Children of Color in the Child Welfare System:

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE CHILD WELFARE COMMUNITY

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Executive Summary

Responding to concerns about the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system, particularly African-American children, the Children's Bureau sponsored an exploratory qualitative study of the child welfare system's response to children of color. The project was intended to meet the following goals:

- To gain insight into the issue of over-representation (or racial disproportionality) from the perspective of the child welfare community, including agency administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers
- To describe the strategies child welfare and child-welfare serving agencies use to meet the needs of children and families of color in the child welfare system.

The findings from the study are important for several reasons. First, very few studies have considered the child welfare community's perception on over-representation. Second, few studies have looked at the manner in which agencies are responding to over-representation. As such, this study provides a unique perspective on the issue and potential solutions to it. Third, the information presented here can be used to inform policy makers about over-representation and potentially promising practices, strategies, and programs that are being implemented to reduce it. Finally, the information can educate and inform the child welfare community, by increasing awareness of over-representation, and providing examples of programs, practices, and strategies that they can implement in their own agencies to better serve children and families of color.

METHODOLOGY

As an exploratory study and one of the first major efforts in the child welfare field to explore the attitudes and perceptions of the child welfare community concerning racial disproportionality, a qualitative approach was chosen as the primary method of inquiry. In new fields of study such as this one, where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist, and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon (e.g., the field's perception on over-representation), qualitative inquiry is a reasonable beginning point for the research.

To meet the goals of the study, the project team conducted site visits to nine child welfare agencies to talk with agency administrators, supervisors, and workers, among others, regarding the issue of over-representation, and to find out more about the types of programs, practices, and strategies that are being implemented to meet the needs of children and families of color, particularly African-American children and families.

Sites were selected with input from several key Federal stakeholders as well as a team of nationally recognized experts in the field of disproportionality. While the selection criteria varied somewhat across sites, at the minimum, sites were known to be implementing initiatives,

reform efforts, or programs, activities, and projects that were aligned with the study's goals (e.g., to reduce disproportionality and meet the needs of children and families of color.) In addition, the sites were thought to have data available regarding disproportionality and program outcomes, and a willingness to participate in the study.

In the end, nine sites were selected for participation, including: one agency each in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, California, North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas, and two agencies in Minnesota.

FINDINGS

General Perceptions. First, participants were encouraged to describe their own general perceptions of the issue of overrepresentation, that is, why they thought children of color were overrepresented in the child welfare system. The following themes emerged:

- *Poverty*—Across all sites, an overwhelming majority of participants at all levels cited poverty, and poverty-related circumstances, as primary reasons for the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system.

- *Need for services and lack of resources*—Participants noted that, despite their need for services, poor families were more likely to be living in resource-poor communities, many of which also were geographically isolated from other communities that might offer support and services. As a result, families living in poverty were the least likely to have resources available to them.

- *Visibility of impoverished and minority families to other systems*—Participants reported that because minority families are more likely to be poor and to lack access to resources, they are also more likely to use public services, including public health care (e.g., hospitals and clinics), and to receive public assistance, including TANF and Medicaid. Participants felt that having more frequent contact with these systems made African-American families more "visible" in terms of the problems they might be experiencing, including child abuse and neglect.

- *Lack of resources available to minority families to negotiate the child welfare system*—According to participants, African-American parents frequently lack important information about how the child welfare system works, the financial resources to navigate the system, including hiring an attorney, and the confidence to advocate for themselves and their children.

- *Vulnerability of African-American communities*—Participants talked about the effects of oppression on the African-American community, including under-education and unemployment. They felt that as African-Americans experienced fewer and fewer opportunities, the community found itself disempowered. Over time, African-American communities became more vulnerable to such social ills as drugs and violence and, as communities became more vulnerable, so too did the families that lived in them, eventually finding themselves more vulnerable to involvement in social service systems, including child welfare.

- *Over-reporting of minority parents for child abuse and neglect*—Some theorists and researchers argue that disproportionality is a result of discriminatory practices within the larger society against minority, particularly African-American groups (e.g., differential treatment by race). According to participants in this study, in relation to the child welfare system, this differential treatment manifests itself most often in the over-reporting of minority parents for child abuse and neglect. The systems most frequently involved, at least as reported in this study, are the medical and school systems.

- *Pressure from the media*—According to participants, the media also play a role in the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system. In recent years, increased media attention nationwide to extreme cases of abuse and neglect has left supervisors and workers alike feeling vulnerable and under increased scrutiny from the agency administration and the community. Unfortunately, participants in several agencies reported that these feelings of uncertainty often manifest in their substantiating more cases and, as a result, bringing more children into care.

- *Lack of experience with other cultures*—In many cases, participants felt that their colleagues, across racial and ethnic groups and job categories, brought preconceived ideas or biases against minority groups, most often African Americans, to their position within the agency. Participants, most often African-American participants, identified racial bias as a common problem that frequently interfered with good decision making. They felt that many staff, but Caucasian staff in particular, lacked exposure to cultures other than their own and had no context for understanding the cultural norms and practices of minority populations.

- *Defining abusive behavior*—One frequently cited example of worker bias was the difference in perception between white and black workers regarding what constitutes abuse and discipline, particularly discipline within the African-American culture. Many African-American workers gave examples of situations where physical discipline might be confused with abuse if the individual making the determination had no previous exposure to the African-American community and its disciplinary practices.

Influences of Federal policy. In discussions about how Federal policies, such as the Multi-ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) have influenced the way in which the agencies serve children and families, the following issues were common across sites:

- *Familiarity and confusion with MEPA*—In this study, participants' familiarity with MEPA varied based on their position within the agency. While agency administrators were generally familiar with and knowledgeable about MEPA, many direct service workers and supervisors were not. Placement workers were more familiar with MEPA than were investigators or in-home workers, but this is not surprising given that placement workers are responsible for finding and approving adoptive homes for children, a responsibility that requires them to be informed of adoption policies. In addition, supervisors and direct service workers alike reported confusion about what MEPA was designed to do and, subsequently, raised concerns regarding how to implement it.

- *Concerns regarding transracial placements*—The literature regarding MEPA suggests that some individuals who oppose it do so because they are concerned about the detrimental effects of transracial placements on a child's overall well-being. Specifically, some in the child welfare community believe that transracial placements are detrimental to children's overall well-being, including children's adjustment to adoption, their self-esteem, and their ethnic or racial identity. Participants in several sites expressed this viewpoint, reporting that MEPA was contrary to the "best interests" of African-American children.

- *Broadening the role of extended families*—Participants reported that MEPA had helped their agencies broaden the role of the extended family in placement decisions, a positive outcome. They reported that when MEPA was first passed, some of their agencies were desperate to find placement resources for

African-American children. In many cases, without a lot of alternatives and little to no additional funding, agencies had no choice but to turn to the extended family network for help. Participants were not sure they would have considered these options if MEPA had not pushed them to consider alternatives. They also reported being pleased with the outcomes related to involving kin.

- *Shortened timelines under ASFA*—The primary concern expressed by participants regarding ASFA was that its shortened timelines were too restrictive for families dealing with multiple issues. Across sites and at all levels, participants voiced concerns about whether parents experiencing substance abuse, mental health or other serious problems would be able to manage and change their situations effectively within ASFA timelines. Their biggest fear was that the agency would be forced to move toward termination of parental rights before parents had sufficient time to receive appropriate services or become engaged in treatment in a therapeutic manner.

- *Limited resources*—Participants talked about the challenges of implementing ASFA without additional financial resources to support mental health and substance abuse treatment for parents working toward reunification and also for potential adoptive families. With the emphasis on permanency, agencies felt pressure to find large pools of adoptive families, while the emphasis on shortened timelines required quick access to quality services, something that is not always available.

- *Increased permanency options for children*—Participants felt that ASFA had resulted in positive change by increasing permanency options for children. While there were concerns regarding the timelines, participants perceived that the timelines also provided both workers and parents with the motivation to respond more quickly, assessing a family's needs and finding appropriate services in a timely manner.

Directions for change. Participants also described the types of policies, procedures or practices they thought would enable their agency to better serve children and families of color. Their comments are summarized below:

- *Emphasizing prevention*—The overwhelming emphasis among participants was for agencies to focus on prevention and provide more front-end or prevention programs and services to families.

- *Building public and private agency partnerships*—In recent years, public agencies have come to recognize the opportunities and resources that are available through new relationships with private agencies. All of the agencies represented in this study currently have relationships with private child welfare agencies, including community-based and ethnic-oriented agencies. These relationships include both formal contractual relationships and informal referral-based ones. One of the advantages of having relationships with private agencies is that they can be located within the community, especially the ethnic agencies.

- *Additional resources*—Overwhelmingly, participants across sites reported that they simply needed more resources to serve clients, including more time to spend with families, and more resources to support families to stay together, including such basic necessities as food, housing, employment, and child care options.

- *Culturally diverse and competent staff*—Participants agreed that staff should be culturally competent, which in this context means having a diverse workforce that is representative of the population being served and that, regardless of race, can understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities within and among groups.

- *More workers and smaller caseloads*—Across all sites workers reported that hiring more workers and reducing caseloads would improve the delivery of services not only to families of color but to all families. Across the board, workers talked about feeling pressured for time to spend with families, make good decisions and complete paperwork in a timely and efficient manner. In fact, some participants felt that they spend more time engaged in administrative tasks than they do working with families or that they feel pressure to trade administrative tasks for practice or practice for administrative tasks, but always lack sufficient time for both.

- *Administrative support*—Participants talked about the importance of an agency infrastructure that includes experienced workers, proper supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads in reducing disproportionality. They felt that a strong agency infrastructure could reduce disproportionality by allowing supervisors and workers alike to do their jobs more effectively. If supervisors are able to supervise properly, then workers will be able to do their jobs more effectively, leading to better outcomes for children and families, including fewer children coming into the system in the first place.

- *External resources to serve families*—Participants referred to the importance of having access to resources external to the agency to help support families to stay together, including adequate housing, educational and employment opportunities, quality child-care services, and financial support. They also discussed the importance of ancillary services, including community-based drug treatment and mental health services, in keeping families stable and children out of the system. While tangible resources are important, many participants also talked about the importance of addressing larger, more systemic issues such as the lack of information, advocacy and power they often see in their African-American clients. According to some workers, if every family had equal access to these resources, over-representation would take care of itself because fewer children would come into the system in the first place.

- *Agency resources to serve families*—Participants talked about needing additional client resources within the child welfare agency, especially monetary resources, as critical to addressing over-representation. One of the issues most frequently discussed by participants was the need for financial incentives and resources for foster and adoptive families, particularly for kinship care providers. In addition to incentives to foster and adopt, families also need post-adoption support services.

- *Community connections*—Participants in all sites felt that developing relationships with communities and partnerships with community-based systems and agencies was another important mechanism for reducing over-representation, re-emphasizing the need to establish collaborative and contractual relationships with ethnic and community-based agencies to provide services to minority families.

Current efforts to serve children of color. Participants described their own agencies' ongoing programs and policies that address the needs of children and families of color. Some of these activities include:

- *Prevention programs*—including alternative response systems designed to identify and engage at-risk families before they come to the attention of the formal child welfare system. Another prevention program, Schools First, assigns culturally appropriate caseworkers to families who then work with them in their homes to identify needs and negotiate services.

- *Recruitment strategies for minority foster care and adoptive families*—Several agencies are implementing programs targeted toward creating and supporting adoption options for minority families, including recruitment efforts, and strategies to provide financial support to kinship care providers who have assumed guardianship for a relative's child.

- *Systems change efforts*—Two sites have implemented system reform strategies that have resulted in the provision of financial support to kinship care providers. Through a Federal government waiver, local child welfare agencies now have the option of transitioning relatives who are caring for children to legal guardian status, and to provide them with higher payments than they would receive from child-only TANF payments.

- *Collaboration and contracted services*—To better serve minority clients and reduce over-representation, agencies also are increasing the frequency with which they collaborate and contract with community-based agencies for services, another form of system reform. While most of the nine agencies had formal contracts with outside service providers, some also had contracts with ethnic-based and other child-welfare serving agencies to provide foster care, adoption, and support services to minority clients as a major resource to them.

- *Councils on over-representation*—Some agencies have responded to the issue of over-representation by developing and implementing coalitions, councils or other collaborative boards to examine the issue of over-representation, and problem-solve ways to reduce it.

- *Agency practices*—Agencies also have responded to improving the delivery of services to minority families by focusing on agency practices, including implementing practices related to training and supervision of staff, as well as implementing hiring practices designed to diversify the staff to better represent the client population.

ISSUES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- *Administrative support*—In order for child welfare staff to feel confident and effective and, one might argue, perform accordingly, they require support from within the agency. This support takes several forms, including administrative support and encouragement, supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads. In agencies in which one or more of these factors was reported absent, participants (usually direct service workers) talked about feeling overwhelmed and unsure of their ability to make good decisions.

- *Staff training and experience*—Similar to employees in any agency or organization, child welfare agency staff are most effective when they are well educated and well trained. Increasingly, however, to be effective in dealing with increasingly more diverse and troubled families, child welfare staff require greater breadth and depth of education and training than in previous years, before the influx of immigrant groups and the proliferation of drugs into society. As one of the only means for workers to stay abreast of new policies and procedures and strategies for dealing with such client-specific issues as mental illness, addiction, and different and varied cultures, it was important to participants that ongoing, agency-sponsored training remain a priority.

- *Training in cultural competence*—Participants reported needing more training in cultural awareness and sensitivity, especially in light of the number of participants who reported having observed worker bias toward children and families of color. Participants believed that workers sometimes made decisions based on the

race or socio-economic background of a family rather than on the specifics of the case, and that this differential decision making often results in African-American and impoverished families being more likely to have children removed from the home or parental rights terminated. While most agencies have some training focused on cultural issues, the training sessions are frequently short-term or one-time events that may be insufficient to address such difficult and complex issues as racial or class bias.

- *Resources*—Participants reported needing access to resources both internal and external to the agency. With regard to internal resources, participants reported needing more resources to support foster and adoptive families, including kin. With regard to external resources, participants reported that they simply need more resources to serve clients, including financial resources to pay for, and agencies to provide, mental health and substance abuse services. They also reported needing additional resources to keep families together, including relationships with agencies that could provide such necessities as food, housing, employment opportunities, and child care options.

- *Emphasis on prevention*—Participants felt strongly that shifting the philosophy of the child welfare system from one that intervenes after the fact to one that focuses on keeping children out of the system would have profound implications for the numbers of children coming into care, and especially for children of color.

- *Relating policy more closely to practice*—Another issue that emerged is the manner by which policies are created. Because policy often is driven by public perception, and because public perception is influenced by the media's portrayal of events, child welfare policies are often developed in response to a perceived problem or crisis. Creating policies this way sometimes results in policies that are removed from the practices they were designed to guide.

- *Improving services through support of contractual relationships*—Participants emphasized improving services to children and families by contracting out more services to community-based and private child welfare agencies. Participants in this study talked about the value of having access to these services, especially community-based services. Community-based services are invaluable because they can meet the needs of children and families right in their own neighborhood, reducing the amount of time and burden on families to travel long distances to receive services; provide child welfare agency staff with viable options for quality service delivery; and are more likely to have an ethnic focus, allowing for service delivery within a culturally appropriate and sensitive context.

- *Improving the reporting system*—Participants across sites talked about a variety of factors influencing who gets reported and for what. In general, there is a lack of consistency across child welfare agencies regarding standards for what constitutes abuse or neglect. To reduce worker bias and uncertainty when making judgments regarding cases, definitions of abuse and neglect could be standardized and mandated by policy. Standard definitions also might reduce the fear and concern workers have when they are forced to make decisions in the eye of the media.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Three global themes emerged from this qualitative study that can guide future research in this area. These are:

- *Research on racial disproportionality must move beyond the examination of administrative data.* The results of this small qualitative study provided a richness that has not existed in this area of research to date. Other qualitative studies, in combination with exploratory and hypothesis-driven quantitative studies, would provide an increased understanding of this complex issue.

- *It is essential that the research in this area inform practice.* Many participants expressed a desire to address the issue of racial disproportionality head-on, but felt uncertain about effective strategies that a child welfare system could undertake. In addition, in those agencies where research was being conducted around the issue of disproportionality, staff were generally unaware that these efforts were underway and had no knowledge of findings. Empirical evaluations of practice strategies would provide guidance in this area as would an overall dissemination plan for findings that would better target the field itself.

- *It is essential that the research on racial disproportionality examine more than just black and white differences in the trajectories of children in the child welfare system.* The sites in this study served children and families of many ethnic and racial groups that are not represented in the empirical literature on racial disproportionality. For example, the evidence on the newly arrived Southeast Asian immigrants is basically non-existent in the current empirical literature. Additionally, it is important to unpack the larger ethnic groupings to conduct sub-group analyses (e.g., children with Mexican ancestry versus Puerto Rican ancestry).

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In response to concerns about the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system, the Children's Bureau sponsored an exploratory, qualitative study of the child welfare system's response to children of color, specifically, African-american children. Conducted under a contract with Caliber Associates, in collaboration with the Howard University School of Social Work, the project was intended to meet the following goals:

- To gain insight into the issue of over-representation (or racial disproportionality) from the perspective of the child welfare community, including agency administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers
- To describe the strategies child welfare and child-welfare serving agencies use to meet the needs of children and families of color in the child welfare system.

To meet these goals, the project team developed a multi-level and comprehensive qualitative information gathering plan for implementation with a number of child welfare agencies. Specifically, the project team conducted site visits to nine child welfare agencies to talk with agency administrators, supervisors, and workers, among others, regarding the issue of over-representation, and to find out more about the types of programs, practices and strategies that are being implemented to meet the needs of children and families of color, particularly African-American children and families. While the team also was interested in gathering information regarding programs, practices, and strategies that were being implemented with minority populations other than African-Americans, because African-American children are the most over-represented minority population in the child welfare system currently, they are the primary focus of the study.

The findings from the study are important for several reasons. First, there are very few studies that have considered the child welfare community's perception on over-representation. Second, there have been few studies that have looked at the manner in which agencies are responding to over-representation. As such, this study provides a unique perspective on the issue and potential solutions to it. Third, in its commitment to reducing over-representation, the Federal government needs information it can consider in future funding, policy, and research decisions related to this issue. The information presented here can be used to inform the Federal government regarding over-representation and potentially promising practices, strategies, and programs that are being implemented to reduce it. Finally, the information can educate and inform the child welfare community, by increasing their awareness of over-representation, and providing them with examples of programs, practices, and strategies that they can implement in their own agencies to better serve children and families of color.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

One of the most challenging and controversial issues facing the child welfare system is the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority children and families, particularly African-American children. Specifically, the percentage of African-American children who enter the system and remain in out-of-home care is greater than their proportion of the country's population (Anderson, 1997). Although African-Americans account for 15% percent of all children in the United States, they account for 25% of substantiated maltreatment victims. Conversely, Caucasian children (79% of the child population versus 51% of all substantiated victims) and Asian and Pacific Islander children (4% of the population versus 1% of substantiated victims) are underrepresented among victims of child maltreatment. Hispanic children account for an equal share of the population and substantiated victims (NCANDS, 2002). Racial disparities are even more pronounced in out-of-home care. African-American children comprise 45% of the total number of children in foster care (U.S. DHHS, 1999).

Researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners have divergent views on the causes of minority over-representation. This phenomenon may be the result of a disproportionate need for services or of systematic racial influences on decision making at any number of points along the continuum of child welfare services, including reporting, investigation, substantiation, and placement. Researchers have attempted to explore levels of need and to examine how race affects children's experiences at each of these points, but findings have been inconsistent. Where racial differences have been found, the reasons for these differences remain unclear.

One critical shortcoming of the research conducted to date is the lack of studies designed to explore child welfare professionals' perceptions of the issue of minority over-representation in the child welfare system. Child welfare workers and managers, who are involved in day-to-day decision-making for children of all races at all points on the child welfare service continuum, are an important and untapped source of information about this phenomenon. Their position affords them a unique perspective on the issue that should be included in any discussion of the child welfare system's response to children of color.

The current study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring child welfare professionals' perceptions of the issue of over-representation. The study provides critical information on the extent to which the perceptions of child welfare professionals are consistent with the literature on this issue. The qualitative methods employed in this study have facilitated a collection of rich, detailed information not only about the overlap between the literature and practitioners' perspectives, but also about how and why the phenomenon occurs and what child welfare agencies are doing to address the issue.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, which also involves a small sample, and is intended to refine research questions and generate hypotheses for future research studies on the topic

of disproportionality, we begin with a literature review that draws on multiple published and unpublished studies. This review allows for an examination of current theory and research on the issue of disproportionate minority representation in the child welfare system, and provides a context for this study and a framework for interpreting its findings. The review provides a starting point from which to explore the perceptions of child welfare professionals and the extent to which their practical experience is consistent with current theory and research.

2.1 THEORIES OF DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY REPRESENTATION

There are three dominant theories explaining the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system: 1) the disproportionate need found among minority families; 2) racial bias in child welfare decision making; and 3) family risk and child welfare practice.

Disproportionate need

Those who argue that minority children and families have a disproportionate need for child welfare services point to the vulnerability of this population in terms of many social indicators, the most salient of which is poverty. There has been a persistently strong relationship between poverty and minority status in the United States. Specifically, African-American and Hispanic children are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic white and Asian-Pacific Islander children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Almost one third of African-American (30%) and Hispanic (28%) children live in poverty, while the rates are much lower for white (10%) and Asian- Pacific Islander (12%) children.

The relationship between income and child maltreatment is supported by considerable research, including all three National Incidence Studies (NIS) conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) compared families with an annual income of under $15,000 to families with an annual income over $30,000 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). The study found that abuse is 14 times more common in poor families and neglect is 44 times more common in poor families. The NIS-3 further revealed that the incidence of child maltreatment in families with annual incomes under $15,000 is 47 per 1,000, while the incidence falls to 2 cases per 1,000 in families with annual incomes above $30,000. This suggests that the incidence rate is 26.5 times higher in lower income families. The greater incidence of maltreatment among low-income families combined with the over-representation of families of color living in poverty suggests a plausible explanation for the disproportional representation of minority children in the child welfare system.

Racial bias and child welfare decision making

Others argue that the disproportionate representation of minority children in the child welfare system is a result of differential treatment by race or racial bias (Morton, 1999). Proponents of this theory suggest that differential treatment by race may be internal or external to the child welfare agency. Chasnoff and colleagues' (1990) study of drug use during pregnancy provides an example of the way in which racial discrimination may increase the number of minority children reported to CPS. Their study found that although white and black women were equally likely to test positive for drugs, African-American women were ten times as likely to be reported to CPS after delivery. One explanation of this finding is that health personnel tend to believe that drug use is more common in minority families and are more likely to suspect and report families of color. This results in a greater number of children of color coming into the child welfare system. This issue has tremendous bearing

on minority over-representation in the child welfare system, given that drug abuse is currently seen as a major reason for child welfare involvement with families (U.S.G.A.O., 1994).

Proponents of this theory also suggest that racial bias is endemic to child welfare agencies, which in many locales are administered and staffed by majority group members. Critics posit that the child welfare system is not set up to support and serve minority families and children and that caseworkers' decisions about cases are influenced by race. Some research has been done on the effect of caseworker characteristics, particularly race, on substantiation rates, but the findings have been inconsistent. These findings are discussed below.

Interactions between family risk and child welfare practice

A third theory is based on investigations of minority children's trajectories through the child welfare system. Barth and colleagues (2000) refer to this explanation as the multiplicative model. Intended to explain why the over-representation of minority children is so pronounced at the end of the child welfare continuum, specifically in foster care, Barth et al. argue that there are substantially greater risks of child abuse and neglect for children of color and their families due to a variety of risk factors (e.g. poverty). As a result, for those children for whom a report is made, there are small differences in the way that children of color are treated in the decision making process, possibly making it more likely that these children will enter and remain in the system. Finally, among children who are placed in foster care, African-American children experience significantly longer stays than Caucasian or Hispanic children. Differences at each level of the model have a cumulative effect and result in the very large disparity between the number of Caucasian and African-American children in foster care.

2.2 RACE AND DECISION MAKING IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

A child's trajectory through the child welfare system is determined by decisions at a series of points along the child welfare continuum. Key points include reporting, investigation, substantiation, and placement. Below we explore the literature on the effect of race at each decision point. We begin by discussing the literature on whether or not a higher incidence of abuse and neglect among children of color accounts for their initial entry into and disproportional representation in the child welfare system.

Incidence of CAN and reports of abuse

The opening gate to child welfare services is a report of child abuse or neglect. However, research has demonstrated that not all maltreated children are reported and not all reported children are maltreated. To examine this issue further, the Federal government funds the National Incidence Study (NIS), which is an attempt to provide a more accurate estimate of the incidence of child abuse and neglect by including in its sample, children who were investigated by child protective service (CPS) agencies, children screened out by CPS without investigation, and children seen by community professionals who were not reported to CPS. The third National Incidence Study (NIS-3), which examined the incidence of child maltreatment in a nationally representative sample of 42 counties, did not find racial differences overall. These findings suggest that the overrepresentation of African-American children in the child welfare system is not attributable to higher rates of maltreatment in this population, but to factors related to the child welfare system itself.

A number of researchers, however, have challenged the NIS findings. Ards, Chung and Myers (1998; 1999) criticized the conclusions drawn from the NIS study. They argue that the lack of differential incidence rates could be due to selection bias in the

study, namely that the study did not include family and community members who may be more aware of cases of abuse and neglect than community professionals. Others have suggested that the NIS findings are limited by an under-sampling of large urban centers in which the incidence of abuse or neglect is likely to be higher due to the prevalence of numerous risk factors (Barth et al., 2001). Barth et al. (2001) also point out the relationship between poverty, race, and the incidence of various types of maltreatment. Specifically, the NIS-3 found that families earning less than $15,000 per year were 22 to 25 times more likely than families earning over $30,000 per year to experience some form of maltreatment. Given the relationship between race and poverty and the higher rate of neglect among impoverished families, one could contend that it is surprising that the NIS found no racial differences in type of maltreatment.

Regardless of whether or not racial disparities actually exist in the incidence of child abuse and neglect, there may be disparities in the reporting of maltreatment that affects the proportion of children of color in the child welfare system. Specifically, some researchers have suggested there may be over-reporting of minorities and under-reporting of Caucasians. Ards, Chung and Myers (1998) suggest that cultural differences in child-rearing practices and/or differences in socio-economic status between reporters and perpetrators may affect under- and over-reporting rates. The result might be over-representation of children of color entering the child welfare system.

Investigation and substantiation

Little is known about how race affects decision-making from the point a report of abuse or neglect is received to the point at which a finding is made regarding the allegation. Few studies have been done on the characteristics of children reported to CPS but screened out or for whom the case was unsubstantiated. In one such study, Gryzlak et al. examined the factors associated with screening CPS reports in 12 sites. They found that race alone was not a factor in the decision to screen calls in (Gryzlak, et al., 2001). However, white children were more likely to be investigated in cases of sexual abuse, and children of color were more likely to be investigated in cases of physical abuse and neglect. Examining NIS-3 data, Sedlak and Schultz (2001) found no overall influence of race on the likelihood of investigation. However, they did find that African-American families were more likely to be investigated if the allegations included emotional maltreatment, physical neglect, fatal or serious injury, or alcohol or drug involvement, or if a mental health or social service provider made the report.

Studies of racial differences in substantiation rates have yielded inconsistent findings. Eckenrode et al. found that, controlling for all other factors, African-American and Hispanic children were more likely than Caucasian children to be substantiated for physical abuse (Eckenrode et al., 1988). Conversely, Ards, Chung, and Myers (1999) compared cases in which the likelihood of abuse was rated very probable and cases in which information was insufficient to substantiate. They found no racial differences in the likelihood that cases rated very probable and those rated insufficient would be substantiated.

Research on the use of risk assessment tools may provide additional information on the role of race in child welfare decision-making. In a study of the California Family Risk Assessment, Johnson (1999) found no racial bias in the assessment of risk for child maltreatment. Weibush, Freitag, and Baird (2001) found no differences among ethnic groups in the ability of a risk assessment tool, such as the Structured Decision Making model, to predict future maltreatment.

Additional studies have explored how the race of the caseworker and the family affects decision-making. Rolock and Testa (2001) found Caucasian workers substantiated a higher proportion of their cases than their African-American counterparts and

were much more likely to substantiate physical abuse. In general, Caucasian caseworkers did not substantiate abuse and/or neglect in a larger proportion of cases involving African-Americans than Caucasians. However, in cases of substance-exposed infants, Caucasian workers did substantiate a larger percent of cases involving African-Americans.

Family preservation and reunification

Although there have been few studies examining racial disparities in family preservation services, the available evidence suggests racial discrepancies in decisions to maintain children of color in their homes or to return them to their families of origin. For children reported to CPS, the majority of Caucasian children receive support to remain at home, whereas the majority of African-American children receive foster care placement (Harris, Tittle & Poertner 2001; USDHHS, 1999). Studies have recently begun to explore the receipt of in-home services as a component of decisions to maintain children in their families of origin. It has been found that African-American children are less likely to receive in-home services and mental health treatment (Garland & Besinger, 1997). When they do receive services, they tend to receive fewer and a more limited range and quality of services (Courtney et al., 1996; Maluccio & Fein, 1989). In addition, differences have been found in the type of agency to which they are referred and the efficiency with which cases are handled. Finally, research has found that families of children of color receive less support and less appropriate services to retain their children at home.

Hill (2001) identified that the services received by caregivers in families of color are a significant predictor of reunification. Once children are placed out of the home, studies suggest that children of color are less likely to return home and be reunified with their biological parents (Wulczyn, 2000; Wulczyn, 1999; Courtney & Wong, 1996; McMurtry & Lie, 1992). Research also suggests that reunification is slower for African-American children, particularly those in kinship care (Courtney, 1995). However, an increase in the number of African-American children who are reunified was observed in a study examining the effects of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (Goerge & Mackey-Bilaver, 2001). Family structure also appears to play a role in the reunification of minority children with their biological parents. Harris and Courtney (2002) found that African-American children of single parents were less likely to be reunified than their white and Hispanic counterparts. Alternatively, Hispanic children from two parent families were more likely to be reunified than white children from similar backgrounds.

Some researchers have used vignettes to explore how race affects caseworkers' decisions about case plans. Caseworkers are presented identical cases in which only the race of the family is different and asked what they would do in each case. Roberts (2002) argues that in a training of caseworkers race was the preeminent factor influencing workers' decisions about the case. Other studies, however, have not found that varying the race of a family in a hypothetical case affected the workers' assessment or proposed case plan. One study (Britner and Mossler, 2002) found differences in the decision to place a child in out of home care only in the weight various professionals (e.g., judges, social workers, CASAs) gave to different types of information (e.g., risk of re-abuse, stability of the family, severity of abuse). Race was not considered in the decision making process. A similar study using vignettes found that only caseworker gender and job tenure affected the decision to reunify (Gammon, 2001). Again, race was not a factor in decision making.

Foster care

Disproportional minority representation in foster care has been documented in multiple studies, particularly for African-American children. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting

System (AFCARS; U.S. DHHS, 2001) points to clear disparities in the proportion of Caucasian and African-American children who are in foster care. Although Caucasian children comprise 66% of the American child population, they represent only 36% of the children in foster care. African-American children represent 45% of children in foster care, but only 15% of the U.S. child population. It would be interesting to compare these data with the rates of entry into the system for African-American and Caucasian children to determine whether African-American children also enter the system at higher rates than do Caucasian children. Higher rates of entry might help explain the higher numbers of African-American children in foster care. Those data do not exist, however.

Although the existence of minority over-representation in foster care is indisputable, the reasons for this phenomenon remain unclear. Some have suggested that minority children are less likely to be offered in-home services as an alternative to foster care placement. An investigation of the California child welfare system showed that African-American children are more likely than white or Hispanic children to receive foster care placement instead of other services, even when factors such as age, maltreatment type, and neighborhood poverty were considered (Needell, et al., 2002). However, other studies have found no effect of race on the probability of foster home placement versus in-home support (Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1999; Harris et al., 2001).

Racial differences in the length of stay in foster care and types of placements may also account for over-representation of minority children in out-of-home care. African-American children tend to have longer lengths of stay in foster care than Caucasian and Hispanic children (Wulczyn et al., 2001; 1999; Schmidt-Tieszen & McDonald, 1998; Barth, 1994, McMurtry & Lie, 1992). In addition, African-American children are more likely than Caucasian children to be placed with kin (Needell et al., 2000). Because reunification is less likely for children in kinship care, African-American children may remain in the child welfare system longer than children of other races (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1999; Terling, 1999; Everett, 1999). In addition, minority children who are free for adoption may remain in foster care longer than Caucasian children because they are less likely to be adopted. Two studies reported that Caucasian children are 5 times more likely to be adopted than other groups (Barth, 1997; Barth et al., 2000). Both African-American and Hispanic children are less likely than white children to be adopted (Courtney & Wong, 1996; Wulczyn, 2000). Moreover, African-American children from urban areas have particularly low rates of adoption (Wulczyn, 2000).

A recent study by Testa (2001) suggested that foster care placement rates and lengths of stay could be modified by shifts in kinship placement policies. When the state of Illinois created subsidized guardianship and adoption options for relatives of children in the child welfare system, racial disparities in foster care placement rates and length of stay were substantially decreased. Similarly, the implementation of a child welfare system reform initiative reduced racial disparities in North Carolina. The Families for Kids program, designed to provide supports and placements to vulnerable families and children within their own communities, led to a decline in racial differences in foster care entry and length of stay (Wildfire & Usher, 2002).

2.3 CONCLUSION

Minority over-representation in the child welfare system is clearly a complex problem. Research to date has provided inconsistent findings on the causes of this phenomenon. A critical shortcoming of this research is the minimal attention paid to the perceptions of child welfare professionals. The current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature in three ways. First, the study will fill this gap by conducting an initial examination of the fields' perspective on over-

representation. Second, the study is intended to gather information describing the strategies that are being implemented to address the problem of over-representation. Finally, the study is intended to identify the types of services the field believes are needed to reduce the number of children of color in the child welfare system.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

As interest among researchers and policy makers has grown in the last ten years, racial disproportionality has been examined and documented empirically using administrative data sets, primarily. The advantage of an empirical analysis of disproportionality is that it provides objective findings regarding such important issues as the incidence and prevalence of disproportionality, or can document trends over time. The limitation of using administrative data to understand disproportionality, however, is that it does not provide evidence of the context in which the phenomena occur. Specifically, administrative data sets do not allow for the possibility of linking outcomes of interest, for example, the number of minority children in foster care at a given time, to the processes that influence them, such as worker perceptions and agency practices. This study was designed as a first step in understanding the context in which disproportionality occurs from the perspective of those making the decisions.

The research team comprised researchers from Caliber Associates and Howard University, a historical black college. Caliber Associates chose to work with faculty from Howard University's School of Social Work because its mission and the expertise of the faculty in the welfare of African-American children. In addition, a research fellow with the Administration for Children, Youth and Families' Child Outcomes Research and Evaluation division with expertise in African-American child welfare served as an assistant to the Federal Project Officer during the term of her fellowship but chose to stay as a team member after her fellowship terminated. She is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park.

As an exploratory study and one of the first major efforts in the child welfare field to explore the attitudes and perceptions of the child welfare community concerning racial disproportionality, a qualitative approach was chosen as the primary method of inquiry. In new fields of study, such as this one, where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist, and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon (e.g., the field's perception on over-representation), qualitative inquiry is a reasonable beginning point for the research. Exploratory work of this kind is the way that new fields of inquiry are developed (Patton, 2002).

The project comprises two separate but related tasks. The first effort is to gain input from the child welfare field on the issue of over-representation of African-American children and families in the child welfare system. The study is designed to explore the issue of disproportionality from the perspective of administrators, supervisors, and direct-service staff from child welfare and child welfare related agencies, and their perceptions regarding its origins, prevalence and persistence.

In line with the study's goal to gain insight into the issue of racial disproportionality, the second effort is to examine the strategies that child welfare and child welfare related agencies are implementing to meet the needs of children and families of color. In combination, these efforts are designed to begin to

provide guidance and assistance to the child welfare field and the Federal government relating to such issues as policy, practice, and targeted resources associated with reducing disproportionality, and the delivery of appropriate and effective services to child welfare involved children and families of color.

To meet the goals of the study, the team developed a comprehensive qualitative information gathering system for on-site implementation with nine child welfare agencies. Using this approach allowed the team to gather detailed information about each agency, its staff, and partner agencies, and also to explore the similarities and differences among agencies in terms of the variables of interest. Site visits were the primary means of collecting qualitative data from each of the participating child welfare agencies, and were focused on conducting in-depth individual and group discussions with child welfare and partner agency staff, including administrators, supervisors, caseworkers and other direct service providers. Information gathered through on-site discussions was supplemented by written documentation, including policy and procedural documents, organizational charts, annual budgetary and operational reports, and program-specific brochures, manuals, and evaluation reports, provided by agency administrators or their representatives prior to the on-site visit. This information was intended to provide the team with a context for each agency, including such important characteristics as its mission and philosophy, operational policies, and organizational structure.

The following sections of the report present the details of the team's approach to completing these five major tasks.

3.1 DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The development of the research questions was an iterative process. That is, the questions were reviewed and refined by the team over a period of three months. The questions were designed after both a thorough review of the literature on over-representation, and discussions with several experts, both researchers and practitioners, on the issue. In the end, there were three overarching research questions, including:

- How do child welfare and child welfare-serving agencies, organizations and communities address the issue of racial disproportionality?
- How do different child welfare and child welfare-serving agencies, organizations and communities operating at different levels and at multiple decision points along the child welfare continuum, address the specific needs of children and families of color?
- What types of services do children of color receive after entry into the child welfare system? What factors influence decisions about the nature and type of services minority children and their families receive?

The final set of questions was used to guide the development of the information gathering plan, including the criteria by which sites would be selected for participation, potential discussion topics and questions, and the characteristics (e.g., job title, position, years of experience) of individuals who would participate in on-site discussions.

3.2 SELECTING AND RECRUITING THE CASE STUDY SITES

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the project team felt it was not methodologically necessary for the sample to be representative of child welfare agencies nationwide. As one of the first efforts to engage the child welfare community in open discussions regarding issues related to disproportionality, the project team felt is was more important to identify and recruit sites that were willing to participate and where there were activities of interest rather than those that were representative of the population of agencies nationally.

Nine sites were selected for participation in the study. As was the case with the research questions, the site selection process was iterative. That is, there were several steps taken before the final selection was determined, with each step producing additional, relevant information that helped guide the final selection.

The first step was to organize a meeting with the project team, several key Federal stakeholders, including the Federal project officer and five nationally recognized experts in the field of disproportionality. The Federal project officer, in collaboration with other ACFY stakeholders, identified the expert panel. The expert panel included Jestina Richardson, President, Black Administrators in Child Welfare; Gretchen Test, National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators Mark Testa, Director, Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Clarice Walker, Howard University and the Black Child Development Institute; and Carol Wilson Spigner, University of Pennsylvania.

During the meeting eighteen sites, and contacts for each, were recommended for consideration, including county- and state-administered child welfare agencies and private and non-profit child welfare-serving agencies. The private and non-profit child welfare-serving agencies included both stand-alone agencies and agencies that held a contract for services with the local child welfare agency. These groups were not mutually exclusive. While the selection criteria varied somewhat across sites, at the minimum, sites were known to be implementing initiatives, reform efforts, or programs, activities, and projects that were aligned with the study's goals (e.g., to reduce disproportionality and meet the needs of children and families of color.) In addition, the sites were thought to have data available regarding disproportionality and program outcomes, and a willingness to participate in the study.

The project team developed several key participation criteria for assessing the suitability of the sites for inclusion. These criteria included:

- The overall mission and philosophy of the agency
- The demographic breakdown of service areas and client populations
- The types of efforts that were being implemented to meet the needs of children and families of color or children and families, particularly African-American children and families, including systems reform, and special programs, practices, and activities
- The availability of descriptive and evaluative data, including operational manuals, organizational charts, annual reports, program brochures, and evaluation findings, among others
- The nature and extent to which the agency collaborated with other agencies to provide services to children and families of color, specifically in relation to public child welfare agencies
- The interest and ability of the agency to assist in the planning and implementation of the site visit.

Letters informing the sites of the study and their potential inclusion in the study were sent to the eighteen sites, and approximately two weeks later,

the project team began conducting screening calls. During these calls, project staff first referenced the letter and then briefly assessed the situation to determine if the contact person was someone who could provide the information of interest. In many cases, once the purpose of the call was determined, project staff were redirected to other senior agency staff persons, such as administrators or directors. The screening process took place over a three-month period. At the end of the screening process eleven sites remained. Three sites had been eliminated because they had not returned telephone calls after three attempts. An additional site was eliminated because the child welfare system was being reorganized at the state level and the agency administrator felt the system was under too much strain to participate. Finally, three other sites were deemed too small in terms of client population and staff to meet the study's goals.

At several points in the screening process, the team held discussions to review the information being gathered and discuss its implications for the study. Over the course of these discussions, it became clear that the focus of the selection process needed to shift to the public child welfare agencies. This decision was made for several reasons. First, because the study was focused on gaining insight into the issue of disproportionality from those in the field, specifically, child welfare agency administrators, supervisors, and direct service staff, the team felt it was important to focus their efforts on those individuals. Second, the team felt that, in the end, they would not be able to make generalizations or recommendations regarding the child welfare system's response to children of color without fully involving the system. Finally, as the primary, child welfare-serving agency in a given area, the public child welfare agencies were serving the largest numbers of children and families of color. As a result, they were more likely than any other agency to influence the over-representation of minority children in the system. Many of the private and non-profit agencies were simply not serving large enough numbers of children to affect the nature and extent of over-representation. However, one issue remained; the small private and non-profit agencies were often implementing innovative programs or practices with child-welfare involved families that were of interest to the study and for that reason would be important to include.

In the end, the team decided to select nine public child welfare agencies from the initial list, including an agency in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, California, Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, and two agencies in Minnesota. As part of the revised selection plan, the team asked the public child welfare agencies to identify and include local private and non-profit child welfare-serving agencies (partner agencies) in on-site discussions so that their perspective could be included and their practices explored. These included agencies that held contracts with the public child welfare agency or were serving minority children and families in the same service area as the public agency.

Once the sites were chosen, another letter was sent to the public child welfare agency administrators to inform them that they had been selected to participate and that someone from the project team would be contacting them within two weeks to speak with them further. Initial telephone conversations were focused on presenting the study in greater detail and in discussing how the on-site visits would be planned and implemented. In all cases, the agency administrator appointed a representative to work with project staff to plan and implement the site visits. The process by which site visits were planned and implemented is presented in detail in the section 3.4, below.

3.3 DEVELOPING THE DISCUSSION TOPICS

Given the goals of the study, the primary focus of information gathering efforts included individual and group discussions with public child welfare agency and related staff, and parents of child-

welfare involved families (parents). Child welfare agency staff included administrators and directors, supervisors of CPS, adoption and foster care workers, and direct-service staff. In addition, staff members (administrators, supervisors, and direct service providers) from partner agencies also were asked to participate in individual and group discussions. This multi-level sample was designed to provide the team with the most comprehensive cross-section of the child welfare community as possible.

In total, three sets of discussion topics were developed. Once the team had identified the various groups of participants, they used the research questions to guide the development of a pool of discussion topics, one for each group of participants. Over the course of several weeks, the team reviewed, discussed, and revised the discussion strategies. In addition to the content of the discussions, length had to be considered as well. Because child welfare agency staff and direct service providers generally have very little time for activities other than those required by their jobs, it was necessary to develop strategies to keep the discussions brief. In the end, discussion topics ranged from eight to four topics, with the former intended for child welfare agency staff and the latter for parents. Once the final pool was agreed upon, the procedures were pilot-tested in two different settings at two time points.

The first set of discussion topics, those for agency staff, was designed to elicit opinions and attitudes regarding the issue of over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system, including Federal, state, agency, and individual factors that might be associated with disproportionality, either directly or indirectly. To accommodate time limitations, the team prioritized the final list of topics. Priority one topics were deemed the most important and would be asked first. The set of priority one topics addresses the following questions:

- What is your perception of over-representation? That is, why do you think children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system?
- How have Federal policies like the Multi-ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) changed the way in which your agency serves children and families of color?
- What has your agency done, if anything, to improve the delivery of services to children and families of color?
- What types of services, programs, or policies do you think are necessary to reduce the over-representation of children of color in the child welfare system?

A second set of discussion topics was deemed priority two. It was decided that priority two topics would be addressed if time allowed. While these topics were not necessarily of less interest to the team, pilot test findings suggested that this set of topics shared some similarities with the set of priority one topics and so were frequently answered within the context of the other topics. In addition, in situations where there was not enough time to address all eight topics, it was necessary to focus the discussion on those topics that were likely to elicit the most relevant information. The set of priority two topics addressed the following questions:

- What kind of training does your agency provide, if any, to assist you in working with children and families of color?
- What policies, procedures or practices would assist your agency to serve children and families of color better?
- As a child welfare worker, what do you do to increase the effectiveness of your work with children and families of color?

- What else do you think is important to consider in reducing the over-representation of minority children and families in the child welfare system? For reducing the number of children of color in out-of-home placement?

In some cases, all eight topics were covered. In other cases, most often due to time restrictions, discussions were focused on priority one topics only.

A second set of discussion topics, for program staff, was designed to gather information regarding the history, components, factors associated with implementation, and outcomes of agency initiatives, practices and programs focused specifically on children and families of color. Program staff included those who were employed by either the child welfare or partner agency to implement or direct the activities of specific initiatives, practices and programs of interest. For example, program staff might include a child welfare worker that is responsible for overseeing the implementation of a special program to recruit minority foster and adoptive families. Topics for program staff elicited the following information:

- How was the program developed? That is, what is the history behind the development of the program?

- What are the major components of the program and how are they implemented?

- How is the program different from what you or your agency used to do?

- How has your involvement with this program changed the way you think about how to work effectively with children and families of color?

- *For new programs:* What are your expectations for this program? What do you think this program will change for children and families of color?

- *For existing programs:* What difference has this program made for children and families of color?

A final set of discussion topics was designed to gain insight into parents' experiences as recipients of child welfare services. Topics for parents targeted the following information:

- Can you talk about your history and experience with the child welfare system? Specifically, how did you come to be involved in the system and what has been your general experience?

- How is your experience with this agency (or program) different from other experiences you have had in the child welfare system?

- As a minority family, do you think your experience has been different from non-minority families involved in the child welfare system? If so, how do you think your experience has been different?

Because the project team had very little control over selecting the parent sample, there was more variation in the parent group than in any other. Often, parents were selected based on availability and convenience (they were at the agency for an appointment at the time of the site visit) or because their experience with the agency had been a particularly positive one, with positive outcomes. As a result, this set of issues often required modifications. For example, in some cases the team talked with parents who had adopted children through the child welfare agency. In others, they talked with parents whose children had been removed and were in the process of working towards reunification. In others, parents were not African-American and so could not talk about their experiences in that way. As with modifications made to the other sets of discussion topics, these were made at the discretion of the senior team member responsible for conducting the discussion and noted accordingly.

The study procedures were pilot-tested in two different child welfare agencies, one urban (Baltimore City) and one suburban (Montgomery

County). The pilot sites were chosen for reasons of geographic convenience and ease of access; when approached, administrators from both agencies agreed to serve as pilot sites. Second, the two sites provided the team with the opportunity to pilot-test the discussions in two very different agencies. The Baltimore City agency is located in a poor, urban setting, and serves a primarily African-American population. The Montgomery County agency, on the other hand, is located in an affluent, suburban community, and serves a more diverse population. Given the nature of the study and the content of the discussions, it was thought that these differences (e.g., race and class) might affect the manner in which agency staff responded to the issues and, as a result, would be important to explore during the pilot-tests. In general, the pilot tests were conducted to assess the discussion strategies on three factors, including content, clarity, and response.

3.4 CONDUCTING THE SITE VISITS[1]

As a first step in conducting the site visits, the team worked with agency administrators to identify a contact person at each site who could assist the team to plan and implement on-site discussions. In most cases, this person was an employee of the child welfare agency. All communications regarding site visits were coordinated through the identified contact person and the team member assigned to a particular site. Through telephone conversations, team members worked with each contact person to identify the individuals and groups most important to include in on-site discussions, and then to plan proposed discussion groups, and other activities to be conducted during the site visit. To the extent possible, across sites, the team attempted to focus discussions on similar topics and to talk with individuals of similar title and position. In the end, the discussions commenced as follows:

- Individual discussion sessions with state-level child-welfare officials and agency administrators as well as partner agency directors and other high-ranking individuals (i.e., Attorneys General and judges)
- Individual or group discussion sessions with child-welfare agency supervisors and direct service workers, and partner agency supervisors and direct service providers
- Individual or group discussion sessions with child-welfare agency and partner agency program staff
- Individual discussions with parents.

Opportunities for gathering additional information, such as observations of program activities or court hearings, were identified by the contact person and discussed with team members prior to scheduling. In two sites, discussions were held with researchers who provided evidence regarding the effects of particular service delivery strategies on children and families of color.

At the beginning of each site visit, the team met with the agency administrator to review the purpose of the site visit, discuss the intended goals of each planned discussion session, and to resolve any issues or concerns related to the team's efforts. In many instances, this first meeting included agency administrators as well as management staff. At the conclusion of the site visit, a brief meeting was scheduled with the agency administrator or his or her assigned representative. The meeting was designed as an opportunity for the administrator to ask questions but also for the team to give feedback regarding the issues of interest.

[1] A summary of the site visit procedures is described in this section. A more thorough presentation of site visit procedures can be found in the Appendix.

In total, nine site visits were conducted. At the conclusion of each site visit, audio-tapes were transcribed and analyzed using both traditional qualitative techniques (e.g., content analysis) and text analysis software, specifically, IN-VIVO, a qualitative software package that allows the analyst to store documents, create text categories, code text segments, and generate reports.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Study findings are presented in the two sections that follow. The first section presents the findings related to the issue of over-representation. Specifically, this section is focused on the participants' perception of over-representation, including how Federal policies have influenced their ability to work effectively with children and families of color. The second section is focused on examining the types of strategies child welfare agencies have used to meet the needs of children and families of color. It includes information regarding participants' perceptions about what resources would assist agencies to better serve children and families of color, and the types of practices and programs they feel are necessary to reduce over-representation. Finally, it presents information regarding the programs, practices, and strategies that agencies are implementing currently to improve the delivery of services to minority children and families.

4.1 THE ISSUE OF OVER-REPRESENTATION: THE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

To gain input from the child welfare field on the issue of over-representation, the project team solicited information from all participants across the nine sites based on the following topic: *What is your perception of the issue of over-representation? That is, why do you think children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system?* The next section presents the perceptions of the participants regarding this issue.

External factors

Consistent with the literature that relates disproportionality to a variety of risk factors, including poverty and such related problems as family instability, the issues most commonly reported by participants as primary to disproportionality were factors external to the child welfare system. Participants across the nine sites consistently reported such factors as poverty, lack of resources in poor communities, discriminatory practices in the larger society, the characteristics of the families entering the system, and the media as contributing to the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system.

Poverty and related issues

The link between poverty and child abuse and neglect is strongly supported in the literature. Much of the literature focuses on documenting the link between income and the incidence of abuse and neglect, with lower incomes correlated with a higher incidence of abuse and neglect. Other sources have documented the link between poverty and risk factors. Consistent with the literature, across all nine sites, an overwhelming majority of participants at all levels cited poverty, and poverty-related circumstances, as primary reasons for the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system.

> I think [racial disproportionality] has a great deal to do with socio-economics. It has to do with society. It has to do with politics. It has to do with all the barriers that society and the world has put up for people of color, for poor people. It has to do with the struggle. (Administrator)

> You have your money, and then you [have the] people…and the blacks are going to fall at the bottom because of their income and their locality, and the [lack of] jobs and education and all of that. (Direct service worker)

The poverty-related issue that participants talked about most frequently was the relationship between the need for services among minority clients and the lack of resources available to them. According to participants across sites, poverty exposes families to multiple stress factors that compromise their ability to manage day-to-day activities. Because minority families in this country, particularly African-American families, are more likely to be poor than are non-minority groups, they are also more vulnerable to social problems, including child abuse and neglect, domestic violence and substance abuse, among others. Participants were quick to note that, despite their need for services, poor families were more likely to be living in resource poor communities, many of which also were geographically isolated from other communities that might offer support and services. As a result, families living in poverty were the least likely to have resources available to them. According to participants, without access to services, families are further compromised. The more compromised these families are, the more likely it is that they eventually will come into contact with the child welfare or some other social system.

> We have waiting lists forever to get any kind of services, [including] substance abuse, domestic violence, [and] parenting classes. When you go into different neighborhoods, Caucasian neighborhoods, we make a referral... within days, they have the services they need. My clients wait months. If we put in the referral or the case is in court but the client hasn't gotten services yet, they'll pull those kids. (Direct service worker)

> There's a lack of black resources. We don't have resources in place for [black] people to get help. And if there are resources, there are so many hoops that you have to jump through to get something, even a little bit. People just say, "Forget it. Just take my kids or I'll take them and whatever happens, happens." It's too hard. It's too complicated for people to get anything. (Direct service worker)

Related to resource issues is the visibility of minority families, which, according to participants, is another factor that contributes to disproportionality. Because minority families are more likely to be poor and to lack access to resources, they are also more likely to use public services, including public health care (e.g., hospitals and clinics), and to receive public assistance, including TANF and Medicaid. Participants felt that having more frequent contact with these systems made African-American families more visible in terms of the problems they might be experiencing, including child abuse and neglect. In addition, they felt that individuals employed by public welfare agencies were likely to hold prejudices against the people who used them and, subsequently, to scrutinize their behavior more closely. According to participants, these factors often result in reports to formal systems, including, most frequently, the child welfare and criminal justice systems, regarding African-American clients.

> I think any individual, regardless of their minority status, that ends up in a poverty situation is more visible, because they're having to access free clinics, and social services, and welfare, and those types of things…. Child abuse, it certainly crosses the broad range of socio-economic classes, however, if you have more wealth to your name, it's easier to cover up. People are less likely to report you. (Administrator)

Participants talked about another discrepancy in resource availability between minority and non-minority clients—the lack of resources African-American families have to negotiate the child welfare system once they've entered it. After years of oppression and negative experiences with formal systems, participants noted, African-Americans are often scared, uninformed, and intimidated when interacting with formal systems. When African-American parents are approached by the child welfare system, therefore, they are often at a distinct disadvantage. According to participants, African-American parents frequently lack important information about how the child welfare system works, the financial resources to navigate the system, including hiring an attorney, and the confidence to advocate for themselves and their children. These factors create a distinct disadvantage for African-American parents that often follow them throughout their family's trajectory through the child welfare system.

> Once they enter the system, [African-American] clients feel powerless. (Direct service worker)

> Society, it's unfortunate, but we look at black people, poor black people in particular, they're not empowered. They don't feel empowered. They don't feel in power politically. They are not educated. They fear authority and they have a reason to. Because when you look at the jails, when you look at all the systems, they have a reason to be afraid. (Supervisor)

> I think one of the reasons for over-representation is there are no advocates for these individuals. They are intimidated by everybody. They don't know how to present themselves. They probably know that something is wrong but they don't know how to address it or explain what it is that they are feeling or what is happening to them. So, a lot of times, they leave [the system] without answers, without solutions, until CPS gets involved again and we've got to go through this whole process again. I really don't think they understand their rights, their roles, what they can really do to help themselves. (Direct service worker)

Community and family characteristics

Studies consistently suggest that over-representation may have less to do with race or ethnicity of minority groups and more with the characteristics of the communities in which they reside. In this study, participants in Illinois, Georgia and Michigan talked about the disorganization of many African-American communities and the disintegration of the African-American family as factors responsible for over-representation.

> The black culture that we've created since we've been in this country...is not about "old world" customs. We don't have "old world" customs that [we brought] over here. The other nationalities that I've worked with, the Hispanics especially, there is a strong sense of culture... The child welfare system is a reaction to how society has fallen apart in the African-American community. There is no culture. There is poverty, drugs, teen pregnancies, and no fathers at home. So we take the kids in, clean them up, and put them out, but the problems started a long time ago. (Direct service worker)

In two states, both African-American and Hispanic participants used perceived differences between Hispanic and African-American communities to explain the lower rates of Hispanic children and higher rates of African-American children in the child welfare system. Participants perceived that the Hispanic population, having come to this country more recently and under different circumstances than African-Americans, had not experienced the kind of oppression and disadvantages that African-Americans have. As a result, the Hispanic community has not been affected by years of racism and oppression that, ultimately, has led to social, economic, and political challenges for African-American families and communities. In and around one site, there are enclaves of tightly knit and tightly

connected Hispanic communities, comprised of extended families that, while mostly low-income, are not seen as experiencing the same types of challenges as many African-American communities, including substance abuse and domestic violence. In addition, participants felt that because Hispanic families and communities were more cohesive, they were better able to support each other in times of crisis. Bound by a we take care of our own philosophy, the Hispanic community was ready and able to respond, often without outside intervention, to family or community crises. They also tended to have access to resources, often within their own communities, in their own language.

> As far as the Hispanic community, I think, it's like, "we take care of our own. We'll take Mama out... and get her straight. [The child welfare system] won't take Mama out and get her straight. We will do that." [The Hispanic community] has our own DCFS system that's not the public child welfare system. (Supervisor)

> We need to realize that there are a lot of resources for Spanish families. And they do have families, and strong family support systems, in their own language, in their own communities. They have outreach programs. The Spanish community is growing. It has very strong support. It has strong family support. It has resource referrals, resources that we can tap into immediately. Now, some of them are coming into custody, but a lot of them are not because we have those resources for them. (Supervisor)

> I feel that the majority of the Latinos in this county are probably Mexican families that come into the country looking for agrarian work. Because they have larger family compositions we can rely on other family members to help reduce some of the risk to the children…. We look to extended families to help with off setting risk factors. (Direct service worker)

To some extent, participants in a third state expressed this viewpoint as well. There, participants were just beginning to notice (or talk about) discrepancies between the number of Hispanic and African-American children coming into care, with African-American children coming into care more often than Hispanic children. The participants were not certain what accounted for the discrepancy, but many felt it was related to the same issues that were discussed above. Specifically, they suggested that the African-American community was more disorganized than the Hispanic community, although they acknowledged that this wasn't always the case.

One participant, an African-American supervisor, reminisced about the African-American culture of long ago. Her perception was that cohesive and supportive were adjectives that were used years ago to describe African-American communities. She spoke of a community with a strong sense of family and connection, a community of families where elders lived in the home, helping to raise the children, and parents worked hard to give their children a life they themselves never had. Lamenting the disintegration of this archetype, she noted that these characteristics had been replaced by less positive ones, including the lack of an extended family, inconsistent care taking, and dependency on public assistance. Years of oppression and related problems had resulted in the disintegration of African-American communities, which had left both the communities and the individuals residing in them powerless to prevent problems or intervene to change things.

> One of the things we talked about [in relation to the differences between Hispanic and African-American families] was that there used to be [in the African-American family] a sense of family and a sense of connection and extended family… Older relatives lived in the home and were both being taken care of and taking care of… Now

> we see some of our African-American families without extended families, and lacking consistent care [for their children]. Whoever is around, that's who takes care of the children. Years ago, if things went wrong, you got sent up north, you got sent to live with family and those kinds of things... [There] was a sense of family and extended family. (Supervisor)

Participants in a fourth state also talked about the challenges African-American communities and families have faced in recent decades as central to disproportionality. Their perception was that generations of economic deprivation had resulted in disadvantages for African-Americans in important areas, including education and employment. They felt that as African-Americans experienced fewer and fewer opportunities, the community found itself disempowered and caught up in a cycle of crisis and response. Over time, African-American communities became more vulnerable to such social ills as drugs and violence and, as communities became more vulnerable, so too did the families that lived in them, eventually finding themselves more vulnerable to involvement in social service systems, including child welfare. According to some participants, these problems persist today except that now, rather than presenting a challenge to be overcome, they have become a part of the culture.

> [Disproportionality] is representative of a group in crisis. It's coming from the fact that there are no family resources and so the children are coming into care. It's coming from the fact that families are not intact and so the children are in the system instead. It's coming from the fact that there's a feeling in other [non-black] communities that they can do something to help their community. We need to empower the black communities again so they can rise above their current circumstances. (Supervisor)

Participants in a fifth state were also beginning to examine the child welfare involvement of Hispanic families. In contrast to other sites, they did not suggest that Hispanic families were more organized than African-American families. They attributed their lower numbers to a lesser emphasis on reporting in Hispanic communities, different standards in the Hispanic community regarding childrearing, lower utilization of public institutions (which are responsible for many child welfare referrals), and the language barriers. In one site, participants spoke of rising numbers of Hispanic families due to culture-specific child rearing practices that are perceived as negative in the mainstream culture (e.g. extreme corporal punishment) and the lack of supervision related to the agrarian employment of parents.

> They (Hispanic families) don't have access to resources or don't utilize the resources because of the language barriers, and they don't see the bruise on the kid's butt when he's at the Health Department. (Direct service worker)

Discriminatory practices

Some theorists and researchers argue that disproportionality is a result of discriminatory practices within the larger society against minority groups, particularly African-Americans (e.g., differential treatment by race). According to participants in this study, in relation to the child welfare system, this differential treatment manifests itself most often in the over-reporting of minority parents for child abuse and neglect. The systems most frequently involved, at least as reported in this study, are the medical and school systems.

In the case of hospitals, participants in Illinois, Virginia, and Texas noted that clients were most commonly reported for neglect based on postpartum drug tests. They felt that doctors and other health care providers tended to believe that drug use was more common among minority groups. As a result, medical personnel were more likely to suspect and report minority families for

drug use during pregnancy. Participants told story after story about clients that had been drug-tested without knowledge or consent after giving birth[2]. In fact, in most of these stories, consent was not even an issue—no one had asked the woman for it. This issue has tremendous bearing on racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, given that currently drug abuse is thought to be one of the major reasons for child welfare involvement with families, although evidence is mixed.

> …Far more African-Americans go to [that] hospital for whatever, including pregnancies, than other races, and they would routinely test the babies for illegal drugs in their system, without the mother's knowledge. So that was contributing a great deal, and the other hospitals in the city were doing the same thing. So, if you're an African-American mom and you looked kind of poor, you're kid was likely to be tested. And so there was a report to DCFS, and an investigation, and an indication on your child abuse and neglect tracking system record that you gave drugs to the baby… So, it's more likely that African-American kids were brought into the system. (Supervisor)

School personnel also were implicated for over-reporting minority children, especially for neglect. Again, in three states, participants felt that teachers frequently confused neglect with issues related to poverty, calling in neglect reports regarding children who were, for example, hungry and unkempt or who were sometimes absent from or late for school. While participants did acknowledge that these issues could be associated with neglect, they felt strongly that school personnel were unable to differentiate poverty from neglect and, when dealing with minority (or impoverished) families, were not invested in detecting the difference.

> Because most often, what happens, is that people confuse poverty and how it impacts children and families with neglect…[And that's how they end up in the system] (Administrator)

> One of the things that we talked about and we dealt with specifically was the issue of poverty versus neglect and abuse, because so many cases come in because of poverty issues. But poverty issues have nothing necessarily to do with child abuse and neglect. We need a whole different system or way of looking at [issues related to poverty], but that is another reason why the proportion [of black children in the system] is so high. (Supervisor)

> Just little things, like you see it in the school system. They [say] "Well, she came to school dirty, her clothes are always dirty." And it's usually the minority kids. Well, they [minority families] often don't have a washer and dryer where they can just wash clothes every day. They don't have the money to go to the laundromat daily. But that doesn't mean [the children] are being abused or neglected. (Direct service worker)

> We get a lot of calls from schools and from hospitals, and a lot of these mandated reporters don' t actually know, don't have a clue, what they should call in… They call in every little thing, and, a lot of times, it is the African-Americans they're calling about, once again, disproportionately. And the Child Abuse Reporting Act states that a report should be called in when there is a suspected case of child abuse or neglect, not any time you see a child walk down the hall with a bruise or a mark... (Supervisor)

[2] It is the case that some hospitals do not require consent for drug testing if they suspect a mother has used drugs during her pregnancy or is under the influence of substances at the time she is admitted to the hospital. Regardless, participants perceived that African-American mothers were suspected of drug use and drug tested in far greater numbers than Caucasian mothers or mothers of other racial or ethnic groups.

Media issues

According to participants, the media also play a role in the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system. In recent years, there has been increased media attention nationwide to extreme cases of abuse and neglect, especially those involving child deaths. The media attention has left supervisors and workers alike feeling vulnerable and under increased scrutiny from the agency administration and the community. Unfortunately, participants in several agencies reported that these feelings of uncertainty often manifest in their substantiating more cases and, as a result, bringing more children into care.

Workers in two states reported feeling frightened and insecure during times when they were under increased scrutiny from the media, which has become more and more frequent, as least from their perception. During times of increased media attention, and, according to some participants, at all times, workers report being more inclined to both substantiate a case and remove a child. Despite reports that in substantiating a case workers reduce the ever-present fear that one of their children will end up in the media, this coping mechanism also results in feelings of powerlessness. In one state, workers reported questioning their ability to make good decisions, while in the other, workers reported feeling frightened when case decisions were imminent. In addition, because both of these agencies are located in communities that are primarily African-American, substantiating more cases generally means substantiating more cases involving African-American children and families.

> [Workers] tend to feel safer placing children in care... because they've gotten pressure about leaving children in homes and something happens to them so they feel safer bringing a child into care. When in doubt, take them out. A lot of times, in African-American communities, they're going to take them out. (Direct service worker)

> I know [the agency] is in the spotlight right now. It's safer to just take the case [regardless of the seriousness of the report] and check it out... Also, you never know if it is a 'set-up.' You never know who's setting up or calling in and making an intake. It's safer just to check it out. (Direct service worker)

Participants in another state also reported an increase in both hotline calls and substantiated cases after high profile cases hit the media. To stop what had become a media frenzy, the administration decided not to run from the media, but to respond to them. Now, when cases end up in the media, the administration does two things. First, they give the media the full story, even if the agency was to blame to some extent. Next, they use their opportunity with the media to educate them about other child welfare issues and to give them positive stories to write about, for example, the increase in adoptions or decrease in the number of children coming into care. While the administration feels that this strategy has resulted in more positive relationships and press coverage from the media, workers continue to feel frightened about making bad decisions and uncertain as to whether the administration would support them if one of their cases ended up in the media.

One state has taken a proactive stance with the media. Recognizing the benefit of an informed media with whom you have a formal relationship, the child welfare agency invited a prominent local reporter who frequently covers local child welfare issues to be part of their council on over-representation. By involving him on the council, agency administrators hoped they would have an opportunity to educate the media regarding the mission, philosophy and operations of the agency, thereby providing them with a context in which to interpret and report future child welfare cases. It is not clear whether this strategy will produce its desired outcomes but, for now, the administration is hopeful that it will.

Internal factors

While most responses to the question regarding disproportionality included factors external to the child welfare system, there were two issues internal to the child welfare system that participants discussed in relation to over-representation: 1) worker bias; and 2) agency practices.

Worker bias

> I think it's not only African-Americans but also poor people in general. Here I am, a social worker with a Master's degree. I've got the training. But my first court experience, I was really afraid to enter the courtroom [because the people were different from me]. And so, if it [being African-American] has that kind of impact on me, imagine what kind of impact it could have on someone else that is not at my level. (Direct service worker)

In many cases, participants felt that their colleagues, across racial and ethnic groups and job categories, brought preconceived ideas or biases against minority groups, most often African-Americans, to their position within the agency. Participants, most often African-American participants, identified racial bias as a common problem that frequently interfered with good decision making. They felt that many staff, but Caucasian staff in particular, lacked exposure to cultures other than their own and had no context for understanding the cultural norms and practices of minority populations.

> There are so many different factors involved in worker bias or racism. Even just going out and doing home-calls in different neighborhoods. I think some workers immediately, just driving into a certain neighborhood, have a particular perception. (Direct service worker)

> [Workers] have preconceived notions of how they're going to deal with blacks and other minorities. I worked with a child welfare worker who, before she even went out to the house, before she even interviewed them, already said, "This is what I expect." (Direct service worker)

> Maybe my culture is different from a person of color, so having a staff person who you can go talk to and, even for myself, I can find out things from a staff person about somebody else's culture. (Direct service worker)

One frequently cited example of worker bias was the difference in perception between white and black workers regarding what constitutes abuse and discipline, particularly discipline within the African-American culture. Many African-American workers gave examples of situations where physical discipline might be confused with abuse if the individual making the determination had no previous exposure to the African-American community and its disciplinary practices. The participants who discussed this issue were quick to note that they were not trying to justify the use of physical discipline or abusive behavior. Instead they were trying to explain the importance of understanding the cultural context of certain behaviors when critical decisions were being made and the lives of children and families were at stake.

> One of the issues that I think has not been addressed would be cultural issues with regard to people of color and forms of discipline that have been passed down for generations. I think the way we were disciplined back in the 70s and 80s... my grandmother went out and got a switch... And now, you know, people of other races, they have "time out." But a lot of African-American families are still raising their kids the way they were raised. There's no "time out."... There are circumstances that come into play. It's not just, you see a bruise and it's a founded case. You still have to look at the circumstances that caused it. (Direct service worker)

> Culture plays a very major role in terms of how protective services interfaces with the families. When they go in, understanding the

> dynamics of the families based on their culture is important in determining whether or not to remove the child. I mean, abuse is abuse; that is not a cultural issue. Neglect is neglect; that is not a cultural issue. But if you have a situation where a child is sitting on the floor eating some collard greens or cornbread with their fingers, that's not an issue of neglect. That is just how some of us of color eat our food. But it can be something as simple as that that can have far-reaching ramifications for splitting up a family. (Direct service worker)

Participants also talked about class bias. Class bias, however, seemed to be more of an issue in those agencies where the client population, the surrounding community, and the majority of agency staff were minority. It may be the case that race is less salient in those communities that are predominantly African-American.

> Classism impacts children coming into care... I've even talked to...our own staff who have never experienced poverty or the kinds of conditions or violence that some of our families have had to endure. And because of that, they go immediately to [wanting] to remove the children. They don't see the strength in the families because they are very middle-class and their decisions about whether or not kids can stay in their own homes is based on their own perception… It doesn't matter if they're African-American. They're making those decisions based on their perception as middle class persons. (Administrator)

Overall, participants felt that worker bias had a negative effect on African-American clients. Specifically, they felt that biased decision-making resulted in more African-American children being removed from the home, and fewer returning home to their families.

> When you have [workers] who are disconnected from the cultural dynamic of a community that is poor and minority and you send them into that particular community with the force of the law to remove children.... They'll determine the environment to be unsafe... The system does not have controls to limit the subjectivity of the worker. (Administrator)

Agency practices

In some sites, participants did attribute racial disproportionality to internal agency practices. For example, some suggested that their agency had in the past ignored the rising numbers of minority children and did not attempt to address the issue practically. They emphasized the importance of making the reduction of racial disproportionality an important administrative and practice goal. There were specific agency practices that they felt contributed to the large numbers of minority children in care. For example, participants in two sites suggested that their use of a standardized risk assessment tool reduced the number of minority children and families who were involved in the child welfare system. The tool was utilized to make more objective decisions regarding substantiation of cases and the need for placement of children.

Additionally, participants identified the lack of front-end work (i.e., prevention) as having an impact on the numbers of minority children brought into the child welfare system. Additionally, they suggested that the historical recruitment of mainstream (i.e., white and middle class) foster and adoptive parents limit the placement options of minority children, and therefore affect the numbers of children in care. Excluding relatives as service partners and potential placement options also was perceived as leading to higher numbers of minority children in care. Staff training and hiring issues also were raised as

contributing to racial disproportionality. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of the report that examines agency practices and promising programs more closely.

Over-representation and Federal policies

This study sought to assess the impact of Federal policies on child welfare practice with children and families of color, specifically, the Multi-ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). To this end, discussions were focused around the following topic: *How have Federal policies like MEPA or ASFA changed the way in which your agency serves children and families of color?*

The Multi-ethnic Placement Act

For three decades, racially matched adoptive placements for child-welfare involved children were not uncommon child welfare practice. In recent years, however, concern that racial matching practices were contributing to a delay in placing children of color in adoptive homes pushed policymakers to examine it more closely. In the end, MEPA was born.

Passed by Congress in 1994, MEPA is a Federal law designed to remove barriers that might delay or deny the placement of African-American children and speed up the adoption process by prohibiting state's from considering a child's ethnic and racial background when considering placements with prospective parents. MEPA has three primary goals. First, it was designed to decrease the length of time children wait to be adopted. Second, it was designed to prevent discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Finally, MEPA was designed to facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive families that could meet the needs of children needing placement.

Since its passage, MEPA has been criticized for several reasons, including that its legal mandates do not translate easily into child welfare settings or social work practice because they are vague in nature. In this study, participants' familiarity with MEPA varied based on their position within the agency. While agency administrators were generally familiar with and knowledgeable about MEPA, many direct service workers and supervisors were not. Placement workers were more familiar with MEPA than were investigators or in-home workers, but this is not surprising given that placement workers are responsible for finding and approving adoptive homes for children, a responsibility that requires them to be informed of adoption policies. In far more cases than was expected, however, the research team members found themselves explaining MEPA to participants and fielding questions related to its guidelines and implementation.

> I'm not very familiar with that. I don't know what the details of it are. (Direct service worker)

> I could probably be more helpful if you would define [MEPA] for me. (Supervisor)

Explanations frequently were required even for those participants who reported having some familiarity with MEPA. Supervisors and direct service workers alike reported confusion about what MEPA was designed to do and, subsequently, raised concerns regarding how to implement it. While this confusion was less commonly reported among adoption workers, they too were sometimes uncertain about MEPA regulations. This general lack of knowledge about MEPA and confusion over its guidelines suggests that there may be a gap between policy and practice when it comes to understanding, interpreting and implementing MEPA.

> MEPA has been very confusing to staff. I think there is a fear factor associated with it. [Workers think] "Oh, my gosh, if I do something wrong, I'm doomed. My career is on the line here." And I think that's real. It's been very difficult to train in and answer all the questions staff have [about MEPA]. We have made progress in moving minority children out of care over the

last few years but I don't know that I can say MEPA did that. I'm not sure how much staff really know about it. (Administrator)

The literature regarding MEPA suggests that some individuals who oppose it do so because they are concerned about the detrimental affects of transracial placements on a child's overall well being. Specifically, some in the child welfare community believe that transracial placements are detrimental to children's overall well being, including children's adjustment to adoption, their self-esteem, and their ethnic or racial identity (although there is controversy in the field regarding the empirical validity of these concerns).

Participants in three states expressed this viewpoint. In these sites, participants, mostly African-American direct service providers and placement workers, reported that MEPA was contrary to the best interests of African-American children. These participants felt strongly that because race is critical to a child's emotional and psychological well being, one cannot think about the child's best interests when making placement decisions without consideration of race. They talked about the difficulties inherent in raising a black child in a white family, especially in terms of access to culture and culturally specific practices and rituals, and racial and cultural identity. In many cases, workers reported that they lacked confidence in a non-minority family's ability to provide these things for African-American children.

> That's very difficult because color does matter. If you have two families that are equal with everything, and one is African-American and one is Caucasian, and the child has only known African-Americans, your color is a factor in placement even though the law says you can't use it as a basis. But if everything is equal and this is what the child knows and this is what the child doesn't know, why would you place him in a situation that is completely unfamiliar with him or her? First of all, the child is going to have adoption issues to begin with. And then you add on the transracial issues of 'why am I different' and ['why am I] being placed in a completely different world than what [I am] accustomed to?' That's difficult. (Direct service worker)

> One time, I had an African-American little girl placed with a white family, and they didn't know how to comb her hair. And they called and told me, "We just want to cut it off." I said, "Well, no, we just can't do that. We need to come out and I can give you some lessons. Or you know what? Better yet, I'm just going to take this little girl and I'm going to get her hair braided for her, but we're not going to cut her hair." (Direct service worker)

> I have a problem with a black child being in a community where they don't see anybody else that looks like them. I have a problem with a child being in a family that doesn't recognize that they are black kids... This child needs some life skills because the world out there is very ugly. I have to teach my little black boy, "It's ugliness out there" and I have to teach him the skills to learn to deal with that. How is a white family going to teach a black boy that? (Direct service worker)

> I think historically a lot of the African-American families will feel more comfortable with an African-American child being in their home. They have expressed it…that if placement were to occur that they would feel more comfortable with an African-American child. (Direct service worker)

Despite their concerns, however, participants agreed that children should not languish in foster care if, for example, a white family was available to adopt a black child, and that they always practiced in a manner that reflected this philosophy. In fact, there was a general consensus among most participants that it was always better for a child to be adopted by a caring family, regardless of race, than for the child to endure a long term in foster care. However, participants did acknowledge that they made placement decisions after careful

consideration of a number of important factors, two of which might be the family's race or, more important, their ability to provide the child with culturally specific experiences and opportunities.

Despite the negatives, participants reported that MEPA had helped their agencies broaden the role of the extended family in placement decisions, a positive outcome. They reported that when MEPA was first passed, some of their agencies were desperate to find placement resources for African-American children. In many cases, without a lot of alternatives and little to no additional funding, agencies had no choice but to turn to the extended family network for help. Participants were not sure they would have considered these options if MEPA had not pushed them to consider alternatives.

> What MEPA did was make us really pull back and …make sure that we were comfortable placing a child in a home, that we would be comfortable with that family adopting that child, should it come to that. (Direct service worker)

They also reported being pleased with the outcomes related to involving kin. Previously, kin were not generally considered as alternatives for placement for a number of reasons. In some cases, it was assumed that dysfunctional families produced dysfunctional children, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree analogy. In other cases, it was simply assumed that extended families were not interested in fostering or adopting kin because of the added financial burden additional children bring to the family environment. What participants reported, however, was that when family members were given the opportunity, even those with children still living at home, they were willing to assist. In fact, they were willing to assist even if it meant fostering or adopting a child or even a sibling group, an outcome that some participants found surprising.

Participants also perceived extended family placements as win-win situations. Because kin placements often provide stability and safety as well as familiarity and cultural appropriateness, participants report feeling confident that all the important bases had been covered. They also thought that kinship placements would likely result in more positive outcomes for African-American children because they are consistent with the African-American historical experience.

> The other thing that [MEPA] has done…is that it has broadened the scope of the role that family [are] able to play. For instance, we never used to recommend relative adoptions. It was seen as being very problematic and creating all kinds of difficult dynamics within the family system. And, now, that's a preferred plan, to have a relative that wants to adopt. So, you work through those other issues and figure out solutions. (Supervisor)

In addition to decreasing the amount of time children wait to be adopted, MEPA also was intended to facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive families to meet the needs of children needing placement. As a result, in many cases, agencies have stepped up their efforts to recruit African-American foster and adoptive families, although results have been mixed. Some have had success while others are still struggling to find placements for these children. In places where recruitment efforts have been successful, however, participants report that by providing additional placement options for African-American children, recruitment efforts have helped to move children out of the system, thereby decreasing the number of African-American children in the system.

> One good thing about [MEPA] is you can look for the best placement for the child, regardless of race, or color, or religion or whatever, and you don't have to be limited to only looking for one certain type of family. (Direct service worker)

Adoption and Safe Families Act

Passed as law in 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act, was designed to promote safety and permanency for children through its emphasis on adoption. ASFA also identifies circumstances under which reasonable efforts to reunify are not required and shortens the timeframe for initiating proceedings for the termination of parental rights. ASFA also provides incentive payments to states to encourage adoption of children out of foster care.

Overall, participants were more familiar with ASFA than they were with MEPA; however, knowledge was still tied to position within the agency. As was the case with MEPA, agency administrators were more knowledgeable regarding ASFA and its implementation than any other group. This is not surprising given that administrators are responsible for ensuring that agency practices are in line with state and Federal policies and regulations. In addition, ASFA includes a number of specific provisions that require or provide incentives to states to change policies and practices to promote children's safety and adoption or other permanency options, including expedited timelines for moving children into permanent placements. As a result, its impact on agency-level policies and practices has often been significant and immediate. Some states, including Minnesota and Texas, had initiated expedited timelines before ASFA was enacted, while agencies in other states quickly had to restructure policies and modify practices to meet ASFA requirements.

Generally, the primary concern expressed by participants regarding ASFA was that its shortened timelines were too restrictive for families dealing with multiple issues. Specifically, across sites and at all levels, participants voiced concerns about whether parents experiencing substance abuse, mental health or other serious problems would be able to manage and change their situations within ASFA timelines. The workers' biggest fear was that they would be forced to move toward termination of parental rights before parents had sufficient time to receive appropriate services or become engaged in treatment in a therapeutic manner.

> Poverty wasn't created in six months. Drug addiction wasn't created in six months. So how are we going to take six months to undo it? The kind of logic in that really never made sense to me. (Direct service worker)

> The thing about ASFA is we're giving them 18 months to get it together and sometimes it takes them longer [especially in substance abuse treatment]. (Direct service worker)

> With regard to [ASFA time limits], especially if you are working with women with substance abuse issues... I've worked in substance abuse... I worked with heroin addicts and that is one of the worst addictions, and these women need more time to get it together. The time limit is not enough. [These] mothers have a right to a second chance to those children. That time limit is just not good. (Direct service worker)

In addition to the shortened timelines, participants talked about the challenges of implementing ASFA without additional financial resources to support mental health and substance abuse treatment for parents working toward reunification and also for potential adoptive families (a perception that is not supported by the reality of ASFA, which provides additional dollars for ancillary services). With the emphasis on permanency, agencies felt pressure to find large pools of adoptive families, while the emphasis on shortened timelines required quick access to quality services, something that is not always available.

> If you are going to say you have to meet these requirements in a shorter time period, then the other side of that is that you have to adequately fund services that are going to make it possible for families to do that. You can't get assessments, mental health assessments. There are waiting lists. So it's unrealistic... (Supervisor)

> What I've seen in terms of the time limits is that adoptive families are being quickly certified because the resources that were put into certification were not substantial enough [to support lengthy home studies]. I think it's horrible for a child to languish in foster care... but I think it's equally horrible for them to be placed quickly into an adoptive home that's not appropriate for them and where there's no training and support. (Direct service worker)

> If you're going to put in a Federal guideline, you've got to give us the tools, the money, everything we need to accomplish that. (Supervisor)

Another challenge related to ASFA as reported by workers in two states is the practice of concurrent planning, a practice that is emphasized in the Act. Concurrent planning is a practice that requires workers to work toward reunification while simultaneously planning for the permanent placement of a child. The strategy is designed to support reunification but also to plan early for an alternative permanent placement should reunification become impossible.

According to participants, one of the problems with concurrent planning is that it seems to make more sense in theory than it does in practice. Supervisors and workers alike talked about the difficulty of being fully committed to two outcomes that seem to be in direct opposition to each other. Workers reported feeling pressured by the competing demands of reunification and permanent placement and the perceived increase in effort concurrent planning requires from them. In many cases, workers felt that they were experienced enough to tell, early on, which cases had a chance for reunification and which ones did not, making concurrent planning seem like nothing more than extra work. Other workers mentioned, on a positive note, that concurrent planning sometimes puts them ahead of the game in cases where reunification became unlikely early on and placement plans had already been arranged.

In one site where the family conferencing process is utilized, participants reported that concurrent planning allowed them to search for a permanent home for children among the community members who came forward to provide support and care for children and families at the initiation of the child welfare referral. Generally, however, workers felt that the benefits of concurrent planning did not outweigh the additional effort it requires. While these issues do not relate directly to over-representation, they may have implications for children of color, especially in relation to the higher numbers of African-American children in foster care currently.

On the positive side, across all sites, participants felt that ASFA had resulted in positive change by increasing permanency options for children. While there were concerns regarding the timelines, participants perceived that the timelines also provided both workers and parents with the motivation to respond more quickly. Many participants reported that the timelines associated with ASFA provided workers with the leverage they needed to both push parents to commit to reunification earlier, or not, and to implement timely consequences when parents failed to comply with the conditions set out in the permanency plan.

> It surprised me how much of a turnaround we made in terms of the number of kids we were able to move out of long term placement. It put [parents and families] on a real tight timeline in terms of having to demonstrate that they could work a plan. If they weren't getting it together, those kids would be terminated. And we had to work harder too, to meet their needs more quickly. But it was ok because we should have been doing that all along. (Supervisor)

> It motivates families right away, families that might not have been motivated [otherwise]... I think it gives the agency a really good guide, one that was needed to seek and reach permanency for children a lot faster. I've seen a lot of children benefit from it. (Direct service worker)

> You'd be amazed at how the service plans look different. Suddenly, they're not trying to make perfect families for kids. They're focused on safety, which is really all you should be focused on...Now, you have to do risk assessments and it has to happen early on and ASFA is wonderful in reducing timeframes so that happens more quickly. We've got a whole lot farther to go but it has moved people and it's raised the bar in terms of permanency. (Direct service worker)

Participants also reported that the timelines pushed workers to assess a family's needs and find appropriate services to meet their needs more quickly. The hope is that an early commitment to reunification combined with immediate access to support services (and timely consequences for non-compliance) will increase the number of children who go home rather than into adoptive placements. Similarly, for those children who are not likely to return home, because parents are unsure about reunification or are unwilling to make the necessary changes to achieve it, workers can begin the search for an appropriate adoptive home sooner than they had previously.

> ASFA has really helped us to focus more on the needs for achieving permanency in a timely manner. When our law changed here, we were making those changes anyway, out of necessity to comply with the law locally. [ASFA] was a big adjustment in the way we were thinking. We really had to start being more geared to do stuff faster, up front…I think that you can achieve permanency in a timely manner, if you can do everything in the case up front, and I think ASFA has really emphasized the need for that. (Supervisor)

4.2 EXAMINING THE STRATEGIES CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES USE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF COLOR

States have been grappling with the issue of over-representation for at least a decade, when studies first began to document its existence. In recent years, however, the child welfare system has come under increasing scrutiny in response to the ongoing barrage of media attention on extreme cases of abuse and neglect, cases often involving minority families. In addition, the recent passage of such Federal policies as the Multi-ethnic Placement and the Adoption and Safe Families Acts also have focused attention on issues related to minority children in the child welfare system. As a result, agencies are once again focused on the issue, including searching for effective practices to respond to it.

To learn more about the strategies child welfare and child-welfare serving agencies use, the study team asked participants to discuss several issues. First, they were asked to talk about programs and practices that might help them better serve minority families. Next, they were asked to discuss strategies that they felt might reduce over-representation. Finally, they were asked to describe programs, practices and strategies they were implementing in their agencies to either reduce over-representation or better serve minority families. This section presents the findings related to these issues.

How can agencies better serve children and families of color?

In addition to gaining insight into the issue of over-representation and the impact of Federal policies on an agencies' ability to serve children and families of color effectively, the team also was interested in learning about factors that would assist agencies to serve children and families of color better. To gain

this perspective, discussions were focused on the following topic: *What policies, procedures or practices would assist your agency to better serve children and families of color?*

In response to this question, participants did not talk about strategies designed specifically to reduce the over-representation of minority children and families in the system. Instead, they spoke most often of philosophical shifts or general practices. Across the sites, participants talked about several areas in which improvements would result in better services for children and families. First, participants talked about changing the nature of service delivery, including emphasizing prevention over intervention and treatment, and establishing collaborative relationships with other service providers and agencies to improve the availability and delivery of quality services to clients. They also talked about needing additional resources to serve clients effectively. In addition, participants also talked about agency-related factors such as administrative support, culturally competent and experienced staff, and reducing caseloads as strategies for improving services to families of color, and families, in general. These issues are explored in greater detail in the following section.

The nature of service delivery: Emphasizing prevention

The overwhelming response to this question was that agencies need to emphasize prevention and provide more front-end or prevention programs and services to families. Participants talked about the overarching philosophy of the child welfare system as being crisis- rather than prevention-oriented, and how it works against rather than for families by focusing on what families are doing wrong or intervening only after family functioning has deteriorated beyond repair. A shift in focus to prevention would allow the system to capitalize on opportunities to stabilize families before they come to the attention of the child welfare system. By providing resources and services to support families before they come to the attention of the system, fewer minority children would enter the system in the first place.

> It isn't until the family situation becomes worse and worse and worse and then there is some sort of crisis that involves physical abuse or something more serious that child protection gets involved…There would be a benefit and maybe you would avoid the crisis later on if you could give appropriate services for families earlier. (Supervisor)

> One of the things that is a real impediment for us is that we are somewhat crisis oriented and it cuts down a lot on the plan for a thoughtful approach to constructing a service system. We're trying but it is really a hindrance when we are always kind of running ragged trying to prevent some imminent crisis from occurring. (Supervisor)

To shift the focus toward prevention successfully, families need access to quality, community-based services. In many cases, workers reported that their clients lived in communities that lacked basic resources and services, including safe and affordable housing, mental health and drug treatment, and employment and educational opportunities. As a result, clients either did not get services or were required to travel long distances to meet with service providers who were generally not culturally competent. Participants also felt that locating services within the community would help to empower the community, and that an empowered community would be better positioned to support at-risk families from entering the system.

> We are now diverting families to community-based agencies where there are family advocates that go out and provide services. The goal is that they will not come back to our attention. They will get the services they need to remain intact and stable. (Supervisor)

> Agencies that are really effective, are effective because they are rooted in the community... Agencies that are effective are rooted in the [ethnic] neighborhoods; they're seen as part of the community. It's seen as a place that people feel comfortable stepping up to. It's safe to walk inside their doors. You know they're going to get help there. They have that kind of reputation in the community. And then, when families walk inside the door, they see people that look like family. They're agencies that have come up out of communities of color. (Administrator)

Building public and private agency partnerships

Historically, the relationship between private and public child welfare agencies has been wrought with tension. The tension often stemmed from the perception that public and private agencies were in competition for clients. In addition, the service agendas of private and public agencies were often very different. Some individuals from the public arena felt that the public agency's job has always been to move families out of the system, while the private agencies, focused on profit and sustainability, were sometimes motivated to retain families for long-term services. Regardless of the validity of this explanation, it remains the case that in years past, the public and private agencies frequently operated without regard for one another. In recent years, public agencies have come to recognize the opportunities and resources that are available through new relationships with private agencies.

> A lot of what we do now in terms of getting the community involved is our relationship with community providers that we contract with. About three-quarters of our work is done through contractor relationships. And we make the extra effort to recruit ethnically sensitive or ethnic specific provider organizations to work with a number of the families that we serve. And it works. It provides a level of support that families might not otherwise receive. (Supervisor)

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on comprehensive, collaborative service delivery at both the state and Federal levels. This, combined with recent reductions in service dollars, and an increasing recognition among service providers of an overlap in client populations across social service systems, has brought public and private agencies together. All nine of the agencies represented in this study currently have relationships with private child welfare agencies, including community-based and ethnic-oriented agencies. These relationships include both formal contractual relationships and informal referral-based ones. While it may not always have been the case, participants feel positively about their current relationships with other service providing agencies and, in most cases, report that it enhances their ability to do their job.

> We had this backlog of kids on whom adoptions had not been finalized. And so, we contracted with [a private, African-American focused, adoption agency] and they assisted us. They really assisted us in finalizing those adoptions and finding adoptive homes for those children. It was extremely helpful. (Direct service worker)

> I think the communication avenues that they've opened up between [the child welfare agency] and the courts and [other private agencies] and the schools are doing incredible things for our kids. They're really helping to move things along. And I think it's incredible. (Family court attorney)

One of the advantages of having relationships with private agencies is that they can be located within the community, especially the ethnic agencies. The location gives clients access to services that may be less intimidating than services located elsewhere because the providers understand the community's needs.

Additional resources

Overwhelmingly, participants across sites reported that they simply needed more resources to serve clients, including more time to spend with families, and more resources to support families to stay together, including such basic necessities as food, housing, employment, and child care options. Across sites, participants talked at length about the lack of resources and the implications for children and families.

> I think the main issue is just having the resources available to meet the needs of our clients. We don't often have what they need and that hurts kids' chances of going home. (Direct service worker)

> You ask, "Why are children over-represented?"… One of the problems is that you are really out there alone. You have no resources. You have a family that is homeless but there is no housing they can afford and you have nothing to offer them...A lot of the African-American community, we don't have services to offer them. We're losing a lot of our resources. Funding has cut a lot of resources for families. (Supervisor)

> We have waiting lists that go on forever to get any kind of services, substance abuse, housing, domestic violence, parenting classes. And if you can't get the services in place within a specific timeframe, they'll pull the kids. (Direct service worker)

Participants in several agencies felt that minority families could be better served if there were more resources for supporting reunification, including more financial incentives for kin to provide temporary foster care, and in cases where children cannot return home, financial assistance for kin to adopt. Most workers perceived relative placements as a positive alternative to traditional foster care but also recognized the additional strain these placements could put on a sometimes already strained family.

> Our approach to placement, preparation and recruitment is one way that we support families. The fact that we offer support after placement is important. When people know that they are going to get supported after placement, especially when they are taking on kin or kids that they know are going to be a challenge from the get-go, it makes a difference. We are not going to place them and leave them. It is all of that combined that does it. (Direct service worker)

> How do we get the services and resources that those children will need to maintain those families until they grow into adulthood? There's a piece beyond, "Okay, we've now got homes for these children, we're out of it." As an agency, we've have limited dollars for adoption subsidies. We have limited dollars for post-adoption services, especially for kin, and what we do have we just piece-meal together. It's been a real struggle. (Administrator)

Finally, participants in two states reported that foster and adoptive families are resources that are critical for moving children out of the system, especially for older children. Unfortunately, many agencies continue to experience a lack of minority foster and adoptive families. Participants in both agencies reported having difficulty recruiting and maintaining minority foster and adoptive families and convincing non-minority families to take in minority children. Some participants thought African-American families might be less willing to adopt because many are single parents or are already caring for a sibling's child or an elderly family member. Participants did acknowledge that finding foster and adoptive families for children might not be the best way to serve minority *families*. However, in situations where a child can not go home, workers must focus on providing a permanent, stable, and safe home for that child and, unfortunately, for many African-American children, those homes do not exist. Foster and adoptive homes, then, are importance resources that are often lacking.

> We need more homes, more African-American homes, especially for children 14 and older. It's just the way it is. We would do much better by these kids if we had more homes. We just need more homes. (Supervisor)

> We also need to increase the numbers of appropriate families willing to look at these [minority] kids... If you look at the number of African-American families that we've received [foster or adoption] inquiries on versus the number of Anglo families versus the number of Hispanic families, you'll see that, in particular, African-American families are not looking to foster or adopt. (Direct service worker)

Agency-related factors

Participants also talked about agency-related factors that would assist them to perform their jobs more effectively and, in doing so, would result in better services for children and families. Specifically, participants noted issues related to staff and administrative support.

Staff issues

There are many different perspectives about what cultural competence means and what relationship it has to effective practice. In this context, participants agreed that cultural competence meant having a diverse workforce that was representative of the population being served and that, regardless of race, could understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities within and among groups. While participants did not necessarily feel that supervisors needed to practice race matching when assigning cases, they did feel strongly that non-minority workers needed to be well versed and open-minded to issues related to the particular culture of the client to whom they had been assigned. Participants talked about training and diversifying the staff as potential solutions to increasing its cultural competence. They also noted the importance of finding mechanisms to assess workers on issues related to race and ethnicity before they are hired, such as screening tools or specific interview questions that address issues related to the racial and ethnic make-up of the client population.

> I think it's critical to have diverse staff because we're not the only ones involved in the decision making, especially after removal. And if we don't have staff that have an understanding of the cultural and can correct the misconceptions of these other people, then regardless of where we stand on the case, if the judge or someone else sees it differently, the decisions that are ultimately made may not be what we think should happen. (Administrator)

> I do honestly think that getting people to understand and appreciate cultural differences and how to work within that context is an effective strategy that's in the best interest of the families; that is what we need to focus on and workers need to have it continually drilled into their heads. We also need that message being brought down from senior management that that is where we are going [toward cultural competence]. We need to be more about serving our community in a way that is amenable to our communities. (Supervisor)

In several sites, participants perceived that a lack of training and experience among workers frequently resulted in culturally insensitive practices among them. To explain this, some noted the lack of colleges and universities that offer courses that prepare students for work with racially diverse groups (except for social work programs which, according to some participants, have courses that emphasize culturally sensitive practice). They also noted the lack of exposure some workers, including both Caucasian and minority staff, have had to people outside of their own racial or ethnic group. This lack of exposure limits their ability to understand the context of other cultures and can result in biased decision-making against certain racial or ethnic groups. For example, participants

in three states talked about the role of discipline in African-American families and how someone without exposure to the African-American community might confuse discipline with abuse and poverty with neglect.

> A lot of times, when the schools call in their report, the children have explained to them why they received a spanking or why the mother may have spanked them with a belt. And they explain it to the social worker and it still gets substantiated. The way I look at it, why isn't that social worker seeing what really happened or what might have happened and how she can help that family instead of opening a CPS case on them? It is not always abuse and the workers should know that. (Direct service worker)

Participants also talked about the assumptions that are sometimes made about clients who live in certain neighborhoods, with workers associating certain neighborhoods and, therefore, certain clients, generally minority clients, with drug use and violence. In cases where workers perceive that the neighborhood is unsafe or unsuitable, they might be more likely to substantiate a case and then place the child in foster care outside of the community. According to participants, workers who engage in this practice are using it as a means to ensure that they do not have to go into certain neighborhoods for home visits, not because it is the best placement for the child.

> So these workers [that grew up in affluent communities], what they see in delivering services or investigating an African-American home is real different from someone who may have grown up in the inner city. And then their sense of how to assess risk if these children are at risk is real different from someone who has been a part of a minority group, and understanding their culture, not being shocked at seeing impoverished circumstances. Their assessment of that situation is going to be real different from someone who has not been exposed to that and their decision-making and assessment of risk is going to be different. (Administrator)

Finally, across all sites workers reported that hiring more workers and reducing caseloads would improve the delivery of services not only to families of color but to all families. Across the board, workers talked about feeling pressured for time to spend with families, make good decisions and complete paperwork in a timely and efficient manner. In fact, some participants felt that they spend more time engaged in administrative tasks than they did working with families or that they feel pressure to trade administrative tasks for practice or practice for administrative tasks, but always lacking sufficient time for either task. These issues, coupled with the demand of working with families that are experiencing a variety of serious problems, including substance abuse, mental illness, and homelessness, resulted in workers feeling overwhelmed, burned out, and subsequently, concerned about the quality of service provision.

> Well, we need more workers to do what we want to do, which is to help families. (Supervisor)

> We need more workers so we can work with our families longer and with more intensity. (Direct service worker)

> We need more staff because it's like you come into the emergency room and you get a band-aid and you go back out in the world. Because of the numbers [of cases], we cannot spend quality time that is really needed with families and children, to keep children out of care. (Direct service worker)

Administrative support

Recognizing the importance of a strong relationship between an agency's administration and its work force, the administration of agencies in three states talked about their efforts to improve services by improving the work environment.

Specifically, they talked about the importance of an agency infrastructure that includes experienced workers, proper supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads. They felt that a strong agency infrastructure could reduce disproportionality by allowing supervisors and workers alike to do their jobs more effectively. If supervisors are able to supervise properly, then workers will be able to do their jobs more effectively, leading to better outcomes for children and families, including fewer children coming into the system in the first place.

> This is about effective management...When you think about this as new or emerging practices within the field, I am [talking about] new or emerging management practices that help to strengthen any operation. [Our staff] felt that the leadership was disconnected, that we couldn't bring our staff high enough due to turnover. [The agency administration] did not have appreciation for the challenge of the job, did not have appreciate for how community decisions are actually made, that people felt that they couldn't participate in the system... We were going to build real conduits between top administrators and front-line workers that could really facilitate the exchange of ideas, improve services to families. (Administrator)

> Our ratio of child protection workers to their supervisors is too high... If we could get it down to eight child protection workers to one supervisor, that would give supervisors much more time to focus on coaching and supporting staff on a whole broad variety of issues... The lower ratio also helps us get at these attitudinal issues so that if a supervisor picks up that a social worker has a punitive attitude, they can begin to turn that around... This is what can help improve disproportionality. (Administrator)

Clearly infrastructure (e.g., experienced workers, proper supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads) and administrative support is important because, in places where participants felt disconnected from the administration and its decisions, job performance was affected. For example, in one state, staff reported feeling isolated from the decisions that were being made by the administration and, as a result, felt there were unrealistic expectations placed on supervisors and workers. Supervisors, in particular, talked about how it was difficult for them to see the big picture or understand the rationale behind administrative decisions if they were lacking important information regarding changes in practice or policy.

> I don't feel like a manager... I really feel like a glorified worker. Because the expectation is that if [the workers] can't do it, [the administration] is telling us that we ought to do it. If they can't go to court, we have to go to court. If they can't go out and investigate, we have to go out there. In the past, we were able to delegate, and the workers were expecting us to be out in the field supervising. It's just more difficult now and I don't understand [the administration's] reasoning behind it. (Supervisor)

In addition, workers in one location talked at length about on-going budgetary constraints and the closing of a regional office. These were issues they did not understand but that were having a serious impact on their work performance. The perceived lack of information regarding the decision to close the regional office, coupled with the loss of income, employment opportunities, and peer relationships for those involved, contributed significantly to the negative feelings workers expressed during discussions.

In addition, supervisors and workers often felt an underlying sense of mistrust toward the administration when it came to media cases. In response to several attacks by the media, supervisors in three states reported feeling pressure from the administration to scrutinize workers decisions more carefully. According to the

workers, this increased scrutiny often left them feeling that they could not be trusted to make good decisions and fearful that if they made a decision that resulted in further harm to a child, the administration would not support them.

> To me, I can follow policy to the letter, and if a kid dies, I am not going to feel comfortable with my decision... It may be a kid in a family where the worker has established a relationship, they're visiting the family every week, and they've established a relationship with that child, and the child dies. But instead of showing compassion for the worker, [the administration] is like, "what did you do wrong?"... It seems like you can never do anything 100 percent right, even if there's no repercussions. It's just the stress level... If there is an incident where a kid dies, it is already assumed that you did something wrong. (Supervisor)

While issues related to staff and administrative support may not *directly* influence the over-representation of minority children in the system, there is evidence that they affect it indirectly. When staff are not culturally sensitive, the agency infrastructure is weak, and workers lack the confidence they need to make informed decisions regarding cases, both the work environment in general, and the quality of services provided are compromised. When services are compromised, it is not just families of color that are affected. All families are affected.

What is necessary to reduce over-representation?

After asking participants to talk about changes in policies, procedures or practices that would assist them to serve children and families of color better, they were asked to focus the discussion around the following topic: *What types of services, programs, and policies do you think would be necessary to reduce over-representation?* The responses fell out into two categories: resources for clients, both external and internal to the agency, and developing community connections.

It is important to note that there is some overlap in responses to this topic and the one preceding it *(What policies, procedures or practices would assist your agency to serve children and families of color better?)*. In both cases, participants talked about the need for resources, both external and internal to the child welfare agency, to serve children and families. They also placed particular emphasis on the need for preventive and community-based services, and to build collaborative relationships with other service-providing agencies. While the overlap may be related to the salience of these issues to the participants, it also may be the case that the two questions were similar enough in nature to elicit similar responses.

External resources for clients

Related to the perception that poverty and poverty-related issues are two primary explanations for over-representation, participants linked the availability of resources, again, preventive resources, for clients to a decrease in over-representation. Specifically, participants referred to the importance of having access to resources external to the agency to help support families to stay together, including adequate housing, educational and employment opportunities, quality child-care services, and financial support. They also discussed the importance of ancillary services, including community-based drug treatment and mental health services, in keeping families stable and children out of the system. According to some workers, if every family had equal access to these resources, over-representation would take care of itself because fewer children would come into the system in the first place.

> I think moms need more health services now but we can't find those services. We have very poor quality substance abuse treatment; it's almost a joke. And you [have] a lot of other stuff going on that if we could help, we would keep them out of the system. The quality of service in our area [a predominantly African-American community] is just so lacking. (Supervisor)

> If I could fix it, I would put some child care facilities in place that don't charge families so that they can put their child in a safe environment, so they can go and get job training, and they can look for employment, and they can go to work, so that they can have the money they need to do what they need to do to support their family. I would put some facilities in place within their communities where they can go and get some support services. Those are some things that I think would matter [to keeping African-American families out of the system]. (Supervisor)

While tangible resources are important, many participants also talked about the importance of addressing larger, more systemic issues such as the lack of information, advocacy and power they often see in their African-American clients. In two states, participants commented frequently that African-Americans did not know their rights when it comes to social service systems, and have neither the power nor the information they need to advocate for themselves when the child welfare system knocks on their door. Participants gave examples of situations involving Caucasian families where parents, when confronted by the child welfare system, not only knew that they had the right to an attorney but exercised that right immediately. Without knowing their rights, African-American parents were unable to do the same (although it is unclear why this disparity exists and why Caucasian families are better advocates for themselves than are African-American families). In other reported cases, African-American mothers were unaware of hospital confidentiality and consent policies and so submitted to drug tests without having given prior consent. Participants in one of the states talked about cases in which mothers did know that consent was required for drug testing but, too frightened and intimidated to resist, they complied regardless of their desire to do otherwise.

Similarly, once involved with the system, African-American clients are much less likely to know how to negotiate it, especially when it comes to the courts. The most commonly cited example was the assignment of public defenders to minority clients that cannot afford to hire a private attorney, a very common situation. Overwhelmingly participants reported that private attorneys will do a lot more work for their clients than will public defenders and that parents who are assigned public defenders are at a distinct disadvantage, especially in terms of whether the children will go home or not. According to some participants, children are less likely to go home in families represented by public defenders.

> Those clients [that are given public defenders] are given an injustice. When they come into the system, where their children are taken away from them for various reasons, most of them are given a public defender, and that's an injustice to the client... Now, you bring someone else, someone of a different race or someone that's middle class, and they come in here with their attorney, and their attorney really looks out for their rights. These poor people don't have anybody to look out for them. The public defender may say, "I'm going to help you" but they have to tell their story to 10 people every time they go to court and that's unfair. That's one of the worst things that happens to our kids... When you take protective custody, and I get to court, if we have a private attorney, those kids are going back home. (Supervisor)

In addition, there was some discussion among participants in three states regarding the social stigma attached to poverty and how that plays out in the courtroom. Many workers felt that, regardless of the quality of the legal representation, the negative stigma associated with poverty often resulted in differential outcomes in court for African-American and non-minority families, with minority families losing their children more often than white families.

> I don't know the extent that socioeconomic [factors] play [a role], but I do see it in my section in intake and the courtroom. The people who are socio-economically disadvantaged, they get whatever they get in terms of legal representation, and then the families that happen to be socio-economically advantaged, they tend to bring in private attorneys. And it is very clear when there is a private attorney in there versus a public defender versus a court appointed attorney. The private attorneys will do, in my opinion, a lot more work for the clients than the other attorneys. (Supervisor)

Participants also expressed frustration at their powerlessness to do anything to change these issues for their clients. They talked about empowering African-American communities but recognized that this solution was complex and multi-faceted and, most important, out of the control of the child welfare agency.

> I think it is really more about politics than anything else...We have to empower communities but that's difficult. [The child welfare system] can only do so much and that's really limited. (Supervisor)

Agency resources for clients

In addition to addressing issues and resources external to the child welfare agency, participants talked about additional client resources within the child welfare agency, especially monetary resources, as critical to addressing over-representation. One of the issues most frequently discussed by participants was the need for financial incentives and resources for foster and adoptive families, particularly for kinship care providers. Because kinship care practice is one of the oldest traditions in African-American culture, many African-American children who do not live with their parents are already living in informal kinship placements with grandparents or other kin. While the informal practice of kinship care keeps children out of child welfare system, the lack of resources for formal kinship placements often means that families are either not able to take children in at all or are unable to take in additional children when formal placements are necessary. Participants felt confident that family members, including those already involved in informal kinship care, would be more likely to foster and adopt children if financial support and other resources were available.

> If we looked at policy changes, I would want us to look at kinship care. Because a lot of the family members that we have been involved with, who might actually be a good resource for children, are not financially able to do it. Or they agree to take it on and find out later that they really can't do it financially. If we increased financial support and assistance to these families... I think we'd have less disruption in the placements that we put them in. (Supervisor)

In addition to incentives to foster and adopt, families also need ongoing post-adoption support services. In two states, workers reported that foster care subsidies are available only to families that are fostering children and are terminated once a family adopts. Once they adopt, families also lose contact with their foster care worker and access to a variety of supportive services—resources they depend on when children are acting out or need emotional support. Participants felt that these restrictions reduced the number of families willing to adopt but that on-going financial and supportive assistance to adoptive families, post-adoption, would increase the number of permanent placements available for African-American children, helping move them out of the system more quickly.

> One of the issues that we really struggle with is financial disincentives for relatives or foster parents who want to adopt children. We are pretty generous with our foster care rates... but we have relatives that cannot afford to adopt children and so they don't get permanency for that very reason. So then we get frustrated with them because they won't commit to adopt

> but really, it is [because] they cannot afford it... People are already struggling and then they take on more... Support those kin with more funding, more services and I guarantee you will get more minorities willing to adopt. (Supervisor)

Community connections

Participants in all sites felt that developing relationships with communities and partnerships with community-based systems and agencies was another important mechanism for reducing over-representation, re-emphasizing the need to establish collaborative and contractual relationships with ethnic and community-based agencies to provide services to minority families. In this context, however, participants talked about moving beyond the provision of community-based services, focusing instead on establishing real connections with minority communities.

> [As an agency], we have a real obligation to step forward and be a catalyst and bring community members together with us as partners. To begin to look at what can we do in partnership and how can we use natural supports in the communities, like churches and neighborhood groups, and those types of things. How do we empower [communities] to support families and how do we connect families with those natural resources? (Administrator)

Participants recognized that one way to establish relationships with minority communities was to engage community leaders. Community leaders, whether formal or informal, are often community experts, especially in the African-American communities. Leaders are often individuals that have lived in the community for decades and, as a result, have a great deal of knowledge regarding the community. They know what goes on in the community, including where the problems and resources exist, and often have long-standing relationships with families and local organizations and agencies. Because of their standing in the community, there are a number of ways leaders can assist the child welfare community. They can assist workers to understand the culture and dynamics of the community. This information can help workers decide how best to approach and engage families in social services. In addition, aligning themselves with local leaders may give workers the credibility they need to access and engage family members. Because community members often look to local leaders for guidance, community members may feel more comfortable initiating contact with a child welfare worker if they know the leaders are supportive of the agency's practices.

> I think it's crucial that our services are community-based... close to where the people live so they can access them and we can be part of the community... And to really work with community leaders in trying to understand what families need and providing services to families... really reaching out and looking at community leaders as the experts and try to work together with them to connect with families. (Direct service worker)

Once the child welfare community had established relationships and credibility in minority communities, participants felt that they might have new opportunities to work within the community, including educating community members about the mission of child welfare and working proactively with families. Participants acknowledged that partnering with the community would likely be difficult, especially in light of the fact that clients can have preconceived ideas about child welfare workers, based on misinformation and misunderstanding, just as easily as workers can have them about clients.

> Partnering with the community is tough because you first have to get through all those sort of miscommunications and misunderstandings and lack of understanding and lack of knowledge [about the child welfare system]. But, then, once you get through all that, it usually pays off. It

> helps us provide better services because we get input from the community. (Supervisor)

For example, one worker talked about her experience venturing into certain minority communities and how, regardless of her mission, people automatically thought she was there to cart off their kids. Participants felt that if they could get close enough to the community they could educate them about the system, dispelling long-standing myths of the child welfare agency as baby-snatcher and helping them to see that the system could be a resource to them, not just an enemy. Also, by increasing their knowledge about the system and related systems and services, workers could build the community's capacity to respond to children and families in need.

> I think that when planning for services and programs for families... it should be more about connecting with the community, with community agencies that are out there, community organizations and just being more hands-on with the community. And not just saying, well, here's how we're going to address the disparity issues, "we're going to hire more black staff." We need to be out in the community. (Direct service worker)

Establishing community connections also is important because it can assist workers to learn about and take advantage of existing community resources, something many workers report knowing very little about. For example, because the church is central to the African-American culture, it can often be a tremendous resource to the child welfare system. Church leaders are often part of the informal community leadership structure and can help workers identify and help families that may be struggling. In addition, the church often has financial resources and services, such as faith-based counseling, that families can access right in their own community. In addition, because recruiting more families of color to adopt is essential to reduce the numbers of waiting children, and because the church has such strong ties within the community, churches can provide an important opportunity for recruiting African-American foster and adoptive parents. This has been the premise on which such practices as One Church, One Child have been built. As a result, many agencies have incorporated a faith-based component to their recruitment efforts. Because of its strong ties to the community, the church has become an important resource for recruiting African-American foster and adoptive families.

> One of the things I'm hoping we can be a part of is a real faith-based initiative in the community... There are social services that exist within many of our temples, and churches, and synagogues... and particularly within the African-American community... I would love to see the faith community... taking on the charge of recruiting and certifying foster and adoptive families and providing support for families in the community so that they can identify fictive kin for our children and keep our children home and supported. (Administrator)

Finally, workers in one of the sites talked about giving power back to the communities. Instead of *providing* services to the community, they felt that the child welfare agencies could redirect some of its financial resources to local agencies and organizations, including faith-based groups, to empower them to find solutions to their own problems, including supporting their own families. While the workers recognized that there might always be a need for a formal child welfare system, they felt that the system could reduce over-representation and better serve communities by re-building them instead of trying to fix them.

4.3 RESPONDING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF COLOR: PROMISING PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

The previous two sections were focused on participants' perceptions. Specifically, they were focused on the types of practices, strategies, activities, and policies participants reported as necessary to improve the delivery of services to children and families of color and to reduce over-representation. This section is focused on the actual programs, practices, and strategies that agencies are implementing to both reduce over-representation and meet the needs children and families of color. To examine these, participants discussed the following topic: *What has your agency done to improve the delivery of services to children and families of color?*

It is important to note that given the exploratory nature of this study, participants were not asked to differentiate between programs, practices, or strategies that were designed to improve the delivery of services to all children and families and those that were designed to reduce over-representation. Agencies also were required not to provide empirical evidence of a program's success. The goal of this study was simply to get input from the field regarding the types of programs, practices, and strategies they had implemented to improve services to children and families of color. In some cases, however, agencies had instituted programs, practices or strategies to improve services to all children and families, regardless of race or ethnicity. While some of the strategies presented here may ultimately reduce over-representation, it is beyond the scope of this study to identify and empirically document them.

Agencies have responded in several ways to improve the delivery of services to minority families. Some agencies are implementing new programs and practices, including prevention programs and recruitment and support efforts for minority foster and adoptive families. Other agencies had initiated system change efforts designed to modify or change policies, practices, procedures or relations between child welfare agencies and related systems to improve operations and services. System reform efforts include: increasing collaboration and coordination between the child welfare and other child-welfare serving agencies, establishing judicial reform, and decentralizing staff into the schools, courts, and community-based agencies. Other agencies have formed task forces or collaborative boards to examine the issue of minority over-representation and identify strategies to reduce it. Finally, agencies also have attempted to enhance agency practices, including providing culturally specific training to staff, and hiring more minority front-line workers and supervisors. These strategies are outlined in more detail in the following section.

Prevention programs

When asked how agencies can better serve children and families of color in the child welfare system, many participants felt strongly that providing more prevention or front-end services was the answer. Specifically, participants felt that prevention services would keep children from entering the system. Fewer children in the system would mean smaller caseloads for workers. Smaller caseloads would allow workers to spend more time with families and to focus limited resources on families that need them the most. In this way, children and families would be better served. Two agencies described prevention programs they had undertaken.

Alternative response systems. Consistent with an emphasis on prevention services, one of the Minnesota sites is implementing two prevention programs in an effort to reduce the number of minority families coming into the system. The first, the Alternative Response System, also being implemented by the California site (and in other agencies nationwide), is an intensive, voluntary prevention program designed to identify and engage at-risk families before they come to the attention of the formal child welfare system.

Program staff work with community-based agencies to identify families but families also are identified through more traditional means, such as hotline calls. Once identified, families are approached and offered assistance. Once they agree to participate, the staff person works with them to identify their needs and develop a plan for service. For example, in many cases parents need parenting classes so those will become part of the service plan. Similarly, if children need counseling, they will be referred to community-based ethnic agencies for services. If the family refuses services, however, the worker can refer the case back to the formal agency for further investigation. The agency contracts with local ethnic based agencies for services because it allows families to receive culturally appropriate services in their own community, and reduce the stigma attached with child welfare involvement. Agency staff reported feeling that the program is less punitive, less blaming and more family-friendly than traditional agency practice.

The same Minnesota site also is supporting the SchoolsFirst program, which provides casework services to struggling families. Developed to enhance school achievement and reduce neglect by providing family support, the program assigns culturally appropriate caseworkers to families who then work with them in their homes to identify needs and negotiate services.

Recruitment and support efforts for minority foster and adoptive parents. Since the passage of ASFA and its focus on permanency, many agencies have implemented strategies to increase adoption and other permanency options for children. In an effort to achieve permanency for children, several agencies are implementing programs targeted toward creating and supporting adoption options for minority families, including recruitment efforts, and strategies to provide financial support to kinship care providers who have assumed guardianship for a relative's child. The sites in Illinois, Texas, California, North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia and Minnesota have programs that are designed to increase the recruitment and retention of African-American foster and adoptive families.

In several cases, agencies have partnered with the community to implement culturally specific recruitment efforts. In the Illinois site, *HOTEP or Holding on to Every Person* is a culturally- and community-based recruitment program designed to increase the numbers of licensed minority foster and adoptive families. The program's primary goal is to promote reunification by placing children in their own communities, preferably with family members, and then supporting the parents and the extended family to work toward reunification. A secondary goal, for those families in which reunification is not possible, is to keep the child as close to his or her family of origin as possible by supporting extended family members or individuals who live in the child's community to adopt. Although the program has recently been curtailed due to funding issues, the program's sponsors are optimistic that they can both find the resources to fully implement the program and that it will promote positive results for children, families, and communities of color.

The child welfare agency in Virginia works collaboratively with *One Church, One Child* to reduce the number of African-American children in out of home placements. Created in 1985 by the Virginia Department of Social Services and a group of Virginia clergy, the *One Church, One Child* program has specific responsibility for recruiting families to adopt African-American children out of the child welfare system. Sponsored by an independent agency, the program not only has contracts with the Department of Social Services but also houses a Department-employed child welfare worker within their agency. Built on a collaborative model of service delivery, these recruitment efforts are conducted statewide, with agencies strategically placed throughout the state to facilitate adoptions within those specific regions.

A program similar in its mission to *One Church, One Child*, the *Roots* program, a grassroots program based in Georgia, is a private adoption agency that is used by the state of Georgia for recruitment of families for adoptive children. It places all children, but is focused on placing African-American children. Their goal is to decrease the over representation of African-American children in Georgia's foster care system. Using an Afro-centric approach, Roots recruits, prepares and supports prospective adoptive parents who can appropriately meet the needs of children who have been abused, abandoned and neglected. Roots recently moved its offices from a commercial area to a house located in the community to be more integrated into one of the communities it serves.

Texas has two recruitment efforts, both of which are collaborative. *The Collaborative Adoptive Network (CAN)* is a collaboration between the child welfare agency and several other community-based agencies, such as Casey Family Programs, the Children's Shelter of Texas, and Methodist Family and Rehabilitative Services, to name a few. Developed in response to the lack of minority adoptive families, and funded by a grant from the Kronkosky Foundation, CAN is a recruitment effort targeted at finding and recruiting families of color for children waiting to be adopted, including children with physical, emotional or psychological limitations. Once recruited, CAN provides support to children and their adoptive families during every phase of the adoption process, including post-adoption support services. The other recruitment effort is called *Project Ujima*. Based on the Swahili word for collective work and responsibility, Project Ujima brings together stakeholders from the African-American communities around the major city in which it is being implemented. Together, they plan and implement culturally specific and community-focused strategies to raise awareness in African-American communities of the issues facing minority families in the child welfare system, and to identify and strategically recruit minority adoptive families.

Texas also has implemented a post-adoption support program to provide education, social support and financial assistance to relative caregivers. In the *Comprehensive Relative Enhancement Support and Training (CREST)* program in Texas, a collaborative effort with Casey Family Programs, kinship care providers receive services similar to those provided to licensed foster care providers, although financial assistance is more limited. The program began in 1997 as a three-year kinship care demonstration project to increase the number of kinship placements, strengthen kinship placements to decrease the number of disruptions, and reduce the cost of substitute care by encouraging relative care placements. The program has been continued in its city of origin after an evaluation of the project showed that it made notable progress towards each of its objectives, including that the program is highly cost effective. Interestingly, because the program has been so successful, instead of seeking term-limited grant funds to support the CREST worker, the agency opted instead to reallocate existing funds to support the position. An agency administrator reported that by doing so the agency sent a message that it supports kinship care and also secured the program's future within the agency. Workers involved in the program are hoping it will be implemented statewide.

Systems change efforts. In addition to new programs, agencies also are implementing system change or reform efforts. System change efforts are those system- or agency-wide efforts designed to modify or change policies, practices, procedures or relations of child welfare agencies and related systems to improve operations. Operations include decision-making, service delivery, and collaboration and coordination between agencies and social service systems to improve outcomes for child-welfare involved children and families.

Two sites, those in Illinois and California, have implemented system reform strategies that have resulted in the provision of financial support to

kinship care providers. In Illinois, through a Federal government waiver, local child welfare agencies now have the option of transitioning relatives that are caring for children to legal guardian status, and to provide them with higher payments than they would receive from child-only TANF payments. Illinois also recently modified the definition of relative to include second cousins and godparents, a significant change for children of color. Because they are now considered relatives, second cousins and godparents are eligible to receive financial and other supports targeted for kinship care providers. The California site is implementing KinGap, a program that provides financial assistance to relative care providers, again, as in the Illinois site, with income above and beyond what they would receive from child-only TANF payments. The California site also has started using state tax revenues that are targeted for children's services to fund kinship and family support centers for relative care providers.

A small rural site in North Carolina has experienced significant systematic reform due to the Families for Kids Initiative, which has been continued with federal, state, and county funds since the ending of their original grant. The overall philosophy of the child welfare agency changed with the initiation of this effort. For example, their goal was to place children in a permanent setting within one year, and to have children only experience one placement prior to permanency. To accomplish these permanency goals, they instituted several changes in practice. First, they now conduct a family conference (called Family Assessments in their agency) on every family with a substantiated case of child maltreatment. Thus, they have brought family members, neighbors and friends, the religious community, professional helpers, and other interested parties to meetings to discuss safety plans and permanency options for children. They also focus on the well being of the child, documenting the child's current functioning and ensuring that appropriate child-oriented services are in place. These meetings occur intensively at the beginning of a family's involvement with the agency and then continue regularly until the identified child receives a permanent placement. Concurrent planning is an integral part of this process; relatives and other members of the family's social network are targeted as potential permanent placements for the children early in the case.

This agency has also changed its organizational structure so that children who become involved in the child welfare system remain with the same staff team, whether they are in the protective, preventive, foster care, or adoption end of the service delivery spectrum. They also use a standardized risk assessment to assist in decisions about substantiation and placement, which staff perceive as reducing the numbers of minority children who may be brought into the system for subjective reasons. Additionally, their targeted recruitment of foster and adoptive families for minority children has increased. In line with this, they began to use relatives, fictive kin (i.e. unrelated persons who have a close relationship with the family), and more diverse foster families (e.g. single parents, low-income parents) as placement options for these children. They also have a foster-adopt model, so that foster parents are encouraged to adopt legally available children in their care. Their philosophy is that all children deserve permanency, so they do not stop recruiting for a home for a particular child until the child ages out of the system. They also made a commitment to keep children in placements within their county so that reunification efforts would not be thwarted by distance. Finally, they worked to reduce the numbers of children in group placements to a minimum, and to reduce the numbers of children discharged from group homes due to infractions. Importantly, the Families for Kids effort included an evaluation, which documented that this site had accomplished most of their goals and had indeed reduced the racial disproportionality in their child welfare system.

Collaboration and contract services. To serve minority clients better and reduce over-representation, agencies also are increasing the frequency with which they collaborate and contract with community-based agencies for services, another form of system reform. While most of the nine agencies had formal contracts with outside service providers, participants in Illinois, Virginia, and Minnesota identified contracts with ethnic- and other child-welfare serving agencies to provide foster care, adoption, and support services to minority clients as a major resource to them.

The Illinois site, for example, has a contract with the Nation of Islam to recruit and support case aides to work with child-welfare involved Muslim families. The agency also maintains contracts with several other African-American and Hispanic agencies to provide a wide range of culturally appropriate services, including substance abuse, mental health and support services, to meet the needs of their minority clients.

The Virginia site has several contracts with local private agencies to provide support services to child welfare workers and clients, but the primary one is with a local private social service agency called Collaborators-II (C-2). Recognizing the potential for staff burn-out, the administration initiated the contract to assist child welfare workers to perform their responsibilities more effectively by providing them with support services and training opportunities. To this end, C-2 provides case planning and adoption studies for families involved in the child welfare system. This service takes some of the burden off the child welfare staff, allowing them more time to complete paperwork or work with families.

C-2 also is responsible for developing and delivering training sessions on a variety of child-welfare related topics to agency staff. Because of the nature and intensity of their work, too often child welfare staff miss out on training opportunities. This aspect of the contract brings the training to the agency and helps agency staff stay on top of current trends in child welfare policies, practices, and related issues. While there are no hard data at this time, participants from both the child welfare agency and C-2 report that these activities have consistently reduced the over-representation of minority families in the system. The Virginia site also maintains service contracts with two of the local faith-based agencies, one to assist in finding foster and adoptive homes for African-American children, and the other to provide child welfare and support services to agency-involved families.

In Georgia, an exciting program for community partnering exists to which the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) is very much committed. The Community Partnership for Protecting Children (CPPCP) works in partnership with the local East Point Community Action Team (EPCAT) to protect children who reside in communities that have been identified by DFCS as having a high number of children involved with child protective services. Supported with funds from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, this collaboration is aimed at building the community's capacity to protect children and keep them from entering the system. EPCAT provides concrete services (e.g., housing, consumable goods, emergency financial assistance) to families at-risk and engages the community in supporting them to keep their children or to facilitate reunification. DFCS also has placed a worker (who considers herself a community organizer) in the EPCAT office so that she can be closer to the community she serves. In this role, she works with the schools, churches, police, and other agencies in the community to set up prevention programs. She also works to facilitate the delivery of services and goods to families identified as at-risk for abuse or neglect, and provides on-site counseling and crisis intervention to families at-risk.

Agencies also are responding by decentralizing staff, getting them out of the agency and into the schools, courts, and community-based agencies.

According to participants in the agencies that are decentralizing staff, this strategy allows workers to educate other social service systems and communities about the child welfare system, which can reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to the agency. It also brings the workers closer to those who need them. For example, the site in Virginia has placed two workers in the courts to help provide a link between the department and the court system, and placed another worker in the school from which a high number of referrals are received by the agency. They also have a worker who has been placed with a private adoption agency to oversee and facilitate placements for agency-involved children. The Georgia site has decentralized its offices to different locations throughout the county to provide better working conditions for staff and easier access to services for clients. The site also has a staff person located in the court to help build a strong relationship between the agency and the courts. The Texas site has an office located in the court staffed with workers from the agency. The agency also has placed a worker in an ethnic-based community service center, which happens to be housed in the neighborhood from which the agency receives the majority of its cases. Not only has the worker been able to see her clients more regularly, but also, now that the worker is in the community center rather than the agency, her clients actually come to her before problems arise or when they are feeling particularly vulnerable or in need of support.

Councils on over-representation. Some agencies have responded to the issue of over-representation by developing and implementing coalitions, councils or other collaborative boards to examine the issue of over-representation, and problem-solve ways to reduce it. The California site has two such councils, the African-American Council and the Spanish Speaking Council. They also have the African-American Advisory and Advocacy Board. Developed in the early 90s, at a time when the agency's staff was overwhelmingly white and the client population overwhelmingly African-American, the Board, composed solely of child welfare staff, came together to examine ways to develop and maintain a culturally diverse and culturally competent staff. The members of the council take pride in the contribution they have made to the agency. For example, since 1996, their efforts have increased the number of African-American workers employed by the agency by 13 percent, as well as the number of African-American supervisors and senior managers.

The Texas site has two such councils. The Diversity Council is an interagency council responsible for ensuring that staff are culturally sensitivity, and the agency supports practices that represent the interests of minority groups, including, for example, recruiting and hiring African-American and Spanish-speaking staff. The Collaborative Adoption Network (CAN), as described above, is a collaborative council composed of representatives from the child welfare agency and several other community-based agencies whose mission it is to find and recruit families of color for children awaiting adoption. While numbers are not yet available, members of the CAN report that their efforts have increased the number of minority adoptions through the child welfare agency and other private adoption agencies.

Finally, Michigan has the Minority Over-representation Think Tank. Formed because of a mutual concern on the part of multiple agencies and service providers regarding the number of African-American children in foster and residential care, the Think Tank is devoted to identifying factors responsible for minority over-representation that are internal to the child welfare system. The group comprises individuals, mostly at the administrative level, with extensive experience working in the child welfare system; particularly in communities that are predominantly minority or that have an over-representation of minority children in the system.

Agency practices. Agencies also have responded to improving the delivery of services to minority families by focusing on agency practices. Specifically, they have been implementing practices related to the training and supervision of staff, as well as implementing hiring practices designed to diversify the staff to represent the client population better.

Most state-administered systems sponsor a training program that is mandatory for new workers. In California, Virginia, Texas, and Minnesota this mandatory training includes a cultural competency component. In the Texas, California and Minnesota sites, the local or regional agency also sponsors its own culturally specific training, which is generally offered on an ongoing basis and is specific to the groups represented locally. In Texas, workers are required to attend cultural diversity training that is designed to raise their awareness of issues related to specific racial and ethnic groups. In addition, the agency offers optional classes throughout the year on specific ethnic groups and related issues. For example, one optional class was designed to teach workers about Mexican American families, including information regarding their religious and cultural holidays. While these classes are optional, workers are required to maintain a certain number of cultural training hours each year.

One of the Minnesota sites provides a range of training that covers issues related to a variety of racial and ethnic groups and also provides staff with an annual stipend that can be applied to outside training. Staff are encouraged to use this money to improve their knowledge of local racial and ethnic groups. The other Minnesota site also offers local training to its workers. Because this site is located in such a diverse county, on-going cultural competency training is imperative to effective service delivery. In the last year, this site has sponsored training sessions on issues related to Hmong, Mongolian and Somali families. The California site also offers its own training which includes components on ethics and values. The Ethics and Values training not only teaches the specifics of working with different racial and ethnic groups but also includes a large component that is focused on assisting workers to recognize their own biases and finding ways to control them while working towards minimizing them.

Staff diversity. Several agency administrators reported that effective practice begins with staff diversity or a staff that reflects the population served by the agency. As a result, they were implementing efforts specifically designed to diversify their staff.

The administration in Texas is committed to diversifying its staff. Administrators talked at length about the importance of having a diverse staff especially in response to a diverse client population. Located in a predominantly Hispanic community, the agency has little trouble recruiting and retaining Hispanic staff. They do, however, have difficulty finding African-American staff. This is not because they have not tried. They have several initiatives in place to reach out to the African-American community. One such program is an internship program targeted toward African-American social work students. Coordinated through the local university and supported by the child welfare agency, the internship provides qualified students with the opportunity for paid employment with the child welfare agency and financial assistance for tuition support. For the last three years, however, the internship position has not been filled. While discouraged by this, the administration continues to set aside the funds for the position each year because, with a large Hispanic and African-American client population, they are aware of the issues related to providing quality, culturally appropriate services to minority clients. Until they fill the internship position, they will continue to search for alternative strategies to recruit and maintain African-American staff and to implement culturally appropriate practices and programs.

The administration in the California site also is committed to diversifying its staff. After coming under fire for decades from the African-American community for what they perceived as differential and inappropriate treatment of African-American children, including the lack of minority workers within the agency, the agency was ready for change. Under the direction of the new administrator, there have been concerted efforts to increase the number of minority staff, including altering the standards by which staff could be hired. Previous requirements for employees to hold a Master's degree were changed to provide opportunities for B.A.-level workers. Altering the standard has significantly increased the number of African-American workers employed within the agency. Although these changes led to tensions among the staff initially, most of the current staff feel positively about the agency's success in diversifying the staff. In addition, the administrator also restructured the organizational chart, providing management opportunities that previously did not exist for some staff, created minority leadership committees within the agency, and mandated cultural competency training for staff. In combination, these efforts have resulted in a more racially balanced staff that is better positioned to provide quality services to clients, regardless of their race or ethnicity. The administration reports anecdotally that these changes have improved services to children and families of color, although empirical evidence of such changes is not available.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This qualitative study represents the field's first attempt to gather systematically the perceptions of child welfare personnel about the issue of racial disproportionality. In many ways, the findings are consistent with the evidence from the extant empirical literature regarding this issue. This study also amplifies and enriches the available evidence, by highlighting the voices of the people who do the work on a daily basis. In this section, we examine the findings from this study in the context of the literature that addresses racial disproportionality in the child welfare system.

5.1 RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Across the board, child welfare personnel in all nine sites acknowledged that racial disproportionality existed in their child welfare systems, and offered varying reasons for its existence. In summary, they attributed racial disproportionality to external factors such as poverty and racial discrimination, to community and family characteristics such as the lack of informal and formal supports, and to internal issues such as worker bias.

The evidence from this study linking racial disproportionality to external factors is consonant with much of the literature in this area. For example, numerous studies on child maltreatment find strong associations between child neglect and poverty (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996; Eckenrode et al., 1998). One would expect, then, that groups that are more likely to be impoverished, such as African-Americans, also would be more likely to be represented in the child welfare statistics on neglect. In regard to child welfare system involvement, Barth and colleagues (2001) have suggested that the overrepresentation of African-American children may be due to their increased need for child welfare services due to the many poverty-related risk factors that they experience, such as substance abuse, mental health problems, and academic underachievement. Additionally, numerous studies, including this one, have pointed to the resource impoverishment of minority communities to explain their representation in the child welfare system. Frequently, minority communities are devoid of the formal and informal institutions that could respond to the needs of vulnerable families before they enter the system (Wilson, 1987).

Racial discrimination was another factor identified by respondents as contributing to racial disproportionality. The child welfare literature is replete with discussions of how racial discrimination in the larger society has affected African-American and other children of color (e.g. Everett, Chipungu & Leashore, 1993; Pinderhughes, 1991; Gibbs, 1993; Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). Although there is currently limited empirical evidence to address the specific effects of racial discrimination in the child welfare system, we can draw from the literature that has documented discriminatory practices in multiple social institutions. Racial disparities in various aspects of health care were a recent topic of a Surgeon General's report (USDHHS, 2001). The

discriminatory practices of judges, attorneys and juries have been documented as contributing to the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the justice system (e.g. Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, 2000).

In multiple sites, and on multiple occasions, child welfare personnel suggested that the over-reporting of minority families to the child welfare system contributed to the overrepresentation of minority children. The existing data addressing this issue are mixed, with some studies documenting differential reporting rates and others not. The perception of many child welfare workers that minority families are more visible to reporters, and therefore are more likely to be reported, has been empirically tested. Extant evidence, refutes the visibility hypothesis, and suggests that there are no differences between reports for minority families in settings where they are more visible versus where they are less visible, with the possible exception of African-American families (Garland et al., 1998). In addition to the visibility hypothesis, respondents in the study pointed to the increased likelihood of minority mothers to be reported because of their prenatal drug use, which is a major risk factor for child welfare involvement. Evidence from studies of prenatal drug exposure suggest that minority mothers are more likely to be tested for drug use than Caucasian mothers (Chasnoff et al., 1990), which could lead to a higher likelihood of referral to the child welfare system.

Particular community and family characteristics also were identified in this study as contributors to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. Study respondents in many sites discussed the weakening of community institutions, supports, and connections in many areas with large minority populations. Recent sociological and psychological studies of community have pointed to the negative impact of community disorganization on child and family well-being (e.g. Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Additionally, some scholars have documented severe changes in the infrastructure of African-American communities that may lead to this type of community disintegration. For example, Wilson (1987) has suggested that, with the advent of integration, middle-class African-Americans migrated to other neighborhoods, leaving the socioeconomically disadvantaged members of the community without role models and institutional supports. Interestingly, respondents referred globally to the African-American community as the group of families who were at high-risk, and did not raise the fact that the majority of the African-American population does not live in poverty or in high-risk environments.

Relatedly, many respondents discussed the distinctions between the Hispanic and African-American cultural communities. As was presented in the findings section, the Hispanic community was perceived as being more integrated and having more resources available for its members. Anthropologists and other social scientists have distinguished between voluntary immigrants such as Hispanics and involuntary immigrants such as African-Americans (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). It is suggested that minority groups who enter this country voluntarily may be more motivated and skilled, as well as have more cultural connections than African-Americans. However, many scholars argue against such comparative approaches and recommend examining each group's cultural processes individually (e.g. Garcia Coll, et al., 1996). Further, there is no evidence to suggest that Hispanic communities have more resources than African-American communities. In fact, many scholars and practitioners have decried the minimal services available in Hispanic communities, particularly in reference to the lack of institutions that have Spanish-speaking personnel who can work with Hispanic families (Zambrana, 1998; Sue et al., 1990). The perception that Hispanic communities have more resources and are more integrated than are African-American families is interesting, however.

Worker bias was repeatedly identified in the discussions with child welfare workers in this study as one of the reasons for racial disproportionality. The issue of worker bias and discrimination has long been an area of concern in social work practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1996; Davis & Gelsomino, 1994). Cultural differences between workers and clients have been found to influence worker expectations of clients as well as their service delivery (Fletcher, 1997; Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Reflecting discrimination within the child welfare system, worker bias was perceived by many participants in this study to occur in terms of class and culture. For example, respondents suggested that a Caucasian or a middle class worker might not be aware of the cultural foundations of some modes of corporal punishment. There are data to suggest racial, ethnic and cultural differences in how children are reared in this country. Although the majority of Americans resort to corporal punishment in their disciplinary interactions with children, there are racial and class differences in parenting style as well as in individuals' perceptions of parenting style. For example, poor and minority parents are more likely to use control-oriented forms of discipline than are middle class and Caucasian parents (Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992). Some longitudinal research has suggested that this type of parenting style may result in more favorable outcomes for poor and minority children (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Steinberg et al., 1992).

The final set of questions for respondents relative to racial disproportionality focused on federal laws and their impact on children of color (e.g. Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, Adoption and Safe Families Act). As the findings section indicates, child welfare personnel varied in their understanding and perceptions of these laws. However, practitioners at all levels had strong opinions about the impact of the specific policies on children of color. MEPA/IEPA was perceived by many child welfare practitioners as benefiting children of color by promoting placements with extended family. The increasing use of kinship placements across the country (AFCARS, 2003) suggests that this perception of child welfare workers was accurate. Despite this perceived benefit, many child welfare practitioners articulated that this policy might have harmful effects on children of color, a position that reflects findings from other studies (e.g. Carter-Black, 2002). A concern raised about MEPA/IEPA was the potential increase in transracial adoption due to the penalties for the use of race as a factor in placement decisions. The data thus far do not support this perception; transracial adoptions have not increased in the years since the implementation of MEPA (Wulczyn, Oberleke & Haight, 2002). It is also important to note that worker concern about transracial adoption seems to stem from their belief that this type of adoption has detrimental effects on children, particularly in the area of racial identity. There is considerable controversy in the literature regarding the impact of transracial placement on the well being of minority children. One set of scholars has documented that tranracially placed children may fare as well as those in same-race placements (e.g. Simon & Alstein, 1992; Brooks, et al., 1999). Others have found a diminished sense of racial identity in children who are transracially adopted, particularly during adolescence, when identity strivings are most salient (e.g. McRoy, 1994; McRoy et al., 1984).

In regard to ASFA, many child welfare practitioners in this study suggested that children of color experienced permanency more often and more expeditiously as a result of this policy. Although the impact of this policy will not be known for some time, current data do suggest that children of all racial and ethnic groups are more likely to receive permanent homes in the post-ASFA era, at least in terms of increased adoptive and permanent relative placements. In contrast, other child welfare practitioners denounced ASFA as inherently unfair to families of color because the time limits were not realistic to support the rehabilitation of parents who had multiple problems, which many minority families were likely to have. The evidence regarding the decrease in

successful reunifications post-ASFA is consistent with such a misperception (e.g. Wulczyn, 2003).

Additionally, respondents stressed the challenge of doing concurrent planning, which is mandated by ASFA (i.e. seeking an alternative, permanent home for a child while working towards reunification). Similar ambiguity and difficulty have been reported in other studies of concurrent planning (Katz, 1999). No study to our knowledge has addressed the impact of concurrent planning specifically on children of color. However, extrapolating from the data on kinship care, concurrent planning may be easier with African-American children. First, African-American children are more likely to be in kinship care (Berrick et al., 1997). Kinship placements tend to be stable and provide children with another permanency option (Benedict, Zuravin & Stallings, 1996; Beeman et al., 1996). Additionally, children in kinship care are more likely to have sustained relationships with their biological parents (Chipungu et al., 1998; Benedict et al., 1996). Taken together, these findings suggest that concurrent planning may more naturally occur when children are in the potentially permanent homes of relatives who support their reunification with their biological parents.

5.2 SERVICE DELIVERY STRATEGIES AND CHILDREN OF COLOR

When asked what services would benefit children of color in the child welfare system and address racial disproportionality, respondents offered many suggestions. Preventive intervention was the most common theme. Consistent with the services research literature, child welfare related preventive services were underfunded in the sites included in this study (Bess et al., 2003; Courtney, 1997). Respondents strongly recommended the development of quality, community-based services that address the unique needs of specific cultural groups. The family support literature suggests that such services are more effective for families and children (Kagan & Weissbourd, 1997). In a similar vein, staff identified the need for more and better quality reunification services. Evidence from child welfare services research suggests that African-American families are less likely to receive in-home and reunification services (Landsverk et al., 1996). For families in child welfare, it has been recommended that a targeted approach to service delivery is necessary for prevention and reunification programs, in which services are not universal but are designed to meet the unique needs of families (Littell & Schuerman, 2002).

Various scholars have discussed the importance of building a community infrastructure that is integrally connected to the service sector (Wilson, 1987). Just as the lack of resources was repeatedly identified as a reason for the existence of racial disproportionality, respondents in this study underscored the need for more external and internal resources to support families and children of color, including basic services such as housing and employment. Many studies have documented that families with increased financial and other concrete resources have enhanced psychological functioning (Mistry et al., 2002 & McLoyd, 1998). The need for mental health and drug treatment services for families of color also was emphasized by study participants. Often minority parents are reluctant to utilize such services due to the stigma associated with receiving mental health services and their perception that the staff of these programs lack cultural competence (Garland, Landsverk & Lau, 2003; Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Decreased mental health usage has also been reported for minority foster children when compared to Caucasian children, due to issues related to diagnosis, referral, and accessibility (Garland et al., 2003). Finally, court reform was often cited as an important step toward improving services to children of color. Families of color were perceived as having less knowledge about negotiating the legal system and less access to strong legal representation. There are examples of court reform efforts that have been reported in the literature, although

rigorous evaluations of these initiatives have rarely been conducted (Malik et al., 2002), particularly regarding their impact on families of color.

Child welfare personnel participating in this study tended to believe that kinship placements were beneficial for children of color. Other studies of kinship care (e.g. Beeman & Boisen, 1999) have documented positive worker perceptions as well, with some suggestion that workers of color may be more positive than Caucasian workers. Child welfare practitioners in this study advocated for more concrete and psychological resources for kinship caregivers, including board and maintenance payments. Many jurisdictions have experimented with providing concrete and instrumental support to kinship families. For example, evaluation of subsidized guardianship and licensed (i.e. paid) kinship care in Illinois has suggested that such efforts can reduce racial disproportionality (Testa, 2001). Although services for kinship care providers have grown over the past decade, many scholars underscore the need for additional services for this vulnerable population (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Dubowitz et al., 1994; Chipungu et al., 1998).

Enhancing the staff's capacity to work with families and children of color was also a salient theme, specifically regarding staff diversification and cultural competence. Many practitioners emphasized the pivotal role of culture-specific organizations internal and external to the child welfare system to promote diversity and cultural competence. Although the literature does suggest that the goal of staff diversification is important for effective child welfare programs (English & Brown, 1997), the data on race matching between worker and family are less than compelling. Many scholars suggest that the cultural competence of workers is more influential than their race per se (Fletcher, 1997; Williams, 1997). Cultural competency training and supervision on this issue have both been raised as strategies for enhancing staff's capacity to work with minority families (Zayas et al., 1997; English & Brown, 1997; Jones et al., 1995). A major issue in this area is the capacity of staff to work with the multitude of ethnic and cultural groups that currently characterize the American populace (see U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), and thus are involved in the child welfare system.

On the surface, creating a strong infrastructure in child welfare does not seem to relate to the overrepresentation of African-American children. However, this strategy was described by a number of administrators as part of their effort to enhance service delivery to children of color, and perhaps reduce racial disproportionality. Management strategies, such as reducing caseloads and improving supervision/training, have been found to enhance outcomes for families at risk (Oregon Healthy Families evaluation). In addition, an aspect of various child welfare system reform initiatives is supporting the system's infrastructure to be able to implement fairly global policy changes (e.g. Family to Family program, Families for Kids program, public-private partnerships). Such efforts may serve to facilitate optimal service delivery to all children in the child welfare system, including children of color. For example, in North Carolina, changes in the child welfare system resulting from the implementation of the Families for Kids program did result in a reduction in racial disproportionality (Wildfire, 2000). Thus, the administrators in this study who are committed to improved overall child welfare service delivery may be simultaneously working toward the goal of improving the child welfare experiences of children of color specifically.

5.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

By and large, the findings from this study provide qualitative documentation of processes that have been anecdotally discussed in the literature. Some empirical studies using administrative data have examined these issues as well, and offer similar notions of the reasons for racial disproportionality,

and strategies to reduce it. The voices of child welfare personnel provide specific information about perceptions of administrators and front-line workers, which has been lacking in the literature. On specific issues, it seems that child welfare personnel in this study may be operating on faulty assumptions about the experiences of minority groups. For example, many view Hispanic communities as being more resourceful, and many adhere to the notion that the visibility of African-Americans renders them more vulnerable to child protection involvement. Thus, specific practice decisions emanating from these assumptions (e.g. not providing sufficient agency supports to Hispanic families) could potentially further racial differences in how children are served in the child welfare system.

These findings point to the need to examine the perceptions of child welfare personnel more fully, as well as address their concerns and strategies from a policy and practice perspective. We now turn to implications of these findings for policy, practice, and research.

CHAPTER 6

Implications for Policy and Practice

To relate the findings presented here to practice and policy, it is first important to understand a few issues related to the current state of the child welfare system. Foremost is the growing recognition of the complex nature of society and the child welfare system's response to it. Designed as a temporary resource for troubled families, the child welfare system was never intended to provide the comprehensive range of social services that are demanded of it today. As increasing numbers of child welfare agencies have failed to meet the needs of the populations they serve, there is a growing recognition that the child welfare system alone cannot provide all of the services needed by the families and children who come into it. Poverty and an array of social problems as well as difficulties inherent in public child welfare systems have made it difficult to provide services to an increasingly diverse and troubled population. Many factors—both internal and external, demographic and structural—contribute to the wide scope of the crisis of a system with diminishing resources and increasing responsibilities. Substance abuse, inadequate housing, health needs, parental incarceration, and racial discrimination are just some of the issues that challenge the capacity of the child welfare system and its staff to provide adequate services to the families and children it serves.

Moreover, the child welfare system was never intended to serve the vast numbers of children and families that are involved in the system today. The data released most recently by the Department of Health and Human Services, based on information collected through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), show that child protective service agencies received about 2,672,000 reports of possible maltreatment in 2001. There were 903,000 substantiated cases of maltreatment of children the majority of which involved cases of neglect. About 1,300 children died of abuse or neglect, a rate of 1.81 children per 100,000 children in the population (DHHS, 2003). Furthermore, as of September 2001, there were 542,000 children in foster care and approximately 117,000 waiting to be adopted, nationwide (AFCARS, 2001). In total, in this same year, there were 805,000 families served by the child welfare system nationwide (AFCARS, 2001).[3] These numbers do not take into account the number of families that were being served within the home and, in some cases, those that were in kinship placements. Clearly the problem has surpassed the child welfare system's capacity to handle it effectively and more efficient measures are required to provide even the most basic services to the population it is intended to serve.

[3] This number includes children in care, entries and exits (including adoptions), children waiting to be adopted, and cases that ended with the termination of parental rights.

Additionally, the ever-changing racial and ethnic make-up of this country has posed special challenges for child welfare agencies and staff. Racial and ethnic discrimination, and language and cultural barriers to service provision have become commonplace in many social service systems, including public health and education as well as in the judicial and child welfare systems. In 2001, there were eight racial and ethnic categories of children who entered foster care during that same year, including American Indian/Alaskan American, non-Hispanic; Asian, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic (of any race); and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic, to name a few. Identifying the special needs of multiple racial and ethnic groups, and developing practices, programs, and strategies to meet their unique circumstances has proven an overwhelming task for a system that has yet to determine how best to meet the needs of its African-American families, families that have been overrepresented in the system for more than a decade.

Finally, the stressful nature of working within the child welfare system has increased in direct response to the issues outlined above. Given the complex nature of today's child welfare involved families, combined with changing policies and diminishing resources, to practice effectively, child welfare agency staff now must possess expertise in a number of different areas, including social work, psychology, job training, child development, and human resources, among others. In addition, the increasing tension brought on by media exposure to extreme cases of child abuse and neglect and the resulting onslaught of bad publicity and negative attitudes toward the child welfare system have contributed to burn-out, insecurity, and high turnover among child welfare agency employees. This, in combination with the issues described above, provides a snapshot of a system that is struggling to operate effectively and in the manner in which it was intended.

The findings presented in this study suggest that, despite the challenges it faces and the factors that are outside of its control, there are several factors that public child welfare agencies can address to improve child welfare practice and the delivery of services to children and families, including families of color. In addition, several other issues have emerged from the findings presented here that can be used to help inform future child welfare policy.

6.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Within the context of the findings presented here, two specific practice-related issues emerged that agency administrators and policy makers might consider as they attempt to determine how best to serve children and families, especially children and families of color. These are workforce issues (e.g. training and supervision), and the specific strategies agencies are implementing to meet the needs of children and families of color.

Workforce issues

While agency administrators may not have control over the types of families and individuals they serve, they do have control over the type of work environment they create and support, and the employees they choose to hire. In this study, several factors related to the workforce were critical to both worker retention and satisfaction, and effective service delivery to children and families.

First, there is the issue of support, specifically, administrative support. In order for child welfare staff to feel confident and effective and, one might argue, perform accordingly, they require support from within the agency. This support takes several forms, including administrative support and encouragement, supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads. In agencies in which one of more of these factors was reported absent, participants (usually direct service

workers) talked about feeling overwhelmed and unsure of their ability to make good decisions. Feeling overwhelmed and lacking confidence, without strong supervisors to whom they could turn for help, workers reported being more likely to substantiate abuse and neglect cases, making decisions based more on their fear of administrative repercussions than on their training and experience. While administrative support and adequate supervision are important aspects of day-to-day practice, they are especially important during times of high stress or media exposure when workers reported feeling great pressure to make quick decisions regarding complicated cases.

Related to the issue of administrative support is the development of an infrastructure that allowed for flexible, responsive programming. In some of the sites, agency administrators spoke specifically about making administrative changes that would build a better infrastructure for the child welfare agency that they led. These administrative changes included creating a strong leadership team, bringing in key administrative staff from the outside who had experience in specific areas (e.g. clinical work with families and children), reorganizing existing staff in order to accomplish new mandates, creating staffing teams so that families would remain in the same units, and integrating specific service areas (e.g. foster care and adoption). In the sites where such administrative changes were occurring, the management staff (and in some cases the front-line staff) reported that the quality of child welfare service delivery had improved greatly.

Second, there is the issue of staff training and experience. Similar to employees in any agency or organization, child welfare agency staff are most effective when they are well educated and well trained. Increasingly, however, to be effective in dealing with more diverse and more troubled families than in previous years, child welfare staff require greater breadth and depth of education and training than in previous years, before the influx of immigrant groups and the proliferation of drugs into society. In addition, over the years, as the child welfare system has come under increasing scrutiny from society and the media regarding its ability to effectively serve children and families, recruiting and retaining competent, well-trained staff has become more difficult. Recent State budget cuts also have taken their toll on child welfare agency staff. In some States, including those in this study, budget cuts have forced agency administrators to lay off or retire their most experienced (and highly paid) employees, and replace them with younger, less experienced (and less expensive) workers. These issues have serious implications for the quality of service agencies are able to provide. As one of the only means for workers to stay abreast of new policies and procedures and strategies for dealing with such client-specific issues as mental illness, addiction, and different and varied cultures, it is important that ongoing, agency-sponsored training remain a priority. While most agencies require new workers to participate in agency-sponsored training to familiarize them with agency policies, practices, and operational procedures, participants reported that this training often is insufficient. They reported that training would be more salient for them if it was frequent, ongoing, and of sufficient substance that new skills could be acquired and problems, such as racial bias in decision making, addressed and changed.

Participants also reported needing more training in cultural awareness and sensitivity, especially in light of the number of participants who reported having experienced worker bias toward children and families of color. Specifically, participants reported that workers sometimes made decisions based on the race or socio-economic background of a family rather than on the specifics of the case. According to participants, this differential decision-making often results in African-American and impoverished families being more likely to have children removed from the home or parental rights terminated. Again, while most agencies

have some training focused on cultural issues, the training sessions are frequently short-term or one-time events that may be insufficient to address such difficult issues as racial or class bias.

With regard to worker bias and cultural awareness and sensitivity, it is important to note that, in general, agency administrators were very sensitive to these issues and were willing to address them. However, in most cases, they were somewhat unsure as to how best to address them. In many cases, such characteristics as cultural sensitivity and awareness are difficult to define and so methods to increase them are equally difficult to identify or develop. Even the literature in this area is unclear regarding how best to define and promote cultural sensitivity and awareness in child welfare workers. Similarly, worker bias is difficult to define and, therefore, to detect. In some cases, workers emphatically denied that race or class ever entered into the decision making, while other workers, in the same agency, felt just as strongly that it did. Clearly these issues require additional exploration to determine the extent to which they influence decision making and practice, and how agencies can best manage them.

Finally, there is the issue of resources. Agency administrators can provide the strongest support possible to their staff, and also can ensure that only the most highly qualified candidates are hired. If resources are lacking, however, practice will be compromised. In this study, participants reported needing access to resources both internal and external to the agency. With regard to internal resources, participants reported needing more resources to support foster and adoptive families, including kin. With the passage of ASFA and the subsequent focus on permanency, workers report that the number of children needing foster care and adoptive placements has increased but that the resources available to support finding and maintaining such placements have not. Necessary resources include financial incentives for foster and adoptive families, including more post-adoptive services and more foster and adoptive families.

External resources also are important to good practice. With regard to external resources, participants reported that they simply need more resources to serve clients, including financial resources to pay for and agencies to provide mental health and substance abuse services. They also reported needing additional resources to keep families together including relationships with agencies that could provide such basic necessities as food, housing, employment opportunities, and childcare options. Recently, in recognizing their limitations to provide comprehensive services to children and families, agencies have started cultivating more formal and informal relationships with other service providing agencies, including those based in the community. In an attempt to broaden service options for child-welfare involved families, agencies are moving towards contracting out services to local service providing agencies, outsourcing child welfare staff to community-based agencies, and building collaborative relationships with private child-serving agencies. In addition to increasing service options, these strategies also have been effective in meeting the needs of different racial and ethnic groups as many of the community-based service agencies also have a racial or ethnic affiliation and focus.

While the child welfare system has been plagued with challenges in recent years, it still plays a central role in the child and family service delivery system. Agencies can be supported to hire competent staff, administration can be supportive, and resources can be made available to provide quality service.

Strategies for serving children and families of color

Many service delivery strategies were identified in this study that were perceived as or documented to be beneficial for families of color. Some were explicitly designed to address the needs of this

population of families; others were created to benefit the child welfare population at large. Interestingly, none were specifically designed to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare systems observed in this study. Following are brief descriptions of these service delivery strategies, all of which could be adapted for other child welfare systems to address the needs of children and families of color.

Kinship care and subsidized guardianship. Long heralded as a strength of African-American and other minority families, the use of relatives and fictive kin (unrelated persons with whom family has a close relationship) as caregivers for children is an important measure for increasing permanency for minority children while simultaneously maintaining ties to their family system. Relatives can be used as caregivers in three distinct ways. One, they can become guardians of children, and thus be legally responsible for the care of the children without the requirements and benefits that are attached to being a foster parent. Providing subsidies to these guardians has proven to be beneficial. Alternatively, relatives can become foster parents. This status would require them to be licensed using the same criteria used for unrelated caregivers, and be regularly monitored by child welfare personnel. Finally, relatives can become adoptive parents of children. As with guardianship, providing subsidies to adoptive relatives has been found to be beneficial. It is important to note that in Illinois subsidized relative placement has resulted in increased permanency for children and reduced racial disproportionality in the child welfare system.

Family conferencing. Originated in New Zealand, family conferencing calls for the collaboration of multiple parties who have an interest in the well being of the child and family who are involved in the child welfare system. Referred to as the family assessment process in North Carolina (which was the site implementing this strategy), this approach brings together biological parents, relatives, neighbors and friends, religious and other supports, as well as professionals with the goal of averting placement. These meetings occur frequently and, as part of the program model, are designed to emphasize the safety, permanency, and well being of the child. The community is integrally involved in the decision-making about the child, and thus tends to be involved as participants in the child's care (e.g., a church member providing day care; a grandmother caring for child full-time while mother participates in drug treatment). Although it is not clear whether family conferencing per se was the factor that reduced racial disproportionality in the North Carolina site, it was a major component of the service delivery strategy in the county in which racial disproportionality was reduced.

Recruitment and retention of minority foster and adoptive parents. The majority of the sites identified the recruitment of minority foster and adoptive parents as an important strategy to reduce racial disproportionality. Targeting recruitment to minority communities, specifically minority social organizations and institutions (e.g. churches), was emphasized. In addition to these recruitment efforts, participants in multiple sites stressed the importance of being more flexible regarding the types of families deemed acceptable, given the diversity of family composition and characteristics of minority communities. Helping potential minority caregivers through the licensing process was also identified as an important strategy. Finally, providing culturally sensitive post-placement services was suggested in order to retain the minority foster and adoptive families involved with the agency.

Concurrent planning. Although concurrent planning is not on the surface a practice that differentially benefits minority families, many participants felt it was effective in reducing the number of minority children remaining in the foster care system. As this practice requires child welfare staff to work for reunification while simultaneously seeking another permanent

home for the targeted children, children may not remain in the system as long as when the practices occurred sequentially. Thus, adoption can be explored with relatives or foster parents while the biological parents are receiving rehabilitative services. The other benefit that staff perceived is that children do not have to be removed to another placement if the decision is made to change the permanency goal to adoption or guardianship; they are already in their permanent placement. Despite the thinking that minority families, particularly relatives, may have difficulty with the notion of terminating the rights (TPR) of the biological families, participants in this study reported that minority relative and foster caregivers were not resistant to TPR and adoption.

Promoting permanency. An agency-wide focus on permanency for all child welfare involved families has the residual impact of fostering permanency for minority families, and therefore reducing their numbers in the child welfare system. Although some participants saw more stringent time limits as creating more difficulties for minority families, the majority felt that focusing on permanency and foster care time limits had a beneficial effect on children. Thus, agencies were more likely to emphasize permanency for children from the time they came into care, through prevention and reunification services, family conferencing efforts, and relative placements. In addition, agencies focused on creating a waiting pool of adoptive families and recruiting families in the child's environment to be adoptive parents. The philosophical and practice shift toward permanency was perceived to result in higher quality services and outcomes for minority children.

Supporting biological families (prevention). Most participants asserted that preventing minority children from entering the system was crucial for addressing racial disproportionality. Prevention programs that supported children to remain with their families of origin can be implemented by child welfare agencies, with a particular eye to the needs of minority children and families. Thus, these programs should be culturally sensitive regarding services, and employ staff that is reflective of the culture of the targeted population. It is important to note that a broad conceptualization of culture emerged from the findings of this study, and included religious, language, immigration, ethnic, racial, family composition, and class factors. Several different types of preventive services for biological families were perceived as particularly effective for minority families. Alternative response systems provide preventive casework services to families in the community who are at-risk of child maltreatment to avert entering into the child welfare system. Family conferencing, as described above, allows biological parents to receive supports from their own informal social networks for prevention and reunification purposes. Community-based, family-support programs that are targeted to the needs of the population have also been used to create a system of care for families that prevents their entry into the child welfare system.

Community-based strategies and collaborations with other agencies. The long-held practice in child welfare services to contract out specific services has had particular implications for minority families. First and foremost, child welfare agencies have been able to link with programs designed to serve particular ethnic groups. Often these programs are part of agencies that emerge from informal or formal institutions in the minority community, and have particular philosophical approaches that promote the well being of that specific population. In addition, these collaborations allow for a focus on a particular service strategy, such as prevention and reunification, recruitment of minority and adoptive families, or post-placement services. These linkages also provide service settings for families that are in their individual communities, versus in the centralized and often bureaucratic setting of the child welfare public agency. These various factors promote more intimate relationships between

the service providers and recipients, as well as the provision of more culturally and otherwise responsive services.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

There also were issues that emerged from the findings that have implications for child welfare policy. Foremost is the emphasis on prevention. Participants felt strongly that shifting the philosophy of the child welfare system from one that intervenes after the fact to one that focuses on keeping children out of the system would have profound implications for the numbers of children coming into care, and especially for children of color. In addition to keeping children from coming into the system, prevention is less expensive than focusing on the back end. In current child welfare policy, foster care is an entitlement. That is, for every eligible child States automatically get partial reimbursement. As a result, between 1999 and 2003, the Federal government is expected to spend nine dollars on foster care for every dollar spent to prevent it (Rosenbaum, 2001). Other existing policies, such as ASFA and MEPA, are focused more on foster care and adoption rather than on prevention and family reunification. Other policies have allowed States to use Title IV-E dollars more flexibly, including providing services and other resources to child-welfare involved families. Because funds are appropriated to support existing policies, including incentives for agencies to implement them effectively, there are currently very few financial resources for prevention services. The limited resources that do exist must be used to implement strategies that meet policy requirements.

Another issue that emerged is the manner by which policies are created. Because policy is often driven by public perception primarily, and because public perception is influenced by the media's portrayal of events, child welfare policies are often developed in response to a perceived problem or crisis. Creating policies this way sometimes results in policies that are removed from the practices they were designed to guide. For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed in 1997 in response to concerns from policy makers that children (mostly minority children) were languishing in foster care, in part, because of the system's previous emphasis on family preservation, which started in 1993 with the passage of the Family Preservation and Family Support Act. Designed to promote safety and permanence for children through adoptive placements, ASFA provides incentive payments to States to encourage adoption of children out of foster care, and shortens timeframes for initiating proceedings for the termination of parental rights. Although increased adoptions have been observed since the passage of ASFA, some argue that the increase in adoptions has been offset by the number of children now coming into care because of the policy. Participants in this study felt strongly that an emphasis on prevention and family reunification, including financial resources to support them, might be a more viable solution to the large numbers of children in care, again emphasizing the importance of keeping families out of the system to begin with. This example underscores the importance of policies that are driven by careful examination of the strengths and limitations of the system rather than political considerations. It also emphasizes the importance of policies that are developed to promote viable options for workers and families at each point along the child welfare decision-making spectrum.

Another important issue that emerged was the emphasis on improving services to children and families by contracting out more services to community-based and private child welfare agencies. With increased responsibilities and caseloads along with diminishing financial resources, public agencies are often operating at or over the limits of available resources. Tasked with finding alternative means to provide services for children and families, agencies have turned to contractual relationships with private or non-profit child welfare agencies. Participants in this study

talked about the value of having access to these services, especially community-based services. Community-based services are invaluable because, first, they can meet the needs of children and families right in their own neighborhood, reducing the amount of time and burden on families to travel long distances to receive services. Second, community-based services provide child welfare agency staff with viable options for quality service delivery. Finally, because community-based services are also more likely to have an ethnic focus, they can deliver services within a culturally appropriate and sensitive context. Despite their value, many agency administrators are struggling to discern effective means for developing and implementing these types of contractual relationships with already limited resources, and to maintain high levels of accountability and control for quality service delivery. Policies to guide these types of relationships and promote the reallocation of funds to support them would prove helpful to local child welfare agencies as they continue to identify ways to provide comprehensive support services to children and families.

Finally, there is the issue of reporting. Participants across sites talked about a variety of factors influencing who gets reported and for what. Closer partnerships between child welfare agencies and schools, hospitals, and other common sources of reports could facilitate more accurate and equitable identification of cases of maltreatment at the point of reporting. Moreover, there is a lack of consistency across child welfare agencies regarding standards for what constitutes abuse or neglect. To reduce worker bias and uncertainty when making judgments regarding cases, definitions of abuse and neglect could be clarified and standardized. Standard definitions also might reduce the fear and concern workers have when they are forced to make decisions in the eye of the media.

The findings presented here also have implications for future research. These are discussed in the section that follows.

CHAPTER 7

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study have shed light on child welfare staff perceptions of the issue of racial disproportionality, which has not been accomplished in any other study to date. Emerging from these data are questions that to some extent have been answered by other studies, and others that have not received any empirical attention. Although there are several research implications of these data, three global themes emerged from this qualitative study.

- Research on racial disproportionality must move beyond the examination of administrative data. The results of this small qualitative study provided a richness that has not existed in this area of research to date. Other qualitative studies, in combination with exploratory and hypothesis-driven quantitative studies, would provide an increased understanding of this complex issue.

- It is essential that the research in this area inform practice. Many participants expressed a desire to address the issue of racial disproportionality head on, but felt uncertain about strategies that a child welfare system could undertake. In addition, in those agencies where research was being conducted around the issue of disproportionality, staff were generally unaware that these efforts were underway and had no knowledge of previous or current findings. Empirical evaluations of practice strategies would provide guidance in this area as would an overall dissemination plan for findings that would require researchers to disseminate findings, in appropriate forums, to the field itself.

- The sites in this study served children and families of many ethnic and racial groups. Many of these groups are not represented in the empirical literature on racial disproportionality. For example, the evidence on the newly arrived Southeast Asian immigrants is basically non-existent in current literature. It is essential that the research on racial disproportionality examine more than just black and white differences in the trajectories of children in the child welfare system. Additionally, it is important to unpack the larger ethnic groupings to conduct sub-group analyses (e.g., children with Mexican ancestry vs. Puerto Rican ancestry).

The following section discusses further the implications of the specific findings of this study for future research. Included in the discussion are the linkages between the current study findings and evidence from the existing literature on the phenomenon of racial disproportionality. Implications for future research are discussed in the context of overarching questions that the data suggest.

What is the impact of systemic reforms and their resulting practices on racial disproportionality in the child welfare system?

In several of the site visits, specifically those in California, North Carolina, and Illinois, administrators suggested that global, systemic,

reform efforts would ultimately reduce racial disproportionality. Certainly, the data from the Illinois site indicate that such policy changes as subsidized guardianship and relative adoption can reduce the numbers of minority children in the system, thereby reducing racial disproportionality. The North Carolina Families for Kids initiative also documented the effectiveness of this effort for all children in the child welfare system, but also provided evidence that at least in this specific site racial disproportionality was reduced. It will be important for other agencies that attempt these models to evaluate their effectiveness so that there is an opportunity to replicate the Illinois and North Carolina data.

In addition, other reforms that are not as culturally based should be examined for their impact on disproportionality. For example, as a means for reducing over-representation, some managerial staff pushed for an increased focus on permanency outcomes (e.g. tracking, supporting relevant practices). Outcomes could be examined by testing the relationship between achievement of permanency goals in an agency and the numbers of children of color in the system. Direct service and managerial staff in several sites discussed policy decisions that mandate the use of specific models (e.g., Family to Family, family group conferencing, Families for Kids). Evaluation of these models should always include some analysis of their impact by race. Finally, the Georgia site discussed the salience of judicial reform efforts in the experiences of minority children and families. It is important to include variables related to racial disproportionality in studies evaluating such judicial reform efforts (e.g., relative number of foster care dispositions and Termination of Parental Rights in different racial groups, and services mandated for families of varying races).

Do those who report child abuse and neglect discriminate against families of color?

An issue that was raised in multiple sites was the differential reporting rates for families of color versus majority families. Staff particularly identified hospital and school personnel as reporters who tended to over-report minority families. The literature on reporting rates by reporter and the race of family reported is very limited, but tends to point to some disproportionality. Future research should target hospital and school personnel and examine their reporting rates by race of family. This could be accomplished by examining administrative data regarding reports, but could be more richly examined by qualitative studies of these reporters and quantitative research designs using hypothetical scenarios or questionnaires. In addition to understanding if these reporters are more likely to report families of color for abuse and neglect, it also would be important to determine why these reporters make the decisions they do.

Are culture-specific, prevention programs successful in reducing the numbers of children entering the child welfare system?

Several of the sites, including Georgia and Minnesota had implemented prevention programs targeted to minority children and families. Evaluation of such programs should not just address whether families improve as a result of experiencing the intervention. The evaluations should include an examination of the effect of the program on racial disproportionality. This would necessitate an investigation of whether specific minority groups who had experienced the intervention were less likely to enter or exit from the child welfare system when compared to a similar group who had not experienced the intervention. A randomized control design (or at least a quasi-experimental design) would be most beneficial to address this issue. It would also be useful to address whether such culture-specific interventions had a differential impact on minority

children and families as opposed to children and families from the majority group.

Do targeted recruitment programs, designed to increase the numbers of minority foster and adoptive parents, result in decreased numbers of minority children in the child welfare system?

Several of the sites, including those in Texas and Illinois, had specialized recruitment efforts designed to increase the numbers of foster and adoptive placements for minority children. When these programs are evaluated, results have been mixed. Such recruitment efforts should always include an evaluation component, which at the very least addresses whether the initiatives have had an impact on the numbers of minority children awaiting placement. More refined analysis could examine whether permanency is more likely to be achieved for the group of minority children who receive these specialized services when compared to a group that does not receive such services.

Do staff characteristics influence the trajectories of minority children in the child welfare system?

Child welfare workers and administrative staff in this study underscored the importance of having a diverse workforce to address the needs of children and families of color. They also emphasized that staff should not just represent diverse racial groups, but should be culturally competent. This point was highlighted in the Illinois site where recent data have suggested that both African-American and Caucasian workers are more likely to substantiate maltreatment in African-American families than in Caucasian families. Thus, future research should examine issues such as the relation of worker race to child welfare decision-making regarding maltreatment substantiation, foster care placement, and termination of parental rights. Issues such as race matching between workers and families and level of cultural competence would also be important to investigate in terms of their impact on the trajectories of minority children.

Do minority children and families have a different level of resources when compared to majority children and families?

The data from this study suggest that Caucasian families have more resources available to them than families from minority groups, even when their socioeconomic status is similar. Many study participants attributed this to Caucasian families having more community support and being clearer about what their rights and entitlements are. To address this question, neighborhood and other ecological variables could be examined to determine the availability of community and other supports (e.g., private attorneys) for different groups of families. Given the research that suggests that these factors may be more influential of minority families' use of services than simple availability, accessibility and outreach issues would be important to examine. Additionally, future research could examine whether service providers who are reflective of the culture of minority families, or are at least culturally competent, produce improved outcomes for children and families when compared to service providers who are not.

In line with this issue, study participants indicated that child welfare agency collaboration with other systems (e.g. substance abuse, housing) would positively influence service provision to minority families. In addition, they discussed the importance of having such services provided by community-based agencies that had a presence in minority neighborhoods. Evaluating the differential impact of such service models on the trajectories of minority children would contribute greatly to the literature on racial disproportionality. For example, future research could evaluate programs which basically provide the same service, but one administered by a community group that is entrenched in the community and

one administered by a private agency that is less reflective of the culture of the families.

What are the effects of cultural competency and cultural sensitivity training on actual child welfare practice?

Workers and administrators in this study reported having participated in various types of cultural competency training. Agencies that provided the training offered it at varying times during the tenure of employees at the agency. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of studies on the impact of cultural competency on actual child welfare practice, including its effect on practice, and the quality of services provided to children and their families.

There is also limited empirical evidence to support long-term changes related to such training. The question is: If there is an effect, how long does it last in new workers? Similarly unknown is the frequency with which the training should be provided, and the influence of exposure to diverse cultural groups on cultural sensitivity. These issues need to be addressed careful research. Empirical research findings can be used by agencies to both answer these questions and develop effective training curriculum for agency staff.

Existing research on cultural competency is also limited in its generalizability. The empirical evidence that exists has been conceptualized and gathered in such a way that conclusions are agency specific. Future research should utilize designs that are generalizable to a wide range of types of agencies.

It is likely that the absence of generalizability of findings has served as a barrier to the diffusion of training to systems related to child welfare. Most frequently, public agency child welfare employees reported receiving such training at the beginning of their tenure at the agency. However, employees in other systems, including the courts, reported participation in cultural competency training much less frequently. Judges, lawyers, teachers, and other critical players in the child welfare arena will have little incentive to participate in training if no demonstrable effect has been described in practice or professional literature, or experienced by system participants. Thus training must be elevated to a level worthy of serious scientific study.

What about Federal policies?

An important point of discussion was participants' perception of the impact of specific Federal policies (e.g. ASFA, MEPA) on their work with children of color. In regard to MEPA, some workers were not aware of the provisions of the law and, when they had knowledge of them, were not sure how to interpret them. Others did not see that the law had any impact on their practice. ASFA was alternately perceived as positive or negative by workers, depending on their point of view about the rights and needs of biological parents. It would be beneficial for the field to examine more closely child welfare workers' understanding and perception of such policies and, more importantly, their practices as a result or in spite of these policies. Moreover, it is important to address the long-term implications of these policies for children of color. For example, does the implementation of MEPA lead to increased permanency for minority children as it was intended? Does ASFA lead to premature terminations of parental rights as is feared by many child welfare workers?

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

This study was undertaken for two purposes—to gain insight into the issue of over-representation from the child welfare community, and to examine the programs and practices child welfare agencies are implementing to serve children and families of color. Findings indicate that the child welfare community is not only aware of over-representation of minority children in the system but is very concerned about it. There were a number of reasons given to explain over-representation. The most commonly reported reasons, however, were related to factors in the larger society including disparities in income, opportunities, resources and services between African-American and Caucasian groups, that result in more poverty, isolation, and risk factors for problem behavior, including substance use and child abuse, in African-American communities.

Findings also provide evidence that the child welfare community, at least in the nine agencies represented here, is actively engaged in efforts to respond to over-representation. Participants talked about strategies they felt would be useful in reducing over-representation. These include more preventive and support services targeted at reducing the number of families that come into contact with the system, and more ethnic-focused and community-based services to provide culturally appropriate interventions to families once they have entered the system. In addition, it is clear that more African-American foster and adoptive homes, including kinship placements, for children who are unable to return home, are critical to reducing over-representation. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a culturally diverse staff and having opportunities for ongoing training around culturally relevant issues.

Participants also showcased programs, practices, and strategies that agencies are currently implementing in response to over-representation. Agencies are implementing a variety of strategies from system reform efforts in Illinois to prevention efforts in Minnesota to numerous family and community support programs across all nine sites. These efforts demonstrate a clear commitment to reducing over-representation and improving service delivery to minority clients.

Most important, this study points to the work that still needs to be completed in the area of over-representation. While the findings presented here provide insight into the child welfare community's perception of disproportionality, the factors that contribute to it, and the strategies that might reduce it, it is still unclear why over-representation exists and, therefore, what can be done to reduce or eliminate it. What is clear is that the over-representation of minority children in the child welfare system is a complex, multifaceted issue that cannot be solved through child welfare intervention alone. Because it involves such difficult and long-standing social problems as racial and class bias, it is imperative that future research and policies look beyond the child welfare system for answers. At the same time, it is incumbent upon the child welfare system to continue to make efforts to more clearly understand and address this important issue.

APPENDIX

Conducting the Site Visits

As a first step in conducting the site visits, the team worked with agency administrators to identify a contact person at each site who could assist the team to plan and implement on-site discussions. In most cases, this person was an employee of the child welfare agency. All communications regarding site visits were coordinated through the identified contact person and the team member assigned to a particular site. Through telephone conversations, team members worked with each contact person to identify the individuals and groups most important to include in on-site discussions, and then to plan proposed interviews, discussion groups, and other activities to be conducted during the site visit. To the extent possible, across sites, the team attempted to focus discussions on similar topics and to talk with individuals of similar title and position. In the end, the discussions commenced as follows:

- Individual discussion sessions with state-level child-welfare officials and agency administrators as well as partner agency directors and other high-ranking individuals (i.e., Attorneys General and judges)
- Individual or group discussion sessions with child-welfare agency supervisors and direct service workers, and partner agency supervisors and direct service providers
- Individual or group discussion sessions with child-welfare agency and partner agency program staff
- Individual discussions with parents.

Opportunities for gathering additional information, such as observations of program activities or court hearings, were identified by the contact person and discussed with team members prior to scheduling.

Due to the comprehensive nature of the information gathering efforts, most visits lasted a full week, and were conducted by two, sometimes three, team members. At the beginning of each site visit, the team met with the agency administrator to review the purpose of the site visit, discuss the intended goals of each planned discussion session, and to resolve any issues or concerns related to the team's efforts. In many instances, this first meeting included agency administrators as well as his or her management staff.

Prior to each individual or group discussion, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality guidelines, and the anticipated length of the discussion, and were asked to give verbal consent to participate. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and gain clarification on issues of concern prior to giving consent. At this time, they also were asked permission for the facilitator to record the interview using a tape recorder. If participants were uncomfortable with the recording for any reason, and there were instances when this occurred, team members were instructed to use paper and pencil to record responses and important notes. Once consent was obtained and participants were comfortable, the discussion began. At the end of each session, participants were thanked for

their time, allowed to ask questions, and reassured regarding confidentiality guidelines.

At the conclusion of the site visit, a brief meeting was scheduled with the agency administrator or his or her assigned representative. The meeting was designed as an opportunity for the administrator to ask questions but also for the team to give feedback regarding the issues of interest. Because the data had not been analyzed at the time of the meeting, and team members were reporting based on their initial impressions, feedback tended to be broad and general but informative.

ANALYZING THE DATA

In total, eight site visits were conducted. After the conclusion of each site visit, audio-tapes were transcribed and analyzed using both traditional qualitative techniques (e.g., content analysis) and text analysis software, specifically, IN-VIVO, a qualitative software package that allows the analyst to store documents, create text categories, code text segments, and generate reports.

To conduct the qualitative analyses, the transcripts first were organized by topic areas. Due to a number of factors, including time limitations and variation in participants, discussion questions often varied across participants, both within and across sites. As a result, the development of the coding scheme and subsequent analysis was focused on the five topics that had been addressed most consistently. The following four priority one topics were included:

- What is your perception of over-representation? That is, why do you think children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system?
- How have Federal policies like MEPA and ASFA changed the way in which your agency serves children and families of color?
- What has your agency done, if anything, to improve the delivery of services to children and families of color?
- What types of services, programs, or policies do you think are necessary to reduce the over-representation of children of color in the child welfare system?

Additionally, the following priority two topic was included, "What policies, procedures or practices would assist your agency to better serve children and families of color?

Once the data were organized by question, a sample of discussion sessions was drawn, and responses from each session were examined across the five questions. From this examination, an exhaustive list of response "themes" (e.g., initial codes) was generated. These themes or codes became the foundation for the coding scheme, which was used to code the data within and then across the sites. As a quality control check, other team members reviewed the list of response themes for accuracy and completeness.

The development of the final coding scheme was an iterative process. As team members applied the initial set of codes to the data, codes were modified, revised, or dropped altogether, and new codes were developed. Each time new codes were developed or others were changed, team members went back to the previously coded data and applied the new or revised codes, where appropriate, a task common to qualitative data analysis and generally referred to as re-coding. Once the coding scheme was finalized and the data were coded, they were analyzed across site for common themes and significant differences. In addition to the qualitative analysis, written documentation provided by agency administrators were reviewed to provide both a context for the qualitative analysis, including agency characteristics and operational guidelines, and descriptions of

programs, projects, and strategies that were being implemented with children and families of color. Generally, written documentation was limited to descriptive information. The findings of the analyses are presented in detail in Chapter IV of this report.

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