



Child Welfare, Domestic Violence, and Race: Understanding and Addressing Disparities

A Brief Research Summary

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Introduction

Racial disproportionality, the overrepresentation of children and families of color, in the U.S. Child Welfare System is a well-established fact. Decades of research has consistently shown that children and families of color experience higher rates of child welfare intervention compared to white families: they are more likely to be reported to child protective services, investigated and substantiated for child maltreatment, and enter out-of-home care (Richards et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Samuels, 2020; Chambers & Ratliff, 2019; Beniwal, 2017; Fluke et al., 2011). Additionally, children of color experience longer stays in care and a lower likelihood of reunification with their families than White children (Richards et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Fluke et al., 2011). This disparity has been long enduring, with little sign of improvement over the years. In fact, a recent study indicates that existing system disparities have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic; in particular, out-of-home care entry rates disproportionately increased for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and disparities in adverse exits from out-of-home care increased for most children of color, especially, AI/AN children (Thakral et al., 2024).

The intersection of the child welfare system with domestic violence adds another layer of complexity. Survivors of color face unique challenges and barriers to accessing the help and support they need (Hulley et al., 2023; Valdovinos et al., 2021; Lippy et al., 2020; Kulkarni, 2019; Brown, 2012), further exacerbating disparities within the child welfare system. This brief highlights key research evidence on the causes and perpetuation of racial disparities at the intersection of domestic violence and the child welfare system, as well as policies and practices to effectively reduce racial disparities and improve outcomes for children and families at this intersection. Review of the research literature was guided by three research questions:

- (1) How are racial and other interrelated biases and inequities (e.g., gender, class) embedded within the child welfare system and responses to domestic violence?
- (2) How do synergistic interactions among systems compound the barriers, inequities, and harms experienced by survivors and their children?
- (3) What are equitable, culturally responsive practices and policies for reducing racial disparities at the intersection of domestic violence and the child welfare system?

Understanding the intersection of domestic violence, the child welfare system, and race, including the causes of racial disparities and what can be done to address them, is critical to improving the way the child welfare system works, creating equitable services and outcomes for all children and families.

Understanding Causes of Racial Disparities and Disproportionality

The causes of racial disproportionality within the child welfare system have been extensively studied, with debate centered around whether disproportionality is the result of systematic bias or simply a reflection of disparate need. Overall, the body of research produced indicates that disparate need among families of color, although a significant factor leading to higher rates of system involvement, does not fully explain disproportionality (Fluke et al., 2011). Evidence suggests there is increased maltreatment surveillance of communities of color, especially Black communities, leading to greater child welfare referrals (Fluke et al., 2011; Harris & Hackett, 2008). Considerable research further demonstrates that, when controlling for various other family risk factors, race emerges as a significant predictor of investigation, substantiation, out-of-home care entries, length of time in care, and exits from care (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Fluke et al., 2011; Dettlaff et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008). Research also points to inequitable policies and procedures within the child welfare system which produce and perpetuate differential access to services for children and families of color including in-home family preservation services, housing, counseling, substance abuse treatment, and childcare services (Farrow et al., 2011; Fluke et al., 2011; Alliance for Racial Equality in Child Welfare, 2009). Moreover, an entire body of research has documented personal experiences of racism in the child welfare system among families of color, including differential treatment by child welfare professionals, cultural misunderstandings, lack of cultural sensitivity and culturally responsive services, negative perceptions of differing parenting styles, use of biased language, and being unfairly judged against a White middle-class parenting standard (Merritt, 2021; Miller et al., 2013; Harris & Hackett, 2008).

The preponderance of evidence therefore suggests that systemic bias significantly contributes to racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. This is further strengthened by unpacking the argument that disparate need is the primary factor contributing to racial disproportionality. Disparate need is the result of structural racism

and other inequities embedded within our systems and policies, resulting in people of color, women, and gender and sexual minorities being disproportionately impacted by poverty and lacking equal access to opportunity and critical resources to ensure health, safety, and economic security (Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Feely & Bosk, 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Chetty et al., 2018; Dunkerley, 2017; Bridges, 2017; Reich, 2005; Lindsey, 2004). These systemic inequities create conditions of risk that lead to child welfare system involvement. Disproportionality cannot be fully understood or explained without examining the historical policies that embedded structural racism throughout our society and underline the child welfare system. In this regard, disproportionate child welfare intervention into the lives of families of color is not merely a result of disproportionate need, but is deeply tied to the ongoing legacy of colonialism and slavery; the systematic dismantling of families of color has historically been used as a means to control Black and Brown bodies and enforce White standards of citizenship (Dettlaff 2023; Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021; Navia et al., 2018; Lash, 2017; Crofoot & Harris, 2012). Those who support the continuation of policies that target families on the basis of poverty and disadvantage fail to acknowledge or address the ways in which disparate need among communities of color is the product of discriminatory policies, practices, and structural inequalities that have systematically disadvantaged people of color, and assume that the best way to address disparate need is to continue to take children away from their families, rather than providing the necessary social and economic supports to keep children in their families and communities.

Issues of disparate need are further compounded by the over-surveillance and over-reporting of marginalized and disadvantaged families to child welfare systems (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Poor families, who are disproportionately families of color and female-headed households, are subjected to greater surveillance than more affluent families, particularly through their utilization of public programs such as Medicaid, welfare, food assistance, public/subsidized housing, and public hospitals and clinics (Woodward, 2021; Bridges, 2017; Lee, 2016; Roberts, 2012; Sered and Norton-Hawk 2011; Farrow et al., 2011; Reich, 2005; Lindsey, 2004). By defining the very conditions of poverty as neglect, moreover, state policy ensures that poor families are primary targets for child welfare intervention. Importantly, targeting families surviving poverty for surveillance and intervention serves to target families of color while maintaining the guise of “race neutral” policy, since people of color are disproportionately represented among the poor (Bridges, 2017).

This body of research further highlights the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), as fully understanding the impact of racial oppression requires an interrogation of how this intersects with other forms of oppression (CSSP, 2020). Child welfare decision making processes are embedded with White, middle class, heteronormative biases that inform expectation of acceptable parenting and often fail to recognize the problems of poor families of color as symptoms of systemic inequities (Woodward, 2021; Merritt,

2021; Dunkerley, 2017; Lee, 2016; Sered & Norton-Hawk, 2011; Reich, 2005). Intersectional experiences of multiple forms of systemic inequities and oppression lie at the center of the child welfare system, with child welfare policies and practices serving to further exacerbate the marginalization of these families. The additional stress and burden placed on parents from excessive system oversight, surveillance, and intrusive services further impacts their ability to parent effectively (Merritt, 2021; Cloud et al., 2017). Without understanding how racism and inequities affect clients, child welfare practitioners often develop case plans that discount and exacerbate the daily struggles of parents in their efforts to achieve safe and stable environments for their children (Merritt, 2021). As a result, child welfare policy largely serves to reinforce and perpetuate social inequalities along gender, race, and class lines (Bridges, 2017; Ramsay, 2017; Dunkerley, 2017; Reich, 2005; Roberts, 2012, 2003).

The additional layer of domestic violence introduces further inequities that may intensify these disparities, as barriers to accessing help among survivors of color increase their risk of child welfare involvement. Similar to the child welfare system, mainstream responses to domestic violence have largely been developed around the experiences and interests of White women and White standards of family and parenting (Washington, 2022). Research indicates that survivors of color are at greater risk of child welfare involvement and disproportionately have their children removed (Washington, 2022; La Brenz et al., 2022; Mabatah, 2016). A recent study, for example, found that inclusion of domestic violence as a form of child maltreatment in state policy was more strongly associated with substantiation for children of color than for White children (LaBrenz et al., 2022). Moreover, survivors who experience multiple forms of oppression (e.g., on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability, immigration status) have an elevated risk of experiencing child welfare system interventions (LaBrenz et al., 2022; Dosanj et al., 2008). Meanwhile, people with lived experience and from impacted communities are largely excluded from the processes of defining child safety and abuse, sharing their lived experience of interpersonal and systems violence, and developing child welfare policy (Washington, 2022). This further ensures that policies and practices fail to respond effectively to the marginalized experiences of those who are disproportionately impacted by the child welfare system.

The body of research outlined here further demonstrates how racial disproportionality is not the simple result of racial bias within the child welfare system, but a product of cumulative, synergistic interactions over time and across interrelated systems and societal settings (Merritt, 2021; Menedian & Watt, 2008). Inequities across various systems intersect, excluding families and survivors of color from accessing the benefits and supports they need, instead directing them into the child welfare system (Minoff & Citrin, 2022; Merritt, 2021; Feely et al., 2020; Chetty et al., 2018). This interaction of disparate treatment and inequities across systems has a multiplier effect, further entrenching poor families of color in the child welfare system, which in turn further exacerbates poverty and vulnerability to domestic, community, and systems violence.

Research has shown, for example, that Black mothers are more likely than White mothers to experience ongoing domestic violence and more severe physical violence after becoming involved with child welfare services (Dunbar & Barth, 2007). Their inability to become “self-sufficient” and ensure a safe home for their children further reinforces the child welfare system’s conclusion that they are unfit parents because they cannot obtain the same standard of parenting as more affluent and advantaged families (Woodward, 2021; Merritt, 2021; Dunkerley, 2017; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). Similarly, cross-system interactions also exacerbate the disparate outcomes experienced by children of color. Foster care further increases the already heightened risk among Black youth of experiencing economic hardship, low educational attainment, criminal justice involvement, and other poor outcomes over their lifetime, thereby becoming a source of ongoing oppression (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). This body of work, taken as a whole, makes clear that addressing racial disproportionality in the child welfare system requires responses that attend to the enduring impacts of structural racism embedded throughout our society and its various institutions.

Approaches to Equitable and Culturally Responsive Child Welfare Practice

As the research summarized above illustrates, racial disparities at the intersection of domestic violence and the child welfare system result from interwoven threads of racism, classism, and gendered norms and expectations of parents that have been evolving throughout U.S. history. These threads are not easy to untangle within a single system, much less across multiple institutions that intersect in complex ways. For this reason, many academics and activists call for dismantling the entire child welfare system and starting over, asserting that any system built on such a foundation cannot be fixed (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Dettlaff et al., 2020). While these arguments hold merit, for those currently working within the system, there are ways to begin working towards a more equitable child welfare system.

Child welfare leaders, judges, policymakers, and others can take actions to reduce the race, class, and gender disparities that are now understood as known features – and outcomes – of the system. Following are four strategies to build an anti-racism infrastructure to address the specific ways that survivors of domestic violence are harmed by the child welfare system, or to reduce racial disparities overall, and thereby reduce some of the harm to Black, Indigenous, and other survivors of domestic violence from communities of color.

1. Enhance the economic safety net for children and families to reduce burdens of poverty and prevent child welfare involvement.

Providing direct and flexible cash assistance, leveraging TANF funds, expanding tax credits and SNAP benefits, investing in supportive housing and child care, expanding access to health care, and similar strategies have all been shown to reduce the entry of families into the system (Chapin Hall & APHA, 2023; Weiner et al., 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). Since Black, Indigenous, and Latinx families are more likely to live in poverty in the U.S., these policies can help to reduce disproportionality in the child welfare system.

2. Learn from survivors, data, and research in an on-going quality improvement process.

This should begin with engaging survivors of domestic violence and the child welfare system in exploring how they and their children have been harmed, placed at greater risk, and had their parenting undermined by decisions of caseworkers, supervisors, and managers within child welfare agencies. Providing space for survivors to share their stories helps policymakers and system leaders in developing deeper understanding of the impacts of the system's policies and practices, as well as the changes needed to respond effectively to the lived experiences of system involved families (Merritt, 2021). For example, view the recordings, policy recommendations, and other resources from the [Accountability Dialogues](#) in which Black, Indigenous, and Latinx survivors of domestic violence engaged in a multi-session dialogue with top child welfare policymakers, judges, and national advocates.

Child welfare systems should engage, compensate, and support survivors and other people with lived expertise to participate in analysis of available data to understand the impacts of the system's practice and policies (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022). Disaggregate, analyze, and share data that helps system and community leaders to understand the scope of race, class, and gender inequities within child welfare and help to reduce them. Additionally, child welfare agencies can conduct an [Institutional Analysis](#) and create action plans to change features of systems (definitions, tools, practices, procedures, etc.) that contribute to racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity or inequities related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

3. Establish authentic race-equity-focused partnerships.

Another key strategy is establishing race-equity-focused partnerships with culturally specific and community-based organizations and other systems that work with families experiencing domestic violence, or families who experience the stressors that can lead to violence (Green-Rogers et al., 2022). Invest in building trust and capacity among partners to grapple with long-standing disparities and poor outcomes for many families (White Starr et al., 2020). Adopt a shared strategy of building and promoting protective factors at multiple levels of the social ecology that mitigate the negative impacts of domestic violence on both adult and child survivors and promote a trajectory of healing and well-being (Harper Brown & Ung, 2023).

4. Establish accountability for child welfare and related systems

Systems that contribute to racial, gender, and class inequities and result in disproportionate harm to Black, Indigenous, and other families and survivors of color must be held accountable for the harm they cause (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). For example, child welfare policy should require child outcomes and holistic needs of families to be considered in all domains of service provision, with consequences for failure to adequately support families' needs (Feely et al., 2020). Agencies will have greater incentive to increase families' access to and utilization of resources and services if they are held accountable for the resulting outcomes of child welfare interventions.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of strategies to advance anti-racism within child welfare, but jurisdictions who are committed to this work will benefit from building the infrastructure described above. Modifying training, developing practice guidance, and similar efforts will fall short as it has in other jurisdictions who neglected the larger structural issues and the quality of collaboration and relationships with other parties who work with the same families.

Learn more about anti-racist practice and NCAP's Levers for Change:
<https://www.centertoadvancepeace.org/levers-for-change>

Please contact the National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families for assistance: info@centertoadvancepeace.org

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