

Working Towards Racial Equity in Child Welfare: The San Francisco County Disproportionality Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes San Francisco County's multi-disciplinary approach to address the disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes of African American youth in foster care and makes recommendations for applying aspects of this approach in Alameda County. This report also provides information about racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare based on a review of recent research.

Project Description

This case study highlights five strategies that have been developed in San Francisco over the past several years to address racial disproportionality in the city's child welfare system. The Family & Children's Services Division of the San Francisco Human Services Agency, along with community partners, have 1) conducted a review of the literature; 2) collected local data and published recommendations for change based on that data; 3) developed plans to test policy, training, and practice strategies; 4) implemented workgroups to apply the changes and recommen-

dations; and 5) participated in a citywide task force with oversight responsibility to ensure the activities are carried out.

Recommendations for Alameda County

Alameda County should ensure that all children, youth, and families have the resources they need to achieve positive outcomes associated with safety, permanence, and well-being.

Alameda County should utilize the already established Family to Family workgroup structure and create a Disparity and Disproportionality workgroup that will take a systematic approach to analyzing the issues, hypothesizing recommendations for change, and implementing and testing the changes to ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved. This is an approach that utilizes:

- research and data analysis;
- program, policy and practice initiatives to effect change;
- effective program evaluation that links practice to outcomes; and accountability and oversight.

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Introduction

The disproportionate number of African American youth served by the child welfare system has been a major academic and professional concern for several decades. Social service professionals, policy makers, and academic researchers have been offering hypotheses, collecting data, adjusting practice and policy, and testing strategies intended to address racial disparity and disproportionality.

It is important to examine the impact of foster care on individual youth and families who are not attaining the intended outcomes of safety, permanence, and well-being. It is important also to address the impact child welfare has on the functioning of entire communities of color. Dorothy Roberts¹ asserts that “The disproportionate removal of individual Black children from their homes has a detrimental impact on the status of Blacks as a group. Excessive state intervention in Black family life damages Black people’s sense of personal and community identity. Family disintegration leads to community disintegration.”

Discussions regarding racial and ethnic disproportionality in child welfare have recently expanded to include other concepts such as disparity and equity. The following definitions will provide the framework for this discussion. “Disproportionality” refers to the extent to which a racial or ethnic group are over- or under-represented in the child welfare system compared to that group’s percent of

the census population. “Disparity” refers to unequal or inequitable treatment or outcomes based on race or ethnicity regarding decision-making, treatment, support services, or resources. “Equality” means everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, receives the same thing in quality and quantity. “Equity” is giving everyone what they need to achieve desirable outcomes, even if certain racial or ethnic groups receive more or different support services.

These distinctions and definitions help shape goals and objectives in achieving institutional change. For example, a child welfare agency, rather than or in addition to reducing disproportionality, may choose to ensure that all children are treated equitably and work towards the goal of reducing disparities by giving each family what they require to achieve the most desirable outcomes. As Robert Hill² (2006) asserts, “If children with the same needs were treated equitably—regardless of their race or ethnicity—their over- or under-representation in child welfare would be less of an issue.”

Project Description

According to managers in The Family & Children’s Services Division (FCS) of the San Francisco Human Services Agency, the over-representation of African American children in foster care has reached crisis proportions in San Francisco. In 2005, African American youth made up 11% of the child population in the city yet were 70% of the children in foster care

¹Roberts, D. 2002. *Shattered bonds: The color of child welfare*. New York, NY: Civitas Books.

²Hill, Robert. October 2006. *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update*. Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System.

that year. To address this issue, FCS has participated in The San Francisco Disproportionality Project and other activities described below. While many FCS managers have expressed a desire to reduce racial disparity, their plans and recommendations do not outline specific goals to address disparity and equity in their child welfare services. The specific goals of participating in these activities have been to conduct research to find out the reasons for over-representation of African American children in foster care, to develop comprehensive recommendations to address this disproportionality, and to engage in action steps to implement the recommendations.

FCS staff, along with community partners and key stakeholders, have engaged in five ongoing activities over the past several years to address racial disproportionality:

- **Literature review**—Key managers and stakeholders conducted a review of the literature to gain an understanding of racial disproportionality in other child welfare jurisdictions.
- **The Disproportionality Project**—A multi-disciplinary team of stakeholders came together in 2004 to conduct local, exploratory research. They produced nine recommendations to reduce racial disproportionality in San Francisco.
- **Breakthrough Series Collaborative**—Sponsored by Casey Family Programs in 2005, staff from 13 child welfare agencies, including San Francisco, created plans to test various strategies aimed at reducing racial disproportionality.
- **Foster Care Improvement Task Force**—Legislation passed in 2006 created a Task Force with oversight responsibilities to ensure that the nine recommendations published by The Disproportionality Project are implemented.
- **Implementation Workgroups**—Scheduled to begin in June 2007, these workgroups will be chaired by FCS senior managers and will implement the recommendations produced by the Disproportionality Project and the plans created as a result of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative.

A more detailed description of these five activities follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the first steps in any change effort is to gain an understanding of the issues and contributing factors by reviewing research and theoretical approaches to the problem. Therefore, in their effort to reduce disproportionality, managers and stakeholders conducted a review of the literature to gain an understanding of racial disproportionality in child welfare through research and practice in other areas of the country. This section will briefly describe some of the relevant research and case studies from national, state, and local projects.

A review of the literature on racial disproportionality in child welfare reveals research in three main areas of interest to this case study:

- decision-making in child welfare;
- disparity in services and outcomes; and
- causes of disparity and disproportionality.

Recent national, state and local research indicates that race is a factor in decision-making at various stages in the child welfare process, from reporting abuse and neglect to foster care placement to family reunification or adoption. The federal government has sponsored three versions of the National Incidence Surveys (NIS) of Child Abuse and Neglect, which have found that children of color are not abused at higher rates than white children.³ In fact, after controlling for various risk factors (including income and home structure), the most recent NIS found significantly lower rates of maltreatment for black families relative to white families. Yet, in many areas across the nation, African American children are frequently involved in the child welfare system for child maltreatment at much higher rates than other children.

Appendices A and B of this report provide data from San Francisco and Alameda Counties on the child welfare pathway by race and ethnicity, which include many of these decision-making points. Disproportionality of African American youth increases at almost every stage in child welfare for both San Francisco and Alameda Counties.

³U.S. DHHS, (1980-1996). National Incidence Study I, II, & III, Washington, DC.

Additionally, there is a limited body of literature that describes *disparities in the services and outcomes* of children and families of color. Most research regarding disparity focuses on disparate outcomes rather than disparate services or treatment. However, Robert Hill (2006) does cite several research studies that have shown racial disparities regarding the following: fewer and lower quality services, fewer foster parent support services, fewer contacts by social workers, less access to drug treatment and mental health services, and higher placement in detention or correctional facilities.

Furthermore, African American and Latino children are about twice as likely as White children to be placed with kin. According to Robert Hill (2006), however, "despite their disadvantaged economic status, kin caregivers receive fewer services and benefits and lower financial assistance than non-related caregivers. Kin caregivers are less likely than non-kin foster parents to receive foster parent training, respite care, educational or mental health assessments, counseling or tutoring for their children. This may be an example of institutional or structural discrimination."

Even with the increasing amount of research and activity in this area, there are not yet easily identifiable causes for racial disproportionality or disparity. Almost all of the research focuses on introducing and explaining racial disproportionality or disparity, and not directly on their causes, contributing factors, or evidence-based practice strategies. While there are theories being proposed that identify possible causes, these theories have yet to be tested and confirmed.

THE DISPROPORTIONALITY PROJECT

The Disproportionality Project, instituted in 2004 in San Francisco, was a short-term planning project to conduct exploratory research, examine the problem of disproportionality, and to propose recommendations to address it. The Stuart Foundation and Annie E. Casey Foundation funded this eight month process, which consisted of four main components:

- 1 a task force comprised of key stakeholders to define the issues and develop recommendations;

- 2 a research project conducted by California State University East Bay to collect local quantitative and qualitative data;
- 3 an advisory council to guide the research and act as a liaison between the task force and research team; and
- 4 the core project staff who managed the task force and advisory council and wrote the final report.

The project culminated with the publication of *Raising Our Children Together*,⁴ which provides a description of the project activities and nine major recommendations to reduce disproportionality. The researchers from the Urban Institute at California State University East Bay also presented the results of the research component in their final report.⁵

The project included a review of the following data from 2003:

- Child Welfare Pathway Chart, which shows disproportionality increasing at every stage. Refer to Appendix B for this data chart.
- Allegations by race/ethnicity, which shows that approximately 44% of the allegations for African American families were for neglect or absent caretaker, which is slightly higher than the other racial/ethnic groups for those categories.
- Child abuse and neglect reports by race/ethnicity and relationship of the reporting party, which shows that 40% of all reports on African American youth are made by relatives or other non-mandated reporters, a higher percentage of non-mandated reporters than any other group.
- Geographic concentration maps for child abuse reports and removals, which show concentrated levels in five priority neighborhoods that have large public housing complexes.
- Length of stay in foster care by race/ethnicity and kinship placement, which show that African American children had the longest length of stay

⁴The Disproportionality Project. 2004. *Raising Our Children Together: A Report on Recommendations for Reducing the Disproportionality of African American Children in San Francisco's Child Welfare System*.

⁵Bowser, B. and Jones, T. August 2004. *Understanding the Over-Representation of African Americans in the Child Welfare System: San Francisco*. (retrieved April 2007 at www.childwelfare.gov)

and that all children placed with kin had longer stays than children in non-kin placements.

Additionally, the research team gathered qualitative data on the perceptions of over-representation of African American children in foster care. They conducted focus groups with fifty-one Emergency Response and Dependency Investigation social workers and eighty biological and foster parents. Four administrators were interviewed individually.

The questions to parents were designed to elicit experiences with different stages of the child welfare process. The questions to social workers focused on organizational structure and process. The focus group participants highlighted societal or family factors that lead to disproportionality, including poverty, isolation, incarceration, institutionalized racism and drug abuse. Social workers stated that they were more likely to be cautious and substantiate an allegation of abuse or neglect when there is insufficient staffing to conduct investigations thoroughly.

Parents said that they believed social workers and foster parents would be out of a job if their children had not been taken into foster care. In their final report mentioned above, Bowser and Jones (2004) write, “in the parent focus groups they said that everything about the foster care process is ‘racial’—racism has everything to do with the over-representation of African Americans in foster care. The fact that they are poor also has everything to do with it. They see a system that has a strong appetite for their children.”

The Project team published the following nine recommendations:

- 1 Implement Circles of Support within the community that support and mentor individuals in crisis.
- 2 Launch a targeted positive campaign to influence the community, especially the five priority neighborhoods.
- 3 Develop family support strategies and programs, especially for fathers and incarcerated parents.
- 4 Strengthen collaboration among FCS and other key city departments to support parents and adult caregivers who are substance abusers.
- 5 Focus on youth permanence (adoption, guardianship, and reunification).
- 6 Implement policies and practices, including an assessment tool, that ensure consistency and equity, especially in family placements.
- 7 Focus on preventive, culturally competent services.
- 8 Improve and expand city departments’ data systems.
- 9 Initiate and maintain inter-departmental and community collaborations.

BREAKTHROUGH SERIES COLLABORATIVE

San Francisco Family and Children’s Services participated in the Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Disproportionality beginning in mid-2005. In the BSC meetings, staff created eleven Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) outlines and utilized the seven key components in the BSC model, *Framework for Change*.

The PDSA cycle is a process for testing a strategy by developing a plan for change, executing the plan on a small scale, observing the results and evaluating the feedback, and acting on the observations and evaluation.

BSC’s Framework for Change involves seven key components:

- 1 Create a supportive agency mission,
- 2 Develop cross-system leadership,
- 3 Support families in context,
- 4 Improve community capacity,
- 5 Educate staff and stakeholders,
- 6 Design culturally sensitive services, and
- 7 Use and share data.

Thus far, FCS has utilized the *Educate Staff and Stakeholders* component by holding informal discussions, called Courageous Conversations, with social work staff and supervisors. During these meetings, managers and data analysts facilitated informal discussions about the data on disproportionality. Additionally, a group of managers and supervisors has attended a two and a half-day training, *Undoing Racism*, conducted by the People’s Institute West and funded by the San Francisco Foundation.

FOSTER CARE IMPROVEMENT TASK FORCE

In 2006, a citywide Foster Care Improvement task force was created as a result of legislation sponsored by a County Supervisor. The task force has oversight responsibilities to ensure that the nine Disproportionality Project recommendations are implemented by FCS and other city departments.

Key stakeholders participate in monthly meetings, including managers from city departments, funding agencies, staff from community based service and advocacy organizations, and birth and foster parents from the five communities most impacted by child welfare involvement. The Family to Family staff of the Annie E. Casey Foundation provide staff support for the task force. The task force began meeting in November 2006 and is scheduled to end in August 2007. However, the Board of Supervisors will likely institute an extension. FCS executive management reports to the task force on the plans for implementing the recommendations and reducing disproportionality.

IMPLEMENTATION WORKGROUPS

As a result of the activities listed above, FCS currently has several plans to address disproportionality:

- the nine recommendations from the Disproportionality Project report,
- eleven PDSA outlines for change, and
- seven key components in the *Framework for Change* from the Breakthrough Series Collaborative. Each of these plans includes major goals with strategies, activities, and deadlines to meet these goals.

The FCS management has planned strategy workgroups to begin meeting in June 2007. The workgroups, chaired by senior managers and including staff who volunteer to participate along with relevant community partners, will begin to engage in the activities that have been outlined by the Disproportionality Project recommendations, PDSA outlines, and the components from the *Framework for Change*.

Implications for San Francisco County

Over the past several years, San Francisco County's Family & Children's Services Division has engaged their community partners in a multi-disciplinary approach to address the disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes of African American youth in foster care. There are several implications for FCS managers and other stakeholders to consider as they continue to work towards their goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Over the past several years, San Francisco County has engaged in the above-described activities to address racial disproportionality. Their primary intention is to reduce the disproportionality of African American youth and families in various stages of the child welfare system.

The major work of implementing the recommendations from the various PDSA outlines developed in the Breakthrough Series Collaborative and the recommendations from the Disproportionality Project is yet to be accomplished. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) lists San Francisco County as one of ten jurisdictions to watch as an emerging leader in the area of racial disproportionality. CSSP states "Jurisdictions are just beginning to test strategies to achieve more equitable outcomes for children of color, and thus their practices are best viewed as examples of 'places to watch.' The actual implementation is still in the early stages."⁶

FCS managers intend to accomplish the work of implementing their plans through the Implementation Workgroups mentioned above. The management team will have to continue with their commendable efforts of oversight by management, community partners, and stakeholders to ensure that these implementation workgroups do not duplicate the strategic planning efforts and do actualize the plans that have already been developed.

⁶Paper prepared for The Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity. December 2006. *Places to Watch: Promising Practices to Address Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare Services*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

Will full implementation of these plans reduce disproportionality and/or disparity for African Americans? San Francisco, by participating in the PDSA method of testing change, has begun the process to test strategies. However, they may not have linked these strategies to the contributing factors found in the research that was conducted in their county. There does not seem to be a program evaluation component to ensure that the activities have the intended impact. FCS managers intend to continue collecting data on racial disproportionality at the various stages of the child welfare process; however, they do not currently have a way to ensure that the activities they are implementing are having an impact on that data.

BUDGET AND FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

San Francisco County has received the majority of its funding for the above-mentioned planning activities from the Stuart Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, San Francisco Foundation, and Casey Family Programs. These organizations have provided funding and staff support for the planning activities. Effective and comprehensive planning is essential to any successful system reform effort; however, funding can be difficult to sustain for social service agencies. San Francisco has completed some of the most extensive local, exploratory research and planning efforts to address disproportionality compared to other jurisdictions, statewide and nationally. FCS and other community stakeholders will have to continue to seek funding and find creative ways to implement the majority of the work that is yet to be accomplished.

Recommendations for Alameda County

There are several recommendations for Alameda County. First and foremost, I recommend that Alameda County Department of Children of Family Services (DCFS) tackle the issue of disparity and the challenge of ensuring that all children, regardless of race and ethnicity, are treated equitably and have equitable outcomes. The goal for DCFS may not be to replicate the percent of the population for every

racial/ethnic group at every decision-making point in the child welfare process. The approach would only address disproportionality, not disparity. Alameda County can take action to ensure that all children, youth, and families have the services and resources they need to achieve positive outcomes associated with safety, permanence, and well-being.

Through its extensive planning efforts, San Francisco County has collected useful information in focus groups with staff and parents. Staff and community partners have also developed extensive plans for testing strategies, much of which might be relevant to their efforts.

Alameda County DCFS should take a systematic approach to describing the issue for the county, hypothesizing recommendations for change, and implementing and testing the changes to ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved as a result of the program changes. This is an approach that utilizes:

- research and data analysis on disproportionality and disparity in Alameda County;
- program, policy and practice initiatives to effect change;
- effective program evaluation that links practice to outcomes; and
- accountability and oversight at each of these steps.

Specifically, I recommend that DCFS achieve the goals listed above by participating in the following activities:

- Form a Racial Disproportionality and Disparity Workgroup with staff, community partners, youth, and parents to guide and focus the work and provide a structure for oversight and accountability. The most appropriate venue for such a workgroup is through the Family to Family workgroup structure, which consists of workgroups made up of staff and community partners who iron out the details of system reform. Alameda County is a Family to Family Anchor Site, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Collect quantitative and qualitative data on both disproportionality and disparity for all racial groups. Alameda County should conduct focus

groups and/or interviews with birth parents, foster parents, community partners, and DCFS staff to gain their perceptions of disproportionality.

- Participate in California's Racial Disproportionality Project, which will be facilitated by the Child and Family Policy Institute of California and will begin in the fall 2007, for an opportunity to test strategies from the beginning of our process.
- Engage university and think-tank research staff to form hypotheses about contributing factors to disparity and disproportionality in Alameda County and to develop evidence-based practice so that programs can effectively be linked to outcomes.

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