

JOIN HANDS FOR CHILDREN

DISPROPORTIONALITY

Written by Marian Harris, co-chair, Outcome and Evaluation Issues Advisory Committee

Context

Disproportionality occurs when a particular racial/ethnic group of children are represented in any system including the child welfare system in higher or lower percentage than their representation in the general population. Data has repeatedly shown that children of color and their families are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system in America; children of color, when compared to white children are more likely to be removed from the care and custody of their birth parents and placed in foster care. Once in foster care, they remain longer and they receive fewer services; they have less contact with child welfare caseworkers when they are in care (Barth, 1997; Child Welfare Watch, 1998; Harris & Skyles, 2008; Harris & Hackett, 2008). Key decision points in the child welfare system are used when examining or analyzing disproportionality; key decisions points include (a) reporting for abuse and neglect; (b) referral of the report for investigation (and the process of investigation); (c) efforts to preserve the family (in-home or reunification services); (d) the court process moving toward alternate family (dependency process and termination of parental rights); and (e) pathways exiting the system.

In 2007, Substitute house Bill 1472 (SHB 1472) created the Washington State Racial Disproportionality Advisory Committee to determine if racial disproportionality exists in Washington State. The legislature directed the Committee to answer the following questions:

1. *Does racial disproportionality exist in the Washington State Child Welfare System?*
2. *What points in the Washington State Child Welfare System reflect the highest level of disproportionality for children of color?*
3. *Are children from low-income backgrounds more likely to be in the Washington State Child Welfare System than children from more affluent backgrounds?*
4. *Are children from single-parent families more likely to be in the Washington State Child Welfare System than children from two-parent households?*
5. *How do outcomes for children of color differ from the outcomes of White children?*

The Washington State Institute for public Policy (WSIPP) was the technical staff to the Advisory Committee and chose to use Children's Administration data from 2004 to answer the aforementioned questions.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy examined proportions of children from varied racial groups at key decision points to determine whether disproportionality exists in the Washington State child welfare system they identified 58,005 children referred to Child protective Services (CPS) and followed these children through November 2007. Findings include the following: American Indian children were three times as likely to be referred to CPS. Black children were nearly twice as likely to be referred to CPS. Hispanic children were 1.3 times as likely to be referred to CPS. Asian children were less likely to be referred to CPS. Indian children were 1.6 times as likely to be removed from home and twice as likely to remain in foster care for over two years. Black children were 1.2 times more likely to be removed from home and 1.5 times more likely to remain in care for over two years. Hispanic children were no more likely

to be removed from home or to remain in care for over two years. Asian children were no more likely to be removed from home and less likely to remain in care for over two years. Children from poor families and those from single parent households are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Disproportionality varies among the DSHS administrative regions; the largest disproportionality after the referral was seen with Indian children in Region 4.

Disproportionality Outcomes

Program and Police Level Outcomes

- Increased use of culturally specific in home services for children of color
- Increased number of resource families who reflect racial and ethnic diversity of children in need of families
- Enhanced tribal capacity to implement safety decision making processes and placement decisions
- Expanded use of tribal resource families and other children of color resource families

Practice Level Outcomes

- Decreased disproportionality of African American, Native American, Latino, Asian American/Pacific Islander and multiracial children in DCFS care
- Increased number of African American, Native American, Latino, Asian American/Pacific Islander and multiracial children and families receiving services in their own home
- Reduced time to achieve permanency for African American, Native American, Latino, Asian American/Pacific Islander and multiracial children in DCFS care
- Increased services to maintain family connections for children of color when placement is not with kin
- Decreased service disparities to African American, Native American, Latino, Asian American/Pacific Islander and multiracial children and families
- Increased opportunity for families to contribute their ideas about cultural issues that should be considered in decision-making
- Increased number of children in tribal versus DCFS in-home and out-of-home placements

All of the aforementioned outcomes are under the screen of culturally competent practice. From a social work perspective, the term *cultural competency* refers to the ability to understand the dimensions of culture and cultural practice and apply them to the client and the cultural/social environment. The term *cultural competency* describes the set of knowledge and skills that a social worker or other human service professional must develop in order to be effective with multicultural clients. Any system that has an outcome of eliminating or decreasing disproportionality and/or service disparities must provide a continuum of services that are culturally sensitive and competent.