO report, commissioned by Congressman Rangel from New York, used national data from AFGARS to examine disproportionality and disparity. With AFGARS, California's disproportionality and disparity indices can be compared to other large states where disparity is evident, such as New York, Illinois, Texas, and Florida. In each of these states, there is an over-representation of African American children compared to White children. The disparity is the largest in New York City, followed by Illinois, and then California. Hispanic children are considerably over-represented compared to Whites in New York and considerably under-represented in Florida. The data often provide more questions than answers about disparity in the child welfare system as a whole.

Conclusion

Using data for children born in 1999 or 2000, almost 40% of African American children were found to have been reported to the child welfare system, while the percentage of reports for children of other racial backgrounds was much less. Dr. Needell encouraged the audience to visit the CSSR website, view the data, share findings with colleagues and staff, and use the information to promote equitable outcomes in California's child welfare system.

Please see the accompanying PowerPoint for graphic models of the data discussed in the presentation.