

Worker Factors in the Overrepresentation of African Americans in the Child Welfare System

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Executive Summary

This study investigated whether or not biases in child welfare worker judgments of African American families are a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare. Based on the procedures used in a smaller study that found such effects (Owens & Roushion, 2006) 218 intake workers from two county child welfare agencies in California were randomly given one of two hypothetical family scenarios that were identical in every respect except ethnicity and names of the clients (half were African American families and half were European American families). Workers then assessed the degree of risk for abuse or neglect for the family, among other questions. Analysis revealed that workers did not assess the risk of abuse or neglect for the African American family as greater than for the European American family, thus discounting worker bias as a major factor in the overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare.

However, African American workers on average indicated they would give more time to respond to the family, implying assessment of lower risk of abuse or neglect. Also, all workers on average rated the overrepresentation of African Americans nearly last on a list of concerns related to child welfare. Of most concern to workers was the lack of community resources. Workers thought their educational programs and agencies had a moderately high emphasis on cultural competence, yet on average workers thought their cultural competence was excellent.

The conclusions from the study are that among the workers surveyed, there was no statistically significant bias that led to judgments of greater risk of abuse or neglect for African American families. These findings suggest that agency efforts to improve cultural competence since the smaller 2006 study have been successful, and thus should be continued. However, the finding that African American workers were willing to give more time to respond to the African American family indicates that there is reason to continue to investigate how worker characteristics interact with client characteristics. Also recommended is greater analysis and development of community resources to assist families that are investigated by child protective

service agencies. The remainder of this executive summary presents a concise summary of all aspects of the study.

The issue of overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system is troubling, especially in California where African American children are only 7.5% of the general population yet account for 31% of the foster care population (Hill, 2005). California is listed among states in the nation with “extreme disproportion” (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2004). Among factors theorized to explain disproportion are child welfare worker factors, specifically biased judgments on the part of workers when dealing with African American families. A small study found that workers judged the risk for abuse or neglect in a hypothetical African American family higher than that for a hypothetical European American family with identical presenting problems (Owens & Roushion, 2006). The current study sought to test this effect in a larger sample of child welfare workers in two California county agencies.

The main research questions of the study were: All else equal, do workers assign greater risk of *neglect and/or abuse* to African American families as compared to European American families? Are there variables such as age, gender, ethnicity or years in child welfare that are associated with biased risk assessment? Other attitudinal questions such as perceived importance of the issue of overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare were also asked. The purpose of the study was to verify whether bias existed, to what extent, and what variables might be associated with it. Given the extreme overrepresentation of African American child welfare clients in California and a small study showing worker bias, it was important to discover if such bias was a contributing factor to overrepresentation.

The study used an experimental design wherein participants were randomly given identical scenarios depicting either an African American family or a European American family to assess for abuse and neglect. The participants for the study were recruited from two large counties in California. Researchers distributed the survey instrument during meetings consisting of five to more than fifty workers. With assistance from administrators, all intake worker units in both large counties were surveyed during these meetings. Although workers could opt not to fill out the survey, no blank surveys were returned. The only workers not surveyed were those who were unable to attend their meeting due to having active responsibilities (e.g. court appearance) at that time. Thus, a good sample of workers was obtained and it is reasonable to conclude that those few workers missing the meetings where the survey was distributed were similar to those who were able to attend the meetings.

The survey took 10 to 15 minutes to complete and it was self-administered. The survey instrument consisted of a hypothetical scenario of a family reported to child protective services. Using close-ended scaled questions (scale of 1-10, one being no risk and ten being highest risk), participants were asked to rate the degree of risk for neglect and abuse they thought was present in the family. Participants also answered questions on how quickly they would respond to the family and what services they were likely to offer. These questions were also asked in a close-ended format.

After they answered the questions related to risk, participants placed these responses in an envelope and then answered demographic and attitudinal questions. This was so that participants did not have a chance to re-think or change their initial responses once they began to answer attitudinal questions that pertained to racial overrepresentation of children in child welfare and cultural competence of child welfare workers. The research protocol was approved by the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board.

Analysis of the data for this sample found no statistically significant difference between the risk ratings for the African American family and the European American family for either neglect or abuse. No differences were found in the perceptions of the mother and father based on their ethnicity. There were also no differences in the services that the workers would recommend. These findings were not affected by other variables such as participant gender, ethnicity, age, education, or years of experience.

There was, however, a statistically significant difference in the time in which the worker would respond to the case and this was affected by the ethnicity of the worker. Specifically, African American workers would respond to the African American case in a longer time frame, thus possibly indicating a lesser perceived less risk of abuse or neglect in the scenario with African American families. Other findings of interest were that given a list of issues of concern to child welfare workers such as salary and public perceptions of child welfare workers, workers selected lack of community resources as of most concern and overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare as second to the last concern. Workers rated their educational programs and agencies as placing a moderately high emphasis on cultural competency. Workers rated their own cultural competency as very high.

These latter findings have several implications for policy. One is that worker bias is not likely a large contributor to the overrepresentation of African Americans in child welfare in the counties surveyed. However, these findings must be taken in the context of recent efforts by the agencies to provide training on this issue. Also, the data collection took place during the presidential campaign where a highly visible African American candidate, likely appealing to the more liberal political leanings of social workers, was in the news every day. This exposure may have reduced unconscious bias through the frequent positive images of an African American person and his family. Agencies should continue their efforts on an on-going basis to ensure that it is clear that cultural competency is a major goal of the agency. Internet-based training, like that developed for the curriculum that accompanies this project, may be part of that effort.

The implications of African American workers allowing more time to respond to the family are that how worker and client characteristics interact continue to be an area for study as a contributor to overrepresentation. Finally, the finding that workers rate lack of community resources as their highest concern may give support to theories about challenged communities as a source of overrepresentation. Routine analysis of community resources and advocacy for needed resources can be part of fairness and equity efforts.

This research was conducted with the presumption that even if bias on the part of workers' decisions was discovered, it was likely unintentional or unconscious bias. It was also assumed that professionals would welcome any sound research findings that would assist workers in doing their work more effectively and fairly. Nonetheless, it was heartening to find little evidence of worker bias. Also notable was the cooperation of county administrators in the conduct of this research. The administrators' openness to the possibility of discovering bias demonstrated courage and dedication to their work.

References

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