Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System: Survey of Stakeholder Perceptions and Recommendations for Reducing Racial Inequities

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BACKGROUND

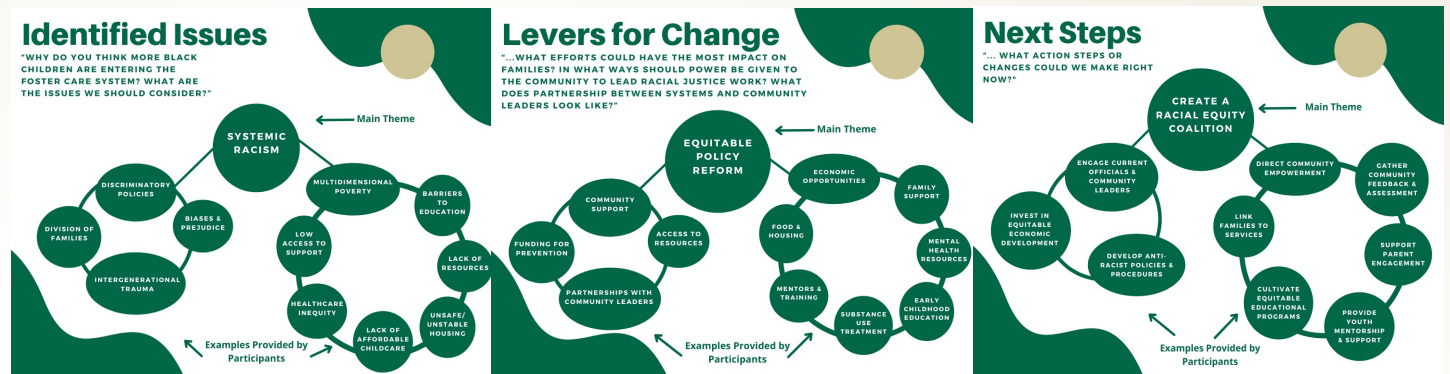Since 1962, the United States (US) has seen an increase of black children being removed from their families.
• Child welfare policies, practices, and regulations in use today are over 60 years old and were founded in an era that were founded of US normalization of racism.
• Proportion of black children entering US foster care is 2.2 times higher than proportion of black children in the US child population.
• Black families are more than twice as likely to be investigated for child abuse than white counterparts.
• When investigated, black children are twice as likely to be placed in out-of-home care, and they remain in non-kinship care 55% longer than non-black children.
• Black children in Florida's Hillsborough county comprise only 20% of the child population but make up 38% of all children classified as alleged victims of child abuse/neglect.
• Black children also enter out-of-home care at nearly double their representation in the population (39%), and they represent 45% of children in care for two or more years.
• Criteria for what constitutes unsafe living conditions for black children appear arbitrary
• There is little research regarding issues of fairness or justice for black children and families involved in the Child Welfare system , despite knowledge of social and political stigmatization of black people in the US. (DETTLAFF, A. J, BOYD, R, ANNALS, AAPSS, 692, November 2020)

METHODS

• Cross-sectional study, Online survey consisting of open-ended questions
• Study conducted between December 2020 and January
• Purposive venue-based sampling methods to recruit 40 key stakeholders of Hillsborough County child welfare system , i.e., 'Community Alliance'.
• Snowball sampling enabled further recruitment of participants (n= 101)
• Participants provide their insider perspectives regarding racial/ethnic disparities in the system, efforts they believe need to be made to address the racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system, the urgency of the situation, and, what actions need to be taken now to create change.

RESULTS

Themes & Codes

Illustrative Quotes

"(…)Inherent bias when making decisions to remove children from homes of (black) families. There is a great deal of research as to biased decisions (where) black children are removed from homes in similar instances where white children are not."

"Years of systematic racism and resulting assumptions on the capacity of black families to care for their children. (…) Black families tend to be (…) poor (and) live in neighborhoods of toxic stress (...causing) Adverse Childhood Experiences that impact the optimal development of their children."

"(…A) result of systemic inequality that produces unequal social and economic outcomes leading to higher rates of incarceration, drug addiction, lack of economic opportunity, etc. Issues (to) consider include ways to address economic inequality, health inequality, (…) and criminal justice reform."

"Working with law enforcement and CPI to educate them on the needs of the community, factors that influence removal and the available resources to reduce children coming into care. CPI and LE should also be educated as to their racial bias and how that can affect rate of removal."

"Provide a framework of interactive actions that leaders can use to organize a change implementation plan. Learn more about the families, make it more diverse and equitable, (and include) parents, teachers, hospitals, the community, etc."

"More community focused prevention programs that provide opportunities for early childhood education, career development opportunities for youth and young adults, and community development activities (…). Recruit foster parents within vulnerable neighborhoods and support relative care givers…"

"We (…) need more direct support in the communities that need it most (inner city and rural) and we need to provide resources, support, and education to marginalized (…) families to prevent removals and strengthen families. We need a proactive rather than reactive model and approach."

"Create a Commission on Racial Equity with community leaders (parents in the community, church leaders, black children who aged out of FC) who can identify the needs of the community, develop action plans to enact change and communicate with the SOC on ways it can support initiatives."

"Set up trainings for Law enforcement and CPI lead by the black community to target ideas of racial inequality, racial bias, needs of the black community and historically relevant events that have contributed to the black community being targeted for system involvement."

CONCLUSION

• Our findings suggest that most stakeholders perceived the root causes for disproportionalities and disparities in the child welfare system for black children are based on multiple internal and external factors.
• The internal factors include, but are not limited to: systemic racism, bias and discriminatory policies, lack of training for workers and supervisors, low worker retention rates, lack of black people in leadership and decision-making positions, lack of cultural competence and responsiveness, and lack of care and resources available for black children in foster care.
• The external factors are primarily due to Adverse Child Experiences (ACE's) of black children, youth, and families, which include parental factors (intergenerational family trauma, poverty, higher rates of teen parenthood, substance abuse, loss of critical support systems for families due to parental incarceration) and community factors (cross-cultural differences, lack of community).
• Despite efforts made to reduce these contributing factors, black children in the US continue to be disproportionately removed from their families, and end up staying the longest in the foster care system without proper care, shelter, guidance, and education. This creates more ACE's for these children, youth, and families, leading to a vicious cycle that desperately needs to be broken. Further research and community engagement is warranted.

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