THE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Child welfare systems across the country are under continual pressure to keep children safe and help them live securely with a family, their own whenever possible. These public systems are judged and held accountable for their actions by the federal government, state legislatures, communities, and oftentimes lawsuits and consent decrees. Far too often the current flaws in our child welfare systems are attributed to individual leaders and workers, a general lack of resources, or a failure of other public systems. While these attributions may be valid, they are not the sole cause for the poor results of many of the interventions of our child welfare systems. In order to have meaningful and long lasting improvement child welfare systems must address the entrenched institutional practices and biases that inhibit a caseworker’s ability to effectively assist children and their families.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) in partnership with Praxis International developed the Institutional Analysis tool to uncover problematic policies and practices in child welfare systems. The Analysis is a diagnostic tool used by a team of experts to reveal and address the disjuncture between what a child, youth, or their family needs in order to be safe and what institutions are actually set up to do. This tool is intended to help interdisciplinary groups, child welfare systems, and advocacy organizations work toward the common goals of improving safety outcomes for children and ensuring accountability of those who work with children and their families. The Analysis process asks questions from the standpoint of children, youth, parents, and caregivers involved with the child welfare system, but the gaze is not on individual judges, police, or social workers. It is on the institutional policies and practices and the logic, thinking, and assumptions that support them. By asking how something comes about, rather than looking at the individual who is doing it, the Analysis process reveals systemic problems and produces recommendations for longer-lasting change.

The Analysis can help design new initiatives, evaluate current practices, craft new rules and procedures, point to needed changes in assumptions, concepts and theories that underlie problem practices, and also be an organizing tool to improve coordination and working relationships among intervening agencies and the community.

Underlying Assumptions of the Analysis

When certain case outcomes regularly occur within an institutional setting, the sources of those outcomes can be located in the structures of case management practices. Individual workers do not independently decide how they are going to talk about or act on cases. Instead, the institutions in which workers operate coordinate and organize them to conceptualize and act on cases.

Local, state, and federal institutions (such as child welfare, judicial, mental health, domestic violence, and other agencies) use eight common, always present, key methods to standardize how workers talk about and act on cases. They are:

- **Policies** in the form of laws, rules, regulations, and policy manuals;
- **Administrative procedures and protocols**, such as forms, screening tools, and report-writing formats;
The provision (or absence) of **resources**, such as parenting classes, visits from workers, emergency funds, child care, and substance abuse evaluation and treatment;

*Systems of accountability* to clients, to other practitioners, to the intent of policies and directives, and to the goals of intervention. Examples include supervisory approval of case plans, court review of placement plans, and family involvement in case plan development;

**Job descriptions, agency missions**, and specifically **assigned tasks** at various points of intervention (such as job performance evaluations and skills for performing various functions);

**Education, training, and skill development** in the form of training for workers and supervisors, mentoring opportunities, and participation in local, state, and/or national forums;

Organized **linkages** that connect a worker operating at a given point of intervention and other practitioners with prior or subsequent involvement in the case; for example connections between child welfare workers and law enforcement officers, or linkages between child welfare staff and mental health practitioners; and

**Concepts and theories** that are embedded in the discourse of the field as well as in policy and administrative régimes. Institutions use these organized conceptual practices to coordinate the ways workers talk about and act on cases. For example, a predominant concept is that mothers who are using drugs or alcohol are not able to provide their children with adequate supports to thrive. Therefore, systems require mothers who have been found to use drugs and have their children removed to have clean drug screens before reunifying with their children.

### Uncovering racial disparities in child welfare systems

The Institutional Analysis views *racial disparity* as a phenomenon “produced” by the manner in which workers are institutionally organized to think about and act on cases as they are processed through the child welfare and legal systems. Similarly, *racial equity* is “produced” by the manner in which workers are organized to think about and act on cases.

The Institutional Analysis functions first to make visible the structures that shape, direct, and determine workers’ actions and second to show how those structures produce disparity and equity. In most situations, the sources of disparity and equity can be traced to some combination of the eight organizing methods described above. Groups conducting the Analysis use the eight organizing methods of institutions as “trails” to guide both their efforts to discover the sources of disparity and their development of recommendations for promoting equity. They apply the analysis to local, state, and federal institutions that influence how cases are processed, and they recommend changes that must be made at all three levels.

### Five Key Stages to the Analysis

1. **Initial planning and preparation**

This stage involves forming a planning team, agreeing on some common definitions and understandings, determining the scope of the investigation, selecting staff and consultants to guide the process, and securing agreements with agencies participating in the Analysis. An important part of the planning process is reaching agreement on how to articulate the question the investigation will address. By doing this, the team places a boundary around the investigation
in order to set a realistic goal for the Analysis. The team should ask the investigation question from the standpoint of those who are being managed as cases in the system. For example, as African American parents coming into this system, how is it that we are more likely to have our children removed, our children will stay out of home longer than other children in the system, we will be offered and receive fewer services than other families in the system, we will find the services less helpful than other parents, we will be less likely to successfully complete our service plans, our children will have much higher rates of placement changes, etc... Typically in an Analysis, some documentation of a set of related problems already exists. The Analysis does not produce a quantifiable documentation of a problem. Instead, it seeks to answer the question, “How does this previously documented problematic outcome come about?”

2. **Mapping key points of institutional interventions**

The Analysis focuses attention on key points of institutional intervention. It is designed to explain how workers are organized to talk about and act on cases in ways that produce undesired outcomes such as racial disparity. The mapping process is an important step which lays out the sequence of institutional actions that comprise case processing. The case processing map shows each step in the process, identifies key actors at each step, and identifies the purpose and function of each step. The team will use the map to make decisions about which core intervention steps to analyze in order to show how racial disparity is produced. They will also use the map to plan the investigation schedule and to identify people to interview, processes to observe, policy and administrative documents to analyze, and case files to review. These tasks are all a part of the continuation of the Analysis planning phase.

3. **Gathering information**

The Analysis team members have received training on how to use the eight investigative trails to collect information about the manner in which cases are processed. The team will spend a number of concentrated days gathering information. For each processing point the team decides to analyze, it will conduct a series of interviews; observations; case file reviews; administrative text reviews of rules, regulations, and administrative protocols such as structured decision making forms and evaluation forms. The information gathering stage results in the full revelation of how workers are institutionally organized to process cases at this step of the process. The information collected should include the documentation of each assumption, concept, or theory that underlies the management of the case at this point in the process.

4. **Analyzing information**

In order to best analyze the information obtained, the Analysis team has among its membership a diverse group of investigators including policymakers, advocates, experts in racial disparity within public institutions and the law. An advisory team will be consulted during the on-site data collection to assist in interpreting data.

5. **Determining key findings and recommendations**

Invariably, the sources of the problems identified by the team rest in combinations of these eight organizing methods as they are applied to specific families in local communities. In identifying findings and recommendations, the team will articulate the problems it discovered. For each

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1 We use the words “talk about” to emphasize the importance of the professional and institutional discourses that we will see organize and coordinate workers to discuss, report on and analyze their cases regardless of their personal belief systems.
problem, the team will explain how it comes about as cases are processed, identify the specific group of people it affects, show how the problem results in racial disparity, and suggest alternative case management processes that are likely to produce more equitable outcomes for families of color. These findings and recommendations are provided to the jurisdiction analyzed and it is the intention of the Analysis team that the Advisory group, or other empowered body, drive and monitor institutional changes that required.