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Racial Equity Special Issue

Black Families and The Child Welfare System

Guest Editors: Jessica Pryce, PhD, MSW; Reiko Boyd, PhD, MSW



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Editorial

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Introduction

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Advisor committed to publishing a special issue focused on confronting systemic racism and bias as they impact disproportionality and injustice experienced by African American families in child welfare. As two Black women scholars who are committed to divesting from and dismantling systems that target and oppress Black families, it is an honor to serve as guest editors. It was our paramount goal to contribute to the growing knowledge base regarding policies, practices, and paradigm shifts that can promote life-affirming approaches centered on the needs, dignity, and value of Black families.

Disproportionality and Disparity in Context

The overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system is well documented and has been a persistent issue for several decades. Anti-Black racism and systemic oppression of Black families have been defining characteristics of U.S. social and economic institutions since this country's inception. We are overdue in accounting for and meaningfully addressing the interconnection between these two insidious legacies and how their consequences manifest through inequitable outcomes for Black families observed across systems today. This is especially true in regard to the child welfare experiences and outcomes of Black families.

Current national data indicate that Black children represent 23% of children in foster care, though

they represent only 14% of children in the general population (KIDS Count, 2020). Recent studies that examine the cumulative prevalence of CPS intervention shed light on the expansive reach of the system's surveillance of all children, but especially of those in Black and Native American families. Nearly half of Black children in this country are the subjects of investigated child maltreatment reports by their 18th birthday (Kim et al., 2017; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021). African American children are 2.4 times more likely than White children to experience the termination of parental rights (Wildeman et al., 2020).

Have we become apathetic to the statistics and data points that numerically quantify disparities experienced by Black families? Do we try to justify them or explain them away, ignoring the undeniable historical evidence of discriminatory laws, practices, and policies that are at the root of the present racial inequities we see? When will child welfare leaders, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers engage in an earnest reckoning of how the problem of anti-Black racism routinely manifests in child welfare system practices, policies, and procedures? In recent years, major current events in the United States created an unprecedented sociopolitical context in which systemic racism became a subject of mainstream public discourse. There seemed to be a global awakening toward racial justice, and together these events provided a "new" lens through which to view the experiences of Black families in contact with child welfare. It seemed that a light was shed on the urgent need for child welfare leaders to



place new investment in the pursuit of equity for historically marginalized communities. It appeared that the appetite for change and political will to pull meaningful child welfare policy levers in pursuit of racial equity was as strong as it had ever been.

Yet, where are we now? Has the window closed for radical innovation, evidence building, and redress that will fortify the ability of Black families to thrive in a society where they are truly respected and cherished? We emphatically declare that the answer is NO! The choice is ours and the time is now. In the present moment, where the threat of apathy looms and the backlash from those invested in maintaining the status quo is real, to what course of action will the child welfare field commit? Doing what we have always done will produce the same results. The articles in this special issue confront many of the questions we raise head-on. Collectively, they represent empirical and conceptual windows into potential paths forward.

Featured Articles

This special issue includes a critical exploration of the child welfare system’s historical and contemporary impact on Black children and their families. We are pleased to feature the following six articles: 1) *Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities*, 2) *Income, Ethnicity, and Equality: Assessing Racial Disparities in Foster Care Using a Self-Sufficiency Range*, 3) *Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research*, 4) *African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System*, 5) *The Multi-ethnic Placement Act: Preventing Discrimination or Promoting Colorblindness?* 6) *Anti-Black Racism within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future*.

Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities

The first article examined racial disproportionality and disparity in one community. The researchers utilized an anti-oppressive and anti-racist framework while conducting an Institutional Analysis on this community's disparate outcomes. The authors present six guiding principles that facilitate an equity-centered and justice-oriented approach to their work. There are many implications for this work moving forward. First, this framework could be very useful for researchers as they are highly encouraged to include the lived expertise of community members within their work. Additionally, this work compels researchers to think differently about unintentional harm and to be diligent in their efforts to co-create research methods with those who have firsthand experience of systemic harm.

Income, Ethnicity, and Equality: Assessing Racial Disparities in Foster Care Using a Self-Sufficiency Range

The second article explored a self-sufficiency range (SSR) in order to examine racial disparities in income for foster youth. The authors present a depiction of the very common reality of families who are living on a low income and often in poverty. They sought to examine economic disadvantages of youth who were in care in order to determine the impact on outcomes. The authors also presented the stunning reality of the many systemic and economic barriers to kinship care in our country. The sample was taken from Washington State, and you will see through this article the estimates of what income families need in that region of our country in comparison to what families actually have. In order to impact significant shifts in family support and decreasing barriers to kinship placement, it is imperative that we continue to highlight the economic realities for families, particularly the Black families who are targeted and harmed by the child welfare system.

Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research

The third article highlighted the importance of creating safe spaces for African American families to share their experiences and also to offer their recommendations for systemic change. The authors present more evidence of the importance of community participatory research methods that encourage collaboration with community members. Specifically, this study examined the utility of Community Cafes, which were held over the course of 4 days with 101 participants. The ongoing and important discussion about incorporating the voices of our community members with lived expertise is elevated through this work. It compels researchers and child welfare professionals to prioritize creating safe spaces for this sort of partnership. We are hopeful that this article ignites more interest in utilizing the model of community cafes in child welfare advocacy and research.

African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System

The fourth article highlights the disparate involvement and experiences of Black families who encounter the Ontario child welfare system. The authors detail the development of the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC), a restorative, culturally responsive innovation to support Black families at risk of, or in current contact with, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area. In this conceptual article, the authors describe the community-based research that led to the development of the ACB-FGC model and implications of this model for local approaches to addressing anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and among partner institutions. This article provides a prime demonstration of how to harness existing empirical evidence, effectively engage diverse stakeholders and those with lived

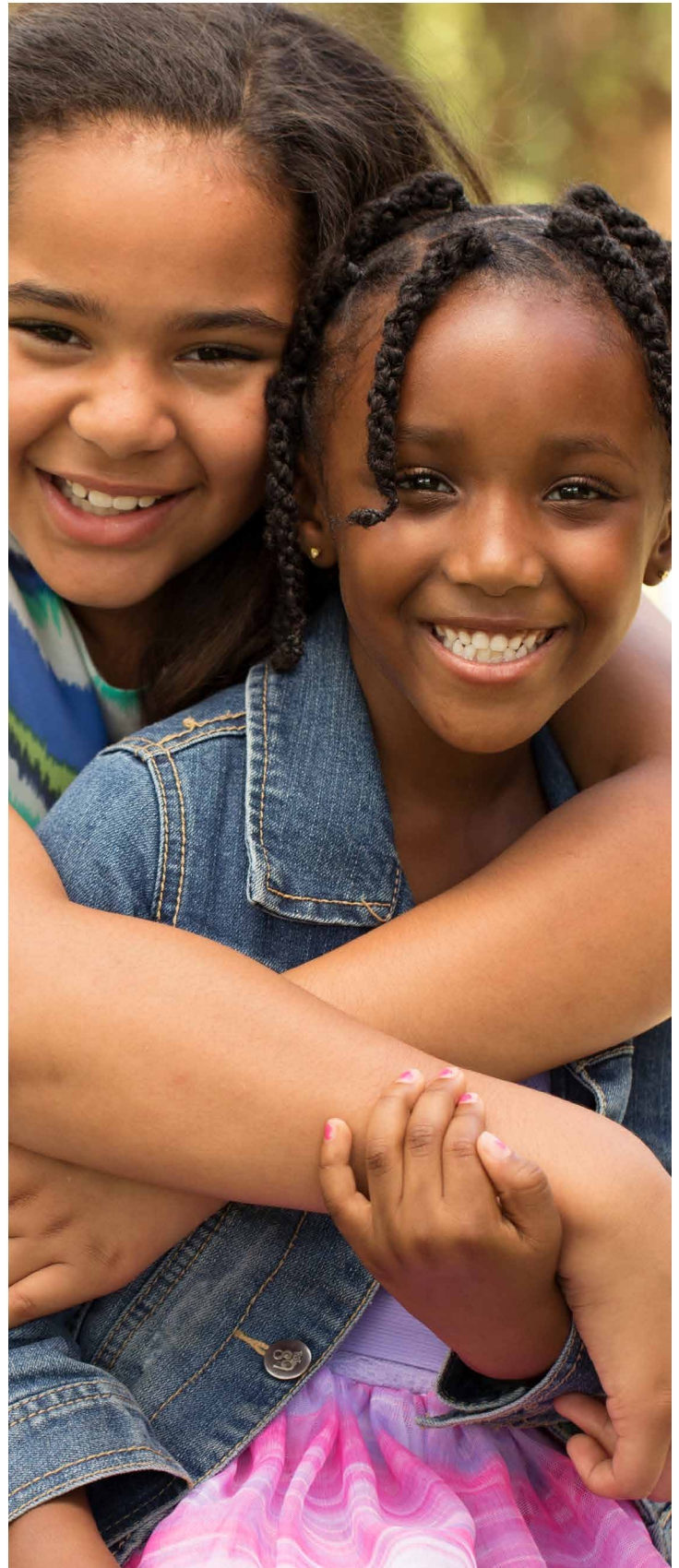
experience in the system, act with responsiveness to local needs, and execute community-centered efforts that move beyond surface-level modifications to current practices. In describing challenges confronting the ACB-FGC, this article also draws important attention to the need to eliminate policy barriers at the local level that can compromise the fidelity of interventions explicitly designed to address disparities and stifle access to resources for such efforts.

The Multi-ethnic Placement Act: Preventing Discrimination or Promoting Colorblindness?

The fifth article presents a bold argument for the repeal of MEPA-IEP based on the needed to remove the colorblind features of the policy. The authors explain the concept of colorblind racial ideology, engage in a critical analysis of MEPA-IEP, and engage in an analysis to hold the policy accountable to its stated goal of eliminating discrimination in foster and adoptive placements. The authors discuss the value of cultural continuity for children of color, offer nine redesign efforts that prioritize cultural continuity, and make the case for potential replacement legislation would contrast directly with current policy by encouraging workers to use race as a criterion. This work invites us to aptly focus on policy-level contributions to patterns of disproportionality and disparity. It provides a strong analytical template for directly calling in to question prior frames that fail to center race by applying faulty “colorblind” logic through performative race equity strategies.

Anti-Black Racism within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future

The final article acknowledges that many families, especially families of color, experience contact with the child welfare system as invasive, punitive, and traumatic. The authors provide a deep dive into the history of racial discriminatory practices and policies within the child welfare system, including a history of how it has evolved within a larger system



of structural racism within the United States. In acknowledging emergent discourse on the need for transformative change, the authors describe both grassroots movements to abolish the child welfare system and discuss efforts to enact child welfare reform. The authors present considerations for moving forward by acting on areas of overlap between the abolition and reform perspectives. We anticipate that this article will meet its stated aims of engaging diverse perspectives and generating important dialogue regarding potential direction of the field in light of widespread commitments to anti-racist practice.

Conclusion

Together, these articles have implications for the ongoing and ever-evolving discussion about the reality of systemic harm of the child welfare system and the necessity for significant change. These articles have the potential to facilitate the integration of systemic change efforts around the country. This special issue's prominent goal was centering the experience and disparate outcomes for Black children and their families, as well as how to recognize and build on the inherent strength of the Black community. It is therefore our hope and aim that this special issue renders important insights and perspectives and that those who encounter these articles will do so with a posture of cultural responsiveness, humility, and justice.

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Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities

Kelechi Wright, MA; Sarah McCall, MLS; Shelby Clark, PhD, LCSW; Kaela Byers, PhD, MSW; Becci Akin, PhD, MSW

Abstract

The child welfare system has been fraught with racial disparities for Black children and families, showing that there is significant work needed to reform the system. While prior research has expanded the field's knowledge of racial inequities, few studies have been conducted with methods that center Black families and community. This paper describes a framework for anti-oppressive and anti-racist research in child welfare, which emerged from a research team's work in conducting an Institutional Analysis on racial disproportionality and disparities in one community. Six guiding principles are shared to describe how this work applied an equity-centered and justice-oriented approach to interrogating the child welfare system and identifying potential solutions for reducing structural inequalities.

Key Words: Child Welfare, Foster Care, Racial Disparities, Parent Engagement, Community Engaged, Institutional Analysis, Anti-racist Research, Anti-oppressive Research

Disclosure Statement

All authors report no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

The U.S. child welfare system was constructed on the soil of a nation embedded in and founded on deep racial injustices. Thus, it is not surprising that racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system have become a long standing and plaguing issue. Evidence shows that routine practices of the child welfare system fail to help Black families stay intact (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004; Pryce et al., 2019). One statistic sharply illustrates the child welfare

system's oversurveillance of Black families: National research that examined the percentage of children who experienced a child maltreatment investigation during their childhood (age 0 to 18 years) found that 53% of Black children compared to 28% of White children were investigated one or more times (Kim et al., 2017). In other words, Black children's rate of lifetime prevalence of child maltreatment investigations was nearly double that of White children. Similar results have been found by other researchers who investigated a single birth cohort in California and 20 large counties across the United States; both studies indicated that surveillance of Black families via child protective services (CPS) investigations was common (Edwards et al., 2021; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021).

Scholars posit that the child welfare system is responsible for creating grave outcomes for Black children, beginning with failing to properly assess, develop meaningful case plans with, and adequately serve Black families in ways that meet their needs (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004). Additionally, child welfare systems disregard Black families' unique cultural and ethnic practices and diminish their struggles with navigating a system that is inherently designed to work against them (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004; Weaver, 2008). Indeed, scholars have found that child welfare systems are designed precisely to perpetuate control and surveillance of Black families, which fuels disempowering, stigmatizing, and disenfranchising experiences and poor outcomes for Black families via individual racial biases and structural racial biases (Merritt, 2021; Miller et al., 2012). Once the child welfare system is involved, Black families are more likely than their White counterparts to have their children removed and placed involuntarily into foster care (Maloney et al., 2017; Rivaux et al., 2008; Shaw & Webster, 2011; Wildeman et al., 2020). Further, the likelihood of poor permanency outcomes as children exit care is higher for Black children and their families. For

instance, rates of reunification with families are lower and parental rights termination rates are higher for Black children than for White children (Kortenkamp et al., 2004; Noonan & Burke, 2005; Wattenberg et al., 2001; Wildeman et al., 2020).

Beyond negative outcomes that are tracked by the formal child welfare system, separating Black children from their communities marks the ignition of lifelong injustices for these children. Roberts (2021) posited that child welfare involvement has a significant impact on the Black community and suggested that the racial disproportionality in child welfare mirrors the violent effects of mass incarceration on Black people. Researchers have repeatedly shown a foster care to prison pipeline that disproportionately affects Black children, especially Black boys (Marshall & Haight, 2014; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Overall, child welfare surveillance marks an entry point into grave, long-standing violence: the iniquitous practice of institutionally policing Black bodies (Baughman et al., 2021; Michalsen, 2019; Summersett Williams et al., 2021).

The causes of racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system are multifaceted and historical. From a historical lens, the forcible removal of Black children from their families has been traced back four hundred centuries to slaveholders separating Black children from their parents as a cruel tool that instilled fear in parents to encourage submission (Briggs, 2020; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). Scholars have also identified factors both internal to the system (racial bias, institutionally racist policies, and placement dynamics) and external to the system (poverty, under-resourced communities, neighborhood conditions) that perpetuate this violent inequity, noting that all of these factors are founded in structural and institutional racism that permeates child welfare systems and society as a whole (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020, p. 257). Current day structural and institutional racism cannot be delinked from the ongoing legacies of colonialism, slavery, and segregation that reinforce

oversurveillance and devaluation of Black lives. Importantly, at the heart of the quantitative indicators of racial disproportionality and disparities lie real past, present, and future families who are directly, collaterally, and generationally affected by an oppressive and systemically racist system.

The purpose of this article is to share the guiding principles of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research that emerged through the lessons learned from the experiences of a community-engaged research team. The guiding principles were developed inductively while conducting a research study that sought to uncover and describe the racial disproportionality and disparities occurring for Black families of young children in one urban community of a Midwestern state. This work was based in two key definitions. First, racial disproportionality was defined as occurring when a specific racial or ethnic group is represented in the child welfare population at a different percentage than what they represent in the child population. Second, racial disparities were defined as occurring when a specific racial or ethnic group experienced poorer outcomes than other racial or ethnic groups.

With training and technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy, we undertook an Institutional Analysis (IA) (Weber & Morrison, 2021) that aimed to understand more deeply the experiences of Black families who became involved in the child welfare system. Importantly, we sought to discover and amplify the ways in which the child welfare system was structured as an institution, specifically identifying misalignment between the needs and strengths of Black families and the institution's practices, procedures, and policies (Wright et al., 2022; Weber & Morrison, 2021). This work, through systematic reflection and assessment of our approach, led to our development of six guiding principles of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research, which may be applied in many other jurisdictions and among other populations to extend and enrich work that advances racial and social justice in child welfare systems.

Literature Review

Racial Disproportionality Research, Identifying Historic Harm

As clearly and richly documented by Dettlaff (2014), racial disproportionality in child welfare systems has been identified and studied for more than four decades. Across studies, researchers have largely applied quantitative methods to clearly define and describe the problem with only a few exceptions (Chibnall et al., 2003). Researchers have analyzed multiple waves of the National Incidence Survey (NIS) examining the occurrence of disproportionality (e.g., Sedlak et al., 2010). Researchers have similarly examined administrative data available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (Ards et al., 1998; Morton, 1999). Fluke and colleagues (2011) advanced this field by illustrating disparities at multiple decision points in the child welfare process. More recently, researchers have used county- and state-level administrative data to investigate differences in court, placement, and permanency outcomes for Black children involved with the child welfare system (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Wright et al., 2022; Zinn & Cusick, 2014). Additionally, researchers have identified disproportionality among Latinx children entering care as a salient problem within child welfare systems (Dettlaff, 2014; Duarte & Summers, 2013; Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2021). Birth cohort analyses have demonstrated yet another analytic approach to observing racial disparities, and one recent analysis reported the greatest disparities in termination of parental rights among Indigenous children (Wildeman et al., 2020). Researchers have also identified important methodological critiques and advanced the measurement and reporting of disproportionality and disparities (e.g., Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2008). For example, Johnson-Motoyama and colleagues (2018) described the calculations, strengths, and weaknesses among different measurement approaches including decision point analysis, disproportionality index, and disproportionality ratio.

Moving Toward Inclusion and Accountability

Moving beyond problem identification, subsequent scholarship has advanced, specifically highlighting the significance of child welfare system accountability to communities, demonstrated through the implementation of anti-racist policies, training, and use of data (Anyon, 2011; Gourdine, 2019; Johnson et al., 2009). Community-engaged scholars have worked alongside communities of color to rectify disparities and disproportionality within child welfare systems. For example, one California study examined a grassroots group who sought to rally and create a community task force to address the issues of overrepresentation of Latino children within the county's foster care system. This task force, comprised of leaders within the community, served as a permanent force of accountability for the local child welfare system (Duarte & Summers, 2013). Another coalition was founded in Washington state, fueled by passion for justice due to similar disparities among Black and Native children (Clark et al., 2008). The systems of interest in both studies welcomed this accountability and leveraged partnerships to collaboratively address racial disparities. This approach has facilitated the reduction in the number of children of color in foster care within the California site (Duarte & Summers, 2013) and other important system accomplishments in the Washington site, such as new state legislation (Clark et al., 2008).

Another study conducted in Canada assessed community involvement attempts and the inherent challenges that emerge when operating within a racialized society (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2021). This study, conducted in a nation fraught with similar racial disproportionalities to those in the United States, applied qualitative methods to assess a local child welfare agency's attempt to bridge gaps with local communities of color. The study found that decisions makers' limited understanding of the context of families of color, poor organizational approaches to culture, and weak legislative support stunted any sincere attempts to build relationships between the child welfare system and local

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Rich qualitative data directly from members of the community themselves were especially pertinent to this study and represented a rare find in community centered, rigorous research on racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2021).

Theoretical Foundations to Decolonizing Research on Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare

Despite advancements in building knowledge on the study of racial disproportionality and disparities, much of the previous research has used methods devoid of perspectives from the people most impacted by the negative consequences of the child welfare system. Many studies intensely focus on the child without considering the family and community from which the child comes (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 2018; Curtis & Denby, 2011; Garland et al., 2003). Beyond omitting family and community voices, the literature largely does not honor the communal nature of the Black family. Rather, an overemphasis on the child isolates Black children from their families, communities, advocates, connections, and their culture's collective norms. Such practices continue to sustain covert and systemic racism.

In conducting community-based research that aimed to reduce racial inequities in child welfare, the present study was informed by several important theoretical foundations that contributed toward developing a framework for anti-oppressive and anti-racist research in child welfare. First, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was relevant to our thinking and research practices. Ford and Airhihenbuwa (2010) Race Equity, and Public Health: Toward Antiracism Praxis (2010) asserted that "to center in the margins is to shift a discourse's starting point from a majority group's perspective, which is the usual approach, to that of the marginalized group or groups" (p. S31). Truly challenging systemic and structural racism in child welfare must involve positioning the Black community and Black families at the forefront of

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service planning and delivery, research, and systems reform efforts. CRT acknowledges the forces of race and racism in society, and, when applied to child welfare practices, policies, and research, CRT amplifies the importance of knowledge building through the sharing of families' lived experiences (Bell, 2008; Kolivoski et al., 2014). Derek

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and provides tools to challenge White-dominant narratives and norms, reject colorblind approaches, and interrogate unequal power differentials (Andrews et al., 2019; Kolivoski et al., 2014). Second, while centering Black families, this work was also influenced by conceptual frameworks that call for decentering Whiteness and naming and discussing White supremacy, anti-Black racism, and anti-Native racism, including critical race feminism and decolonization frameworks (Okun, 2021; Pon et al., 2011; Tamburro, 2013). While we recognized that we were operating within an institution of higher education that often perpetuates White supremacy characteristics such as individualism, perfectionism, paternalism, and power hoarding, we strove to use our positionality and power to enact antidotes that centered on power sharing and valuing all contributions to the work (Tamburro, 2013; Dismantling Racism Works [dRworks], 2016; Okun, 2021). Community members and impacted people were included in the analyses and authorship of research findings. Data from the lived expertise of Black family members were recognized and lifted up as essential knowledge. Despite missteps in unlearning Whiteness, we dedicated time, attention, and care to language and its potential impact on communities who have been marginalized by our systems (e.g., raising our awareness of the meaning of the term "stakeholders" (Delaney, 2021) and excluding it from our lexicon). The team was explicit in conversation and in writing about the harm caused by the child welfare system. As an example, one community-facing document included a statement of acknowledgement that named this

harm. Third, this study was grounded in conceptual frameworks of anti-racist approaches that necessitate acknowledging and incorporating two key concepts into anti-oppressive and anti-racist research: (1) the historical contexts of slavery and colonialism, and (2) the contributions and consequences of institutional, structural, and systemic racism. Finally, the study was aligned with theoretical and practice-based models that apply critical reflection on self, including those that require researchers to assess and acknowledge their own roles in perpetuating and recreating harmful structures (Badwall, 2016).

Study Purpose

Current literature has advanced the child welfare field by exploring and fine-tuning the quantitative methodologies required to understand racial disproportionality and disparities. A few qualitative or mixed method studies have also centered Black parents and community members to acknowledge historical and structural racism, recognize the specific struggles and challenges they experience, and hold up their overall lived experience of the child welfare system. Missing from literature are descriptions of child welfare research approaches that are anti-racist and anti-oppressive. To our knowledge, no studies have identified a framework for anti-racist and anti-oppressive research that is specific to child welfare settings and explicit in guiding work toward racial and social justice in child welfare. Given the racialized history of forced child removals in Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities (Briggs, 2020); the current state of outcomes described above for Black families; and, the coercive, patriarchal, and oppressive nature of the child welfare system, an equity-centered and justice-oriented framework is needed to guide research in the child welfare system.

In sum, we find that the existing literature lacks examples of real-world research that occurred in collaboration with community and practitioners and demonstrated concrete examples of dismantling racism, achieving racial equity, and ensuring the child welfare system's accountability to the Black

community. The aim of this paper is to describe a research approach that examines and dismantles problematic structures, sets goals in partnership with and is accountable to community, and applies practices that honor and support Black families and communities. This example works toward addressing the identified gaps by describing our process of applying an equity-centered framework to interrogate the child welfare system and identify potential solutions for reducing racial disproportionality and disparities. Our study aim was to describe the guiding principles of our research team's process that established and sustained an anti-racist and anti-oppressive framework.

Method

Research Design

This article is a descriptive case study of the approach to one Midwestern state's federally funded demonstration grant, focusing on the pillars of an anti-racist/anti-oppressive research team, which we identified while working to eliminate racial disproportionality and racial disparities in child welfare. The description represents a retrospective, reflective, and longitudinal view of our process over a two-year period. Case study was selected as an appropriate design due to the need for in-depth description (Yin, 2018) of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research teams in child welfare settings. We initiated this process by systematically reflecting on the approach applied when undertaking a qualitative study that used IA. The results of our IA have been recently published (Wright et al., 2022). In the current study, we aim to describe the results of our retrospective analysis of our team's process that wrapped around the IA and formed a framework of the guiding principles of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive research process.

Case Study Setting

IA is a unique framework that served as a foundation for bold anti-racist research practices. IA was originally developed by the sociologist, Dr. Ellen Pence of Praxis International, in her work on

domestic violence, and IA was identified as the Safety and Accountability Audit (Weber & Morrison, 2021). The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) worked with Dr. Pence to apply the IA framework to the examination of racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. IA is a diagnostic process for exploring how negative outcomes occur for individuals involved with human service institutions such as child welfare and for revealing disconnects between an institutions' stated mission and purpose and individuals' experiences (Pence, 2021; Weber & Morrison, 2021). Importantly, IA is different than many other methods because it avoids attributing institutional failures to the attitudes, personal beliefs, biases, or ignorance of individual workers (Pence, 2021, p. 331). In contrast to individually focused problem analysis, IA explores structural contributors to see how they organize workers to think about, talk about, and act on cases in their daily practices (Weber & Morrison, 2021). By collecting and analyzing qualitative data that exposes the institutional discourses that direct practice, IA seeks to identify the mismatches between those institutional discourses and the lived experience of people served by the institution (Pence, 2021). CSSP's IA framework is organized to consider institutions' daily operations around eight trails of inquiry, which are viewed as regulating or standardizing daily practice. These eight trails include: mission and job functions; rules and regulations; process, tools, and forms (e.g., paperwork); linkages between workers and external agencies; resource allocation; accountability; education and training; and concepts and theories (Pence, 2021; Weber & Morrison, 2021). Details on our use of IA are available in an earlier article (Wright et al., 2022).

For this study, IA provided a basis for examining the child welfare system through methods that specifically account for the impact of contextual factors that influence how services are designed and delivered. To examine racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare, contextual factors included geographically-specific legacies related to slavery; forced labor; segregation; discrimination in education, housing, and employment; and

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voting disenfranchisement. All of these factors have benefitted White families while devastating Black families and their communities (McCoy, 2020).

Sample

The sample of our case study included the members of the research team trained in IA by the CSSP. All members were employed by the university and identified as women. One team member identified as Black, one identified as a Person of Color, and three identified as White. With regard to discipline, one member held a Master's in library sciences, two were social work doctoral students, and two held PhDs in social work. With regard to job positions and power positionality, the team included a research coordinator, two graduate research assistants, and two faculty members. All five team members had work experiences and/or personal experiences with the child welfare system beyond their work on this research team.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our case study is described by members of the research team who were trained in and participated in the IA. Our process of regular discussions and debriefings commenced with the IA training, continued during the IA data collection period, and followed directly and seamlessly throughout formal coding and analysis. The team held virtual meetings by Zoom at least weekly for a period of two years. In addition to addressing the activities required to execute the IA study, the team engaged in discussions of anti-racist approaches that pertained to the child welfare system and, as a parallel process, to our research process. The guiding principles identified and described in this article were developed through a consensus-based thematic analysis that grew out of our discussions in weekly meetings. After two years, we established a common document in Microsoft Teams and used screen sharing during Zoom meetings to collectively and critically discuss and develop our ideas. In other words, we met repeatedly to name, discuss, refine, and finalize the guiding principles. All principles were identified collaboratively with full consensus on each principle,

and all members of the team contributed to descriptions of each principle. In sum, we describe our data collection and analysis process as being co-created among the entire team through an iterative process of peer consultation and debriefing. Collectively, we developed a framework that outlines six guiding principles for engaging anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices in child welfare research.

Findings

Six guiding principles were identified and described below. Collectively, these findings represent one revolutionary pathway for pursuing racial equity in the child welfare system, challenging the policies and institutional procedures that have created disparate outcomes, and implementing strategies to eradicate violence perpetuated against Black families. These six themes are presented in roughly the chronological and progressive order in which they occurred; however, our process was also characterized by an open and iterative learning process with ongoing reflection and refinement, at times overlapping or necessitating returning to previously completed activities to revisit or adjust the direction of action steps.

Guiding Principle One: Applying an Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive Research Method That Centers Lived Experience and Promotes System Transformation and Accountability

Our anti-racist/anti-oppressive approach to research began with the selection of a research method explicitly designed to interrogate systems, center the voices of those with lived experience, and be accountable to the community for action as a result of study findings. Serving as the framework for the ways in which research is conducted, selection of a research method well-aligned to anti-racist and anti-oppressive principles is imperative. Characteristics of such methodological approaches include mixed-methods examination of multiple perspectives and data sources that center the voices of those most impacted by systems, policies, and practices and that are authentically engaged with and accountable to

the community throughout all stages of the research. IA is an example of one method with anti-racist and anti-oppressive characteristics inherent to its design. Thus, selection of the IA method was an intentional choice, deviating from traditional methods to understand policy and outcomes within the historical and systemic context, reveal pain points and disconnects in policy and practice, and uncover opportunities for dismantling and restructuring systems to better serve children, families, and communities of color.

IA methods include rich qualitative inquiry from multiple perspectives, centering those with lived experience along with the communities surrounding vulnerable populations. This serves to recognize these participant partners as the experts over their own spheres, as compared to traditional models that elevate outside researchers' perspectives. One strength of this inclusive approach is that IA helps the researchers explore remedies that may already exist and serve as sources of resilience within a particular population, such as Black families and communities, exposing at times what may have not been obvious or simply ignored.

The qualitative IA approach is further deepened by delving beyond individual outcomes into organizational records and may include analyses of policies, forms, job descriptions, beliefs, and other functions undergirding the system. Together, these diverse data sources help reveal the origin of procedures and practices and their effectiveness with applied populations. This approach segments complex problems like racial disparities into discernible trails that emerge as themes, rising to the surface to help expose root causes of negative systemic outcomes.

In practice, the application of IA through a public-private university collaborative included all of these characteristics. For example, we formed and partnered with an advisory board of Black community members. The goal of this approach was to co-design and co-interpret study findings alongside members of the community, who are co-leading subsequent action planning to ensure

systems are held accountable to the study's findings. We also applied a family-centered methods approach, conducting qualitative interviews with study partners and participants to represent and amplify the voices of the community members themselves, rather than translate findings through the lens of the researcher. Further, to document accountability to the community and to authentic action, the research team engaged with the community advisory group and the project steering committee to formalize a guiding covenant (see principle three). Finally, the research team undertook two activities intended to help them understand the historical and geographical context of racial disparity, disproportionality, and racism within the community.

A historical examination of the county revealed a hidden history of the Black community; many professionals interviewed, including child welfare leaders in the county, could not describe the history of the Black community in the area. Geographically, this county was also characterized by systemic inequity. Through a mapping analysis of the target geographic area, we were able to visually understand the contextual factors facilitating or impeding family access to services and supports. This analysis revealed several key findings that informed other aspects of the IA work and informs current and future action planning.

Importantly, the Black community in this area was isolated by fragmented bus systems and interstate and highway systems cutting through the county, separating community members from services. Through a community mapping activity, we learned that families involved with and impacted by the child welfare system were not geographically located near areas where most services clustered. Finally, this activity highlighted the variation across the target county, which is a sprawling urban center that also includes outlying suburban and rural areas with inequitable access to food sources, healthcare, childcare, and social service organizations. These community characteristics have implications for how action is implemented in the community and are essential components of an equity-based approach.

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By selecting and applying the IA methodological approach, we turned our gaze on the system and structure, including ourselves, as the focus of inquiry for systems reform to address racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare. With this method, we committed to centering and amplifying Black voices and holding ourselves accountable to action benefitting the community as a primary outcome of our research. With these methods, we were able to uncover opportunities and imperatives for systemic, structural, and practical transformation that could meaningfully change the experience of Black families through the words and experiences of the families whose lives were impacted by this system directly. Through application of this action-based anti-racist and anti-oppressive research methodology, we help realize a more equitable system that centers, values, and protects Black families.

Guiding Principle Two: Responding to Wise Skepticism and Distrust From the Black Community

Profound distrust among members of the Black community toward institutions is not exclusive to the child welfare system. This distrust is often directed towards researchers who are attempting to gather data from Black families to inform social change. This skepticism has deep roots in the clear consequences of a vast history of systemic injustices, racism, segregation, disinvestment, and outright intentional violence perpetrated upon Black people in the name of science (Chicago Beyond, 2019). As an antidote to this historical violence, Chicago Beyond (2019) highlights practices for researchers to ensure an equity-based research approach. Our team applied principles of this approach to this IA process to avoid further perpetuating harm and in response to the clear skepticism, resistance, or distrust expressed by members of the community when approached to discuss this study. Researchers were not immediately welcomed by members of the community. Members of the research team were cautioned that previous efforts in the community had not resulted in action. This left many

community members with negative feelings about research. In order to proceed, it was necessary to establish credibility by engaging with community leaders in ways that were collaborative, honest, real, authentic, trustworthy, and accountable. By applying this equity-based approach to authentically engage in community-driven reform, we sought to begin redefining how research is perceived in one community—moving from a view of research as a one-way relationship characterized by unreciprocated taking and both overt and covert harm to one of partnership, shared values, reciprocity, action, and open accountability.

Equity-based approaches applied included: (1) designing, analyzing, and disseminating the research reciprocally alongside the members of the community to reflect their purpose and goals and produce value for the community; (2) situating researchers as support and community collaborators and participants as experts; (3) applying an equity lens to analysis and dissemination; (4) ensuring transparency in information sharing to elicit community-based wisdom and expertise; (5) recognizing and working to disrupt and dismantle hierarchical power dynamics in all interactions; (6) ensuring compensation for contributors in recognition of the full cost of participation; (7) owning our mistakes and mitigating risks to build and honor trust given; and (8) ensuring accountability to the participants and to the larger community through bold action.

In practice, the team approached distrust with empathy and understanding, adapting expectations for what “involvement” meant while still working intentionally to build relationships, demonstrate and prove worthiness, and ensure participation and input of Black community members. For example, the research team communicated clear intentions to community members of our willingness to challenge a system that has historically felt “off limits” to communities disproportionately targeted by such institutions. We held their input as that of experts, communicating their feedback directly to child welfare systems leaders through their words without

unnecessary translation. Rather than asking who needs to be at the table, we asked ourselves, “How do we need to reconfigure the table so that more people can participate?” We then followed through with this engagement.

Of note, skepticism about the majority White research team and process did not come only from parties outside of the research team. Black and Indigenous members of the IA workgroup, who were also child welfare professionals, similarly expressed skepticism that this work would result in meaningful or sustained changes, noting that previous equity work in the state and system had not resulted in real or sustained changes. These members advocated that producing outcomes, and not researching for the sake of researching, was imperative for the integrity of this project. One Black member of the project’s steering committee and IA workgroup stated, “We already know what the problem is, so why aren’t we doing something?” This highlighted the need to apply equity-based principles holistically, outside and *within* the research team. Finally, the leadership and advocacy dynamic added weight to the need for swift and meaningful action undertaken as a result of this work.

Guiding Principle Three: Developing a Guiding Covenant as Commitment to Community

In accordance with the iterative nature of this equity approach, the research team—inclusive of community members—engaged in intentional and ongoing reflection on IA activities to adjust and refine study procedures and activities in response to the process and needs of the community. One example of this emerged in response to the earlier theme of distrust among community members. To respond to this need for the research team to demonstrate trustworthiness and accountability both within and outside the team, we engaged the project’s 52-member Steering Committee in a process to create a covenant to serve as a guiding compass articulating the purpose and direction of the IA work (Wright et al., 2021). Members included

leaders and professionals in the state child welfare agency, private child welfare agencies, court and legal partners, and parents with lived experience with the child welfare system. This activity extended the community commitment beyond the IA workgroup and engaged all members of the project in discussion and planning for concrete action, thus extending the potential for impact within and beyond the target community. The covenant was developed using an anti-racist framework that emphasized: (1) centrality of the lived experience and expertise of Black families involved with the child welfare system; (2) importance of partnership with Black community leaders and members; (3) prioritizing equity over equality; and (4) exploration of systemic dysfunction over individual racism. This covenant was prepared as a living and dynamic document intended to bind those involved in the IA work in their intention to be accountable to the community.

Development of the covenant was a lengthy and iterative process, lasting nearly 6.5 months. The covenant draft underwent 12 revisions, strengthening the language through each revision to clearly state the urgency in the need for direct action. This incremental approach was necessary given the geographical and cultural context of the region, where local populations proudly embrace being “Midwest Nice.” This niceness is socially constructed as “polite,” and it allows people to avoid feelings of discomfort or open conflict that may be necessary for change. However, recent discourse has emphasized this type of politeness as a characteristic of White supremacy culture (Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks), 2016; Okun, 2021) and as a form of violence toward People of Color that often masks aggression while using niceties in an attempt to disguise opposition (Kubota, 2002; Miller & Harris, 2018; Ng & Lam, 2020). Thus, politeness is a characteristic that must be deconstructed among members of teams wishing to apply an equity approach to research. The team, as a whole, embraced this work individually and collectively during project meetings, sharing resources, engaging in shared readings and learning opportunities, and taking opportunities to check and correct inherent biases in our language and practices.

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In addition to this incremental refinement coupled with individual and collective development, the team applied a race caucus approach (Obear & Martinez, 2013) to small group discussions and reflections on covenant language. The goal of this approach was to provide Black partners the space to process and discuss topics independently, without the burden of carrying the discussion for White counterparts, and to eliminate opportunity for further exposure to hurtful discussion among White partners who are less knowledgeable, or willfully ignorant, of issues related to systemic racism. A third group was added for members who identify as non-Black People of Color, multiracial, and/or ethnic minorities. All individuals self-selected into the group that most closely described how they identified their race.

Following these processes allowed for introduction of new language and concepts of anti-racist practices over time, challenging the assumption that Whiteness is normative and default, and examining ideas about how we define family in a multicultural society. This process also reduced the burden of education and potential tokenizing representation in workgroups among Black and other People of Color on the team. By recognizing and accounting for the needs of members across the full spectrum of experience and exposure to these concepts, we prioritized meeting and honoring each team member where they were. This helped to promote trust among members in both the process and in each other, and increased buy-in and commitment among all members of the team.

The process of developing the covenant concluded with a formal vote among partners to adopt this final document as a set of guiding principles for our research team to address racial disparities in child welfare. The vote was intended to signify and confirm each person's commitment to uphold the covenant principles, supporting the dismantling of oppressive systems and realizing racial equity and justice for Black children and families. Key features of the final covenant include a direct orientation toward action and a mechanism for accountability from the research team and steering committee to

the community.

Guiding Principle Four: Initiating and Sustaining Anti-Racism Practice in the Research Team

During the planning phase for the IA, the university research team began and sustained a weekly practice of collective knowledge-building and reflection on the legacies of systemic racism, pathways to resistance, and liberatory research practices that center those marginalized by White supremacy. Among team members, the meetings were referred to as "our anti-racism practice." Team members included the principal investigator of the statewide study, the lead evaluator, researchers, project coordinators, and graduate students. Over the course of 14 months, the group read passages from *Dismantling Racism* (dRworks, 2016), *Why Am I Always Being Researched* (Chicago Beyond, 2019), and *Black Lives Matter, and Yes, You are Racist* (McCoy, 2020).

At each meeting, team members took turns reading aloud selected excerpts. Following the readings, the team engaged in critical reflection and discussion on how the reading's ideas and examples showed up in the child welfare system, the research process, academia, and other settings. Discussions emerged around topics such as critical self-reflection; cultural rigor and decolonization in research and teaching; naming and identifying ways to counter White supremacy/bias as it shows up in child welfare, research, and in other systems; examining how interlocking systems work together to enforce disparities across health, education, economics, and other sectors; reflecting on the disconnect between social work and community-engaged work; and strategizing ways to bridge the gap.

Most team members also engaged in independent reading, journaling, and/or other individual activities to expand their awareness of power, privilege, racism, and oppression. Recognizing that this type of practice is an ongoing learning journey and that each team member held their own social identity that affected their process, the team meetings provided

space for members to identify ways that they could affect institutional change from their individual positionalities, challenge traditional colonized research methods grounded in White supremacy culture, and implement revolutionary methods that dismantle oppressive structures in search of equity. By instituting the readings as routine practice of team meetings, individual team members increased their capacities for establishing habits and norms to facilitate individual engagement with research practices that use an anti-racist lens. Consequently, team members also carried these new habits and norms to other spaces and thereby extended them to other activities and projects both within the outside the initiative.

Guiding Principle Five: Amplifying Black Parents' Lived Experience in Data Collection and Analysis

As a core element of the IA approach, it was essential that we centered the lived experience of Black parents in all elements of the project as their experience was the essential evidence of and a direct reflection of the inequities present in the system that were the target of system change. While Guiding Principle One includes centering the voices of those most impacted by systems, Guiding Principle Five is distinct in requiring a process that gives more weight in the analysis and meaning-making to people who have been harmed and marginalized by systems. By recognizing and not silencing or eclipsing these voices that offer inherent expertise, we were able to identify specific changes needed and carry those forward in the words and experiences of the families whose lives were touched by the system. This approach intentionally privileges and amplifies lived experiences and makes a powerful case for change in inequitable policies and practices to end unnecessary surveillance and policing of Black bodies and separation of families. Without this intentional emphasis on Black parents' lived experience of child welfare, findings could have been inadvertently missed. We believe Guiding Principle Five is necessary for researchers working to achieve an anti-racist child welfare system and a reimagining of this

system, such as the child welfare future described by Dettlaff and Boyd (2021).

We demonstrated this core value in our approach by prioritizing the analysis and dissemination of the interviews conducted with birth parents and family members from among the many sources of primary and secondary data, using interviews of system workers and case reviews as evidence further illustrating parents' statements. Key findings from these interviews were derived directly from the birth parents, family members, and community leaders who were interviewed. Further, key findings were reviewed, refined, approved, and disseminated in partnership alongside members of the community advisory group to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Community partners co-authored a paper reporting on study findings along with the university team (Wright et al., 2022), and key findings have and will continue to inform and guide action plans resulting from this project.

Guiding Principle Six: Taking Action and Ensuring Accountability

By engaging a research method that intentionally centered an equity approach, we were able to *show* rather than *tell*, clearly demonstrating our commitment to authentic and engaged inquiry focused on the systems in question rather than laying blame for inequity at the feet of the marginalized community. This often takes the form of misdirected blame-placing, further colonizing research in Black communities by perpetuating misinformation and taking information, history, and emotional labor of the community and failing to deliver in kind through action. Through this public demonstration of commitment, as described earlier, researchers laid the foundation necessary to establish a seed of credibility and trust within the community. This seed must be nurtured through ongoing engagement in action and leveraging the voices gathered through the IA process to realize authentic systems reforms that truly protect and support Black families equitably. This is just the start, and this fragile trust would likely be irreparably broken should the effort stop there.

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In response to the call for demonstrative action, a standing community advisory group was formed. This group is comprised of members of the Black community who are compensated for contributing their expertise. The community advisory group, initially created to guide the work of this specific research initiative, has become a standing group, meeting quarterly, with support from the state and the university evaluation team, to engage in action planning and implementation of system reform initiatives. The research team will also report other areas of action to this group routinely as a mechanism of accountability to the community. The research team is actively seeking additional funding to ensure the sustainability of this group, demonstrating recognition of the importance of ongoing accountability, action, and a commitment to keep efforts of community leadership at the forefront of the research and reform process in place.

Additionally, the approach and findings of the IA initiative sparked a partnership with the university team initiated by Black state agency partners to develop and host a statewide learning collaborative targeted at child welfare and other child and family serving professionals (e.g., educators, early interventionists, court and legal professionals, medical professionals, etc.). This learning journey is planned as a “statewide effort to understand the history of racial inequities in child welfare and to define the problem through a shared language” (Dupree et al., 2022, heading) with the intention of reducing racial disparities within the state. The joint initiative is targeted across sectors to begin moving from a system of siloed agencies and supports and mandated reporters to an integrated system of mandated *supporters* who share responsibility for child welfare and well-being outcomes and wrap around families to ensure they can thrive within their communities. Lecture topics include understanding the historical context of structural racism and current implications, how child welfare inequities intersect with early childhood education, myths in child welfare systems that perpetuate racial inequities, and ways to dismantle practices that control the Black community and shift to practices

that support and embrace them. This initiative is an example of a multi-sector collaborative, with individuals from three organizations coming together to plan and convene this event series. Planning required careful construction of agendas, speakers, and activities in order to move forward toward equity in a constructive way that challenges biases while meeting people where they are in their own personal and professional journeys toward anti-racist practice.

Discussion and Implications

This article provides the guiding principles of an anti-oppressive and anti-racist framework for research in child welfare settings. It serves as an example of the ways in which research may be applied to authentically engage members of the Black community and other marginalized communities and the child welfare system in an accountable process of systems change toward racial equity in child welfare. This study may be distinct in that we extended beyond developing knowledge of *race* as a demographic characteristic related to specific child welfare outcomes; rather, we focused on *racism* in child welfare institutions and systems (Kornbluh et al., 2021). Given that the vast majority of racial disproportionality and disparities literature to date has been quantitative and has not involved the Black community and given that the field lacks comprehensive frameworks for conducting racial equity work with an anti-oppressive and anti-racist approach, this article makes a novel contribution to the field. In all, we identified six guiding principles: (1) Applying an anti-racist and anti-oppressive research method that centers lived experience and promotes system transformation and accountability is necessary; (2) Wise skepticism and distrust from Black communities may be expected due to historical harm and oppression; however, research teams can take specific actions to build trust and collaboration; (3) A written document, such as our covenant on racial equity, can provide a process and tool that promotes racial equity and accountability; (4) Racial equity work in child welfare is complimented by team-based and individual practices that create

greater awareness of structural racism; (5) Black parents' lived experience must be centered in this work toward eliminating racial disproportionality and disparities; and (6) Racial equity work must always extend beyond study to real and sustained action and accountability. Below is a discussion of these principles in relation to the existing literature and consideration of implications for child welfare research teams.

Guiding Principle One suggests that child welfare teams that undertake work on racial and social disproportionality and disparities must use research methods and strategies that align with racial equity and social justice work. In applying *Guiding Principle One*, this research team selected IA as a method that supports anti-racist and anti-oppressive research. At least three aspects of IA call on researchers to integrate some unique components into their work. First, researchers must systematically examine inequity among the target community from multiple perspectives, including lived experience. Second, anti-racist and anti-oppressive research includes analysis of historical as well as present-day harms. While a few studies have discussed the influence of historical racism and the ongoing and cumulative disadvantages it creates for families of color (e.g., Chibnall et al., 2003), most of the existing literature on racial disproportionality and disparities fails to acknowledge the legacy of slavery and intergenerational trauma that persists in the current lives of families and communities. A third feature of IA that is largely missing from the existing literature is naming and exploring racism and oppression in communities and specific geographies. Other scholars have advanced our understanding of the community and geographic impacts of racial disproportionalities in child welfare and identified community-wide consequences for family and community networks (Boyd, 2014; Roberts, 2021). The proposed framework for anti-racist and anti-oppressive research compels researchers to involve community members and to include both historical and geographical aspects in this work.

The nuanced methods of IA serve as a baseline anti-

racist and anti-oppressive approach to researching systems, structures, and processes. IA is well-aligned with anti-racist goals including exploring specific pipelines for disparities, centering data collection and analysis around information sourced directly from parents, and situating parents as foundational to the process of reform.

One key benefit of applying anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches such as IA is the opportunity to increase the multidisciplinary nature of the research. In order to ensure inclusion of many types of knowledge from diverse informants, it may be necessary to borrow and adapt methodological approaches from other disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, history, urban planning, and geography, thus strengthening the rigor and trustworthiness of the results. For example, we described the activities and methods applied in this IA to understand the historical and geographical context of racial disparity, disproportionality, and racism within the community. These variations result from generations of historical and structural oppression and manifest in diverse ways that cause harm to Black families.

Novel methods may be required to disentangle the nuance and complexity of these conditions. Without the addition of these components of the analysis, we would have missed important local contextual factors stemming from historically oppressive policy decisions (e.g., redlining), urban planning (e.g., highway development in low-income areas, fragmented bus system), and other experiences contributing to the systemic oppression of Black families in the community. When combined with other types of data collected to inform the IA (e.g., case records, interviews with families with lived experience, interviews with child welfare and social service professionals, etc.), we more fully understand a comprehensive view of the misalignment between system goals and family experiences, gaps and challenges to system reform, and diverse strengths and opportunities from which to build toward an equitable and just system that halts harm to Black families and meets their needs to ensuring thriving

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families and communities.

Guiding Principle Two speaks to the need for researchers to approach racial equity work in child welfare in ways that prioritize collaboration, reciprocity, action, power sharing, and accountability, especially when working with marginalized individuals and communities. While we used this framework to guide research with Black community members, it can support researchers in validating and working with, rather than against, natural skepticism on the part of people who have been oppressed and harmed by the child welfare system. While these dimensions of research are consistent with some research methods, such as community-based participatory research, few examples exist in racial equity research in child welfare.

IA challenges traditional philosophical and epistemological research approaches by prioritizing community informants' knowledge and recommendations for conducting the study; implementing research that involves collaboratives with key parties, including policy makers and enforcers of racial equity; and directing energies towards deeper community involvement in holding the system accountable to involving families of color in decision making and policy development that repairs practices within the child welfare system. One important implication to the application of these methods is that while using best practices to comprehensively examine a complex issue, the strategies used in IA may also serve a function of supporting restorative justice among communities harmed by the system, thus alleviating the potential skepticism of potential partners over time.

Another important implication is that the activities necessary respond to and alleviate wise skepticism may not be linear and may be resource intensive to implement. Scholars must make space and time to work with target communities to develop and implement research from design to dissemination. To bring co-creation to life in meaningful ways, one key recommendation would be to frontload processes for trust-building and backload processes for developing and executing action plans.

Guiding Principle Three suggests that child welfare researchers conducting racial equity work should consider concrete strategies for acknowledging past harms to Black families and communities, identifying their purposes and intentions, and ensuring accountability for change. We shared one example process, which was the collaborative development of a covenant on racial equity in child welfare (Wright et al., 2021). This approach fits alongside other scholars' recommendations for truth, reconciliation, and reparation in child welfare (Collins et al., 2014; Pryce & Meyer, 2021). For our team, the process was powerful in building shared agreement, speaking truth aloud, and creating a binding document that placed the onus of responsibility on the collective. We asked members to help develop and then publicly endorse the covenant, acknowledging past violence for which they may be complicit, and codifying what was owed to each other. This overt act required displays of professional and personal vulnerability and courage from all members of the group and provided transparency of values, disrupting power dynamics related to positionality.

Collective products and activities such as the covenant example illustrate ways in which anti-racist and anti-oppressive research can counter negative forces like capitalism and White supremacy by minimizing competition in a privatized system intended to foster competitive relationships within the field and instead spotlighting communal efforts and collective agreement. In this example, the covenant serves as a living document and touchstone of our shared values and responsibilities, thus reducing counterproductive activities such as blame shifting and diffusion of responsibility. By stating our intentions in writing, we put the onus for system change as a result of this work squarely on the project team rather on the community.

Guiding Principle Four leans into the critical self-reflection and learning journeys that are required of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research teams. Importantly, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice runs deeper than attending a one-time training or reading a couple of books. It requires the ongoing

resources of time, personal commitment, and courage. To be accountable for change, researchers must name the historical and current harms of structural racism in Black communities and undertake their own unlearning of White supremacy. While not speaking solely to researchers, Saad (2020) describes this type of work as “your truth, your love, your commitment” (p. 17). Other scholars have discussed anti-racism and amplified how it can bring researchers into the research process as humans (Kornbluh et al., 2021). In addition to acknowledging the positionality and privileges of university researchers, necessary is naming and knowing how White supremacy shows up in our training as scientists and scholars (Daftary, 2020).

Guiding Principle Five raises up the critical point of centering the lived experience of people who have experienced violence and marginalization by our systems. Overall, prior child welfare racial disproportionality and disparities literature has frequently fallen short in centering Black families and community members by failing to recognize their overall lived experience of the child welfare system that demonstrates their specific struggles and challenges (Roberts, 2021). Literature that amplifies the voices of not just the child, but the parents, relatives, and kin that comprise family and authentically document how the Black community perceives and experiences racial injustices in child welfare is scarce. Even more rare is any recognition of the inherent strengths and resiliencies that can be derived from the community to remedy problems and reduce the number of Black children in the system (Stephens, 2021). These are important and promising points, as prior studies suggest practice approaches that heighten awareness of racism and racial bias, center and prioritize families over services, promote authentic engagement and the integration of family protective factors, and use a racial equity lens show great potential for transforming child welfare systems (Best et al., 2021).

Guiding Principle Five also demonstrates the necessity of using research methods that decolonize knowledge by honoring multiple ways of knowing. Black families

and communities experience acts of violence every day in the form of racism, oppression, and marginalization, and thus know their individual experiences and their community’s historical experiences. In other words, child welfare research that is anti-racist and anti-oppressive honors life experiences as a central way of knowing. Child welfare researchers hold power and privilege that may blind them to inequities and violence that people with marginalized identities understand fully. The application of this framework suggests that there should be a decentering of researchers and a decentering of their power, privilege, and expertise. Exploring beyond the bounds of traditional research methods, this framework encourages multiple ways of knowing to more holistically understand the system.

Guiding Principle Six spotlights the necessity for action and accountability while illuminating the potential for new relationships and additional momentum that may arise from engaged, service-oriented action. Our approach centered the voices of Black families impacted by child welfare, along with members of the target community. We intentionally and systematically viewed this issue from the perspective of Black families. We also formally documented our commitment to leveraging findings to realize actual systems change in the community. Centering Black families and community members in decision making creates a signpost and safeguard of accountability for institutions like the child welfare system that have a longstanding history of covert and overt systemic racism.

Limitations

In considering this article’s findings and implications, its limitations should be acknowledged. First, we conducted IA within one county of a Midwestern state. While our qualitative study findings (Wright et al., 2022) and these current reflections are consistent with the trends identified across the CSSP’s multiple IAs (Weber & Morrison, 2021), we encourage others to investigate differences between our work and others’ work, which may be specific to cultural,

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geographic, or other contextual factors of a study site. Second, our IA was initiated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but all data collection, analysis, and interpretation occurred remotely due to COVID restrictions and safety precautions. This was the first IA to be conducted remotely, which constrained opportunities for direct observations of families in interaction with the child welfare system. Court hearings were dramatically reduced during this period, so we did not have an opportunity to observe parents in the courtroom. Further, our challenges with partnering with the Black community may have been compounded by not having opportunities to meet with people in person and use important strategies for developing relationships and creating safe and collaborative spaces (e.g., sharing a meal). Third, we acknowledge that our interactions with Black parents and community members were in the context of a coercive system. The research team sought honest and real feedback from participants; however, we also recruited parents' participation through child welfare agencies and knew that they may be reluctant and afraid to speak honestly about a system with so much power over them. Future studies could consider using different mechanisms to recruit Black parents. Fourth, the court/legal system participation in our study was limited to judges and prosecuting attorneys. Other roles within the court/legal system certainly impact children and families and should be considered in future work. Finally, while our IA work extended over 2 years, our data collection still represented a specific point in time. Going forward, especially following the development and implementation of action plans to address racial disproportionality and disparities, it could be useful to repeat IA data collection and examine institutional responses over time.

Conclusion

Courageous, bold, and revolutionary practices are needed to challenge the deeply rooted history of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. Assimilating to readily available and convenient research methods that fail to involve the people harmed by the system is not only negligent but also adds to the present and persisting problems of systemic racism. As scholarly debates about child welfare continue, Black families are struggling as targets of the system. Beyond the debates, this is a time where innovative research methods are needed to challenge approaches that privilege Whiteness, explore problems beyond individual level contributors, honor and raise up the expertise of people with lived experiences, and provide broad and deep evidence of institutional and systemic racism. Expanding and asserting the evidence of historical and ongoing systemic harm is one strategy for tangible action to help influence the development of policies that will eliminate unnecessary child and parent separation and establish supports for families so that they may thrive within their self-determined communities. The Black community and families within the community have demonstrated a rare historical resiliency. It is incumbent upon us as researchers to honor and recognize this and not perpetuate further harm through our use of research methods. Rather, we must use every tool available to us to shine light on and amplify Black voices, sparking and sustaining action to dismantle and reimagine the systems and structures they identify as harmful into systems of authentic, meaningful, and equitable support.

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Income, Ethnicity, and Equality: Assessing Racial Disparities in Foster Care Using a Self-Sufficiency Range

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Abstract

This study employs a Self-Sufficiency Range (SSR) to examine racial disparities in income for foster care youth. Data were collected from 198 foster families across Washington State. Forty-seven percent of families fell below the minimum SSR for their region. Black and Hispanic caregivers, the majority being kin, were more likely to be unlicensed, and 67% of unlicensed kinship-care families fell below the minimum SSR. Furthermore, 81% of Black caregivers reported income below the SSR compared to 43% of White caregivers, and Black foster youth were more likely to be living with families below the self-sufficiency range.

Policymakers need to address the disproportionate burden on unlicensed and Black foster caregivers and adjust the child welfare system to reduce any systematic inequities.

Keywords: Foster care, foster teens, self-sufficiency, income disparities, structural racism

Disclosures

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Introduction

On any given day in the United States, there are more than 84,000 youth from 11 to 15 years of age (early adolescents) in foster care (iFoster, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018a). Many of these youth come from low-income families (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016; Mech, 1983), so it is relevant to investigate their economic situations after foster care placement to determine whether this cycle of poverty continues. It is also important to determine whether any economic disadvantages faced by youth in foster care are observed across racial identities and foster placement types.

Socioeconomic and Race Disparities

The link between socioeconomic disparities and race has long been debated in the United States. More than thirty years ago, Thomas and Hughes argued that between 1972 and 1985 the significance of race as a determinant of lower social class had remained static, despite changes in the legal and social status of Black Americans (1986). More recent studies using multidimensional clustering of disadvantage show Black people are much more likely than White people to face “the double disadvantage of low income and joblessness, or low income and concentrated geographic poverty” (Reeves et al., 2016, p. 10). These broader trends are replicated in child poverty studies concluding that racial differences continue to account for “a significant proportion of the differences in child poverty among minority groups” (Lichter et al., 2016, p. 14). In the context of the child welfare system, where minority youth have been historically (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972) and consistently (Puzzanchera et al., 2021) overrepresented, several studies find that “race remains a significant predictor of the disparities that exist between Black and White children,” even after controlling for poverty and other factors (Dettlaff et al., 2021, para. 4; Dettlaff et al., 2011; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Rivaux et al., 2008). Given these findings, it is important to investigate potential reasons for disparities in the child welfare system, along with any possible solutions to resolve these long-standing issues.

Benefits of Kinship-Care

Youth in the child welfare system can be placed in a variety of settings, including foster families, group or transitional homes, institutions, or supervised independent living. The Federal Social Security Act (Social Security Act of 1934), however, states that agencies should give “preference to an adult relative over a nonrelated caregiver when determining a placement for a child, provided that the relative caregiver meets all relevant state child protection standards” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018b, p. 1). The benefits of kinship-care over nonrelational placements are well documented,

including decreased risk of youth mental illness and greater placement stability (Winokur et al., 2015). Wu et al. (2015) found that youth living in kinship-care showed fewer behavior problems in general and that children aged 6 and older showed lower frequency and severity of problem behaviors compared to youth in non-relative foster care. Other benefits include familiarity with relatives and their home and increased contact with the child’s biological family, all of which can enhance the care transition (Billing et al., 2002).

For Black youth, kinship-care settings can have unique psychosocial benefits, but these benefits need to be weighed against significant financial costs. Black families have shown low involvement in the formal foster care system, owing in part to perceptions of cultural insensitivity among social workers (Pinderhughes & Harden, 2005), organizational distrust related to historical racism (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996), and a tradition of informal kinship-care in African American cultures (Mills et al., 1999). In terms of psychosocial benefits, kinship-care settings help mitigate some of the effects of transracial out-of-home placements caused by an imbalance in multi-ethnic foster caregivers compared to foster youth. Transracial placements are common, particularly for Black foster youth, due to an insufficient number of available Black foster families (Pinderhughes & Harden, 2005). Research is mixed, but some studies show foster youth in transracial settings face difficulties surrounding their racial identity and self-esteem (Burrow & Finley, 2001; Courtney, 1997), and show higher rates of aggressive behavior (Jewell et al., 2010). Being placed with kin rather than in nonrelative foster care can circumvent some of these problems. However, kinship-care placement also has considerable disadvantages, such as difficulty obtaining financial supports that would be available to licensed foster parents. Excluding certain families from the financial supports limited to the formal foster care system creates a two-tier system when such supports are only available to caregivers who are officially licensed within the child welfare structure.

Barriers to Kinship-Care

Analysis of licensing requirements across states has found many barriers to kinship-care families obtaining licensing necessary to receive stipends as formal non-relative foster parents. Regulations vary across states, and include age limitations, citizenship requirements, educational and language requirements, and even physical and mental health standards (Beltran & Epstein, 2013). By far, the most common requirement (found in 41 states) was “sufficient income,” with many states defining this as the ability “to meet the needs of the household without reliance on the foster care payment” (Beltran & Epstein, 2013, p. 5). This income requirement is in stark contrast to research finding that two thirds of children in informal kinship-care arrangements made outside the child welfare system were placed in homes with incomes lower than the U.S. median income (Lee et al., 2017), and that these informal caregivers generally had lower education levels and fewer available resources compared to unrelated foster caregivers (Bavier, 2011; Stein et al., 2014). Without the ability to obtain a license due to income and other requirements, kinship-care families are further disadvantaged in comparison to licensed foster families.

Using the U.S. poverty level as a benchmark, Pac et al. (2017) compared incomes of licensed foster families to incomes of other foster placement types and argued that the safety net provided by foster care payments keeps foster youth out of poverty. Holding child and family demographics constant, they found that youth within the formal foster system are at lower risk of poverty than other children, while youth living with their grandparents faced higher poverty risks due to the absence of foster care or other income supports. While foster care stipends bring heightened economic stability in licensed foster families, a comparable stipend increase can bring unique benefits for kinship-care families, even beyond economic stability. These benefits include longer placements (Pac, 2017), as well as mitigated risk for child abuse and neglect (Kovski et al., 2021). Given the preference for and benefits of placement

within kinship-care families—especially for Black youth—the barriers to licensure and the financial disadvantages associated with unlicensed kinship-care stand to perpetuate existing racial disparities in child welfare.

Current Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate racial disparities in the child welfare system by exploring what economic impact racial identity might have on older foster youth (age 11 to 15) to better understand structural inequalities against Black, Indigenous, and Families of Color within foster care, and particularly in kinship-care. The link between poverty and kinship-care foster care is well established in the literature (Ehrle et al., 2001; Murray et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2020), yet most studies use national income standards (U.S. median income or poverty level) and focus on younger youth within the foster care system. This paper builds upon prior research in two key ways. First, income disparities were measured via the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) (Pearce et al., 2001), rather than by state or federal poverty lines. The SSS (Pearce, 2001) is a validated way of defining the income necessary to meet basic family needs without public or private assistance. The SSS varies by family type (from one adult with no children up to three adults with six children) and also by the age of the children, recognizing that childcare costs differ significantly by age. Additionally, the SSS measures income adequacy based on a range of factors including food, health care, and transportation, and it takes tax rates and credits into consideration. Finally, the SSS is regionally based to provide local costs of meeting basic needs given that housing and other costs vary widely depending on location (<http://selfsufficiencystandard.org>). In other words, for a specific location (county or region within a county) and family size, there are many SSSs depending on a number of factors. In this paper, we assessed whether likelihood of meeting the SSS varied by foster placement type, including kinship-care versus foster care and licensed versus unlicensed care. We also investigated whether caretaker and teen race/ethnicity was associated with

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both foster placement type and income, providing a more nuanced profile of racial and economic disparities in foster care.

Methods

Recruitment, Procedures, and Data Collection

This study uses a sample of foster families selected as part of an evaluation of *Connecting*, an adaptation of the *Staying Connected with Your Teen* program designed to improve bonds between foster parents and the teens in their care through communication, opportunities for teens to contribute to their foster families, skills needed to take advantage of these opportunities, and increasing caregiver positive parenting strategies. Teens between the ages of 11 and 15 years and their foster caregivers were recruited from October 2016 through April 2018 in Washington State. The teens' placement in foster care had to be 30 days or longer, and they were placed in various household settings, including licensed or unlicensed foster care and licensed or unlicensed kinship-care (placement with relatives). The research team collaborated with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families to select families for recruitment; all study procedures were approved by the Washington State Institutional Review Board. During enrollment, 220 caregiver/teen dyads completed separate online baseline surveys (phone interviews were conducted if they did not have internet access or preferred a phone survey for other reasons). As part of the baseline survey, caregivers were asked to report whether they were a licensed foster parent (non-relative), an unlicensed foster parent, a licensed relative caregiver, or an unlicensed relative caregiver. They were also asked to provide an estimate of their household combined yearly income before taxes and list what government financial assistance the household had received in the past year. Current addresses for caregivers, collected as a means for sending a \$20 incentive, allowed for geographical mapping.

Sample

The original sample of 220 teens were placed in care by the Washington State child welfare system; however, 15 teens were placed out of state. Among the remaining cases, two teens and one caregiver did not provide race/ethnicity data, one teen was missing county data (needed to calculate a countywide Self-Sufficiency Standard), and three caregivers did not provide income data. Cases with out-of-state placements and missing information were removed from final analyses, leaving a total of 198 matched teen-caregiver dyads with valid location, race, and income data.

The foster youth sample had slightly more females (56%) than males, and 72% reported their race/ethnicity as White, 15% as Black, 13% Native American, 31% Hispanic, and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander (race/ethnicity was not mutually exclusive). The average age of foster youth was 13.0 years, and they had been in their current placement an average of 20.9 months (Table 1). The youth were representative of foster youth in general in Washington State in terms of race/ethnicity, number of placements, and living arrangements (kinship-care versus foster care), although somewhat more females were included in the sample in comparison to the general foster population (56% in sample versus 49% in general).

The caregivers were primarily female (92%), with an average age of 47.2 years, and they were predominantly White (78%; 8% Black, 7% Native American, 9% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander). Approximately 47% of caregivers were licensed foster parents, 12.6% were licensed kinship-care, 14.6% were unlicensed foster parents, and 26.3% were unlicensed kinship-care. The average family size was 5.9 individuals (Table 1). Compared to foster caregivers in Washington State, the caregivers in the sample were similar in terms of being paid versus unpaid caregivers, as well as being non-relatives versus relatives of the youth in their care.

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants

	Youth (n=198)	Caregivers (n=198)
Age in years (Mean/SD)	13.1 (1.25)	47.2 (11.58)
Gender (% female)	56.1%	92.4%
Duration of current placement (Mean/SD in months)	20.9 (18.63)	-
Average # of family members (Mean/SD)	-	5.9 (2.35)
Caregivers with at least high school diploma/ GED (%)	-	96.5%
Race/ethnicity (%)		
White	71.7%	78.3%
Black	15.2%	8.1%
Native American	13.1%	6.6%
Hispanic	31.3%	8.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	10.1%	1.5%
Caregiver type (%)		
Licensed foster provider	-	46.5%
Unlicensed foster provider	-	14.6%
Unlicensed kinship-care provider	-	26.3%
Licensed kinship-care provider	-	12.6%

Measures

Income to Self-Sufficiency Standard Matching

Caregivers were asked to self-report their combined yearly household income before taxes. They were presented with 11 income ranges (under \$10,000, \$10,000 to \$12,000, \$12,001 to \$15,000, and so on, up to above \$200,000) and asked to choose the range that contained their annual household income. To estimate per capita income, the midpoint of the range (e.g., \$11,000 for someone selecting income in the range of \$10,000 to \$12,000 annually) was divided by the number of people in the household as reported by caregivers.

Estimated self-report incomes were then compared to the Washington State SSS (the SSS is available for each state at <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/state-data/>).

In order to compare the incomes of foster families in the sample to the appropriate SSS, we first matched each family in the sample to all of the SSSs in their geographic location with their family size, then eliminated the SSSs for those family types that did not include at least one teen. Unfortunately, the data for our sample do not include ages of household members. Thus, we could not pinpoint a specific SSS for each dyad. Rather, we calculated a Self-Sufficiency Range (SSR) for the matching geographic location and family size. To calculate the SSR, we took each remaining SSS and divided by the number of household members in order to obtain the per capita SSSs. The minimum and maximum per capita SSS for the matching location and family size were used to create a range of SSSs, or the minimum to maximum per capita income needed to meet basic needs in that location.

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SSR Groups

Dyads were placed in one of two groups based on self-reported per capita household income: those dyads whose income was either below (group 1) or above (group 2) their location and household-size minimum SSR. Of the total sample, 47.0% (n = 93) of dyads were in group 1 and 53.0% (n = 105) of dyads were in group 2. Using alternative measures, such as the 2016 Washington State per capita real income, places almost all of the families (92%, n = 182) below the median income, while the federal poverty line only recognizes 22.7% (n = 45) of the sample families as being in need. Therefore, the SSR provides a much more sensitive and accurate picture of the economic status of families in our sample.

Caregiver and Teen Demographic Information

Each caregiver and teen reported their race and ethnicity on the survey. Race/ethnicity groups were created based on responses to two items: *Are you of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?* and *What best describes your racial background?* Caregivers and teens who selected Hispanic (Latinx), African American/Black, or Native American were coded as belonging to those groups regardless of how many other categories they may have chosen. Therefore Latinx, Black, and Native American are not mutually exclusive categories. An additional variable was created to reflect multiple endorsements of race/ethnicity categories (e.g., Black and White, Latinx and Black). Respondents who selected both non-Hispanic and White and did not endorse any other categories were coded as White (1) or not (0).

Caregiver reports were used to create categories as follows: having or not having completed high school, having or not having full-time employment, household size, and household members receiving or not receiving any government assistance (medical coupons, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] or welfare, food stamps, Social Security or SSI retirement pension, disability pension, and/or unemployment assistance or other public assistance).

Foster Placement Type

The type of placement was based on caregiver responses to one survey question: *Are you a licensed foster parent (non-relative), a licensed relative caregiver, or a non-licensed relative caregiver of [teen participant]?* Based on responses, families were categorized into four groups: licensed foster care (non-relatives), licensed kinship-care (relatives), unlicensed kinship-care (relatives), and unlicensed foster care (non-relatives; caregivers were recoded to this option if they responded with *Other* and indicated they were unlicensed non-relatives).

Analyses

Descriptive statistics (proportions) were used to explore relationships among SSR groups, racial/ethnic backgrounds of caregivers and teens, and foster placement types. Three sets of Chi square tests were conducted: (1) assessing whether there were different proportions of families falling above or below the minimum SSR as a function of (a) foster placement type, (b) caregiver race/ethnicity, and (c) teen race/ethnicity; (2) testing associations between foster placement type and (a) caregiver race/ethnicity and (b) teen race/ethnicity; and (3) testing associations between SSR groups and teen race/ethnicity among teens with at least one caretaker who shares their race/ethnicity.

Results

Income

For our sample, the mean matched per capita SSS was \$14,378.76 (SD = \$2,675.79), meaning that a family would need an average of \$14,378.76 per person per year in order to meet their basic needs. The average household per capita annual income for our sample was \$13,643.28 (SD = \$12,295). On average, the families in our sample earned about \$735 less per capita than the mean income necessary to meet their basic needs.



SSR Group by Caregiver and Teen Demographic Variables

Caregiver Characteristics

Almost half (47%, $n = 93$) of all the foster families in our sample were living below the minimum SSR for their location. Caregivers below the minimum SSR were less likely to have completed high school or have full-time employment (self and/or partner), and they reported a larger average family size. Families below the minimum SSR were more likely to report receiving government assistance (Table 2).

Caregiver Race/Ethnicity

Seventy-eight percent ($n = 155$) of caregivers reported White/Caucasian as their only racial identity, while 8.1% ($n = 16$) reported being African American/Black, and 12.1% ($n = 24$) reported being of more than one race. Caregivers reporting to be White were more likely to report income above the minimum SSR than caregivers reporting to be any

non-White race ($\chi^2 = 4.02, p = .045$). Caregivers reporting to be Black were more likely to fall below the minimum SSR than non-Black caregivers ($\chi^2 = 8.21, p = .004$). Other caregiver racial identities for which there was sufficient representation—including American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic/Latino/Spanish, and those reporting more than one race—showed nonsignificant associations with SSR group (Table 2).

Teen Race/Ethnicity

Fifty-one percent ($n = 101$) of teens reported White/Caucasian as their only racial identity, while 15.2% ($n = 30$) reported being African American/Black, 15.2% ($n = 30$) American Indian/Alaska Native, 31.3% ($n = 62$) Latino/Hispanic/Spanish, and 34.8% ($n = 69$) more than once race. Black youth were more likely to be living with families below the minimum SSR compared with non-Black teens ($\chi^2 = 3.80, p = .05$). No differences were found among other race/ethnicity categories (Table 2).

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Table 2. Associations of Caregiver Characteristics, Caregiver and Teen Race/Ethnicity Variables, and Foster Placement Type With SSR Income Group

	Income group		% of Total Dyads	χ^2	p
	Below min. SSR (47.0%, n = 93)	Min. SSR-above (53.0%, n = 105)			
Caregiver characteristics					
Caregiver reporting greater than high school education	35.3% n = 42*	64.7% n = 77*	60.1% n = 119	16.32	.000
Caregiver or spouse reporting current full-time employment	38.1% n = 59*	61.9% n = 96*	78.3% n = 155	22.72	.000
Household size greater than 5	53.7% n = 58*	46.3% n = 50*	54.5% n = 108	4.33	.045
Receives any government assistance	52.5% n = 74*	47.5% n = 67*	71.2% n = 141	5.98	.018
Caregiver race/ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	42.6% n = 66*	57.4% n = 89*	78.3% n = 155	5.52	.019
African American/Black	81.3% n = 13*	18.8% n = 3*	8.1% n = 16	8.21	.004
American Indian/Alaskan Native	46.2% n = 6	53.8% n = 7	6.6% n = 13	0.00	.951
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	64.7% n = 11	35.3% n = 6	8.6% n = 17	2.35	.125
More than one race	54.2% n = 13	45.8% n = 11	12.1% n = 24	0.588	.516
Teen race/ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	43.6% n = 44	56.4% n = 57	51.0% n = 101	0.96	.327
African American/Black	63.3% n = 19*	36.7% n = 11*	15.2% n = 30	3.80	.051
American Indian/Alaskan Native	42.3% n = 11	57.7% n = 15	13.1% n = 26	0.26	.609
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	50.0% n = 31	50.0% n = 31	31.3% n = 62	0.33	.564
More than one race	47.8% n = 33	52.2% n = 36	34.8% n = 69	0.03	.860
Foster placement type					
Licensed foster care	37.0% n = 34*	63.0% n = 58*	46.5% n = 92	12.71	.005
Licensed kinship-care	48.0% n = 12	52.0% n = 13	12.6% n = 25		
Unlicensed foster care	41.4% n = 12	58.6% n = 17	14.6% n = 29		
Unlicensed kinship-care	67.3% n = 35*	32.7% n = 17*	26.3% n = 52		

*Cells in the same row differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$).

Foster Placement Type by SSR Income Group

Almost half (46.5%, $n = 92$) of caregivers were licensed foster parents, while a quarter (26.3%, $n = 52$) were unlicensed kinship-care; the remaining teens were in licensed kinship-care (12.6%, $n = 25$) or unlicensed foster care (14.6%, $n = 29$). Overall, foster placement type was associated with SSR group ($\chi^2 = 12.71, p = .005$). Right-tailed post hoc tests at a Bonferonni corrected threshold of $p = .006$ showed that this effect was driven by the unlicensed kinship-care group, which were much more likely to fall below the minimum SSR, and the licensed foster care group, which were more likely to fall above the minimum SSR, relative to other foster placement types (Table 2).

Foster Placement Type by Caregiver and Teen Race/Ethnicity

Caregiver Race/Ethnicity

Caregivers reporting to be White were less likely to be unlicensed kinship-care providers ($\chi^2 = 15.12, p = .002$) or any unlicensed provider ($\chi^2 = 8.69, p = .003$) compared to caregivers reporting

to be any non-White race. The majority of licensed kinship-care (80%) and unlicensed foster care (83%) providers reported their race as White; therefore, the remaining race categories were collapsed into either licensed or unlicensed care providers. Caregivers reporting to be Black were more likely to be unlicensed providers relative to non-Black caregivers ($\chi^2 = 5.58, p = .003$), with all but one caregiver in this group reporting to be a kinship-care provider; Hispanic caregivers were also more likely to report being unlicensed ($\chi^2 = 4.36, p = .037$), with 73% of those being kinship-care providers. No differences in foster placement type were found among other race/ethnicity categories (Table 3).

Teen Race/Ethnicity

Black youth were somewhat more likely to report being placed in unlicensed versus licensed care ($\chi^2 = 3.63, p = .057$), and 14 of the 17 (82%) Black youth living in unlicensed care were placed with kin. No other teen race/ethnicity categories showed significant associations ($p < .10$) with foster placement type using either the two or four categories of placement type (licensed versus unlicensed results are reported in Table 3).



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Table 3. Associations of Caregiver and Teen Race/Ethnicity Variables and Income With Foster Placement Type

	Foster placement type				x ²	p
	Licensed foster care (46.5%, n = 92)	Licensed kinship-care (12.6%, n = 25)	Unlicensed foster care (14.6%, n = 29)	Unlicensed kinship-care (26.3%, n = 52)		
Caregiver race/ethnicity						
White/Caucasian	51.6% n = 80	12.9% n = 20	15.5% n = 24	20.0% n = 31*	15.12	.002
	Licensed care		Unlicensed care			
White/Caucasian	64.5% n = 100*		35.5% n = 55*		8.69	.003
African American/Black	31.3% n = 5*		68.8% n = 11*		5.58	.018
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	38.5% n = 5		61.5% n = 8		2.45	.118
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	35.3% n = 6*		64.7% n = 11*		4.36	.037
More than one race	41.7% n = 10		58.3% n = 14		3.43	.064
Teen race/ethnicity						
White/Caucasian	60.7% n = 54		42.2% n = 46		0.168	.682
African American/Black	43.3% n = 13^		56.7% n = 17^		3.63	.057
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	53.8% n = 14		46.2% n = 12		0.341	.559
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	66.1% n = 41		33.9% n = 21		1.85	.174
More than one race	55.1% n = 38		44.9% n = 31		0.707	.400
SSR income group						
Below Min. SSR	49.5% n = 46*		50.5% n = 47*		6.73	.010
Min. SSR and above	67.6% n = 71*		32.4% n = 34*			

*Cells in the same row differ significantly from each other (p < .05).

^Cells in the same row differ significantly from each other (p < .10).

Shared Racial Identity by SSR Income Group and Placement Type

The majority of dyads (63.1%) consisted of a White caregiver paired with a teen of the same race, and these families were slightly more likely to report being above the minimum SSR but did not differ based on either two or four placement type categories (two-category results are included in Table 3). Just under half (46.7%, n = 14) of teens reporting to be Black were placed with caregivers who also reported Black heritage, with the majority of those in unlicensed care (88.9%, n = 8) being placed with relatives (Table 4). Regardless of foster placement type, a significant proportion (78.6%, n = 11) of Black teens living with at least one caregiver

of the same race reported income levels below the minimum SSR for their region ($\chi^2 = 6.04, p = .023$). There were no significant differences for Hispanic/Latino/Spanish teens living with same-race caregivers in terms of income (below or above minimum SSR), but this group was more likely to report being unlicensed ($\chi^2 = 4.62, p = .032$), with 77.8% (n = 7) of unlicensed families being kin. Other intraracial comparison groups were too small for meaningful analysis. In terms of actual income, Black and Hispanic caregivers with same-race foster youth reported an average per capita income of \$7,899.52 (sd = 7,018.76) and \$9,503.57 (sd = 5,141.29), respectively compared to \$14,346.90 (sd = 13,112.25) reported by White caregivers with same-race youth.

Table 4. Associations of Shared Race/Ethnicity With SSR Income Group

	Income group		% of Total dyads	χ^2	<i>p</i> ¹
	Below min. SSR	Min. SSR- Above			
Shared caregiver & teen race/ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	42.4% n = 53 [^]	57.6% n = 72 [^]	63.1% n = 125	2.84	.092
African American/Black	78.6% n = 11 [*]	21.4% n = 3 [*]	7.1% n = 14	6.04	.023
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	69.2% n = 9	30.8% n = 4	6.6% n = 13	2.77	.149
	Placement Type		% of Total Dyads	χ^2	<i>p</i> ¹
	Licensed care	Unlicensed care			
Shared caregiver & teen race/ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	61.6% n = 77	38.4% n = 48	63.1% n = 125	0.88	.347
African American/Black	35.7% n = 5 [^]	64.3% n = 9 [^]	7.1% n = 14	3.41	.065
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	30.8% n = 4 [*]	69.2% n = 9 [*]	6.6% n = 13	4.62	.032

¹When cell count is less than 5, Fisher's Exact Test is reported *p* value.

^{*}Cells in the same row differ significantly from each other (*p* < .05).

[^]Cells in the same row differ significantly from each other (*p* < .10).

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Discussion

This study supports prior research into the economic disadvantages faced by certain groups in the foster care system. Using the more sensitive, geographically based SSS measure of income to examine the placement of youth in foster settings, disparities were found in terms of ability to meet basic needs as well as placement type. Black caregivers and youth were more likely to fall below the minimum SSR, while White caregivers reported earnings above the minimum SSR. Caregivers below the minimum SSR were further disadvantaged, with lower rates of education, higher rates of unemployment, larger families, and greater dependency on government assistance. Placement type also varied by race/ethnicity, with greater likelihood that White caregivers would be officially licensed relative to Black and Hispanic caregivers, who reported lower frequency of licensure. It follows that unlicensed caregivers were more often below the minimum SSR for their region compared to those providers with licenses. When youth are placed with same-race caregivers, who are often kin, Black youth are more likely to report living with families below the income necessary to meet basic needs, and both Black and Hispanic youth were more often placed with unlicensed caregivers. The results suggest that disparities exist within the foster care system in terms of race/ethnicity, income, and licensing.

Consistent with other state and national measures of income, Black caregivers in our sample were more likely to fall below the benchmark income (in this case, the minimum SSR) relative to White caregivers. Furthermore, Black foster youth were more likely to be placed within a family unable to meet basic economic needs. When caregiver and youth races are matched, the results are even more glaring, with a large majority of Black caregivers with Black foster youth reporting incomes below the minimum SSR. Certain ethnic groups tended to fall below necessary sufficient income due to a variety of factors, including education and employment, all of which were found to be related in

our sample. Placement type, in particular a caregiver being licensed or unlicensed within the state child welfare system, was also linked to a family's economic standing and, given the high percentage of unlicensed families reporting to be kin, deserves further investigation.

Foster Care Licensing

A main tenet of the child welfare system is that, where possible, placement should be found with a relative of the child. The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) states that “children are best cared for by a person they have a relationship with, when the caregiver is assessed as safe and suitable” (DCYF, 2022, para. 1). In Washington, unlicensed caregivers must meet basic requirements (i.e., a home safety assessment, and character/suitability test) and are told of available financial support, including TANF, TANF Child-Only grants, and Relative Support Services Funds such as Non-Needy Relative, In Loco Parentis, and Legal Guardian Grant (DCYF, 2022, para. 5). Unfortunately, many of these sources of support include strict regulations—for example, TANF benefits require participation in a job search program, and Relative Support Services Funds require the applicant to sign over child support rights to the Department of Social and Health Services. Relative caregivers are strongly encouraged to become licensed, but licensing is not required to shelter young kin in need of care. Licensing protocols for foster parents vary by state, but most include a few basic requirements such as background checks, ability to communicate with the child and other service or health care providers, and completion of a training course (Beltran & Epstein, 2013). In Washington State, approved licensed foster caregivers must complete ongoing training to maintain their license, and, in return, receive monthly foster care maintenance payments, payments for childcare costs if employed, medical and dental coverage for the child in foster care, clothing vouchers, and reimbursement/liability plans (DCYF, 2020b). In 2020, monthly foster care reimbursements per child for youth aged 12 and

older ranged from a base of \$810 to a maximum of \$1612.30 depending on the physical, mental, behavioral, or emotional conditions of the child (DCYF, 2020b).

Despite the financial benefits, 41% of families in our study were unlicensed, and 64% of unlicensed caregivers were kin. This is, however, in line with research showing that only one third to one half of children in state custody placed with kin receive foster care payments (Murray et al., 2004), and those who do receive support often find their benefits much lower than licensed caregivers (Anderson, 2006). One potential challenge for unlicensed caregivers is Washington State's requirement that applicants have sufficient income to maintain their family without the foster care reimbursement (WAC 110-148-1365; Washington State Legislature, 2015). Our analysis showed that unlicensed providers, and kinship-care providers in particular, are significantly more likely to fall below the minimum SSR needed to provide for their families, so they fail to meet a main licensing criterion of supporting their family without foster child payments. Additionally, providers below the minimum SSR needed to support more family members face higher unemployment and lower education levels than those above the minimum SSR and are thus further hindered by their inability to meet training and licensing requirements. While both Black and Hispanic caregivers were more often unlicensed, Black caregivers faced the additional burden of being below the minimum SSR, and this held true for Black caregivers in general as well as Black caregivers paired with same-race youth who were often kin. The income requirement for licensing appears to be a barrier that limits particular racial groups from accessing the financial supports that come with official recognition as state foster parents.

Policy Implications

Simply eliminating income minimums for foster parent licenses may not reduce barriers for disadvantaged groups. Training and certification requirements could still limit the ability of

unlicensed and Black caregivers to obtain necessary approvals (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002). Furthermore, lowering licensing standards could introduce more risks into the system as previously screened-out applicants become eligible (Testa et al., 2010). Conversely, establishing income minimums for kinship-care providers could result in fewer placements with relatives, contrary to research on the benefits of youth placement with family (Schwartz, 2002). Attempts to assist kinship-care providers through programs such as the Relative Guardian Assistance Program in Washington State have fallen short as they also require relatives be licensed in order to participate. A more equitable solution would be to ensure that unlicensed families who take in foster children receive reimbursements similar to licensed foster homes without additional burdens placed disproportionately on kin and Black providers. Research has shown that access to income provided by child-only welfare grants is associated with a 7% greater likelihood of kinship-care youth graduating from high school (Nelson et al., 2010). Other research has demonstrated that a 1% increase in monthly stipend is associated with a 53% decrease in the risk of disruption for kinship-care families (Pac, 2017), so providing these families with payments similar to licensed foster parents could increase the placement stability and educational success of children in their care. Caseworkers need to ensure they make kinship-care providers aware of any existing available income assistance programs and realize that licensing isn't always an option for these families (Xu et al., 2020). Educational or outreach strategies have been suggested as means to increase awareness of financial assistance offered to kinship-care families (Murray et al., 2004), and greater access to services for all families regardless of licensure could reduce some inequalities (Ehrle et al., 2001). Additionally, policy makers, system administrators, and practitioners need to realize the disproportionate burden fostering places on unlicensed and, especially, Black caregivers, and make necessary adjustments to the child welfare system to reduce any systematic inequities. Such adjustments should include equitable access to financial resources for all caregivers, increased

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awareness and education on currently available resources, and reassessment of barriers to licensing that disproportionately exclude minority and kinship-care providers.

Study Limitations

The results of this study have notable limitations. The sample is limited to Washington State and cannot be generalized to other locations as state systems for child welfare differ considerably. Furthermore, the generalizability of the results must be interpreted with some level of caution due to the nature of eligibility for the study. Youth and caregivers needed to speak and be literate in English to respond to survey questions. Youth in group-home and behavioral rehabilitation services placements were excluded because of the study's focus on primary prevention. Youth included in the study were not known to be regularly using drugs or alcohol in the last 30 days, to have any past involvement in the criminal justice system, or to be receiving behavioral rehabilitation services as reported by their social worker because of the intervention's focus on preventing behavior that has not yet been initiated. Finally, youth were in placements that were expected to last for at least 6 months. These criteria were determined by the DCYF social workers assigned to the youth and limit the ability to generalize the results to families outside the formal foster care system.

Conclusion

According to the Children's Bureau, the child welfare system is "a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families" (2020; <https://www.childwelfare.gov/>). This study demonstrates that these objectives are not equitably distributed across provider types and highlights racial disparities that exist within the system. Black caregivers and youth were less likely to be able to meet basic needs using the SSR as a measure on economic stability; Black and Hispanic caregivers were less likely to be licensed and thereby receive financial benefits available to licensed caregivers; and Black youth placed with same-race caregivers, who are often kin, were more likely to be living with families unable to meet basic needs. These results point to the need for change within the existing child welfare system, including greater access to resources for all caregivers regardless of type or race, improved education on currently available resources, re-alignment of current licensing requirements to be more inclusive, and a general review of child welfare services to reduce systemic racial inequities. Making these adjustments to the child welfare system could help ensure that the needs of all children are met, regardless of income, race, or ethnicity.



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Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research

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Abstract

Legacies of racism, discrimination, and oppression undergird health and social inequities for African Americans in the United States. In response, research-practitioners across various sectors have increasingly employed participatory methods to collaborate with African Americans in addressing causes and consequences of structural racism. These approaches have been gradually gaining prominence in child welfare research and reform. This study explored the utility of Community Cafés—an evidence-based participatory model to engage community members who have had contact with the child welfare system (CWS) to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at reducing CWS contact and preventing placement into foster care. Eight Community Cafés were held over 4 days with 101 participants. Results indicated participants felt the café process provided a safe space for open communication, where their voices were heard and valued. Participants also viewed the cafés as an opportunity to meet, connect and share information and contribute to the common goal of building and strengthening community. Implications for future research and practice for Community Cafés in collaborating with African American families in child welfare research are discussed.

Keywords: Community Cafés, empowerment, African American, participatory research, lived experience, child welfare, child maltreatment prevention

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Introduction

Historically, protecting African American children from child maltreatment has not been a priority in the United States. In the earlier conception of child welfare services, African American children were excluded from services intended to keep children safe from experiencing child maltreatment (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). Following extensive advocacy efforts, African American children and families were slowly included in child protection systems. However, in more recent decades, child protection systems have been characterized by *racial disproportionality*, a phenomenon in

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which certain racial groups are disproportionately represented in a system, when compared to their overall representation in the population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). While nationally 37% of all children will experience a child abuse investigation before the age of 18, over half of African American children in the United States will experience an investigation (Kim et al., 2017). And while there is ongoing debate whether this disproportionate level of interaction is warranted or exists when you consider factors beyond race (see racial disproportionality debate: Bartholet, 2009; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Drake et al., 2021; Fix & Nair, 2020; Kim & Drake, 2018; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Smith & Pressley, 2019; Rebbe et al., 2022; Wulczyn, 2020), it is inarguable that the child welfare system (CWS) impacts the lives of many African American families in America.

While the engagement of families with lived experience in various reforms and programs related to child welfare is not new (e.g., Marcenko et al., 2010, 2011), the regular integration of family experience and voice in designing a better approach to child welfare has yet to be realized. The engagement processes of sharing stories can both be therapeutic and act as a form of empowerment for families who often report having negative experiences with CWSs. Research suggests that although parents sometimes find some aspects of their interaction with child protection services (CPS) as helpful, such as being connected to resources and services, they also report their experiences as being harmful and traumatizing (Rise PAR Team et al., 2021; Roberts, 2021; Schreiber et al., 2013). For example, parents express experiencing anxiety and fear of having their children removed when interacting with CPS (Fong, 2020; Schreiber et al., 2013). Some studies also report that families of color experience discrimination and racism from child welfare agencies (Merritt, 2020, 2021).

Through the sharing of their lived experiences, families can offer expertise and wisdom to improve and shape systems and services in a way that is responsive to family needs and reduces trauma. An

example of such an approach is the implementation of Touchstones of Hope, which is aimed at reconciling child welfare experiences of indigenous families and developing effective programs and policies (Cross et al., 2015). One avenue in which these opportunities have been gaining ground in child welfare research is through the use of participatory research methods (Cerulli et al., 2017; Fernandez, 2007; Stafford et al., 2021; Törrönen & Vornanen, 2014).

Participatory Research Methods

Participatory research is a general term used to describe research approaches that share a central philosophy of inclusivity and that acknowledge the value of engaging in research *with* those who stand to be affected by it (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Recognizing that power differentials in conventional research approaches often mirror societal hierarchies, participatory research aims to create non-hierarchical relationships that value self-determination, in which researchers and participant community members share decision-making power to produce knowledge and engage in social action and meaningful solutions (Hall, 1992; Northway, 2010; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Salsberg et al., 2017). It also maintains that the participant group ongoingly determines both how 'community' should be defined— that is, who will be included in research efforts, and how and to what degree they will participate (Northway, 2010).

Power, safe space, and voice emerge as core, interdependent principles distinguishing participatory research from conventional approaches of inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Salsberg, et al., 2017). The extent to which a safe space is cultivated within the research process by means of intentional redistribution and sharing of power reflects the degree to which the professional research partner supports the expression of participant community voices (Chávez et al., 2008). Participatory research asks community members to expose their personal views about a given situation, often through the retelling of their lived experiences (Desai et al.,

2019). Given the sensitivity of such disclosures, participatory research must take intentional measures to ensure confidentiality, as well as “domination-free” or power-free spaces (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 123) where an “openness” or transparency is promoted and where community contributions are valued as the driving force of positive, foreseeable change (Titterton & Smart, 2008). In keeping central its core principles, participatory research employs strategies that are culturally meaningful to the participant community and grounded in collective ways of knowing (Hall, 1992). Examples of these include community meetings, video documentaries, community dramas, photo-novels, sharing oral histories, community surveys, story-telling, and shared testimonies. This study focuses on one form of community meetings, the Community Café.

Community Cafés as Participatory Research Methods

Developed by Brown and Isaacs (2005), Community Cafés are a derivative of World Cafés (World Cafe Method, 2019), a unique participatory model engaging participants in conversations about questions that are meaningful to them. Cafés are structured in a way that fosters constructive, authentic dialogue, allowing for patterns of collective intelligence and wisdom to emerge through the sharing of experiences (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Careful attention to and maintenance of an environment that is safe and engenders the cross-pollination of thoughts among participants is paramount to the café model. In this safe space, all participants are regarded as experts of their own lived experience, allowing diverse perspectives to engage in co-creating innovative solutions (MacFarlane et al., 2017). The goal is to create an experience that is unlike ordinary meetings with usual routines and authoritative structures, instead supporting the unfolding of organic, self-organizing processes centralized on a designated topic (Steier et al., 2015). Cafés usually begin with a welcoming message that reaffirms the importance of the democratic process established by a group communication agreement. This is followed by the

café questions, several rounds of conversation, and the ‘harvesting’ or gathering of ideas from each table. The café typically culminates with group consensus of potential next steps towards action (Steier et al., 2015).

Until recently, the model has typically been used in business and organizational settings as a way of facilitating strategic planning efforts and promoting conversational leadership (Fullarton & Palermo, 2008). Researchers, however, are beginning to document its utility with vulnerable and disenfranchised populations (MacFarlane et al., 2017), including older adults with diabetes (Yankeelov et al., 2019), youth living with bipolar disorder (Noack et al., 2016), community-dwelling older adults with risk of falls (Khong et al., 2017), residents in an older adult living facility (Roos & Du Toit, 2014), and parents of children with severe disabilities (Carter et al., 2012). The current study builds on this research by utilizing Community Cafés to engage community members from a predominantly African American community who have had contact with the CWS in order to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at preventing child maltreatment and reducing future contact with the CWS.

To date, researchers have used café methods with system-involved parents to examine perspectives on foster care reunification (Stephens et al., 2016), with service providers examining their perspectives on the ways in which funding sources impact community efforts in child protection (Cerulli et al., 2017), and to center children’s voices in family services participation (Stafford et al., 2021). Best and colleagues (2021) also previously used community cafés to identify program elements for their Authentic Family Engagement and Strengthening (AFES) Approach, which aimed to incorporate anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices within the CWS. Overall, these studies find that the Community Café model is beneficial in centering participant voices and identifying keyways to improve service provision. The café approach remains understudied as a participatory research method with African

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American communities in child welfare research. This study explored the utility of Community Cafés by addressing the research question: To what extent does the Community Café model create a safe space for participants to share their experiences, give voice to their expertise, and empower African American community members as active participants in child maltreatment prevention and child welfare reform?

The PACT-STL Project

The overarching purpose of the Parents and Children Together-St. Louis (PACT-STL) project is to develop, implement, and evaluate strategies that prevent child maltreatment, reduce entry into the public CWS and foster care, and enhance the overall well-being outcomes of children and families. PACT-STL is a partnership among a leading nonprofit organization, university researchers, state and regional CWSs, public safety net system agencies, community service providers, and parents with lived child welfare experience, and it is aimed at promoting the well-being of children, families, and communities. Specifically, PACT-STL is working to create a plan that helps to address the needs of at-risk families and reduce entry into the CWS. The first stage of the development of the multilevel intervention plan consisted of a rigorous needs assessment, which included gathering input from the community and combining several sources of administrative and community-level data to get a regional view of availability and accessibility of resources.

Relevant Context for the Study

St. Louis County and St. Louis City have a history of racial and economic inequity, which has resulted in a disproportionate presence of risk factors for child maltreatment and other adverse outcomes in select communities (Vision for Children at Risk, 2017). More specifically, 13 of the 18 zip codes (72%) in St. Louis City have been rated as having severe risks to child well-being, based on a list of child well-being indicators (VCR, 2017). Nine of 45 St. Louis County zip codes (20%) have a severe rating; however, these 9 zip codes look demographically different from the rest of the St. Louis County zip codes.

Most of these zip codes (7 out of 9) have an African American population of 60% or more, whereas St. Louis County zip codes rated as having low risk have less than 3% of an African American population. Community Café participants were recruited from the city and county zip codes determined to be at highest risk.

Methods

PACT-STL held a total of six Community Cafés (two sets of four in-person Community Cafés and one set of two virtual Community Cafés) to gather input from community members residing in the target area who have lived experience or knew someone with lived experience with the CWS. The overall goal of the cafés was to collaborate with African American communities experiencing high levels of risks associated with threats to child safety and well-being. Information gleaned from participants was used to inform a multilevel intervention aimed at reducing these risks and strengthening community and family protective factors, while also partnering with residents to address immediate community concerns related to child abuse and neglect. There were 101 total participants. The first set of four cafés were held in person at a local community center, while the second set were held virtually to accommodate public health measures (e.g., physical distancing) in place due to COVID-19. For both cafés, participants were recruited in partnership with the project's lead community partner via personal outreach, flyers, and word-of-mouth. Following each café, participants were provided with an evaluation survey (paper or online) to capture their experience and feedback of the Community Café process. Participants were provided a \$20 gift card for their participation. Human subjects approval was obtained from Washington University Institutional Review Board. Below are brief descriptions of each set of cafés.

Community Café Session 1: In Person

The first set of cafés had three primary goals: 1) to understand how community members defined child abuse and neglect; 2) to learn about community

members' experiences with and perceptions of the CWS in St. Louis City and St. Louis County; and 3) to identify the type of support and services community members felt could promote child and family well-being. The cafés, which took place at a local organization that is known, trusted, and respected within the community, were held over two days, with morning and afternoon sessions each day. Childcare was provided, along with breakfast or lunch items and snacks. Participants were invited to sit at one of seven large tables that could each accommodate six participants.

Each Community Café began with a brief overview of the PACT-STL project, a presentation on the Community Café model, including the agreements and expectations about communication, objectives of the event, and information regarding the CWS. Attendees then engaged in a one-on-one ice breaker activity. In addition to café participants, two service providers affiliated with local community agencies joined each group, serving as a discussion facilitator and a note taker. Each Community Café had two 30-minute small group discussions, in which participants were tasked with answering a total of four questions:

1. Do you know someone who has had experiences with Children's Division or the courts? What was that experience like?
2. What do you consider child abuse or neglect?
3. Who supports you in your role as a parent? What does that support look like?
4. What else would be helpful in supporting you or your community as parents?

Participants were welcomed to speak in third person to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of their personal stories. The small group facilitators posed the question to participants, and participants spoke freely while note takers documented responses. At the end of each of these discussions, a member of each group reported out to the larger group in a "harvest" session where ideas were noted.

Community Café Session 2: Virtual

The second set of Community Cafés were hosted via Zoom about five months after the first set of in-person cafés. The partnering agency actively recruited participants by making phone calls and inviting participants to attend. Community members were also encouraged to invite others. To address potential platform accessibility issues, a Zoom prep session was held prior to the cafés for participants. The aim of these cafés was to solicit participants' ideas and feedback on the PACT-STL Action Plan, which was formulated based on the first set of cafés. The virtual cafés lasted about one hour longer than the three hours scheduled due to technical difficulties and the participants' desire for continued conversation. Not all attendees had attended the first set of cafés.

Before being sent to breakout groups for discussion, participants received an explanation of the virtual Community Café and ground rules as well as an overview of the PACT-STL Action Plan. In breakout groups of three or four participants, a note taker, and a facilitator, the groups spent 40 minutes discussing two questions related to the Action Plan. Participants were brought back to the main session for Harvest, in which one designated member of each group shared a summary of the main ideas discussed in their group.

Evaluation Survey for Community Cafés

Participant experiences with the Community Cafés were evaluated via survey evaluations (25 questions), as well as through observation notes taken by the evaluation team. The survey consisted of three main sections. The first section asked demographic questions about the participants' race, age, number of children, relationship status, and level of education. The second section assessed participants' experience at the Community Café. Participants were asked to respond on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to statements such as "I felt empowered after participating in the Community Café" and "I felt community members had a voice in the discussion." The third section included

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two open-ended questions: “*What did you like best about this Community Café?*” and, “*What could be done to improve this Community Café?*” to garner feedback on the Community Café process.

Analytical Approach

Descriptive analyses were conducted to present demographic data and participant responses to statements regarding their Community Café experience. Data was managed to account for missing or duplicate survey responses (virtual survey). A thematic content approach was used in combination with principles of participatory research methods—*power, safe space, and voice*—as synthesizing concepts to help organize findings (Sandelowski, 1998). A group of four researchers individually analyzed all the qualitative responses and identified emerging themes and subthemes.

The four researchers then met and discussed the themes they identified and how these themes related to the participatory research methods principles. Following the discussion, the researchers deliberated and agreed on a set of main themes and subthemes that best captured the participants’ responses. The lead researcher then re-analyzed the responses using the final agreed upon themes and coded the responses. A second researcher reviewed the lead researcher’s analysis.

Initially, the researchers reviewed the in person and virtual cafés separately. Given that researchers observed similar themes emerging across both in-person and virtual cafés, all qualitative responses were then coded together. However, findings specific to the virtual platform (e.g., difficulty getting and staying connected) were noted separately.



Results

Table 1 presents participant demographic data for both sets of Community Cafés. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present participants’ average ratings, which ranged from 1 to 4, of statements regarding their experience at the cafés.

Variables	Community Café Set 1 (n=62)		Community Café Set 2 (n=39)	
	n	% or Mean (SD)	n	% or Mean (SD)
Gender	50		38	
Female	39	78%	29	76.32%
Male	11	22%	9	23.68%
Age	45	43.4 (14.92)	38	45.03 (14.83)
Race/Ethnicity	49		36	
African American/Black	42	85.71%	30	83.33%
Latinx	1	2.04%	0	0%
Multiracial	1	2.04%	4	11.11%
Native American	3	6.12%	1	2.78%
White	2	4.08%	1	2.78%
Number of Children in Household	41	2.24 (2.05)	38	2.37 (2.51)
Relationship Status	48		36	
Divorced	7	14.58%	3	8.33%
Married	10	20.83%	12	33.33%
Partnered	3	6.25%	1	2.78%
Single	25	52.08%	18	50%
Widowed	3	6.25%	2	5.56%
Education Status	50		37	
Elementary	2	4%	0	0%
Junior High School	1	2%	1	2.70%
Some High School	3	6%	2	5.41%
High School or GED	13	24%	12	32.43%
Trade/Vocational Training	2	4%	4	10.81%
Some College	10	20%	10	27.03%
Associates Degree	7	14%	3	8.11%
Bachelor’s Degree	5	10%	2	5.41%
Graduate Degree	7	14%	2	5.41%
Military	1	2%	1	2.70%

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Figure 1. In-Person Community Café Set 1 Survey Responses

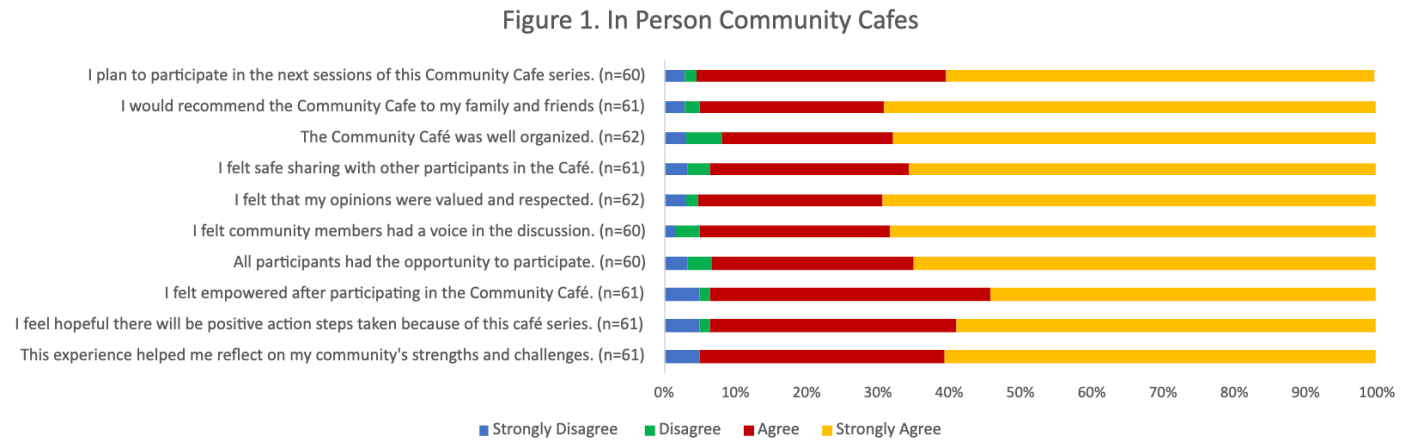
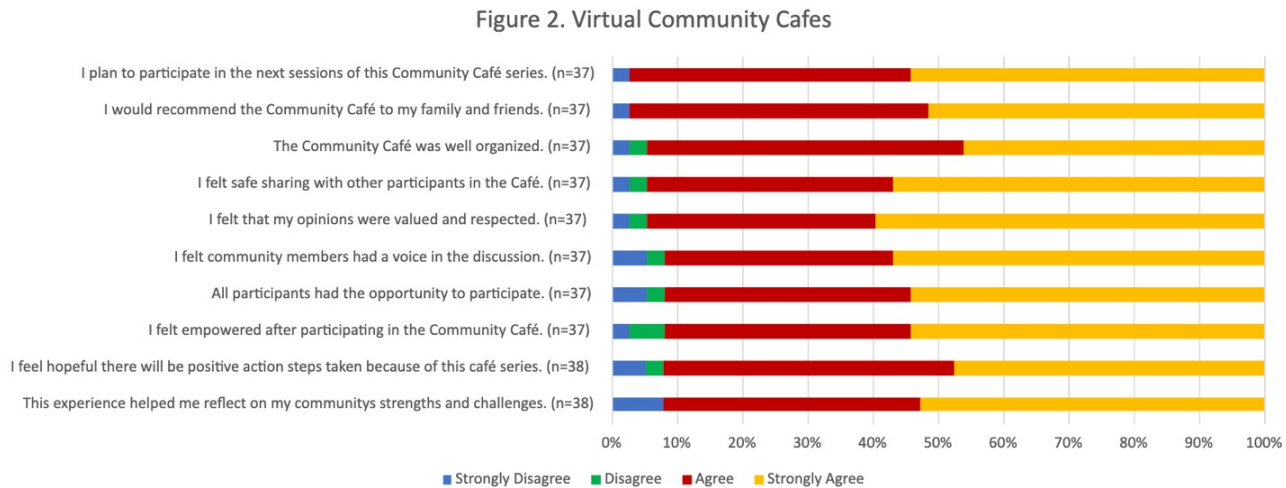


Figure 2. Virtual Community Café Set 2 Survey Responses



Community Café Set 1 (in-person)

The first round of four in-person cafés included 62 participants. While all participants completed a survey, the numbers in Table 1 exclude missing responses for any given question. As a result, the numbers reflect the percentage of the total responses for a given question. Most participants identified as female (78%) and African American (about 86%). Participants’ ages ranged from 16 to 76, with a median age of 42. The number of children in a household ranged from 0 to 7 with families having a median of 2. The highest level of education among

respondents was a high school diploma or GED (24%), some college (20%), an associate’s degree (14%), or a graduate degree (14%).

Survey Responses

In terms of experience of Community Café participation (see Figure 1), 95% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt community members had a voice in the discussion, that their opinions were valued and respected, and that the experience helped them reflect on their community’s

strength and challenges. Additionally, 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that all participants had the opportunity to participate, that they felt safe sharing with other participants in the café, and that they felt empowered after participating in the Community Café. Ninety-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were hopeful positive action steps would be taken because of the café. About 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Community Café was well organized. Finally, 95% of participants would recommend the Community Café to friends or family and would like to participate in the next session of the Community Café series.

Community Café Set 2 (virtual)

The second round of two Community Cafés included a total of 39 participants. Most participants connected from a smartphone (68.42%), while the rest connected by a non-smart cell phone (15.8%) or a laptop (15.8%). Over three quarters of participants were able to participate with video, and most participants (83.34%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to fully participate in all café activities. Finally, more than half (68%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to use the virtual platform, Zoom, with ease. The majority (76%) of participants identified as female and African American (83%). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 79 years, with a median age of 41. The number of children in participants' households ranged from 0 to 12, with families having a median of 2 children. The highest level of education among respondents was a high school diploma or GED (32.43%), some college (27.03%), trade or vocational training (10.81%), or an associate's degree (8.11%).

Survey Responses

In terms of experience of virtual Community Café participation (see Figure 2), about 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt community members had a voice in the discussion, that all participants had the opportunity to participate, and that they felt empowered after participating in the Community Café. Further, 92%

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the experience helped them reflect on their community's strengths and challenges and that they were hopeful positive action steps would be taken because of the café. Approximately 95% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their opinions were valued and respected, that they felt safe sharing with other participants in the café, and that the Community Café was well organized. Finally, 97% of participants would recommend the Community Café to friends or family and would like to participate in the next session of the Community Café series.

Qualitative Responses

The open-ended questions regarding what participants liked best about the Community Café and what they would do to improve café processes provided an opportunity for participants to give more detailed feedback regarding their experience. Similar, overlapping themes emerged from the data across both the in-person and virtual café delivery formats. This suggests that cafés can be effective despite delivery method adjustments.

Five central themes emerged from participants' responses regarding what they liked best about the café: (i) safe space for open communication; (ii) having a voice—feeling heard, understood, and valued; (iii) meeting and connecting to build community; (iv) sharing information and learning from others; and (v) contributing to a common goal of strengthening the community.

Safe Space for Open Communication

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that Community Cafés were a safe space for open communication. Participants pointed out that the atmosphere of the café, specifically the “openness” of café discussions, created unrestricted transmission of ideas where “people were able to be open,” had the “the ability to share and receive,” and had the “ability to communicate and build a platform for healthy dialogue.” Further, this atmosphere supported feelings of protection and security among participants, which allowed participants to be forthcoming and straightforward in their sharing. Participants pointedly

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expressed that they were “feeling safe to talk about personal issues” and that they valued “how we could share our stories in a safe place.” The sense of safety and candidness engendered in the Community Cafés also helped participants feel that they had “the opportunity to voice my honest, personal opinion,” were “able to express my feelings openly,” and that café model provided an “open form of talking problems out.” This open sharing and sense of safety also seemed to enhance feelings of intimacy among participants, as one person noted the “participants’ willingness to be vulnerable.” Participants also acknowledged the value of sharing relatable experiences with others. As one person stated: “It was great to sit with others with similar experiences,” and another expressed, “It was therapeutic to be able to discuss personal things.”

While members did not always explicitly cite the ground rules as a main reason for liking the Community Cafés, their comments reflected how the café structure based on the established rules played an important role in creating an atmosphere of safety and openness. For example, a participant expressed appreciating “the fact [that] we can easily listen to each other and without disruption.” Another participant similarly expressed valuing “that I was able to speak without being interrupted and share some things I wanted to share.” Further, participants noted that confidentiality, a ground rule of Community Cafés, was a highlight of their experience. One participant stated, “I like that everything was confidential and I was able to talk about my experience in 3rd person.” During the Cafés, participants were encouraged to speak in the third person about their experience to maintain anonymity and further promote a sense of safety. Another participant noted that the “the confidentiality was very good.” Finally, the democratic nature of the Cafés resulted in full participation and a diversity of responses. One participant expressed, “I liked how everyone participated in the discussion,” and another stated, “I like best the open discussions and [hearing the] thoughts of everyone.”

Having a Voice: Feelings Heard, Understood, and Valued

Participants noted that what they most appreciated about their involvement in the Cafés was the opportunity to feel safe and confident in expressing themselves openly and to be heard, understood, and valued. One participant stated that Community Cafés provided “the option to voice my opinion and be heard and listened to.” Participants also reported that the ability to express opinions (“I was able to express my opinions about abuse and neglect”), to make known their personal stories (“able to share my story with different families and the café team”), and to convey grievances (“got a chance to show what was bothering me”), were important aspects of the café experience.

The café structure enabled participants to feel heard and understood through a process of bearing witness to and validation of participants’ lived experiences and ideas. As one participant shared, the part they appreciated most was “that ya’ll took the time to understand us and how we really feel. Thank you.” Similarly, another participant emphasized “they [Community Café leaders and agency staff] are there for you if you need help and... they like to hear you out on things as well.” These feelings and reactions also seemed to be related to a communal sense of being respected and appreciated, which engendered a sense of connectedness, as captured in the statements: “I was able to have input and able to learn from others” and “being able to hear other voices and being heard and respected. Thank you.”

Meeting and Connecting to Build Community

Other well-liked aspects of the cafés were the welcoming atmosphere and the opportunity to build community. Several participants indicated that what they liked the most about the cafés were that “I felt welcomed,” “the community atmosphere,” “the vibe of the different people,” and the “cooperation from all attendees.” Participants made specific mention of how the execution of the Community Cafés facilitated the convening of diverse people from different sectors.

This sentiment was highlighted by the statements: *“I love the set-up and the ability to get to know others from community partners,” “being able to meet and discuss with other (professional/community) and gain insight,”* and *“meeting new parents and community sponsors.”* It is important to note that this sense of community building was present even in the Community Cafés held virtually. Participants indicated the use of breakout rooms for certain café activities was conducive to rapport building among participants, despite the virtual space. One participant expressed that they liked *“how we were able to introduce ourselves to people we may not have known. I felt like we were in person.”* Others commented that the breakout rooms enhanced intimacy and *“allowed for more in-depth discussion.”* Overall, participants shared that they appreciated *“the technological advances we get to use to reach out to others simultaneously”* and *“enjoyed this format in spite of not being in a physical room and feeling each other’s energy.”*

Sharing Information and Learning From Others

The café process was conducive to sharing information and learning from others as this acquisition and exchange of information was noted as a key strength of Community Cafés by participants. Some participants explicitly stated that the thing they liked most about Community Cafés was *“the wonderful information I received”* and *“the valuable information and sharing.”* This sharing and exchange of information occurred at various points of the café process, whether it was during the ice breakers, the discussions, or report-outs, and included varying information, whether it was stories, resources, or general information. Participants especially acknowledged the cafés as spaces to share lived experiences, as depicted by the comment, *“It was great to sit with others with similar experience and have open dialogue.”* Some participants particularly liked the exchange of experiential knowledge and wisdom regarding parenting, as illustrated by the responses, *“I really enjoyed being at the meeting listening to other parent advice”* and *“the conversation on children and raising children.”* Markedly, a few

participants mentioned that what they liked most about the cafés was the opportunity to learn from others’ experiences with CPS and reporting child abuse and neglect. One participant stated they appreciated the discussion *“because we was learning more about our community and when to hotline”* and *“learning about other hotline experiences from peers.”*

Contributing to a Common Goal of Strengthening the Community

Another key aspect of the cafés that participants mentioned was their ability to provide a space for participants to inform changes and reform that they believe will lead to improved outcomes for families, children, and the community. One participant shared: *“it was therapeutic to be able to discuss personal things to help the future of our communities become stronger with a stronger sense of family.”* Another participant expressed: *“I was able to give feedback on how the state can be more helpful to our youth,”* and specifically for youth involved in the CWS, *“that they trying to come up with ways to make things better for children in the system.”* Participants also valued the café process as a place where they recognized progressive movement towards collective action (*“community opportunity to share experiences for action planning”*), inclusive governance (*“sharing information and the willingness to include community to be part of the decision making”*), and next steps in developing practical, effective solutions for families (*“we worked together in coming up with solutions to overcome!”*). Ultimately, the Community Cafés were well-liked by participants and contributed to participants’ positive experiences.

Recommendations to Improve Café Experience

Generally, attendees reported that the cafés met or exceeded their expectations, with some participants expressing that they liked “everything” and that “there was a great turnout on all fronts.” When asked, most participants explicitly stated that they had no recommendations on how to improve the café experience, and some even offered praise for the café process in their recommendation responses. However, some participants also provided areas in

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which Community Cafés could be improved as a method and to further the project goals. Four major recommendations to improve the café process and experience emerged and included the need to (i) increase the number and frequency of cafés; (ii) increase and diversify participants; (iii) focus the café discussion content on issues; and (iv) improve the organization and processes related to café engagement.

- **Continue Café Engagement While Increasing Frequency.** Many participants encouraged continued community engagement with cafés, praising the efforts to “keep doing what you are doing” but also recommending that “it be done more often and get more people involved.” One participant gave a specific recommendation about what they believed should determine the length of the cafés: “to continue with Community Café until change and progress[is] in place.”
- **Increase and Diversify Participants.** The majority of suggestions to improve the café processes highlighted the need to increase the number and diversity of attendees. Participants championed for “more community involvement,” specifically to “get more families involved to help the next generation.” Towards increasing family involvement, one participant proposed that efforts be made to “bring fathers in” and another advised “getting some of the people that we are addressing about this matter to possibly attend the next event,” referring specifically to families who have had interaction with child protection services. While some suggested that “having more participants from the community than ‘professionals’” in attendance would improve the cafés, others called for efforts to “bring

in aldermen and police.” One participant even suggested bringing in child welfare workers from the public child protection agency to participate. (There were a small number of these workers present at a couple of the cafés as table facilitators, but these workers were not present at most of the tables.)

- **Organization and Process Recommendations.** Participants also gave recommendations for improving aspects related to café organization and processes. One recommendation was to pay close attention to the pace of the café. One participant commented that café events needed to adhere to “better timing, time went over,” while another participant suggested “maybe get started with discussions earlier” to address this issue. It should be noted that timing recommendations mainly were related to the virtual cafés, as these went approximately an hour over time. Additional recommendations made specifically for the virtual café were allotting more time for breakout room sessions. Some participants noted that they experienced technical difficulties with joining and staying connected to the virtual meeting; however, no specific recommendations were provided regarding this. Finally, participants proposed that the marketing of and recruitment for public participation in Community Cafés be increased. A participant suggested that staff should “extend means/methods of public awareness regarding community café.” A recommended way to increase community outreach efforts was to generally “stay in contact more.” Another participant who provided a similar recommendation explained that, “The café can be made more helpful if we had more events to help us with more information we can use.”

- **Focused Content on Issues.** Finally, although not a recommendation made by many, some participants pointed out that more effort was needed to ensure that attendees understood both the process of the café (“they need to help people understand what’s going on”) as well as the intended foci and desired changes (“clarity on what the focuses are. Define exactly what needs to be changed more clearly.”). Towards achieving this, one participant suggested “better questions focusing on and surrounding the situation at hand.” Overall, only a few recommendations were provided on how to improve the café experience and process, yet those that were made offer important insights into improving the café process.

Discussion

This study evaluated the utility of Community Cafés to engender a safe space for participants to share their lived experiences regarding child welfare involvement while informing the development of a child maltreatment prevention intervention. Our findings suggest that Community Cafés were an effective method to engage predominantly African American community members to not only provide feedback on an initiative aimed at preventing child maltreatment, but also to create a safe space for participants to share their lived experiences and create a greater sense of community. This sense of safety and willingness to share during cafés was of particular importance because several participants reported having negative experiences with the state’s CWS, yet they were willing to be vulnerable and express themselves in front of leaders and/or providers who work for or collaborate directly with the public child welfare agency. Further, some participants even suggested inviting child welfare workers, police and/or local leaders to future cafés. Altogether, this suggests that with careful attention and intention, the Community Cafés model is an effective way to empower community members to use their experiences and voice to change systems in a way that is most responsive to their needs. Given that in some studies African American families

who interact with child welfare have indicated that they feel racially discriminated against by the system (Merritt, 2020, 2021), empowering these communities to inform or change systems that significantly impact their communities is of monumental importance. Future research is needed to explore the empowerment process that occurs through Community Cafés. This deeper understanding could inform the use of café methods as a means to empower populations who interact with CWS.

Participants also liked that Community Cafés provided the opportunity for all to participate, connect from shared experiences, and learn from each other. Paralleling our findings, Löhr and colleagues (2020) found that their use of the café model in research involving global food insecurity promoted mutual learning and high levels of participation among participants. Similarly, in this study, the café process was useful in facilitating dialogue concerning sensitive topics such as experiences with CPS and reporting child abuse and neglect. In their study, Löhr and colleagues (2020) indicated that, compared to other forms of engagement such as individual interviews or focus group discussions, the café model’s inclusivity and ability to convene a large pool of participants made it ideal to reduce selection bias, endorse the diversification of participants, and expand the characteristics of those who were initially invited and participated. However, our community participants noted there was a need to increase the number and diversity of attendees, suggesting that further intentional recruitment efforts should be taken to enhance the advantages of the model.

While there is scant literature documenting the intentional use of the café model to engage African American populations, there is even less that demonstrates its use with African American communities in child welfare research. Stephens et al.’s (2016) research exploring parents’ experiences of their challenges and successes, as well as their perspectives of needs during and after reunification, used the café model to support the integration of

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parent voices and the inclusion of their participation, as they are most impacted by reunification issues but are systematically excluded from such discussions. Similarly, our findings demonstrate that the Community Café model upholds the central aspects of participatory research methods: *power*, *safe space*, and *voice*. Collectively, the results from both studies suggest that the café model's democratic, self-determined processes prioritize concerns, issues, and stressors associated with child welfare involvement—from investigation to reunification—and could be useful in engaging parents from majority African American communities in identifying ways to inform child welfare transformation. To better understand the effect of Community Cafés on promoting and ingraining equitable processes in child welfare research and practice for African Americans, future research should discern the elements of the café model that create this democratic process and support the full participation of parents in the transformation of systems.

Our findings also highlight the utility of Community Cafés in creating a safe space where African American community members feel valued and heard and as an empowering space where agency can be actualized. Participant responses indicated that they recognized the value of their lived experiences in shaping system reform and informing how the system responds to the specific needs of the African American community. As previous research has suggested, the model situates itself as a catalyst for dialogue and action beyond the café session (Löhr et al., 2020). Similarly, an important aspect of the PACT-STL project is ensuring that community members can meaningfully impact prevention of and response to child maltreatment in their communities. To achieve this goal, PACT-STL has continued to collaborate with café participants to address immediate community concerns identified in the cafés. Working groups with café participants and other community members have been created

to develop and implement action plans aimed at reducing family and community risks factors associated with child abuse and neglect/maltreatment and involvement in the CWS. Future community engaged research should explore the usefulness of Community Cafés as a means to empower families and affect community change.

One important contribution of this study was the adaptation of in-person Community Cafés to virtual cafés due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related safety restrictions. At writing of this article, our application of the virtual Community Cafés in child welfare research seems to be the first of its kind documented in the literature, and, as a result, it can provide meaningful insight to future applications of a virtual delivery method. Overall, the virtual platform was well-received by attendees. Despite technological mishaps that were difficult to navigate at times, participants noted specifically that the breakout room feature enhanced the café's already marked ability to create a friendly yet effectively confidential atmosphere. Further, participants in the virtual cafés identified similar benefits as those who participated in the in-person cafés. Altogether, this suggests that the impact of Community Cafés is robust in the face of some adaptations, such as delivery method. The decline in the number of participants who completed an evaluation for the virtual cafés, compared to the in-person cafés, was a noted challenge to the virtual format. What led to this decline remains unclear, and further attention is warranted to fully understand how to maximize participation and engagement. Ultimately, with careful attention and consideration, virtual Community Cafés could become a cost efficient and effective model to engage and empower communities. Continual employment of virtual Community Cafés should look to develop an improved, streamlined approach where protocols are established that help to manage technological complications and enhance community reach and participation.

Limitations

While this study offers new insights into the use of in-person and virtual Community Cafés to garner feedback on child welfare prevention strategies from a predominantly African American community, the study also presents several limitations. Firstly, because a convenience sample was employed, the study results may reflect selection bias and are not generalizable to the larger population. Beyond selection bias, the positive findings may be in part influenced by the existing, positive relationship between the agency leading PACT-STL and the communities from which participants come. Future research that partners with organizations that may not be as embedded in the community as this one can provide additional insight on which Community Café conditions are and are not most conducive to positive outcomes. Further, this study only asked two open-ended questions that gave an opportunity for participants to provide in depth feedback regarding their Community Café experience. Additionally, some of the feedback provided at times reflected the wording present in the Likert scale statements regarding participants' experiences. It is possible that the statement prompted certain word choice from participants. Future research can address these limitations by utilizing a more rigorous evaluation design with a larger sample size.

Conclusion

Overall, despite its limitations, this study provides an important contribution to child welfare research that attempts to engage and partner with marginalized communities to inform the development of interventions, and, more broadly, system change. The current context of child welfare suggests that the system is beginning to reckon with its intended and unintended marginalization of African American communities and slowly moving toward community informed, preventative interventions to child maltreatment. This study demonstrates that Community Cafés have the potential to serve as a promising model to engage community members and produce knowledge on how to improve and shape systems and services in a way that is responsive to the community's needs. Moreover, the use of the café model as a participatory method in the child welfare research space can shift power dynamics and provide an opportunity for harm reduction and healing for the communities most affected by CWSs. As it stands, Community Cafés can be an effective tool for child welfare agencies interested in investing and strengthening relationships with families to creatively problem solve the issue of child maltreatment and avoid future family interaction with CWSs.

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African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System

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Abstract

The disparate and disproportionate involvement of African American families in the child welfare system has been well documented, but research examining the experiences of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) Canadian families in child welfare is emerging in Canada. In the province of Ontario, specifically, recent studies find that Black families are represented in the child welfare system at disproportionate and disparate rates. Experiences of Black youth, caregivers, and workers also highlight differential and punitive treatment within the system. These findings have given rise to the development of the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC), a restorative, culturally responsive innovation to support Black families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In this conceptual article, we describe the community-based research that led to the development of the ACB-FGC model and implications of ACB-FGC for provincial policies and practices to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and among partner institutions.

Keywords: African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) families, Family Group Conferencing (FGC), Child welfare, Anti-Black racism and racial disparity.

Introduction

Canadian research has increasingly highlighted disparities in the involvement and experiences of Black families who encounter the Ontario child welfare system (King et al., 2017; Turner, 2016). In Toronto in 2015, 8.5% of residents self-identified as Black and 8.2% of Toronto's child population was Black, yet 41% of children in care in Toronto were Black (Turner, 2016; Contenta et al., 2015; Teklu, 2012). Within the province of Ontario in 2018, Black youth represented 7% of the youth population but

made up 14% of children involved in maltreatment-related investigations (Bonnie & Facey, 2022). This aligns with an agency study conducted by Children's Aid Society of Toronto, which reported that Black children are five times more likely to be referred to child welfare than White children (2015). These differential outcomes continue for Black families after referral. For instance, given their representation in the population, investigations involving Black children were 2.5 times as likely to be substantiated, 1.7 times as likely to be transferred to ongoing services, and 2.5 times as likely to result in an

out-of-home placement during the investigation compared to White families (Bonnie & Facey, 2022). When comparing similarly situated Black and White families investigated in Ontario with respect to poverty and family-level risk factors, Black families were still more likely to experience deeper involvement in child welfare (King et al., 2017). The overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare is also well-documented in the context of the United States. For instance, 14% of the general youth population in 2017 identified as Black, but they made up 23% of youth in care (Cénat, et al., 2021). Similar to the experiences of disparity for Black youth in Ontario's child welfare system, Black families in the United States experience higher rates of investigation than White families, and Black adolescents are more likely to be placed in out-of-home placements and for longer periods in comparison to White youth (Cénat et al., 2021; Huggins-Hoyt et al., 2019). While this study focuses on the Canadian context to contribute to emergent race-based research, it is significant to emphasize the prevalent patterns of disproportionality and disparity for Black children and families within both the Canadian and American child protection sector.

In 2018, a group of researchers, community members with lived experience of the Canadian child welfare system, and service providers from the Black Creek Community Health Centre (BCCHC) and the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) sought funding from private foundations in Canada and subsequently received a two-year grant from the Law Foundation of Ontario to develop a family group conferencing (FGC) service to address the negative, disproportionate experience of African, Caribbean, and Black families (ACB) in child welfare. In this conceptual article, we describe the community-based research that led to the development of what came to be known as the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing (ACB-FGC) project and discuss the implications of ACB-FGC for provincial policies and practices to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and partnering institutions

Literature Review

Canadian academic literature on child welfare has documented the root issues of Black children and families' overrepresentation and disparity within child welfare. The pathways are a collection of complex influences that include anti-Black racism within a colonial state, poverty, biases and discretionary power by child welfare workers, lack of cultural knowledge, settlement challenges, and procedural child protection policies and practices (Mohamud et al., 2021; King et al., 2017; Tuner, 2016; Teklu, 2012; Clarke, 2011; Gosine et al., 2011). Specifically, socioeconomic status was a considerable factor within the literature on the ensnarement of Black children and families in the child welfare system (Turner; 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012). Biases related to socioeconomic status take place at different stages of the decision-making process (Clarke, 2011) and include a variety of Canadian institutions, such as schools and police, that contribute to overrepresentation of Black children and families by over-referring them to child welfare.

Intersection of Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status

The interconnection of race and poverty, racialized poverty, is critical to understanding the overrepresentation of Black families as anti-Black racism places them on the peripherals of society (Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2012, 2011). For example, 41% of African Canadians under the age of 15 years old live below the low-income measure in contrast to 29% of White adolescents in the same age group (Turner, 2016), and 1 in 5 minoritized families live in poverty in Canada in comparison to 1 in 20 non-racialized families (Canada Without Poverty, 2021). Minoritized poverty also interconnects with gender within Canadian child welfare, as single-parent families are at increased risk (Boyd, 2014; Clarke, 2011). The *Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable* (2010) reported that 51% of families served by Children's Aid Societies (CAS) from April 2005 to March 2006 were led by single female headed households; however, the data was not disaggregated

by race, so the racial composition of the 51% remains unknown. This is crucial, as Black single mothers are subjected to persistent stereotyping as unfit mothers and frequently held responsible for structural challenges within Black families, communities, and the wider society (Clarke et al., 2018; Turner, 2016; Felix, 2017; Clarke, 2011, 2012). Race and gender within the Ontario child welfare system is noteworthy, as many studies have highlighted the power dynamics of child welfare workers, a profession heavily dominated by White women, in surveying and regulating Black mothers utilizing a Western conceptualization of middle-class norms (Clarke, 2012; Pon et al., 2011; Clarke, 2011).

Anti-Black Racism

Many scholars and ACB parents and community members assert that anti-Black racism is an important factor in the disproportionality and disparity of Black families in child welfare (Mohamud et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2018; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon et al., 2011). We draw on a definition of anti-Black racism developed by Dr. Akua Benjamin, a prominent social work educator and activist in Tkaronto/Toronto, who defines it as “a particular form of systemic and structural racism in Canadian society, which historically and contemporarily has been perpetrated against Blacks” (as cited in Mohamud et al., 2021, p. 2). This definition of anti-Black racism highlights both the history and current reality of systemic racism against Black Canadians as well as experiences of slavery and colonization of Black peoples of African descent in Canada. Furthermore, anti-Black racism comprises prejudicial attitudes and beliefs that are systemically embedded in institutions (such as child welfare, education, and the criminal justice system) in their organizational culture, policies, and practices that (re)produce barriers (Mosley et al., 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Gillborn, 2018). Child welfare academics and community members maintain that anti-Blackness is entrenched in Ontario’s and Canada’s child welfare systems, but it is cloaked by the concentration on micro-factors, such as personal risk assessments, that do not take structural influences into consideration (Clarke et al.,

2018; Felix, 2017; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon et al., 2011). Also, the combination of tools used by child welfare workers, including those that define eligibility for an investigation, the conditions that warrant intervention, and the obligation to report circumstances that present risk of harm, have lowered the threshold for reporting and raised the stakes for not reporting (Mohamud et al., 2021; Bergen & Abji, 2020; King et al., 2017; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012). For example, in 2013, half of the investigations carried out by child welfare workers were for future risk of abuse rather than actual current maltreatment (Bergen & Abji, 2020). We argue these tools serve to reinforce the biases and cultural misunderstandings of Black families that are rooted in systemic anti-Black racism embedded in Canadian society.

Impact of Child Welfare on Black Families and Children/Youth

Research has documented how the surveillance and criminalization of Black families is comprehensive and detrimental (Phillips & Pon, 2018; Turner, 2016; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Roberts, 2002). Black youth in care have described their experiences of trauma, anxiety, depression, grief, and loss because of being removed from parents and separated from siblings and community (Clarke, 2011). Black children and youth have reported experiencing differential treatment, surveillance, and control within group and foster homes, which led to being funneled to the criminal system (Finlay et al., 2019; Clarke, 2011). Moreover, youth have lamented the loss and/or severing of identities, belonging, and connection to heritage as challenges that they had to reconcile because of being placed into culturally unsuitable homes and separated from their families, cultures, and communities (Edwards et al., 2022; Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2021; Clarke, 2011). Black parents expressed frustration and feeling overwhelmed navigating the child welfare system, often in combination with other institutions such as schools and police. Black mothers, like their children, reported feeling like they were under constant surveillance by personnel at their children’s schools,

CAS workers, police, and the court system (Clarke, 2011, 2012). They experienced these institutions as structures of forced compliance. Another source of frustration for ACB parents are the mandates enforced by CAS workers (such as anger management and parenting courses) for them to get their children back. Parents saw these requirements as further worsening their circumstances and not addressing factors such as unaffordable daycares/sitters, unlivable wages, affordable housing accommodations, and food insecurities (Clarke, 2011, 2012).

Restorative Justice: Family Group Conferencing

To address these experiences of Black children, families, and communities, a cultural adaptation to FGC was developed as an intervention to support Black families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). FGC is an approach rooted in restorative justice and was developed in 1989 by Māori experts in New Zealand to address disproportionality of Māori children in child welfare through the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (Hollinshead et al., 2017; Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Metze et al., 2015; Malmberg-Heimonen & Johansen, 2014; Ney et al., 2011; Olson, 2009; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Connolly, 2006, 2009). FGC is an alternative approach that allows family members to participate in the decision-making process to address the challenges identified by creating a plan of care (Asscher et al., 2014; Adams & Chandler, 2004, 2002).

The traditional model of FGC has five stages: referral, preparation, information sharing, private family time and agreeing to the family plan. In the **referral** stage, the family is identified and referred, with their consent, for FGC. Secondly, the FGC facilitator meets with all involved members individually to **plan** for the meeting at a neutral location. Thirdly, at the meeting, the FGC facilitator begins by introducing everyone, establishing the rules, and **sharing information** from everyone in attendance on their roles, concerns, and desired outcomes. Next,

the **family gathers privately** to discuss the plan to address the identified concerns as well as the roles for the family members in the strategy. The last stage is to present the **family plan for agreement** to the FGC facilitator and child welfare worker so that the family can implement the proposed solution (Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metze et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Olson, 2009).

FGC is strength-based because it recognizes families' strengths and resources, which challenges and disrupts the dominant hegemony that frequently assesses non-White families and communities from a deficit model. A focal principle of FGC is that families are the experts and, therefore, they can strategize for the well-being of their children and family (Adams & Chandler, 2004). Traditional Māori FGC principles acknowledge and endorse that children have the right to sustain their relations to not only families but also to their communities and cultures (Olson, 2009). Furthermore, the definition of family is extended to include kinfolks and community members that cultivate and care for children (Asscher et al., 2014; Olson, 2009). FGC is also culturally inclusive by recognizing "the context of people's own specific history, culture and environment to deliver services that are meaningful and responsive to their lived experience" (Sheets et al., 2009, p. 1187). Through power sharing, FGC empowers families to negotiate plans that are best for their families and sustains a minimally hierarchical relationship with child welfare case workers (Schmid & Pollack, 2009). The autonomy afforded to families enables families to feel and be empowered and with social support, which may expand their capabilities to be more resilient (Metze et al., 2015).

Despite the restorative possibilities FGCs afford to ACB families, the literature has also identified several fundamental challenges that potentially need to be addressed for FGCs to be effective with ACB families. For example, research has yet to demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of FGC, as most studies have focused on positive short-term outcomes, and comparative analyses using large groups are rare (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015;

Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). Moreover, through its entrenchment into dominant structures, which Moyle and Tauri (2016) refer to as the “mystification of restorative justice and the family group conference” (p. 88), FGC can be increasingly diluted as the service is absorbed by a Eurocentric and standardized process. Unequal power relations with child welfare agencies/workers are prominent within FGC literature, as this power imbalance presents a challenge to families’ decision-making abilities and contributes to further feelings of powerlessness against Eurocentric institutions (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009).

In addition to identifying challenges, the academic literature has outlined several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of FGCs, such as establishing multiple mechanisms to address families’ multifaceted and complex needs (e.g., referrals for substance abuse, counselling for trauma, and legal aid for newcomers). Practitioners also point out that FGCs need to be personalized to families’ circumstances instead of following a standardized formulaic process (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). This necessitates creating and maintaining strong therapeutic relationships that include reflective practice and an understanding of historical and contemporary social and political context to fully comprehend families’ conditions. Researchers also recommend the utilization of longer and more frequent post-conference meetings as long-term support, as check-ins are central for families facing interconnected systemic barriers (Moyle & Tauri, 2016; Devaney & Byrne, 2015; Metz et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2011; Schmid & Pollack, 2009; Sheets et al., 2009; Connolly, 2009). Finally, to avoid FGCs being co-opted by Eurocentric, White-normed institutions to fulfil agency mandates, FGCs need to be community-based initiatives that are delivered by community

members (Moyle & Tauri, 2016) and, in the case of ACB-FGC project, recognize the multiplicity of identities within the umbrella of Blackness. We undertook the aforementioned adaptations through numerous conceptual frameworks that included critical race theory, intersectionality context, protective-factors, risk, strengths-based approaches, and social support.

Conceptual Framework

Several conceptual frameworks informed the development and implementation of the ACB-FGC project. These frameworks, such as systemic anti-Black racism and critical race theory, delineate how race and racism (re)produce Black families’ experiences, engagement, and outcomes with the Ontario child welfare system. Furthermore, specific tenets of the conceptual frameworks, such as counter-narratives, challenge dominant discourses of Black families as pathological and dysfunctional while illuminating the experiences of Black families and service providers with child welfare. In this section, we will outline the conceptual frameworks that were instrumental in ensuring that the current model of ACB-FGC is culturally relevant and responsive to ACB families in Ontario.

Systemic anti-Black racism consists of organizational culture, policies, directives, practices, or procedures that exclude, displace, or marginalize Black people, thus creating unfair barriers for them to access valuable benefits and opportunities (Gillborn, 2018). Systemic anti-Black racism affects how Black populations access social support, so it is important for the ACB-FGC approach to be grounded in *critical race theory* (Veenstra & Patterson, 2016; Hall et al., 2015; Halwani, 2004). Critical race theory, which emerged from legal theory, centers on race and racism, particularly the anti-Black racism that structures the social relations experienced by Black people every day (Dei, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This theory can help expose “racialization as a process,” how individuals and groups are positioned into hierarchies of power relations based on their classifications (Dei, 2013).

Another tenet of critical race theory is using narratives and counterstories by Black people to challenge the anonymity and normality of racism that is embedded within society (Dei, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Counterstories provide critique and experiences, known as epistemological knowledge, which can be used to deconstruct race and racist practices so that power is shared, as opposed to centralized within the dominant group (Dei, 2013).

Another tenet of critical race theory that the ACB-FGC project draws on is *intersectionality*, a framework developed by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, to articulate the convergence of multiple forms of oppression related to social statuses and identities that produce particular forms of marginalization and discrimination for groups of people with multiple stigmatized identities, such as Black girls and women (Columbia Law School, 2017; Collins, 2000). An emphasis on intersecting identities and forms of discrimination makes visible how structural oppressions are multi-layered and complex. It is important to note that intersectionality is not intended to be a “grand theory of everything” and instead should be applied as a tool to visualize obstacles and thereby intervene effectively (Columbia Law School, 2017). While systemic anti-Black racism and intersectionality inform the circumstances of Black families involved with child welfare, *context* refers to the immediate physical and social settings in which people live, including structural and systemic barriers (i.e., policies, procedures, or practices) that unfairly discriminate and can prevent individuals from participating fully in a situation.

Protective factors can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes” (O’Connell et al., 2009, p. xxvii). Conversely, a *risk factor* can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural

level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes” (O’Connell et al., 2009, p. xxviii). Use of the protective factors concept is meant to highlight a *strength-based* approach that emphasizes people’s self-determination and strengths. It is a philosophy and a way of viewing individuals as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity (Daniel & Jean-Pierre, 2020). Strengths related to *social support* are of particular interest; social support is available to an individual both in the form of perceived social support (the feeling of being supported) and received social support (where there is an exchange of resources) (Uchino et al., 2012). Additionally, types of social support range from informational (advice), emotional (someone to listen), instrumental (tangible aid), and appraisal (constructive criticism) (Cohen & Wills, 1985). All types of social support are important during large life events or transitions (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Researchers have found an association between relationships and resilience (Drapeau et al., 2007; Ungar, 2013), as well as evidence on the importance of relationships and family during the process of transitioning out of care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Social support is correlated with readiness to leave care (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Refaeli et al., 2013) and with reduced need for help in the future (Refaeli et al., 2013). In brief, relationships are a key protective factor for determining how successful a youth is likely to be in the transition out of care (Reid, 2007).

Adapting Traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC Model

Overview

Keeping the key concepts above in mind, ACB-FGC has adapted the existing model of FGC. In Ontario, traditional FGC is offered through a children’s mental health service agency. This agency is also responsible for training and certifying FGC Coordinators to work throughout the province. This model is not specific to ACB populations, and it has not been designed to address the specific

cultural and social needs and barriers ACB families involved with child welfare experience. ACB-FGC was adapted and developed in consultation with ACB families, service providers, and communities within Ontario, and it is therefore designed to be community-based and culturally responsive to ACB children, youth, families, and communities. Our model moves beyond surface modifications (e.g., language, racial makeup of frontline staff, visuals used in programming) and includes several key components: 1) recognizing culture as a protective and promotive factor by prioritizing Black cultural traditions and perspectives in programming; 2) understanding the Black community and addressing anti-Black racism by acknowledging and addressing systemic, cultural, and historical oppression faced by members of Black communities; 3) developing a culturally safe environment; 4) delivering services and facilitation with a critical equity lens; and 5) hiring knowledgeable and culturally representative staff.

Literature Review and Stakeholder Consultations

The initial steps towards adapting traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC model involved building a research team of professors, graduate students, postgraduates, and a community advisory committee (CAC) comprised of service providers and ACB community members with lived experiences of the child welfare system; conducting a comprehensive literature review, which was discussed in the previous section; and performing consultations in the form of interviews with members of the CAC and three groups of stakeholders:

- Academics who have researched and published about child welfare
- Black individuals who have lived experiences of the child welfare system
- Service providers/community advocates

The consultations ranged between 30 minutes to an hour, and the researchers took detailed notes.

Stakeholders with lived experience of the child welfare system expressed their concerns about how Black families are treated by system officials, while service providers shared their encounters with child welfare officials after their own children were referred. Stakeholders identified pathological discourses about Black families, who are being assessed through a Eurocentric lens that is endemic to both the education and child welfare systems. Additionally, stakeholders identified anti-Black racism, in concert with other identities such as gender, as the contributing factor of Black families being contacted by child welfare and/or having their children apprehended by child welfare. Many stakeholders cited the need for an intervention that would interrupt this practice of Black children being taken into care. While FGC is cited in the literature as a protective barrier between the referring party and the system so that the presenting issues can be worked out in this restorative justice format, some stakeholders suggested that, in addition to FGCs, wraparound services are needed for long-term support. Many stakeholders expressed the viewpoint that access to wraparound services is central to circumventing future child welfare involvement and other punitive institutions such as the criminal system.

Overall, four key themes were extracted from the consultations that informed the adaptation of traditional FGCs to the ACB-FGC model: 1) concerns about situations in which child welfare was called; 2) the role of the FGC Coordinator in working with ACB families; 3) education in mitigating over-reporting; and 4) the complexities of duty to report in influencing overrepresentation of Black families. Ultimately, the consultations ended up serving two adaptation processes. First, they supplemented the dearth of literature about Black children and families involved with Canadian child welfare systems and informed our understanding of the scope and complexity of intersecting challenges facing Black families involved with child welfare systems. Second, the consultations informed curriculum development for training modules for ACB-FGC Coordinators.

Curriculum Development for ACB-FGC Coordinator Training

The findings from critical review of literature and stakeholder consultations were brought forth to the Expert Working Group (EWG) to inform the development of training modules for ACB-FGC Coordinators. The EWG, who met over the course of a weekend in February 2019, consisted of ten individuals with varying expertise in mental health, community outreach and services, and lived experience of child welfare working alongside Black families and communities in the Greater Toronto Area. The entirety of the planning sessions was recorded, and written notes were captured by the session facilitator. A post-session evaluation was then distributed by the research coordinator and completed by EWG members onsite.

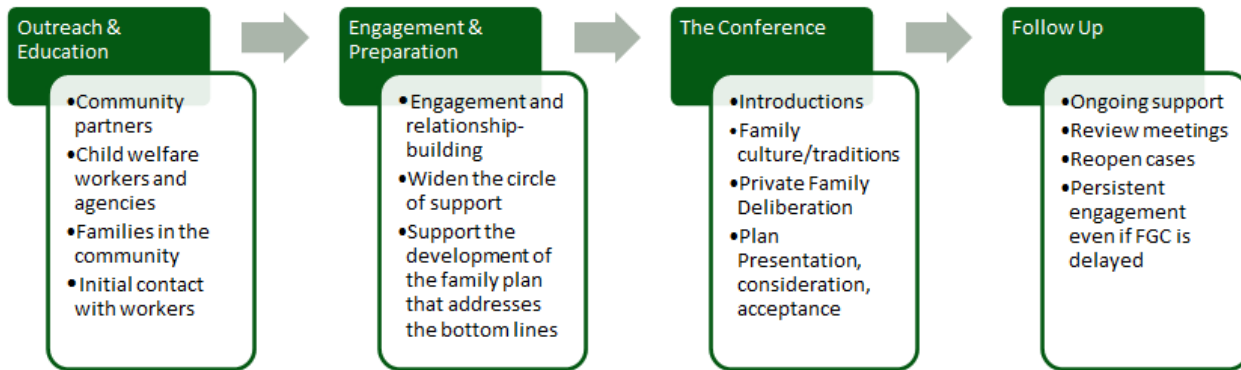
The EWG members suggested that the overall aim of the ACB-FGC service must be to ensure the safety of children (or youth), and that this be accomplished through the leveraging of community resources and, where feasible, families. To further align the service to the needs and context of ACB families and communities, the EWG advised that ACB-FGC Coordinators should self-identify as Black or a person of African and Caribbean descent and should possess extensive experience working with Black children, youth, families, and communities. For the conference phase of the ACB-FGC, the EWG members emphasized centering the goals (e.g., child returning home, increasing access visits) and not the presenting issues (e.g., substance use), as well as providing space for families to voice their own experiences. Another recommendation is the need for ACB-FGC Coordinators to take on a more active role in supporting families to develop the plan of care, which contradicts mainstream FGC model, in which the coordinator is a neutral mediator. The EWG suggested regular check-ins and reviews with each family following the development of an agreement to the plan to guarantee that the family is supported after the conference. Based on the EWG's recommendations, the research team developed training for ACB-FGC Coordinators who would

self-identify as members of ACB communities. ACB-FGC Coordinators, similar to traditional FGC coordinators, support ACB families to come together with significant friends and family members who are caregivers, as well as child welfare agencies and related service providers, in a restorative conference circle. During the conference, stakeholders craft a plan that addresses the child welfare concerns and ensures the future safety and well-being of the child. The training was comprised of four modules focused on: 1) the history of anti-Black racism in the Ontario child welfare system; 2) the sociocultural context of Black family life in the greater Toronto area; 3) working with ACB families and mental health; and 4) the ACB-FGC model of alternate dispute resolution. A detailed discussion of the training modules is beyond the scope of this paper.

Description of ACB-FGC Model

Based on insights generated from the development phase of ACB-FGC, specifically the literature review, consultations, and ACB-FGC Coordinator training curriculum developed by the EWG, we adapted the traditional FGC model for use with ACB families and aptly called it the ACB-FGC model. We envisioned ACB-FGC serving any families that identify as ACB (including Indo-Caribbean families), with a focus on families who are at risk of involvement, who are being investigated, who are receiving ongoing child welfare services, who are at risk for future (not immediate) placement, who are at risk for kinship placement breaking down, or who are socially isolated and need connection to community, extended family, etc. The ACB-FGC model has four phases as depicted in Figure 1: 1) Outreach & Education; 2) Engagement & Preparation; 3) The Conference; and 4) Follow-Up.

Figure 1: The Four Phases of ACB-FGC



Phase 1: Outreach & Education

The ACB-FGC Coordinator (subsequently referred to as the coordinator) does outreach to program directors at agencies serving Black families and child welfare agency supervisors to identify Black families either at risk of being referred to child welfare or who are currently involved. If the family meets the referral criteria and if the social worker, program coordinator, or their supervisor consider the family to be appropriate, the coordinator educates the family (with reference to relevant information leaflets) about the ACB-FGC model. The family should fully understand the process they are considering, including information about confidentiality, child protection, previous criminal convictions, and the availability of support services.

Phase 2: Engagement & Preparation

The coordinator does a substantial amount of preparation and coordination before the actual conference. The coordinator works with the parents and the child or young person to decide who should be invited to the FGC and explores concerns they may have about the meeting and any of the potential participants. Preparation for the meeting also involves deciding on details of the family meeting, such as how family traditions and preferences will be built into the process. The coordinator prepares family members on what to expect and what issues

need to be addressed. The coordinator also contacts the professionals involved with the family to organize their attendance at the meeting.

Phase 3: The Conference

Once the coordinator has reviewed the process and purpose of the meeting, child welfare workers present to the family, community members, and professionals the issues related to the child's care that have to be resolved or decided in the FGC. Other service providers may also share information. Family members are encouraged to ask questions, then are given "private family time" to discuss what they heard and develop their own plan to meet the child's needs. The family is asked to identify resources and supports that are needed to effectively implement their plan. In some cases, when asked, the coordinator can help facilitate conversations amongst family members, friends, and supporters. Once the family plan is developed, child welfare workers and other professionals rejoin the family meeting to hear and discuss the proposed plan. Professionals can ask questions, make suggestions, or request clarification. They may be asked to commit to providing services to support the family plan. The child welfare worker has responsibility for making sure that the proposed plan addresses concerns about the physical and emotional safety of the child. Once the plan is approved, everyone who was at the conference typically receives a copy of the plan, which specifies

what everyone has agreed to. In general, the delegated child welfare worker is responsible for checking that the plan is implemented as outlined and assessing how well it is working, but they are also accountable to the agreements they made during the conference. For example, during an FGC, the family plan sets out the tasks that need to be achieved before the child is returned home, and the worker and supervisor agree to that plan. Once those tasks are completed, the worker and their supervisor are accountable to that agreement, and the child is expected to return home. Plans often also identify family members who will help with monitoring or support, which helps to ensure agreement from the worker and supervisor. Plans cover a specified period of time (e.g., six months), and their effectiveness is typically reviewed by child welfare workers before extensions are granted.

Phase 4: Follow-Up

As previously mentioned, during the development phase of ACB-FGC model, several stakeholders we spoke with felt it was important for coordinators to “check-in” or follow up with them after the conference to see if any new situations or needs had arisen that were affecting families executing the plan. For this reason, the ACB-FGC model has a Follow-Up phase in which the ACB-FGC Coordinator continues to engage with Black families who need ongoing support related to persistent health and well-being needs, new challenging circumstances, or unexpected changes in interpersonal or relational support. In some situations, a case may even need to be reopened and a new plan devised in light of the new factors.

Discussion

We began this community-based project by asking: What does a culturally relevant and responsive FGC model for ACB families at risk of, or already engaged in, the child welfare system entail? A central principle that guided ACB-FGC, related to this question, is an ongoing relationship between ACB families, service providers, community members,

and scholars to inform the development and implementation of the program. Thus, to support and encourage other Black communities seeking to develop and implement restorative justice initiatives, it is critical to embed the FGC project in ACB communities, which means working with and alongside ACB families, community members, service providers, and researchers. This ensures that the intervention is grounded in the ongoing lived context of the ACB community, as well as utilizing their knowledge, strengths, and skills, to ensure relevance and applicability of the restorative justice program. Furthermore, while there are similarities in ACB families’ experiences within the child welfare systems across geographical locations (e.g., such as systemic anti-Black racism that contributes to the overrepresentation of Black families in care), there are divergences and nuances that need to be unearthed and taken into consideration when designing and implementing FGCs in respective locales.

The ACB-FGC, piloted in 2019-2021, is now in its third year of operation. A detailed discussion of the evaluation of the model is beyond the scope of this article. However, in conclusion, we want to emphasize that ACB-FGC is a unique, made-in-Ontario model that provides an example of a culturally adapted intervention to address deep child welfare involvement for ACB families overrepresented in the system. Specifically, based on the New Zealand model, the ACB-FGC in Ontario was designed by Black researchers at the University of Toronto in partnership with members of the Black community and is implemented by Black clinicians. This partnership with Black communities has also been formalized into a CAC that ensures the program continues to be accountable to the community it serves, a feature absent from most other child welfare interventions, including the traditional FGC program implemented in Ontario. Similarly, while all FGCs are intended to engage in a collaborative development of the plans, in order to engage diverse family members, the ACB-FGC initiative also includes a rolling evaluation through family interviews, so every family gets to provide

direct feedback on their experience. This evaluation approach ensures that ACB-FGC is constantly measuring the impact to reduce disparities in child welfare involvement for ACB communities.

As noted above, FGC originated to address disproportionalities in child welfare involvement for Indigenous children in New Zealand. In Ontario, FGC is used in child welfare as a form of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). As described in the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provincial policy directive *CW 005-06* (2018), ADR is “a strategy to streamline court processes and encourage alternatives to court” for child welfare involved families. Situating FGC in the context of ADR has several impacts. First, it means that FGC is exclusively used to address families that are already experiencing “deep” involvement in the child welfare system. It is often employed in circumstances where apprehension is being considered to ensure the child’s safety. As a result, there is limited capacity to implement FGC at earlier phases in the child welfare service spectrum. As noted above, earlier engagement has been discussed by families as necessary to successful program implementation and family outcomes.

Second, since ADR is offered in lieu of court processes, the delivery of ADR initiatives is guided by provincial policy directives with clear thresholds for implementation and eligibility criteria for funding. In Ontario, the provincial policy directive gives a single child and youth organization sole oversight of the training and hiring of FGC Coordinators. The result is a single gatekeeper for a program designed to serve families across Ontario. The impact is that the evidence-based model discussed in this paper is ineligible for recognition and provincial funding in Ontario. Moreover, an intervention that was explicitly designed to address disparities in child welfare involvement for minoritized populations is now being delivered entirely by a mainstream, White-led organization. Child welfare policies are often designed to ensure consistency in service delivery across the service spectrum. However, in Ontario, the policies have created barriers to

implementing initiatives that speak to the direct needs of the client community. Policy design in child welfare needs to consider the evolving needs of communities and both offer flexibility in the policies and undergo regular evaluations to ensure they are meeting the outcomes intended.

Conclusion

This conceptual article delineates community-based research that led to the development and implementation of the ACB-FGC project that is culturally relevant and responsive to ACB families engaged in the child welfare system in Ontario. ACB families’ experiences and engagement within the Ontario child welfare system are unique because of deeply entrenched intersectional systemic anti-Black racism, which necessitated an intervention that recognizes the importance of including the voices, knowledges, and expertise of ACB families, service providers, community members, and researchers in all aspects of the project. Through the course of development and implementation, we learned the complexities of ACB families at risk of, or already involved, in child welfare, who require ongoing wraparound services and advocacy, which do not align with traditional FGC services. However, these are significant components to the wellbeing and maintenance of ACB families, which has meant breaking down silos and creating networks to better connect organizations that serve Black families/communities with the intent of generating wraparound support.

Also, we learned the importance of advocacy by FGC Coordinators and community as well as policy changes that could make this model more accessible to Black families and ensure the long-term stability of the service. We hope this project prompts more research into restorative justice interventions designed to serve minoritized families within the child welfare system and evaluations of these services to corroborate their effectiveness in delivering their stated outcomes, especially for minority families. Particularly for FGCs, an understanding of how race impacts access, involvement, and outcomes is

underdeveloped in the literature. Further research and regular evaluations, alongside collaboration with local ACB community members (e.g., families, service providers, researchers) and equitable ADR policy directives, are critical to redressing the overrepresentation and disparity of Black families

within the child welfare system. We conclude by reaffirming our main argument that restorative justice models, such as FGCs, in respective locales need to be rooted in ACB communities and driven by evidence to continuously consider and address the ongoing needs of ACB families and communities.

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The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act: Preventing Discrimination, or Promoting Color-Blindness?

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Abstract

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act/Interethnic Adoption Provisions (MEPA-IEP) are policies based on color-blind racial ideology that are designed to decrease time to permanency, prevent racially discriminatory placement decisions, and facilitate recruitment of diverse foster/adoptive parents. Since implementation, children of color continue to experience disproportionate entries into care and spend more time in care. Same-race adoptions have declined, and recruitment of prospective parents of color has not been prioritized in implementation efforts. A repeal of MEPA-IEP is needed to remove the color-blind features of the policy. Ideal replacement legislation would encourage workers to use race as a criterion to evaluate the ability of prospective parents to meet children's needs, provide incentives for states to recruit foster and adoptive parents of color, and mandate prospective parent and workforce training to facilitate cultural and relational permanency for children.

Keywords: child welfare, foster care, adoption, policy, adoption, history, legislation



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Spaulding for Children

Voices for Adoption

Introduction: The MEPA-IEP's Color-Blind Approach to Racial Disproportionality

The Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP) of 1996 mandated a color-blind approach to foster care and adoption placements, prioritizing placement of children in homes with almost no consideration for the race of the child or prospective adoptive parent(s) (Hadley, 2020). The main result of the IEP has been a systematic disregard of children's racial and cultural continuity (Wilson et al., 2020), resulting in an increase in transracial adoption of children of color by White foster and adoptive parents (Hynes, 2021; Jennings, 2006). The IEP has not achieved its main goal of reducing time to permanency for children of color (Boyd, 2014; Marby, 2009; Wulczyn, 2020). The authors argue that a key weakness of the IEP is its color-blind approach to addressing racial disproportionality. The authors recommend replacing the IEP with policy that allows culturally responsive placement decisions and culturally relevant training for prospective foster and adoptive parents.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks guide this policy analysis: Anyon's policy perspective framework (Anyon, 2011) and color-blind racial ideology (CBRI) (Benilla-Silva, 2015; Neville et al., 2013). As described by Anyon (2011), four competing and overlapping perspectives inform what child welfare workers should prioritize when children enter foster care: expedient permanency, social advantage, family preservation, and cultural continuity. Each of these perspectives strive to improve child well-being in varying ways. Expedient permanency prioritizes short-term stability by aiming to find a permanent family for the child in the quickest possible timeframe. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act/Interethnic Adoption Provisions (MEPA-IEP) are good examples of policies that prioritize expedient permanency, often at the exclusion of

the other considerations. Social advantage prioritizes children's long-term self-sufficiency by presenting them and/or their caretakers with connections and opportunities that might eventually lead to employment and other opportunities for economic mobility. The most prominent policy example of a social advantage approach to child-well-being is the John H. Chafee Independent Living Program, which supports young people who experienced foster care on or after their 14th birthdays with employment, access to higher education services as well as a monthly living stipend to support the provision of basic needs up to their 21st birthday (U.S Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2021). Family preservation prioritizes biological connections with the child's family. Policies supporting reunification and kinship care can help children maintain family connections. Finally, cultural continuity prioritizes connection to a child's identity and culture. Maintaining children's connection to their culture can be supported through kinship care, recruitment and retention of a diverse foster parent and caseworker workforce, exposure to cultural sensitivity training, and referral to community resources. Each perspective outlined by Anyon (2011) attends to an important aspect of child well-being but implementing child welfare legislation that adequately addresses all four perspectives has historically been a challenge.

CBRI, which consists of two dimensions, color-evasion (i.e., denial of racial differences through the emphasis of sameness) and power-evasion (i.e., denial of racism through the emphasis of equal opportunity) is a theory that has been proven to be ineffective, with mounting empirical evidence suggesting that it promotes interracial tension and inequality (Neville et al., 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In the context of MEPA-IEP, this policy was constructed in a way that appears reasonable and moral while at the same time opposing numerous interventions to address racial inequality. Specifically, it neglects to address the preferential treatment White people have historically received in accessing higher education in pursuit of social work education, and by association, child welfare workforce training programs, and ignores the realities prospective foster and adoptive parents face in pursuit

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of licensure, which must be overcome to qualify them for their roles.

Background: Historical Legislation

In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) was passed. AACWA required reasonable efforts to be made to maintain original family units and offered new funding opportunities to focus on prevention and reunification (Curtis & Denby, 2011). AACWA defined reunification as being in the child's best interest (O'Laughlin, 1998). This strong focus on reunification represented a prioritization of the family preservation perspective, as it placed particular importance on biological family connections. However, AACWA did little to address social advantage as part of family reunification efforts or support children in the process of expedient permanency when termination of parental rights occurred.

Fourteen years later, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was created to “decrease the length of time that children who have experienced termination of parental rights wait to be adopted; to prevent discrimination in the placement of children on the basis of race, color, or national origin; and to facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive parents who can meet children's needs” (Administration for Children, 1995, p. 1). MEPA's focus on decreasing time to adoption helped to prioritize the perspective of expedient permanency. The original version of MEPA also allowed for the consideration of a child's cultural, ethnic, or racial background during the placement process, as well as assessment of a prospective foster or adoptive parent's capacity to meet the needs of foster children with varying backgrounds. This provision of the bill was key to providing children with cultural continuity (Wilson et al., 2020).

The Congressional Black Caucus fought hard for this provision, only to have it repealed by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP) in 1996 (McRoy et al., 2007). The IEP Act mandated a color-blind approach

to foster care and adoption placements, prioritizing placement of children in homes with almost no consideration for the race of the child or prospective adoptive parent(s) (Hadley, 2020). The intention of the act was to reduce the time from foster care to adoption (i.e., “permanency”). Unfortunately, permanency outcomes for children of color have not improved in the decades since the act was implemented (Boyd, 2014; Marby, 2009; Rolock & White, 2016; Wulczyn, 2020). Instead, the main result of the IEP has been a systematic disregard of children's racial and cultural continuity (Wilson et al., 2020), resulting in an increase in transracial adoption of children of color by White foster and adoptive parents (Hynes, 2021; Jennings, 2006).

During the following year, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) provided three goals for the child welfare system to use as a guide: safety, permanency, and child wellbeing. The implementation of ASFA prioritizes legal permanency—reunification with family, adoption, or legal guardianship—in the shortest time possible. In the name of timely permanency, individual parental responsibility was emphasized while government support services, including safety net programs designed to support birth parents and extended family members in achieving social advantage, were significantly reduced (Hynes, 2021; O'Laughlin, 1998). Scholars generally agree that ASFA disproportionately negatively impacts children of color, as parents of color are at a disadvantage in meeting the requirements to be successfully reunified in a short period of time (Boyd, 2014; Hanna et al., 2017; Hines et al., 2004; Yang & Ortega, 2016), resulting in a greater percentage of children of color experiencing termination of parental rights (Wildeman et al., 2020). The National Association of Black Social Workers also released a statement strongly opposing ASFA after its adoption due to its detrimental impacts on Black family preservation (Copeland, 2022). The implementation of ASFA served to further amplify the perspective of expedient permanency, while other perspectives—

including cultural continuity, family preservation, and social advantage—remained out of focus in legislation.

Consequences of Racism in the Child Welfare System

Black children continue to be overrepresented in foster care, to experience termination of parental rights at higher rates, to have longer stays in care; they are also less likely to be adopted (McRoy et al., 2007; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007; Wildeman et al., 2020). As of 2019, Black children represented 15% of the general population but over 25% of youth in foster care (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2021). This is in large part due to the color-blind nature of MEPA. The prioritization of expedient legal permanency over other perspectives like cultural continuity and social advantage has resulted in a child welfare system in the United States today that reflects the country's persistence in legitimizing a more contemporary form of racism: justification of the racial status quo. Specifically, CBRI has promoted anti-Black racism, often in the form of intense surveillance and family policing, disproportionately bringing Black youth into the system and putting them at risk of experiencing the worst outcomes once involved in the system (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

Based on available data, MEPA-IEP has not been successful in achieving its goal of eliminating discrimination in foster and adoptive placements. After MEPA was implemented, transracial adoptions increased, but the adoption rate of Black children decreased. While the overall adoption rate of Black children declined by 22% between 2005 and 2019, transracial adoption of Black children increased by 32% (Kalisher et al., 2020). Successful family reunification also declined for Black children during this time (Kalisher et al., 2020). Essentially, Black children have become less likely to achieve permanency with Black families—either through reunification or adoption—resulting in both an increase in adoptions of Black children with White families and an increase in the number of Black children who remain in care without a permanent

family.

The same trends can be observed for American Indian and Alaska Native youth, who experience the highest rate of disproportionality relative to their representation in the population. American Indian and Alaska Native youth represented 1% of the general population but 2.6% of youth in foster care as of 2019 (Puzzanchera & Taylor, 2021). Over half of American Indian and Alaska Native children are adopted to individuals outside of their tribal community (National Indian Child Welfare Association, n.d.-a, b). Although American Indian and Alaska Native children who are members of federally recognized tribes are eligible for cultural continuity protections under the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), children who are not eligible for enrollment, such as members of state recognized tribes, U.S. citizens who are members of Canadian First Nation tribes, and Native Hawaiians, are not eligible for protections under ICWA. These children outside the purview of ICWA must rely on MEPA to have their need for cultural continuity assessed prior to and during placement.

While Latinx youth are represented in foster care at similar rates to their proportion of the population, they still experience inequities within the foster care system (Alzate & Rosenthal, 2009; Taussig et al., 2001; Church et al., 2005). Latinx children spend more time in care than White children and have the highest rate of transracial adoption at 46% of adoptions (Kalisher et al., 2020). Amending MEPA to recognize the importance of cultural continuity stands to benefit Latinx children as well.

The child welfare system has yet to address its legacy and ongoing impact of traumatizing Black children and other youth of color. Racial trauma can result in hidden wounds of racial oppression including an assaulted sense of self and internalized feelings of devaluation, voicelessness, and rage (Hardy, 2013). Institutional maltreatment of Black children and families has been recognized as a public health crisis, and a conscious consideration of anti-racist policies and practices will be necessary to address these racial inequities (Stephens, 2022). Understanding these

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issues as part of a public health crisis emphasizes the need for active social justice-oriented practices like those encouraged by the liberation health model, through which social workers can take holistic, critical, empowering, and hopeful action to actively support and nurture—rather than separate and devalue—Black families and communities (Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

The Value of Cultural Continuity for Children of Color

Supporting cultural continuity (i.e., maintaining children's connection to their race, heritage, and culture) is widely accepted as a best practice in child welfare (McRoy et al., 2007). Unfortunately, MEPA-IEP prevents thorough assessment of whether a foster or adoptive family can meet a child's racial and cultural needs (McRoy & Griffin, 2012). Due to a combination of structural barriers and unfocused recruitment, there are not enough prospective families of color to place all children with a parent who shares their racial or cultural background, nor is there mandated cultural sensitivity training to prepare foster and adoptive parents to meet foster children's cultural needs (Coakley & Gruber, 2015). MEPA enforcement efforts have largely focused on prohibiting placement delays while ignoring mandates requiring recruitment of foster and adoptive parents from racial and cultural groups that reflect the demographics of the children in care (McRoy et al., 2007).

During the 1960s and 1970s, some national organizations representing communities of color (such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League) proposed promoting transracial adoption to help reduce the number of Black children lingering without placement options. However, not all organizations supported this decision, and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) released strong statements arguing that Black children belong with families and communities that can help them develop their

cultural identities and negotiate the racism they will inevitably face in a White-dominated society (Jennings, 2006; McRoy & Griffin, 2012).

Despite its stated intent to prevent discrimination in placement decisions, MEPA-IEP does not include measures to examine whether families of color are prevented from becoming licensed and/or receiving placements. Instead, the adoption process under MEPA benefits adopters who already have power and privilege in society and thus experience few barriers to adoption, namely White, heterosexual, middle-class couples (Hanna et al., 2017; Jennings, 2006), and results in many parents adopting children of color without training and access to other support services designed to meet the racial, cultural, and ethnic needs of the children in their care (Hadley, 2020). While a child's race or cultural background should not, and legally cannot, be the *only* factor used to make placement decisions (Administration for Children, 1995), it is in a child's best interest to consider whether a prospective family can meet a child's unique needs for identity development and cultural continuity (Hadley, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020).

Children's development is affected by transracial adoption. A 2011 study indicated that transracial adoptees (TRAs) felt different from other Black youth and had to learn how to navigate "acting White" versus "acting Black" in different social spaces (Butler-Sweet, 2011). TRAs indicated that they had little exposure to middle- or upper-class Black families and that their adopted families inaccurately equated "Black culture" with concepts like poverty (Butler-Sweet, 2011). Other research has found TRAs felt pressure to assimilate to White culture and reported difficulty being authentically themselves, entering racialized spaces, feeling a sense of belonging, feeling as though anyone around them shared their ideas about race, and cultivating a positive racial identity (Gross et al., 2017; Hadley, 2020; Samuels, 2009). Transracial adoption can be particularly harmful when parents do not understand or support cultural difference. Research

shows that White parents are significantly less likely to be culturally receptive of youth who do not share their culture (Coakley & Gruber, 2015). Gibbs (2017) asserts that color-blind parenting approaches do not help transracially adopted children form positive racial identities and that parents must instead be open to building cultural competence.

Assimilation, or being expected to adopt the norms and values of the dominant culture, can have various negative psychological impacts on children (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Simon & Roorda, 2000). Assimilation requires that the child develop a new social identity, often meaning they must lose some awareness of their culture of origin. This can make a child feel the need to reject their cultural communities or else be rejected by members of either the majority culture or their culture of origin (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Conversely, ethnic socialization, which involves internalizing beliefs, practices, and positive messages about one's racial or ethnic heritage, plays a role in the well-being of adoptees. Ethnic socialization plays a protective role for TRAs when experiencing discrimination, and parental participation in socialization practices has led to healthier outcomes for adoptees (Arnold et al., 2016; Montgomery & Jordan, 2018).

MEPA-IEP Falls Short of Its Stated Goals

Diligent Recruitment of Families of Color

The stated intent of MEPA to develop a pool of foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic background of children in care has not been achieved (McRoy et al., 2016). While foster and adoptive parent demographics are not federally reported, the data that do exist indicate that the demographic characteristics of prospective adoptive parents do not match those of children waiting in care. As of 2020, 45% of children waiting to be adopted are White, 22% are Black, 22% are Hispanic, and 11% are categorized as "other" (Kalisher et al., 2020). According to 2020 data at the time of adoption, almost 83% of adoptive parents identified

as White, around 11% identified as Black, less than 2% identified as Latinx, and less than 1% identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Day et al., 2022). Without an adequate pool of prospective parents of color, and with a lack of investment in family preservation services, transracial adoption is the main permanency path for children of color who have experienced termination of parental rights (Marr, 2017).

MEPA requires that states make diligent recruitment efforts to ensure prospective foster and adoptive families reflect the racial and ethnic background of children in care. At present, MEPA provides loose standards for what "diligent" recruitment entails; these standards talk little about race and ethnic background (Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 1995). MEPA does not provide funding for recruitment nor enforcement to ensure states are complying with the provision (McRoy et al., 2007; Jennings, 2006). States are not required to provide data on the racial and ethnic makeup of current or prospective foster and adoptive parents in their Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), preventing assessment of states' progress.

Most states are not meeting MEPA's standards for diligent recruitment. According to Kalisher et al. (2020), 34 states received a CSFR rating of "needing improvement," and only 16 jurisdictions received a "strength" rating. Seventeen states' Diligent Recruitment Plans (DRPs) did not contain information about training staff to work with diverse communities or about nondiscriminatory fee-structures, and 13 states did not have strategies to address language barriers.

Lack of Family Preservation Supports for Parents and Kin

In addition to diversifying the pool of prospective foster and adoptive parents, it is important to utilize preventive solutions to child welfare system involvement such as reunification supports and kinship care. In permanency planning, MEPA indicates a clear preference for stranger placement

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compared to family preservation. While the act prohibits denying a prospective parent the ability to foster or adopt due to the parent or child's race, color, or national origin, the act does not expressly prohibit an agency from denying a family reunification or kinship supports due to their identities.

Research suggests that kinship care is associated with positive outcomes for youth. Particularly, kinship care has been shown to reduce placement instability for Black children, who experience disproportionate rates of out-of-home placement (Foster et al., 2011). Compared to children in foster care, those in kinship care tend to experience fewer placements, lower out-of-home care reentry rate, less involvement with the juvenile court system, and fewer days in out-of-home care (Winokur et al., 2008). In addition, children in kin placements are more likely to achieve permanency through guardianship (Winokur et al., 2008).

The foster care system relies heavily on kinship placements, yet it does not support kin as it does foster parents who are unrelated to the child. In 2019, 32% of children in foster care were placed in relative foster family homes, an 8% increase from 2009 (Children's Bureau, 2019). Most kinship caregivers of children in the custody of the state are unlicensed and thus do not receive foster care maintenance payments. In Washington state, for example, only 7.5% of kinship caregivers are licensed (Washington State Department of Children Youth and Families, 2018), and in 23 states, over half of kinship caregivers do not receive maintenance payments (Generations United, 2018).

In some states, informal kinship caregivers may be eligible for some types of financial assistance, such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant, which provides a monthly benefit to caregivers who are raising a kinship child. Child-only TANF grants generally provide caregivers a smaller benefit than foster care stipends. On average, the TANF child-only grant for a single child stipend is close to that of foster care (82%), but for three children, the ratio drops to 43% of the financial

support formal foster caregivers receive (U.S. DHHS, 2004).

The lack of federal support for kin is concerning given that kinship caregivers are more likely to be people of color (Bramlett et al., 2017) and are twice as likely to live in poverty compared to unrelated foster parents (Ehrle et al., 2003). Kinship caregivers experience myriad challenges including financial hardship, legal barriers, unmet social service needs, and lack of childcare (Geen et al., 2001). Legal support is typically not provided for unlicensed kinship families to pursue guardianship or adoption, which can require a family to pay for a private attorney and create undue barriers to permanency with kin (Generations United, 2018).

Workforce Development: Recruitment and Training

Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parent Training

When a parent is fostering or adopting a child transracially, training plays a foundational role in ensuring that parents are prepared to meet the needs of the children in their care and respond to discrimination the child may experience (Hynes, 2021). In a survey of 173 foster parent trainers across the country, over half of trainers identified a need for more culturally relevant training materials that prepare foster parents to care for children from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds (Lin et al., in press). MEPA does not mandate that parents who adopt transracially receive any training or guidance to meet children's unique needs. In fact, MEPA suggests that families cannot be prepared differently based on their race and the race of the child.

Child welfare trainers also skew White (Choi et al., 2019), which can create challenges if prospective foster and adoptive parents of color do not relate to the people recruiting and training them. This is one of several barriers to licensing prospective foster and adoptive parents of color, including lack of outreach in communities of color, racial bias in the licensing

process, lack of Spanish language proficiency among recruiting staff, and insufficient funds to pay fees such as the cost of the home study prior to being reimbursed (Considering Adoption, 2022; Harbert et al., 2015).

Child Welfare Workforce Recruitment and Training

For child welfare workers to make informed placement decisions in the best interest of children, it is essential that the child welfare workforce is well-trained on cultural humility, privilege and bias, institutional racism, and identity formation (Boyd, 2014; LaLiberte et al., 2015; Yang & Ortega, 2016). Agency staff that lack applied cultural humility training struggle to provide on-the-ground support for children and families from diverse backgrounds (Williams et al., 2013). When social workers are adequately trained to respond sensitively to communities with identities different than their own, agencies report higher retention rates and social workers experience more career satisfaction (LaLiberte et al., 2015).

Workers also need to be trained on MEPA itself. Following the introduction of MEPA, the government issued little guidance on how to apply the mandates to practice (Anyon, 2011). Nine years after implementation, a national survey found that 61% of child welfare staff received no training on the effects of considering race in permanency planning (Anyon, 2011). Many professionals report fear of raising any considerations of race during placement given the perception that MEPA prohibits any discussion of race at all. Mitchell et al.'s (2005) analysis of public child welfare agencies from 1999-2000 found that only 29% of agencies implemented race training and considerations into foster care and adoption placement decisions after MEPA.

Proposed Solutions and Best Practices

Through MEPA and other key legislation, the United States has encoded a lack of priority for cultural continuity in foster and adoptive placement decisions. In the decades since these policies have

been enacted, children of color have paid for this oversight as color-blind policies have failed to drive practice decisions that adequately address children's needs. To rectify this, legislation is needed that emphasizes and incentivizes efforts that promote cultural continuity. Progress towards cultural continuity can be made through the following efforts: funding and requiring data collection and research on youth placement and outcomes by race; allowing for race and culture to inform placement preferences; improving efforts to recruit a diverse pool of foster and adoptive parents and child welfare workers that reflect the diversity of populations served in the child welfare system; adoption of rigorous cultural sensitivity training for parents, guardians, and child welfare workers that cover the topic much more deeply than many of the surface level trainings currently being used in the field; and prioritizing and incentivizing recruitment of diverse parents, guardians, and child welfare workers. Specifically, the following nine redesign efforts are recommended as a replacement to the MEPA-IEP:

1. Allow for the Individualized Consideration of Race and Culture at Placement

In addition to legal permanency, federal law must also recognize and prioritize relational and cultural permanency for children in care. In line with the 1994 act program instruction, agencies must be allowed to consider, on an individualized basis, "the child's cultural, ethnic, and racial background and the capacity of prospective foster or adoptive parents to meet the needs of a child of this background among the factors in determining whether a particular placement is in a child's best interests." In addition, a child should be assessed for "any needs related to race, ethnicity and culture as soon as the child comes into contact with the child welfare system" (Administration for Children, 1995).

To achieve this, the IEP of 1996 must be repealed, and the word "solely" must be re-inserted into the MEPA statute (MEPA, 1994):

Section 471, subdivision 18, paragraph A: "neither

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the State nor any other entity in the State that receives funds from the Federal Government and is involved in adoption or foster care placements may deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent, **solely** on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person, or of the child, involved; or”

Section 471, subdivision 18, paragraph B: “delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, **solely** on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child, involved;”

Promising Practices. Prior to the implementation of MEPA, preference for same-race placement achieved some remarkable outcomes for children of color. For example, a North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) study (1990) found that agencies that specialized in placement of children of color were able achieve same-race placement for 94% of Black children and 66% of Hispanic children, while non-specializing agencies were only able to place 51% of Black children and 30% of Hispanic children in same race homes (Gilles & Kroll, 1991). This serves as evidence that cultural permanency was attainable prior to MEPA, when agencies were still able to focus on cultural considerations. While racial similarity should not be the only factor determining placement decisions, child welfare agencies should be intentionally recruiting families of color as a way to maintain cultural continuity for children of color.

2. Create a National Data Portal for Child Welfare Data

To understand and address racial disproportionality in child welfare, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) recommends that child welfare agencies publicly report longitudinal data related to racial disproportionality (Martin & Connelly, 2015). The Children’s Bureau already collects and reports on Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) data, but state-level data is not publicly accessible. AFCARS reports that are released only provide limited, descriptive-

level information on a portion of the data. A national database and public dashboard would allow researchers and child welfare professionals to understand and compare racial disproportionality across states and allocate resources appropriately (Boyd, 2014).

Promising Practices. Despite not having a federal mandate to collect and report racial disproportionality data, at least seven states to date have elected to pass legislation requiring their child welfare agencies to report information on their progress in reducing disproportionality (Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, 2009). For example, the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) maintains an open data portal for both professionals and the public to view key indicators about youth outcomes in the child welfare system. The portal allows users to filter by demographics and calculates a “disparity index” to compare the outcomes of any two groups. CCWIP staff also help child welfare professionals interpret the data. CCWIP could be used as a model for a nationwide data dashboard.

3. Require Racial Equity Analysis as Part of Child and Family Services Plans

All policies have some impact on racial and cultural equity. Most states are not meeting MEPA’s diligent recruitment requirements, and federal legislation has not adequately addressed the impact this has had on families and children of color. Racial equity tools are increasingly utilized at the state level to ensure issues of equity are being addressed. States and territories could be required to conduct a racial equity (also known as disparate impact) analysis as part of the Title IV-B Child and Family Services Plan (CSFP) to demonstrate how the state is addressing racial equity and cultural needs in the selection and provision of services.

CFSRs are conducted periodically by the Children’s Bureau to review state child welfare systems and ensure they are complying with federal requirements (Children’s Bureau, n.d.). States that are not adequately addressing racial disproportionality and

children's cultural needs would require a Program Improvement Plan in order to come into compliance with federal guidelines (Children's Bureau, n.d.).

Promising Practices. Despite the fact that racial equity analyses are not currently a federal requirement, the National Conference of State Legislatures (2021) reports that Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington have all passed legislation requiring an equity analysis in child welfare. In 2001, Minnesota specifically mandated a study of outcomes for Black children in the state's child welfare system with the goal of creating recommendations to address disparities. Washington, Oregon, Texas, and Illinois created task forces to address racial disproportionality in child welfare systems in 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2021, respectively (see the Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare Task Force Act of 2021 for an example). Washington legislation also requires an annual report from the secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services that includes any measurable progress made towards reducing racial disparities in the state's child welfare system.

4. Report Youth Racial Demographics and Tribal Affiliations

Child welfare advocates and researchers agree that additional data elements need to be included in AFCARS and NCANDS. We recommend the following specific elements for inclusion:

Tribal Affiliations. Currently, AFCARS and NCANDS only provide demographic options for Indigenous children who are citizens of a federally recognized tribe. Additional tribal affiliation options are needed for Indigenous children not covered by ICWA, such as Canadian First Nation and Native Hawaiian children. Washington and Michigan's state policies build upon the minimum federal ICWA standards by collecting tribal affiliation data for Canadian First Nation youth. Mandating collection of this information nationwide would allow agencies to consider children's tribal or Native Hawaiian heritage even if they are not protected under ICWA.

Youth Who Exit to Permanency. AFCARS does not currently collect data on the racial demographics or tribal affiliations of children who achieve permanency. This information could identify possible disparities in permanency outcomes and give states a platform to build from.

Youth in Kin Placements. AFCARS should report the number of children in unlicensed kinship homes who do not receive foster care maintenance payments, as well as the racial breakdown of these children, to reveal possible racial disparities in resource allocation and outcomes (Generations United, n.d.).

5. Fund Research to Build Culturally Derived Interventions

Currently, the federal government has not prioritized investment in interventions that could reduce racial disproportionality in child welfare. The federal government should fund the development, implementation, and evaluation of culturally derived programs that build on community strengths, evaluate the effectiveness of blind case reviews, invest in programs that promote and stabilize kinship placements, and other promising interventions to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. In addition, the federal government could award research demonstration grants for researchers to develop a tool to reduce racially biased decision-making in child welfare workforce recruitment and retention efforts.

Promising Interventions. Although there has been a lack of investment in this area, state and local child welfare agencies have implemented some promising interventions to address racial bias and disproportionality. However, there have been no investments in culturally derived programs that specifically target subpopulations of families and children of color. Versions of differential or alternative response, family team decision making (FTDM), cross-system collaborations, and blind case review come up often in the research literature but lack definitive evidence of their effectiveness (Allan et al., 2020; Martin & Connelly, 2015; Pryce et al.,

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2018).

For example, in October 2020, after a 2018 analysis of strategies that reduced racial disproportionality in child welfare agencies across the state, New York mandated that all child welfare agencies across the state implement a blind case review process to reduce biased decision making (Pryce et al., 2018; New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2020). Blind case reviews require a committee of caseworkers to make decisions about whether to remove a child from a home based only on non-identifying details of the case, excluding information such as name and race. This promising intervention would benefit from a nationwide evaluation of its effectiveness to encourage more states to adopt it with confidence.

Anti-bias tools exist in related fields and could be used as a model for a child welfare focused tool. For example, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) recently created an anti-bias tool for juvenile judges that could be adapted for the child welfare workforce (NCJFCJ, n.d.).

6. Provide Funding for and Enforce State Diligent Recruitment Plans

State and tribal child welfare agencies need funding, clear direction, training protocol, and incentives to implement best practices for diligently recruiting families from diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. According to the Administration of Children and Families, diligent recruitment plans must include: data on how the racial/ethnic background of licensed foster/adoptive parents differs from the demographic of children in care; strategies to reach those communities that are under-represented based on the data; how the state is using family finding, kinship searches, and other tools to reach adults already in the child's life; and widespread dissemination of information to targeted communities. Additionally, recruitment efforts must incorporate strategies to ensure all prospective parents have access to the home study process, procedures for timely search for adoptive parents for

a waiting child, and strategies to address linguistic barriers and non-discriminatory fee structures (Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 1995).

Recruitment strategies that aim to address the current lack of diversity in foster and adoptive parent population should be informed by data. Uniform collection of demographic data for both foster and adoptive parents should be mandated across the child welfare system (Martin & Connelly, 2015). Additionally, this data should be made available to the federal government so that it can monitor diligent recruitment practices more effectively and conduct additional reviews if states are not making progress. Recruitment data should be public and accessible for transparency and accountability (Martin & Connelly, 2015).

Promising Practices. Even though there are no federal requirements to collect and report data on prospective and licensed foster parents, many states have elected to collect information from potential and current licensed foster and adoptive families regarding race, ethnicity, and culture of origin. However, this data is not reported to the federal government. States who scored “strong” on their recruitment plans often collected and reported data on the characteristics of children waiting to be adopted (Kalisher et al., 2020). Some states also use data to track characteristics of current foster and adoptive families to identify gaps in characteristics and to address recruitment inequities (Kalisher et al., 2020). Additionally, many states’ DRPs already include characteristics of youth waiting to be adopted (Martin & Connelly, 2015).

7. Prioritize and Incentivize Licensure, Adoption, and Guardianship of Children With Kinship Caregivers

In addition to recruitment of new foster and adoptive parents, more consideration needs to be given to the value of kinship caregivers as an option for permanency. If a kinship or relative caregiver expresses a desire to foster or adopt a child, MEPA

should mandate that kinship caregivers be preferred for foster placement, adoption, and guardianship and helped with becoming licensed as a foster parent and/or pursuing legal permanency with their kinship child (Martin & Connelly, 2015). NABSW (2003) recommends increasing the parity between the benefits that nonrelated caregivers and kinship caregivers receive. Moreover, a child or family's race, color, or national origin should not be used to deny a family reunification services, kinship navigation supports, and/or adoption or guardianship subsidies.

Promising Practices. While the Children's Bureau has issued guidance recommending that child welfare agencies give preference to kinship caregivers in some situations when making placement decisions (Children's Bureau, 2021), there is no federal legislation that mandates that states prioritize kinship caregivers as permanency options, nor that they provide licensing or legal support for kinship caregivers to pursue permanency. Eleven states require that relatives be given first consideration for adoption after the child has lived with those relatives for a specified period of time (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Even when kinship caregivers are licensed, there is no federal legislation mandating that they receive the same monthly maintenance payment as unrelated foster parents. However, California and Oregon provide examples of best practice states, as they provide full foster care maintenance benefits to licensed kin caregivers who are caring for IV-E eligible children (Jantz et al., 2002).

8. Mandate Culturally Relevant Foster and Adoptive Parent Training

Parents who are adopting transracially must be adequately prepared to become racially and culturally conscious. MEPA legislation should mandate that all foster or adoptive parents receive pre- and post-placement training on meeting the cultural needs of the children in their care, understanding their own power and positionality in society relative to their child, and learning strategies to address the racism, discrimination, and stigma their child

may face (Gibbs, 2017). Any training should have the flexibility to be adapted so that it is culturally relevant in the local context. The federal government should fund an evaluation of the effectiveness of culturally relevant training for foster parents and how training prepares foster and adoptive parents to parent transracially (Whenan et al., 2009).

Promising Practices. There are several evidence-based, trauma-informed, culturally relevant training models for foster and adoptive parents (Hebert & Kulkin, 2017). One example is the KEEP Program, which is a post-placement 16-week training that provides parents adaptable information about how to best serve the children in their care (Price et al., 2009). KEEP training helps foster parents understand historical trauma and trains parents to embrace and sustain a child's identities (Day et al., 2020). KEEP is designed to help foster and adoptive parents address any discrimination or racism a child may experience. It has been implemented in states such as California, Tennessee, Montana, and New York and in many tribal nations. The National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) is another pre-service training curriculum that has been adapted for use in tribal communities (NTDCportal.org).

9. Train Child Welfare Staff and Recruit Caseworkers of Color

All child welfare workers should be provided training on anti-racism, cultural humility, and implementation of MEPA, including diligent recruitment of families who reflect the demographics of children in care. Training must go beyond surface-level rhetoric, offering concrete strategies to combat institutional racism embedded in the field.

Current State Practices in Workforce Training

The Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare surveyed 12 states in 2014 to better understand the strategies states used to promote racial equity in the child welfare system (Miller & Esensad, 2015). One promising practice is the Knowing Who You Are

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(KWYA) training (Miller & Esenstad, 2015), which helps social workers understand the importance of racial identity and how it impacts children when it is not addressed, while providing concrete strategies for applying this knowledge day-to-day. This training is offered across several states including Idaho, New York, Oregon, and Texas.

Another promising training is the Undoing Racism workshop (The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2009). Undoing Racism was found to improve knowledge and awareness about racism and racial dynamics among child welfare staff (Johnson et al., 2009). Over a four-year period, agencies in Kentucky and Texas lowered their percentages of out-of-home placements and increased successful placements for African American children (Curry & Barbee, 2011). The CSSP also offers an implicit racial bias workshop (inSIGHT), which is specifically designed for child protection workers and can be tailored to the agency's local context and needs (CSSP, 2019).

Conclusion

There is broad agreement among researchers, policymakers, child welfare administrators, and persons with lived experience that reform to MEPA-IEP is needed to ensure that families involved with the child welfare system are more equitably served. The MEPA-IEP creates barriers to children's relational and cultural permanence and has not achieved its aims of improving legal permanency for children of color. In large part, this is due to the color-blind nature of MEPA-IEP. To move towards more racially just child welfare practice, the United States must shift away from color-blind child welfare policy and towards policy that is color conscious (Hadley, 2020). To begin this shift in policy and practice, the MEPA-IEP should be repealed and replaced with legislation that prioritizes family preservation, cultural permanency, and explicitly anti-racist child welfare practice.

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Anti-Black Racism Within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

Longstanding criticism of the child welfare system (CWS) as being overly punitive and invasive has recently gained new momentum with a grassroots movement to defund, abolish, or otherwise radically transform CWS. This movement contends that CWS in the United States is inherently and irreparably biased against families of color and requires radical transformation. The aim of this article is to further a dialogue with those calling for radical transformations of CWS. First, we aim to consider historical and contemporary factors that have contributed to the present racial disproportionalities in child maltreatment and child welfare involvement. We argue that our current crisis-oriented, rather than prevention-oriented, framework leads to an overly punitive response toward families from marginalized racial groups, and that reforms to CWS are indicated. We then provide an overview of grassroots movements calling for the abolition of CWS. Finally, we present considerations for moving forward by acting on areas of overlap between the abolition and reform perspectives, including taking an anti-racist stance in child welfare and the importance of tackling racial and economic inequalities as prerequisites to equity in child protection.

Keywords: child welfare system, racism, child maltreatment

Introduction

The child welfare system (CWS) in the United States consists of interconnected public and private services that enact policies regarding child maltreatment. In its stated mission to promote the well-being of children, it is empowered to intervene with families, whether that be investigating alleged maltreatment incidents, providing voluntary or mandatory services, or placing children in state custody out of the home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Despite efforts in some jurisdictions to approach families with support (e.g., differential response systems), CWS intervention generally targets problems at the family level without sufficient attention to structural and social determinants of child maltreatment risk such as racism and poverty. Further, CWS itself has been constructed within the context of structural racism within the United States, reflected in the disproportionate rate of intervention

for families of color. Many families, especially families of color, experience contact with CWS as invasive, punitive, and traumatic (Merritt, 2021). In response, interdisciplinary scholars from psychology, public health, sociology, social work, and history have highlighted flaws with the crisis-oriented response of child welfare and the disproportionate impact of CWS policies on Black children and families. Additionally, parents, professionals, and communities concerned about CWS have created a grassroots movement to abolish CWS (Dettlaff et al., 2021; Movement for Family Power, 2020). Here we present a brief overview of the sociocultural context of CWS, including a history of how it has evolved within a larger system of structural racism within the United States. We then describe grassroots movements to abolish CWS, discuss the potential to combine elements of the abolition and reform movements, and consider anti-racist policies to transform CWS.

Anti-Black Racism within Child Welfare Services

Structural Racism and the Child Welfare System

Ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between individual, family, community, and societal and structural factors that not only play a role in increasing risk for child maltreatment, but also lay the groundwork for the development of and challenges within CWS (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). CWS consists of individual actors who interact with children and families, as well as interconnected public and private institutions influenced by layers of federal and state legislation passed over the past century or more, implicating all levels of the ecological system. A robust body of research has examined individual and family (i.e., microsystem) and some community level (i.e., exosystem) factors that influence child maltreatment and interaction with CWS (Stith et al., 2009). Poverty has been widely connected with both child maltreatment and interaction with CWS (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017)2017. Relatively less research has focused on the macrosystem (i.e., laws, customs, and cultural values) and chronosystem (i.e., changes over time, including intergenerational processes and historical context). Specifically, structural racism has been widely overlooked beyond examining the disproportional rates of Black children and families involved in CWS (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

Structural racism describes the ways in which social, political, economic, and cultural societal structures limit access to capital, power, and resources for certain racial groups and gives privilege, power, and resources to other racial groups, continually producing racial discrimination and racial inequity (Omi & Winant, 2014; Powell, 2008). Structural racism can take the form of policies, laws, and practices designed to discriminate against people of color, such as banking practices that actively push Black individuals toward higher interest loans and mortgages (Bonilla-Silva, 2018)“language”:"en-us”,"publisher”:"Rowman & Littlefield Publishers”,"source”:"rowman.com”,"title”:"Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the

persistence of racial inequality in America (5th ed.. Often, policies, practices, and laws within and across institutions appear “race neutral” but result in racial inequity and discrimination; for example, zero tolerance policies regarding misbehavior within schools have resulted in Black students being disproportionately punished, suspended, and expelled (Castillo, 2014; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Importantly, structural racism occurs whether or not agents within a system are racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018)“language”:"en-us”,"publisher”:"Rowman & Littlefield Publishers”,"source”:"rowman.com”,"title”:"Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America (5th ed.. That is, individuals embedded within a system (e.g., educators, CWS staff) may endorse egalitarian views and personally strive to behave equitably but nonetheless perpetuate racism simply by enacting the policies and procedures of the system that have been shaped by structural racism.

Racial Capitalism

Racism within U.S. systems and structures can be explained by racial capitalism (Leong, 2013; Robinson, 2000). Racial capitalism is defined as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong, 2013, p. 1). Specifically, capitalism can only accumulate capital because of “producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). In other words, certain human beings need to be othered and devalued for capitalism to work. White Europeans who saw Indigenous peoples and Africans as inferior beings used this racialization to justify the seizure of natural resources from Indigenous peoples and the capture, enslavement, and brutal exploitation of Africans for labor (Robinson, 2000). This was the basis for the social construction of race in the United States and a template for future devaluation of those not categorized as White (Omi & Winant, 2014). Relevant to the present discussion of CWS, enslavement involved the routine forced separation of parents and children. The abolishment of slavery

led to the rise of sharecropping in the South, which once again exploited Black labor. These historical examples demonstrate how the racialization of Black people (and other groups) is at the root of capitalism in the United States. To control resources and capital and ensure existence of exploitable labor, racialization was built into all U.S. structures and institutions, resulting in structural racism (Desmond, 2019).

As a U.S. institution, CWS contributes to marginalizing Black families and supporting capitalism. Historically and currently, CWS efforts have included monitoring poor families and families of color for abuse with the assistance of agencies and civilians (i.e., mandated reporters), blaming and stigmatizing those families, and severing family ties instead of providing all the resources these families need (Roberts, 2021). These approaches serve to keep families experiencing oppression and discrimination marginalized, which contributes to racial inequities. Furthermore, the oppression and racism present in CWS works in tandem with other systems (e.g., juvenile justice, federal financial assistance), exacerbating racial inequities.

A Brief History of Discrimination Within CWS in the US

There is well documented evidence of not only the long history of discrimination against Black children in CWS but also the lack of support for Black families within social policies in the United States. (Berkman, 2011; Cancian et al., 2017; Daro, 2019; Goetz, 2020). The history of racism and its effects on the family unit begins with slavery; for a review of the historical linkage between slavery and CWS, readers may refer to other sources (Curtis & Denby, 2011; Roberts, 2022). In the 1700s and 1800s, Black dependent children who were not sold as slaves were either placed in institutional care known for providing deficient care (i.e., almshouses) or treated harshly in the indenture system, where children had to work for years to obtain freedom (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; McGowan, 2014). In the first half of the 1800s, private faith-based organizations

established orphanages, but “placing out,” in which children were removed from orphanages or from poor families and placed with “good Protestant” families in the West, became the preferred practice in the latter part of the 1800s (McGowan, 2014). Both practices, orphanage placement and placing out, excluded children of color (Hogan & Siu, 1988); as a result, some communities of color developed their own supports for children and families. For example, within the African American community, child welfare services such as orphanages were developed within a broad spectrum of Black social services supported by Black churches, schools, and philanthropic organizations (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972).

The mid-to-late 19th century saw a shift away from private, faith-based child protective services (CPS) to public state intervention (McGowan, 2014). In the 1880s, the U.S. government began removing Indigenous children from their families and sending them to residential schools (Lash, 2017). In 1925, 60,889 Indigenous children were placed in residential schools, accounting for 83% of all school-aged Indigenous children, many of whom died (Adams, 1995; Lash, 2017). In 1912, the Children’s Bureau was developed and given the broad mandate to investigate and report on the welfare of children (McGowan, 2014). Over the next few decades, CPS, foster boarding homes, adoption procedures, and childcare institutions for dependent children continued to expand. The emergence of psychoanalytic theory and individual talk therapy treatment led to the goal of providing individualized services to children to address their emotional needs. Unfortunately, this movement resulted in an emphasis on individual psychopathology rather than social and contextual influences and factors.

The huge migration of Black people to cities during World War I, advocacy by organizations seeking equality for Black people (e.g., the National Urban League), and a significant expansion of public agencies eventually resulted in CWS starting to serve Black children during the 1920s and 1930s (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). This resulted in

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benefits as well as several unfortunate consequences, including the halt of the Black child welfare system, limitations in the possibility of Black Americans assuming leadership roles in agencies caring for Black children, and allowance of some subtler but ongoing forms of discriminatory treatment of Black children and families (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002). In 1935, the Social Security Act established Title V to protect and care for children who are homeless, neglected, and in danger of entering the juvenile justice system, whether living with their families or in substitute care, by enabling the Children's Bureau to work with state public welfare agencies (McGowan, 2014). Title V also established the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which gave states the power to deny aid if families were determined to be immoral and/or their homes unsuitable (e.g., illegitimacy, presence of men other than biological fathers in home). States used this program to discriminate against and deny benefits to Black families (Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

After World War II, wealth disparity increased among White families and non-White families. Resulting in part from the association between poverty and maltreatment, CWS started serving more Black children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). In 1960, there was public outcry when Louisiana suddenly expelled 23,000 children from the AFDC rolls after expanding home suitability requirements; the majority were Black (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). In response, the federal government established the Flemming Rule, which mandated that if states determined that a home was unsuitable for children, then they were obligated to either improve the home and continue AFDC payments or remove the child from the home (Lawrence-Webb, 1997; McGowan, 2014). This policy, which became part of the 1962 Service Amendments, resulted in states providing substandard and culturally insensitive services to families and removing children from homes to "correct" neglectful conditions instead of supporting families. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of Black children inappropriately removed from their homes (Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

In the 1970s, support grew for mandated reporting (i.e., professionals such as teachers, nurses, psychologists, and social workers are required to file reports with CPS for any "reasonable suspicion" of child maltreatment) following publication of research in the 1960-70s regarding "battered child syndrome" (Kempe et al., 1962). The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 required states to pass child abuse and neglect laws including mandated reporting to qualify for federal funding (McGowan, 2014). However, the law did not specify how child abuse and/or neglect should be defined or operationalized. As a result, every state defined child maltreatment differently. Furthermore, CAPTA placed the primary focus on intervention instead of prevention and promoted a medical model of child abuse, focusing specifically on individual or parental factors (Roberts, 2002). Discrimination against Black children in CWS started to draw attention in the 1960s and 1970s (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002). As the number of Black children served increased, CWS spent more funds on out-of-home care and less on in-home services while increasing their punitive responses to families (Roberts, 2002).

The intractable problem of racial disproportionality in CWS can be traced back to events like the war on drugs (Lash, 2017). In the mid-1980s, due to a belief that crack cocaine was destroying inner-city communities by increasing violent crime and child neglect cases, Congress implemented the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, imposing lengthy mandatory minimum prison terms and harsh sentencing guidelines for those using or selling drugs (Levy-Pounds, 2010). Despite not being more likely to violate drug laws compared to other racial groups, Black adults were overrepresented amongst those convicted and incarcerated, leading to many Black children being placed in the foster care system when their parents were incarcerated (Levy-Pounds, 2010).

Furthermore, Black parents were disproportionately likely to have their parental rights severed (Lash, 2017). The 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act prohibited child welfare agencies from delaying or

denying foster or adoptive placements because of race, with the goal of expediting permanency by allowing transracial adoption (e.g., White families adopting Black children; Reynolds et al., 2010). Although the policy was informed in part by findings that transracial adoption is generally not harmful (Silverman, 1993), a consequence was that courts sought expedited adoption for many Black children separated from their caregivers rather than pursuing parental reunification (McRoy, 2004). The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 gave states the authority to terminate parental rights after a designated period of time if the parent had not completed their reunification requirements (Nicholson, 2006). Compounded by mandatory minimum sentencing introduced by the war on drugs, many parents permanently lost their children to the foster care system, particularly Black parents (Lash, 2017; Levy-Pounds, 2010). Higher rates of incarceration, in tandem with cuts to public assistance, led to a doubling of the number of children in out-of-home placements between 1985 and 1999 (Swann & Sylvester, 2006). Efforts to keep children connected to their families can be seen in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, which required states to notify all adult relatives when a child is placed in out-of-home care and provided financial assistance to children in kinship guardianship (i.e., living with grandparents and other relatives; McGowan, 2014).

Racial Disproportionalities and Disparities Within CWS

Black children and families today continue to be overrepresented in CWS (Lanier et al., 2014; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021). In 2020, Black children were overrepresented in foster care at a rate 1.65 times their rate in the general population in the United States (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Despite not being more likely to abuse or neglect their children after controlling for the influence of poverty (Font et al., 2012; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), Black parents are more likely to be investigated and receive fewer services

(National Association of Black Social Workers, 2003). Compared to White and Asian children, Black and multiracial children are more likely to be removed from the home, spend longer in foster care, and are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their families before aging out of care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Pinderhughes et al., 2019; The Annie E. Casey Foundation et al., 2006). The ongoing racial disparities in CWS can be traced to the legacy of racism and structural disadvantage that have led to higher prevalence of social determinants of maltreatment—especially poverty—among Black families (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Despite a recent review of over 50 empirical studies that suggests that outcomes of CWS involvement are not strongly negative on the whole (Barth et al., 2020), the fact remains that many children and families do experience trauma and harm as a result of their involvement in CWS, particularly Black families (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2022). A recent qualitative study of Black and Latinx parents who have had contact with CPS found that participants felt disrespected, judged about their parenting due to their race, and overburdened by CWS surveillance and intrusion into their family life (Merritt, 2021). In another study in which young African American men reflected on their involvement in child welfare, participants recalled not being told why they were separated from their parents and siblings, nor when or how they could be reunited, contributing to a lack of confidence in the professionals serving them (Miller et al., 2012). Such experiences can engender distrust of CWS, limiting collaboration to promote the safety of children.

Across the decades, many voices from various disciplines have called for a more preventive approach to child maltreatment (Nagi, 1977; Slack & Berger, 2020). Since the 1970s, keeping children with their families of origin has grown to be an increasingly significant priority in CWS, leading to legislation that prioritized family preservation over out-of-home placement (e.g., the Family Preservation and Family Support Act of 1993; Berry, 1997). Efforts to expand and implement family

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preservation services and limit children's entry into out-of-home care have continued with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), passed in 2018 (Williams-Mbengue, 2019). Given major financial and capacity barriers to implementation of FFPSA, the Family First Transition Act was passed at the end of 2019 to provide additional financial support for state CWS systems to build infrastructure for prevention-oriented services (Jordan & McKlindon, 2020). Despite these positive efforts to maintain children in their homes, family separation continues, along with its deleterious consequences for many children and families. The frustrations of many families directly affected by CWS and the concerns of professionals who see a system in a continual state of crisis have led to grassroots movements to abolish CWS.

Grassroots Abolition Movements

Interdisciplinary critiques of CWS have developed in tandem with increasingly vocal concerns from caregivers and communities. Longstanding social justice advocacy efforts (e.g., Rise, founded in 2005; Movement for Family Power, founded in 2018; JMacforFamilies, founded in 2019; and upEND and California Families Rise, founded in 2020) have been led by community activists and professionals alike who are trying to reexamine and redefine child protection and family support. Although they began much earlier, grassroots advocacy efforts received increased attention during the spring and summer of 2020 when the United States experienced a groundswell of outrage over racial discrimination in law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Shumaker & Wallis, 2020). Although the national discourse focused on efforts to radically transform police departments, it expanded to address other institutions that ostensibly aim to serve and protect citizens but ultimately result in disproportionate harm to communities of color. Calls to divert funds from law enforcement to social service agencies, including the CWS, were met with concern. Critics see CWS as another arm of policing, dubbed the "family policing system," that disproportionately monitors, penalizes, and harms racial/ethnic minority

families (Rise, 2020; upEND, 2022b). CWS has become a focus of racial justice advocacy, with calls to abolish CPS. Parents in New York City protested racism in the state CWS in 2020 (Fitzgerald, 2020) and an "Abolish ACF" rally was held on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of 2021 (Conn, 2021). Further, parents and community activists have built organizations including upEND and Movement for Family Power (MFP) to work toward ending family separation.

upEND, founded in 2020, is a collaboration between the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work with the mission of "ending the current child welfare system and creating in its place new, anti-racist structures and practices to keep children safe and protected in their homes" (upEND, 2022a). This organization contends that CWS is a source of ongoing oppression for Black families due to the intrusive and harmful nature of CWS involvement, particularly separating children from their families (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Although upEND recognizes the need for intervention for families struggling to provide safe and supportive environments, upEND calls for supportive interventions that address families' needs rather than punitive, harmful removal of children from homes. Though foster care can have a positive impact for some children and families, upEND argues that abolition is required because, "any perceived or actual benefit of foster care comes at a tremendous cost" (Dettlaff et al., 2020, p. 504). upEND advocates for several major goals, including ending involuntary separation of children and parents, reuniting children currently in care with their families and communities, and repealing state and federal mandatory reporting laws. Further, they advocate for the decriminalization of drug use and sex work and ending the practice of punishing caregivers experiencing intimate partner violence (Dettlaff et al., 2021).

Another organization, MFP, also works toward "divestment from the foster system and investment in community." Founded in New York City by two lawyers, MFP actively engages caregivers of

children who have been impacted by CWS. MFP sees CWS as an extension of oppressive social control systems, including as the new “ground zero for the U.S. drug war” (MFP, 2020). A significant aim of MFP is to raise awareness about harmful consequences of CWS involvement, especially in cases involving parental substance use. Notably, MFP states it is “not the architect of an alternative to child protective services,” but rather they seek to provide support in the form of networking, grant writing support, and research support for people and groups working to limit the size and scope of CWS (MFP, 2019). Given their viewpoint that substance use does not necessarily undermine safe and effective parenting, they also call for modifying substance use treatment programs to be more flexible and supportive, eliminating the practice of “test and report” (routinely administering toxicology screens to newborns and filing CWS reports for positive results), and adopting a less punitive approach to “people who parent while using drugs” (MFP, 2020, p. 109). They call for a repeal of ASFA, elimination of time limits on family reunification, and an end to termination of parental rights (MFP, 2020).

The passion and dedicated work of community organizers has led to recent legislative victories. For example, a bill passed in New York State in April 2020 (but subsequently vetoed by the governor), led in part by the Parent Legislative Action Network, aims to raise the standards of proof to list parents in the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment and limit the length of time they can be listed (S.B. S6427A, 2019). A bill proposed in February 2021 would end the common practice of “test and report” blamed for many cases of family separation (Prohibiting Drug Testing of Pregnant People, 2021). The Minnesota African American Family Preservation Act, introduced in February of 2021 but currently stalled, aims to address racial disparities in the child protection system. Among the bill’s provisions are requiring the state child

welfare authority to set a higher standard for efforts to preserve and reunite families and to consider African American families’ social and cultural values when creating case plans (African American Family Preservation Act, 2021) Although these reforms fall short of abolition, they mark progress toward a less punitive CWS. Beyond their policy advocacy efforts, the abolition movement also raises public awareness about the dysfunction of CWS as a moral issue. They spread the message that families are often harmed by CWS and that many would be better served by expansion of the social safety net. Further, various groups provide social support and educational resources for parents attempting to navigate the system (e.g., JMacForFamilies, 2022). In Rise’s 2021 report, “Someone to Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care,” they propose a model of parent-to-parent support as a replacement for CWS involvement (2021).

Groups advocating for the abolition of CWS and other major changes to our society’s approach to child protection have identified significant, enduring problems that negatively impact Black families. Despite changes to CWS over the years, there are enduring echoes of its foundation of structural racism—for instance, the perspective that although parents have the right to choose how they parent their children, they also are individually responsible for childrearing challenges that arise due to societal inequities. These criticisms of CWS have led many to conclude that dismantling our current system and abolishing CWS is the only viable way to end subjugation and separation of Black families. Another perspective is that reform is needed to CWS policies and procedures while maintaining its core structure. Although abolition and reform appear to be divergent positions, they contain numerous areas of overlap. A combined approach could entail both “fixing what exists now (evolutionary change)” and “building a new way of work (revolutionary change)” (Pryce, 2020), focusing on policies that are aligned with both the abolition and reform perspectives.

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Considerations for Moving Forward

Disentangling Poverty, Racism, and Neglect

Implementation of child welfare policies has been problematic. CWS has a long and storied history of racial discrimination resulting in longstanding disproportionalities and disparities. The ongoing challenges of CWS are due in part to the fact that the United States struggles to balance children's rights to protection against parental rights to control the upbringing of their children. A balance can be struck by expanding parents' access to social and economic support that allows them to be supportive caregivers. Unfortunately, CWS intervention is perceived as—and often is—intrusive and coercive rather than supportive. Viewing childhood maltreatment as an individual- or family-level problem perpetuates a crisis orientation within CWS.

Perhaps no subtype of childhood maltreatment better exemplifies our failure to consider social determinants in CWS than neglect. There is a longstanding assumption within child welfare research that maltreatment is a unitary construct—that is, that neglect and abuse in their many disparate forms comprise the same entity. Although we have historically defined maltreatment as including acts of commission (abuse) and acts of omission (neglect) (Giovannoni, 1971), definitions of what constitutes neglect are vague, subjective, and all too often overlap with poverty. Many families, due in part to structurally maintained racial inequalities, lack the support needed for safe, nurturing, supportive childrearing. As a result, there is an alarmingly high concordance between poverty and neglect (Drake et al., 2022). Material hardship predicts CPS reports of neglect (Slack et al., 2004), and rates of certain forms of neglect are higher among low-income compared to middle- or high-income families (Vanderminde et al., 2019). Due to inequities associated with structural racism, there are higher rates of poverty among families of color (Creamer, 2020). Black and White children tend to experience poverty differently in their communities due to housing segregation (Drake & Rank, 2009).

Johnson-Reid and colleagues found that allegations of neglect due to basic needs not being met have been found to be more common among Black children compared to White children (11.0% vs. 4.3%; Johnson-Reid et al., 2013). Despite the connection between poverty, racism, and neglect, we tend to approach instances of neglect as being parents' responsibility to fix rather than a result of holes in the social safety net. The substance use and mental health challenges seen at higher rates among people living below the federal poverty level further challenge parents' ability to care for their children.

As has been called for repeatedly (e.g., Milner & Kelly, 2020), the field of child maltreatment research must reconsider the utility of the traditional definition of maltreatment—that is, disentangling true neglect from the consequences of poverty—in the interest of providing appropriate services to children and, conversely, avoiding inappropriate and coercive family intervention. It has long been suggested that child maltreatment should include behaviors that are “judged by a mixture of community values and professional expertise to be inappropriate and damaging” (Garbarino & Gilliam, 1988, as cited in National Research Council, 1993, p. 64). However, parent voices from the abolish CPS movement indicate that public opinion differs from professional opinion. Thus, community-engaged mixed-methods research is needed to better understand community concerns about CWS and recommendations for its reformation. Conversations must include parents who have experienced harm through CWS and who are actively calling for abolition. In addition, given qualitative research that many individuals have positive experiences with CWS (Barth et al., 2020), it is important to consider their perspectives about both the benefits of CWS and its challenges.

Addressing poverty-related cases through other avenues besides CWS (e.g., meeting families' basic needs, expanding access to voluntary community-based services) could both shrink the size and scope of the system while also freeing up resources that allow the system to protect children experiencing

severe abuse and neglect. To better identify and track cases of severe abuse and neglect, solutions should be geared at “making the haystack smaller, not bigger, so the needles are easier to spot” (National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, 2021, p. 2). However, whereas the abolition movement focuses mainly on issues of parental substance use, domestic violence exposure, physical punishment, and neglect among families who wanted and tried to improve conditions for their children, this does not characterize all incidents of child maltreatment. In many cases, children experience serious harm and endangerment at the hands of their caregivers that may not desist without formal, and sometimes mandatory, intervention. Neglect is not synonymous with poverty (Barth et al., 2021), and is associated with a host of deleterious outcomes distinct from the effects of poverty (Proctor & Dubowitz, 2014). Efforts to significantly reduce the number of children removed from the home should proceed in tandem with efforts to improve foster care for those rare situations in which it is the only viable way to ensure a child’s safety.

Societal Transformation

Both abolitionists and those who advocate for CWS reform call for broad efforts to correct the maltreatment-related risk factors that disproportionately affect families of color. Organizations calling for abolition of CWS have proposed anti-racist, poverty-reducing policy initiatives that could be implemented in tandem with efforts to radically reform the existing CWS such as fair housing, affordable childcare, and paid family medical and sick leave policies. These policy initiatives are in line with research identifying macro-level risk factors for family violence and recommendations to reduce child poverty (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). For example, upEND and MFP call for creating and expanding social safety net programs such as requiring paid family and medical leave and implementing a universal child allowance. Other policies to increase families’ financial stability include increasing the minimum wage and

establishing refundable state earned income tax credits (EITC), both of which have been associated with decreased maltreatment rates, especially neglect (Kovski et al., 2021; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). The revised Child Tax Credit in the American Rescue Plan increased the amount of money disbursed to families with children and resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of families receiving monthly assistance (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). President Biden’s Build Back Better plan would have continued the expanded child tax credits, subsidized universal preschool and lower childcare costs, and expanded Medicaid coverage, among other proposed initiatives. Unfortunately, the bill’s progress stalled (Fram, 2022), and although many elements of the plan were incorporated into the Inflation Reduction Act (2022), social safety net proposals originally included in Build Back Better were not included (Bhatia et al., 2022).

Existing efforts to increase all families’ financial security must continue and grow, but additional measures are needed to address the staggering racial income and wealth gap due to structural racism. In 2021, Black households have the lowest median income (\$48,297) when compared to Asian (\$101,418), White (\$77,999), and Latino (\$57,981) families (Semega & Kollar, 2022); this racial inequity in income has existed for decades (Ha et al., 2022). Black families represent 23% of the people living poverty despite being only 13% of the U.S. population (Creamer et al., 2022). The typical net worth of a White family is nearly ten times that of a typical Black family (McIntosh, 2020). Eradicating this racial income and wealth gap can ensure that all families have financial security and decrease the stressors associated with maltreatment risk (Ha et al., 2022).

In addition to enhancing families’ financial stability, it is also critical to increase the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health and substance use treatment. Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) is an evidence-based treatment for individuals with opioid use disorder and has been found to be effective in increasing likelihood

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of reunification for CWS-involved families (Hall et al., 2016). Another type of intervention with considerable potential to improve family well-being and prevent need for CWS involvement is nurse home visiting programs. A universal nurse home visiting program, in which services are offered to all new parents regardless of sociodemographic risk factors, has been found to increase community connections, reduce postpartum mental health symptoms, reduce emergency medical care usage, and decrease child maltreatment rates by 39% through 5 years of age (Dodge et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2021). These are examples of a preventive public health approach that is needed to transform CWS from a punitive, crisis-oriented system to one that addresses families' needs proactively.

However, research on universal nurse home visiting indicated that benefits were less robust for

minority families compared to nonminority families (Goodman et al., 2021). Further, although FFPSA now allows states to use federal funds for MAT and other evidence-based substance use disorder treatments (2020), research suggests that Black patients tend to have less access to MAT compared to White patients (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). To address the common finding that interventions are often less effective for or less accessible to populations of color, culturally responsive interventions must be developed, evaluated, and implemented. Barriers to treatment access such as income, insurance status, transportation, and stigma must be addressed. Few existing evidence-based interventions specifically address the social and cultural context of Black children and families, including the effects of interpersonal and systemic racism on parenting



practices and family well-being. Cultural assets, such as racial socialization to support positive identity development, and culturally relevant coping strategies, such as communalism and spirituality, should be integrated into intervention programs for Black families (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2021).

In the immediate future, work must proceed toward societal improvement that would reduce the need for CWS, consistent with abolitionist goals. However, it is also imperative to continue efforts to improve how CWS functions. American children and families cannot wait for the elimination of poverty, establishment of housing as a human right, and other critical goals to come to fruition before the problems specific to CWS are addressed. Accordingly, the abolition movement argues that efforts to clarify and formalize what radical transformation of CWS will actually look like should proceed in tandem

with “reform efforts on an interim basis that shrink the scope and size of the child welfare system” (Dettlaff et al., 2020, p. 510). This represents the “non-reformist reform” approach proposed by André Gorz (1987), in which modifications to the system are intended to ultimately end in its dissolution. According to Gorz, non-reformist reform stands in contrast to reformist reform, whereby reforms do not meaningfully alter the framework of a given system. Abolitionists and reformists disagree as to whether the ultimate goal should be to eliminate CWS, retain it in its present form with minor modifications, or substantially shrink its size and scope while maintaining an apparatus that allows for state intervention when voluntarily accessed supports alone are insufficient to protect children. Despite disagreements about the long-term goal for CWS, it can generally be agreed upon that considerable societal transformation is in order, as is CWS reform.



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Child Welfare Reform

In addition to massive social policy initiatives, specific changes to CWS must happen in the short term to address its harmful consequences that are felt especially by Black children and families. Efforts to reform CWS are not new; federal and state governing bodies have introduced numerous modifications to the system over the past several decades. For instance, reformists have worked to replace family separation with family preservation, divert more funds to kinship care, improve training and retention of frontline workers, and better support foster families. However, the concept of “reform” is in and of itself value-neutral; that is, it simply means to change the existing policies and practices, without specifically indicating anti-racist change. Indeed, the traditional advocacy approach has at times resulted in worse treatment of Black families within CWS, rather than better (e.g., Adoption and Safe Families Act). Although some reform advocates have called for cultural competency and implicit bias trainings to address individual racism among CWS actors, such trainings will not be sufficient to address the problems described above (Font et al., 2012). Racism is embedded within CWS and can operate regardless of the best intentions of individual agents. In addition, reforms that result in the expansion of CWS or the undermining of family rights will fail to address the problem of systemic racism within CWS.

Moving forward, it is critical for reform to proceed from an “oppression framework,” with specific attention paid to the role of racism in shaping the experience of Black Americans at home and within CWS (Curtis & Denby, 2011). At the cutting edge of the CWS reform movement is a partnership among The Children’s Bureau at the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Prevent Child Abuse America called “Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-being.” Now in Round Two

of a three-tiered initiative, Thriving Families has allocated funding provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to build a more equitable, safe, and supportive CWS (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2022).

One potential target of change that has received recent attention is mandated reporting. Although practitioners generally agree that state intervention should occur only when “necessary to protect the child from harm that would be greater than that inevitably caused by the state’s own intervention” (Coleman et al., 2010, p. 111), mandated reports often initiate a course of state intervention that results in irreparable harm to children and families that exceeds the damage that could result from lack of intervention (Goemans et al., 2016). Recent years have seen increasing calls to end or reduce mandated reporting due to concerns that it disproportionately affects families of color (e.g., MFP, 2019). The vague mandate for mandated reporters to file reports to CWS when there is “reasonable suspicion” of child abuse or neglect is open to a range of interpretations, leading to different responses across agencies and providers, which creates an “environment where racial bias thrives” (Inguanta & Sciolla, 2021, p. 123). Further, there is an imbalance between the massive number of reports and investigations relative to services provided for children and families. Although mandated reporting is thought to enable early intervention when children are at risk of harm, empirical evidence suggests that more reporting is not necessarily better for children (Ho et al., 2017). Further, most allegations of abuse and neglect are ultimately found to be unsubstantiated; in 2019, only 16.7% of children reported to CWS were found to be victims of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Recently, Levi (2017) and Raz (2020) have advocated for efforts to reduce unnecessary mandated reporting to free up resources for cases that warrant intervention and to reduce unnecessary and harmful family separation. An issue brief prepared by Safe & Sound, a children’s advocacy organization in San Francisco, CA, proposes a shift “from mandated reporting

to community supporting” (Safe & Sound, 2022, p. 13). Recommended actions include mandating reporters to contact CPS “when there is a substantial or imminent risk of harm” rather than “reasonable suspicion,” requiring that evidence of risk within the home be weighed against the risks of family separation when considering out-of-home placement, and narrowing the category of “mandated reporters” to include only individuals with some degree of expertise in child maltreatment.

Although mandated reporters are legally required to convey to CPS information about any suspected abuse or neglect, definitions of neglect are often vague and subjective, allowing for confusion with the unfortunate consequences of poverty. Mandated reporters including school personnel, childcare providers, physicians, and mental health practitioners should educate themselves about local community resources to which they can link families (Thomas & Halbert, 2021). When mandated reporting is indicated, reporters can consider ways to mitigate the harm to families. For instance, reporters can offer to involve the family in the reporting process to increase transparency, convey family-level protective factors to CPS when filing a report, and inform parents about their rights when interacting with CPS (e.g., the right to refuse entry to their home without a warrant and to be informed of allegations) (Gormley et al., 2020).

Community Ownership

Reform of CWS will entail a societal shift toward viewing child well-being as the responsibility of not only parents, but also extended families, communities, and society at large. This sense of “community ownership” empowers individuals to have the power and responsibility to protect vulnerable children. Adopting community-based maltreatment prevention programs presents a promising opportunity to implement many of the proposals of critics of CWS while retaining its beneficial aspects (Daro, 2019). Community-based maltreatment prevention programs are

consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological model accounting for the dynamic, transactional relationships between an individual and their environment (1992). This shift toward community ownership would enhance appreciation for the importance of supporting and nurturing the family unit. Family systems theory proposes that, in clinical work with children and parents, individual members of a family are inextricably interconnected. The family comprises a unit that is greater than the sum of its parts, and intervention targets the family itself as a distinct entity (Hanna, 2018). Within the realm of child welfare, we ought to consider not only the rights of the child and the parent but also the rights of the family. Operating from the assumption that the family unit has a right to exist supports efforts to enhance services that enable adequate caregiving.

Initial findings from efforts to implement community-based maltreatment prevention programs were promising, suggesting improvements in parental well-being and increased collaboration between child welfare and family support agencies (Daro & Dodge, 2009). However, results also indicated high up-front costs and inconsistent or transient outcomes regarding prevention of CWS involvement. More work is needed to improve the quality, cultural relevance, and implementation of community prevention programs. As we continue toward the goal of supporting families by increasing community support capacity and decreasing punitive, crisis-oriented responses, it is important to capitalize on our existing resources. We can “weave together today’s fragmented public and private, voluntary and mandatory resources into a comprehensive system of care” (Daro, 2019, pp. 32-33). Ultimately, the abolition and reform movements can work toward shared goals of both protecting children and supporting families through confronting and countering systemic racism within CWS, shifting from viewing maltreatment as an individual problem to a consequence of racial and economic inequality, and implementing preventive community services to better support families.

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Author Note

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