

Uneven Ground: The Disproportionate Representation of Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System

Lisette Austin

At first, accepting Carmen as my GAL volunteer wasn't easy. When I met her at age 14, I said, "You're White, I'm Black—there's no way we can have anything in common." I tried everything to push her out of my life. But she showed a lot of patience, and I eventually came to trust her and opened up. Later, Carmen gave me books that I have on my shelf to this day—African-American Wisdom: A Book of Quotations and Proverbs and In the Company of My Sisters: Black Women and Self-Esteem. She also encouraged me to go to Howard University, where I could not only get a good education but learn more about my culture.

—Kadia Edwards, 24
Former foster child and
graduate student at Duke University

Child welfare systems across the US have a difficult task—protecting and providing services to abused and neglected children while helping families stay intact whenever possible. The system strives to treat all children equally, but the reality is that not all children in foster care stand on equal ground. Children and families of color, particularly African-American and American Indian/Alaska Native children, are entering foster care at rates higher than non-minority children—and they stay in care longer. Not only that, but minority children receive fewer supportive services to promote stability, safety and general well-being.

The numbers are difficult to ignore. Of the over 500,000 children currently in the system, nearly 60% are children of color. African-American children represent 35% of children in foster care although they make up only 15% of the general child population. For American Indian children, the foster care rate is double their representation

in the general community (2% vs. 1%). Children primarily enter foster care because of abuse or neglect. However national studies, including the 1993 *National Incidence Survey of Child Abuse and Neglect*, show no statistically significant differences in maltreatment rates between African-American and Caucasian families. So why are there so many African-American children in foster care?

In *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare*, researcher Robert B. Hill, PhD summarizes studies showing where disproportionality occurs. According to the report, minority children are more likely to be reported to CPS for maltreatment than their Caucasian counterparts. Studies also show that African-American families are more likely to be investigated, more likely to have reports of abuse substantiated and more likely to experience foster care. (Casey-Center for the Study of Social Policy Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System, 2006).

Disproportionality rates are only the tip of the iceberg. Research shows that children and families of color in the child welfare system are regularly treated differently than non-minority children and families. Hill's report states that minority children receive fewer and lower-quality services, less foster parent support, fewer contacts by caseworkers and less access to mental health and drug treatment. This

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disparity in services for families of color is consistent nationwide.

So what causes minority overrepresentation and unequal treatment in the child welfare system? The studies summarized in Hill's report primarily point to the problem, rather than uncovering causes. He is careful not to make assumptions. "The processes that lead to disproportionality are complex—you can't just say that certain people are racist and that's why this problem exists," says Hill. "There is something about minorities having more stress and less income, something about agencies that may have stereotyping going on, and then there are policies that give agencies more money to remove children from families rather than serve them in their home."

Hill's report calls for additional research on the possible causes of disproportionality and disparities as well as more research about less-studied racial and ethnic groups. Research is also needed on how racial disproportionality affects not just children and families but the larger communities they come from. Dorothy

Roberts, author of the book *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, has begun researching the impact of child welfare involvement on communities. "White neighborhoods in Chicago have nowhere near the rate of child welfare involvement that the poor, Black neighborhoods do," says Roberts. "Statistics don't get at what it is like to grow up in a neighborhood where children are constantly being removed and placed outside their homes."

Addressing the Problem

Agencies and organizations across the country are tackling the daunting problem of racial disproportionality and finding ways to slowly improve the situation. Addressing this issue is not new for Sondra Jackson, executive director of Black Administrators in Child Welfare. Founded in 1972, the organization has been committed to raising awareness about the issue. According to Jackson, having more people of color in leadership positions is necessary to successfully meet the needs of minority children in care. "Thirty-five percent

of the children in the system are African-American, but only 5% of the decision-making people are African-American—that's not right," she says.

Black Administrators in Child Welfare also offers training seminars exploring the impact of race dynamics in the foster care system. "There needs to be some targeted training," says Jackson. "Most people feel that they are culturally competent, but too often they *do* need a better understanding of world views and communities. My goal is to help people believe that there may be something they *don't* know. If we're going to be culturally competent, we need to always be aware of our *incompetence*."

Casey Family Programs is another organization working diligently on this issue. Based in Seattle, Casey has been working nationally since 1966 to provide, improve and ultimately prevent the need for foster care. Casey is committed to bringing national attention to the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system. "We found that there is a ton of information on the problem out there, but not much on the solution," says Lyman Legters, senior director of Casey's Seattle office. "So we are on the leading edge of this issue."

To raise awareness nationally, Casey Family Programs has partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities and the Center for the Study of Social Policy to form the Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, which published the Hill report referenced above. The alliance produces educational literature and media about racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system and is working to define changes needed to create a system free of structural racism. These include changes in public policy, research and community partnerships. Casey also works closely

with the Race Matters Consortium, a national multi-system initiative also dedicated to reducing racial disproportionality in the system.

Casey's policy is to start building awareness close to home. The organization requires all employees to participate in *Undoing Racism*,™ a workshop facilitated by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond that focuses on recognizing and overcoming institutional racism. Casey also facilitates ongoing employee conversations about race, culture and privilege. "As child welfare workers, we have a responsibility to understand how racism impacts the children we work with," explains Legters. "We have to understand that

To address this, Casey has created a training tool for child welfare professionals called *Knowing Who You Are*. The training explores how professionals can first develop a healthy racial and ethnic identity in themselves and then help the youth they serve to do the same. "The training is a great awareness and motivation-building tool that encourages people to check their own perceptions and the way they practice," says Legters. National CASA recently held a *Knowing Who You Are* training for its entire staff and is looking for ways to promote it throughout the CASA/GAL network of nearly 950 program offices.

Promoting Systems Change

Another approach to addressing racial disparities is promoting systems change. Over the last decade, data improvements have helped child welfare leaders and professionals recognize the scope of the problem and begin to respond to it. As a result, a number of states have created initiatives to improve outcomes among children and families of color.

Washington is one of a handful of states that have passed legislation requiring child welfare departments to examine statistics on

disproportionality and develop remedial plans. Change is also happening at the county level, thanks to the King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality based in Seattle. King County Superior Court Judge Patricia Clark convened this group of 25 child welfare and human service organizations in early 2004 with the goal of reducing racial disparities. The local CASA program participates in this effort.

Tips for Advocates

- Take time to understand the community you serve and the children you are working with. This can include researching local child welfare data.
- Educate yourself about racial disproportionality and racial disparities in the child welfare system. Seek out additional training, and help raise awareness about these issues.
- Know who *you* are. Exploring your own identity can help you understand how important a child's identity is to her—which will in turn help you advocate for her.
- Make recommendations that the youth of color you are advocating for has access to his cultural heritage in whatever way he can. Help promote a sense of pride in his culture and ethnicity.
- Explore kinship care whenever possible, and look for non-relatives with close relationships who could also be helpful, such as godparents.
- Promote the family group decision-making model and help children keep an intact sense of community.
- Work closely with your CASA program on implementing activities to address disproportionality and racial disparities. Ask where you can be of most benefit.
- If you belong to a minority group, help recruit other volunteers of your race and ethnicity.



we are struggling with forces that started a long time ago—and that continue to work to maintain the status quo."

One of Casey's top priorities is helping youth in care develop a stronger sense of their own racial and ethnic identity. Legters explains that while many children in the system struggle with identity issues, this struggle is often exacerbated for children of color.



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The coalition's first task was to conduct an in-depth review of county data on 13 child welfare decision points, from referrals to exits and reentry. "We found that county data mirrored national data," says Legters, who is also one of this coalition's founding executives. "The report showed that disparities increased at every decision point throughout the system."

Next, focus groups were held to explore the reasons behind the disproportionality. These groups included former foster care youth, foster parents, kinship care providers, social workers, legal representatives and mandated CPS

reporters (teachers, health care providers, etc.). The resulting report explores a number of potential contributing factors including stereotyping, a lack of clear definitions of abuse and neglect for cases without obvious physical evidence, language and cultural differences influencing reporter perceptions, lack of cultural awareness among child welfare professionals and a dearth of service providers who can work effectively with families of color.

Once areas of concern were identified, the King County coalition committed to developing and implementing targeted interventions to

affect disproportionality by promoting systems change. "We need to get past this notion of hopelessness and helplessness—racial disproportionality is a solvable problem," says Judge Clark. "It needs to be addressed with the same energy that we tackle other issues of child abuse and neglect."

Texas has also taken the lead on addressing disproportionality. Joyce James was in her position as Texas CPS assistant commissioner for only three months when the governor issued an executive order to review the state's child welfare system. But James had already started working with Casey Family Programs to address disproportionality. The state began by holding an *Undoing Racism* training for local child welfare leaders. "The training had a powerful impact on the CPS leadership in our state and how we view our work—not just in regards to African-American children but all children," says James. Next, educational workshops were held for employees. After educating leadership and staff, the state rolled up its sleeves and got to work.

"When we looked at African-American children and families, we saw that there was disproportionality at points ranging from referral to kids waiting for placement—this was in all regions in the state," says James. "We decided to target the Houston/Dallas region initially since that's where we saw the largest amount of disproportionality."

One crucial aspect of the state's approach has been to partner with the community through advisory committees made up of former foster care youth, birth parents who have experienced the child welfare system, CASA volunteers, kin caregivers and representatives from child welfare, faith-based and human services organizations. The state is now exploring interventions with an emphasis on the front end of the system.

"We are looking at ways we might have an impact on the number of

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Seven Facts to Know When Advocating for Children of Color

Below are selected facts that illustrate why National CASA is clearly focused on achieving diversity and culturally competent child advocacy—and why this commitment is so critical to the children our CASA and GAL volunteers serve.

1. Children of color are *not* abused or neglected at higher rates than White children. (Three *National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect* conducted in 1980, 1986 and 1993)
2. Despite this, African-American children make up 15% of the child population but 35% of the children in foster care. American Indian children make up 2% of the foster care population and 1% of the child population. (US Department of Health and Human Services)
3. Race has been identified as a primary determinant for decision-making in five out of six stages in child protective services: reporting, investigation, substantiation, placement and exit from care. (R.B. Hill, *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update and National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services Delivered to Youth and Their Families*)
4. Instead of being referred to foster care, 72% of Caucasian children receive services in their own homes. Just 40% of Hispanic children and 44% of African-American children receive in-home services in lieu of removal. (*National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services Delivered to Youth and Their Families*)
5. African-American children remain in foster care longer—a median of 18 months in care compared to 10 months in care for Caucasian children. (*Children of Color at a Glance: Child Welfare League of America Fact Sheet and Relevant Research*)
6. Children of color experience less placement stability and achieve permanency less often or not as quickly. They are more likely to be moved from one placement to another, less likely to be reunified with their parents and wait longer to be adopted. (US Department of Health and Human Services and *Children of Color at a Glance: Child Welfare League of America Fact Sheet and Relevant Research*)
7. Children of color have less access to mental health services, and the services they do receive tend to be of lower quality. (Leslie et al, 2000; Garland et al, 2003; Leslie, Hulburt, Landsverk et al, 2004)

RESOURCES

Books

Derezotes, Dennette, Mark Testa and John Poertner (2005). *Race Matters in Child Welfare: The Overrepresentation of African American Children in the System*, Child Welfare League of America.

Graves, Joseph L. Jr. (2001). *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium*, Rutgers University Press.

Graves, Joseph L. Jr. (2005). *The Race Myth: Why We Pretend Race Exists in America*, Penguin Group.

Kivel, Paul (2002). *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, New Society Publishers.

Roberts, Dorothy E. (2003). *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, Basic Civitas Books.

Organizations and Reports

American Humane

(americanhumane.org): A network of individuals and organizations working to prevent cruelty, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children and animals. Search for "decision making" to find the National Center on Family Group Decision Making.

Black Administrators in Child Welfare (blackadministrators.org): A nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of African-American children and their families.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (aecf.org): Grantmaker that fosters public policies, human-service reforms and community supports to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families. Search for "Race Matters" for a toolkit including fact sheets and presentations.

Casey Family Programs (casey.org):

Works to provide, improve and prevent the need for foster care. Search for "disproportionality" to find resources such as *Knowing Who You Are*, a free video and e-learning course. The following reports are also available by searching the site:

Practices That Mitigate the Effects of Racial/Ethnic Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System, Susan Dougherty, Casey Family Programs, 2003.



Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update, Robert B. Hill, PhD, Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, 2006.

Places to Watch: Promising Practices to Address Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare Services, Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, 2006.

Center for the Study of Social Policy

(cssp.org): Strives to help states and localities implement strategies that strengthen disadvantaged communities and families and ensure that children grow up healthy, safe, successful in school and ready for productive adulthood.

Chapin Hall Center for Children

(chapinhall.org): Research and development center at the University of Chicago working to build knowledge to serve children. Search the site by author name for *Entry and Exit Disparities in the Tennessee Foster Care System*, Fred Wulczyn, Bridgette Lery and Jennifer Haight, 2006.

Child Welfare League of America

(cwla.org): An association of nearly 800 public and private nonprofit agencies that assist more than 3.5 million abused and neglected children and their families each year with a range of services.

United States Government Accountability

Office (gao.gov): Their hot-off-the-press report makes several suggestions to address disproportionality, including having congress consider amending the law to allow subsidies for legal guardianships by family members. To find *African American Children in Foster Care: Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care* (July 2007), go to gao.gov and search for "disproportionality."

National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators

(napcwa.org): This affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association published the report *Disproportionate Representation in the Child Welfare System: Emerging Promising Practices Survey*, March 2006.

National Coalition Building Institute

(ncbi.org): An international nonprofit leadership training organization working to eliminate racism and all other forms of prejudice and discrimination throughout the world.

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

(pisab.org): A national and international collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators dedicated to building a movement for social transformation. Provides *Undoing Racism™* training.

Race Matters Consortium

(racemattersconsortium.org): A diverse group of child welfare experts representing research, policy, administration, practice and advocacy that examines disproportional representation of individuals of different races and ethnic groups in the child welfare system.

Films

American Blackout (documentary): 2006, Ian Inaba, Director.

King Leopold's Ghost (documentary): 2006, Pippa Scott, Director.

Rabbit-Proof Fence: 2002, Phillip Noyce, Director.

The Trials of Darryl Hunt (documentary): 2006, Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg, Directors.

American Indian/Alaska Native Children

Many studies show that although child abuse and neglect are pervasive problems in American Indian communities, Indian children are dramatically overrepresented in the child welfare system. Because of a wide range of complex issues—economic distress, complicated jurisdictional issues and limited resources—Native tribes often experience difficulties in handling, investigating and prosecuting cases of child abuse and neglect in tribal communities.

The availability of CASA volunteers in American Indian communities can be low for many reasons. For instance, extremely high unemployment rates in reservation communities often cause volunteers to leave tribal programs to seek paid work. Another common

problem is the vast distances that need to be traveled by CASA volunteers.

National CASA recognizes the great need for advocacy in Tribal Courts as well as in mainstream courts. The association provides training, technical assistance and grant funding to support programs serving this population. Tribal Court CASA programs are an important part of the solution, training community members to be vocal and effective advocates for child victims of abuse and neglect. Additionally, because many tribal children live among the general population, National CASA's training curriculum for all volunteers covers American Indian issues, including the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Promising Practices to Address Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare Services. This paper provides an overview of intervention strategies developed by 10 state and county jurisdictions. Some key strategies highlighted in the report include:

- Understanding how and where the system produces inequitable outcomes
- Collecting and analyzing data around key decision points
- Partnering with communities to achieve change
- Improving service delivery and using team decision-making as a vehicle to improve services
- Improving cultural awareness and competence of staff
- Developing policy intervention at both administrative and legislative levels
- Conducting ongoing community and agency evaluation

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families coming to the attention of this system and making sure we are culturally sensitive," says James. Texas has also begun implementing the family group decision-making model, which originated in New Zealand. This innovative approach engages families in planning for children in foster care—with youth often having a say in who participates. It is also being used by the King County child welfare system and is slowly gaining momentum nationwide.

"An important focus of our systems improvement collaboration in Texas with Child Protective Services is to support the family group decision-making practice approach," says Carolyne Rodriguez, senior director of Casey's Texas State Strategy. Whether used prior to removal or after a child first comes into care, this model is showing promising results—helping children achieve permanency more quickly and with familiar people. "Kinship care is often accelerated through the use of the family group

decision-making model," says Rodriguez. "It is directly linked to disproportionality reduction."

Texas and Washington are only two examples of states implementing innovative practices. The Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity recently published *Places to Watch*:

The CASA Network's Commitment to Diversity

The need for *both* culturally competent and diverse volunteers was recognized by the first CASA program even as it was forming in 1976. And the National CASA Association has been a leader in providing training, technical assistance and targeted





grants to promote these values, particularly over the last decade. (See the spring 2007 issue of *The Connection* for details.) Furthermore, National CASA continues to look for new ways to help improve outcomes for minority children in foster care—and to improve its own track record.

“Currently, roughly 90% of CASA/GAL volunteers are Caucasian, while over 60% of the children we serve are children of color,” says Terene Bennett, National CASA regional program specialist. “We need better communication and greater representation from communities of color so we can better understand and respond to the needs of the cultural groups we are serving.”

As part of National CASA’s current strategic plan, its board of directors backed two initiatives to recruit more diverse volunteers

and raise awareness about disproportionality. With support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Jewelers for Children and Casey, National CASA is working with programs in five sites: two in Chicago, two in St. Louis and one in Miami. Advocates, staff and board members at each pilot site will participate in Casey’s *Knowing Who You Are* trainings. “The overall goal is to come up with some best practices for diversity recruitment, community engagement and disproportionality training—and to look at how we can replicate these strategies at all sites,” says Bennett.

One CASA program in particular already has effective diversity recruitment strategies under its belt: Richland County CASA in South Carolina. “It began in 2004 when we realized that 28% of our volunteers were minorities,” says Paige Jones, the program’s director. “The majority of children we served were children of color, however the majority of our volunteers were Caucasian—and only 16% were males.” Office staff had even less diversity,

with only one minority staff person and no men.

Faced with this reality, and recognizing that they wanted to improve services to the children in their care, Jones and her team decided they needed a plan. “Supported by a modest grant from National CASA, we created a written diversity plan with the help of professors, volunteers, community leaders and diversity experts at other businesses,” she says. “Once you publish a plan like this, you are held accountable for outcomes.”

Jones started by changing the office environment to create an atmosphere reflecting various cultures. She also aggressively recruited minorities into staff positions as they opened. Meanwhile, Richland County CASA’s new volunteer recruitment committee operated from the theory that “diverse people recruit other diverse people.” Although the organization started an advertising campaign that targeted diverse populations, they found that their best recruiters were their current volunteers of color. “I have very much pushed the peer recruitment model,” says Jones. “We have asked minority volunteers to be a major part of all CASA activities including training, public relations and fundraising.”

Their efforts paid off. Out of 300 volunteers, almost 50% are now people of color, and roughly 34% are men. Half of current employees are minorities, and there are now three men on staff. “It has not come without some pain,” says Jones. “Some were offended by the attention on recruiting minorities and men. But if we don’t have diversity, we can’t understand the subtle cultural nuances we face in serving children in care.”

Jacquelyn Buchanan, regional administrator for the Department of Family and Children’s Services in Washington state and an executive member of the King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality, echoes the importance of diversifying. “The

Hispanic/Latino Children

Some sources show that in most of the US, Hispanic and Latino children are actually *underrepresented* in foster care compared to the total population. However, there are areas in the West and Southwest and large cities in other regions where the opposite is true. Additionally, the US Department of Health and Human Services reports that over 18% of children in foster care (91,000) are Hispanic. But only 4% of all CASA and GAL volunteers (under 2,000) are from this community. Bilingual volunteers are especially needed. While all volunteers communicate in English during court proceedings, they are often working with individuals whose first language is Spanish. Navigating language barriers in a family is critical to ensuring success for a child. For these reasons, National CASA works to help programs recruit Hispanic/Latino volunteers.

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Richland County CASA example is exactly what we need to follow—children really do need advocates who they feel can understand them,” says Buchanan. National CASA honored the example set by Richland County with a diversity award at its 2007 national conference (see page 17).

What Advocates Can Do

Child welfare organizations across the country, including CASA programs, are slowly finding ways to address disparities at different points in the system, resulting in a multitude of strategies and outcomes. But what about individual CASA volunteers? What can they do to help level the field for children and families of color in care?

Advocates can begin by taking the time to understand their local child welfare system. “Look at the county level—find out more,” says researcher Hill. Once advocates understand which minorities are overrepresented in their area, he recommends researching the stages at which disparities occur. “Find out if they are reported more, investigated more and/or placed in foster care more.”

Volunteers also need to be willing to examine and shed assumptions they may have about the children and families they serve. “We all come with a set of lenses that we have grown up with and expectations of what families should look like,” says Judge Clark. “We need to be very aware of the impact of our own lens and realize that there are other experiences and ways of doing things that are just as valid.”

Buchanan of the King County coalition highlights the importance of getting to know the child and their culture as much as possible. “Ask questions of family and friends,” she says. “If you are going to make decisions about someone’s life, it can’t just be based on what you alone know.”

Many feel that CASA volunteers can help reduce the overrepresentation of children of color in the system by advocating for kinship care when feasible. “Using kin is a promising practice when abuse has been substantiated,” says Hill. “They may need to be removed from their parents, but the next place they should be placed is with their families—or even a godparent. The emotional impact on children is clearly greater when placed with strangers.”

Echoing Hill is Roberts, author of *Shattered Bonds*. “I think advocates need to understand the importance of community to children and the harm that can come from disrupting their entire social context,” she says. “Many think about the child welfare system only as protecting children and don’t think about the other ways the system can affect children’s lives, families and communities. Think about the long-term repercussions of placement in foster care, and try as much as possible to keep children with their families and communities.”

Most agree that there are no quick, easy answers to the problem of racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system. But awareness and tenacity can go a long way—as can a willingness to look at the difficult reality of racism on both an institutional and individual level. “We are all on a journey, at different points on that journey,” says Legters. “The main thing is to stay at the table, to stay engaged in the discussion even if it is uncomfortable.”

And although the scope of the problem can appear overwhelming, many remain optimistic. “I think this consciousness-raising discussion we are finally putting forward is a positive move,” says Jackson of Black Administrators in Child Welfare. “It’s about exploring the question ‘what can I do on an individual level to change this—and to provide the best service possible to meet this family and child’s needs?’”

Many believe that reducing racial disproportionality and disparities in services for families of color will mean an overall improvement of services for *all* children in care. Says Judge Clark: “If we fix this for kids of color, we fix it for every child in the system.” 🗨️

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