RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN CPS:
SYMPOSIUM RECAP

By Adele Lehman, Field Center MSW Intern

Racial disproportionality in Child Protective Services (CPS) is well-documented (USDHHS, 2023), and the extent to which CPS reporting contributes to this disparity is a major topic of discussion among child welfare experts and practitioners. Based on the 2021 child population data (AECF, 2023) and CPS hotline report data (Children's Bureau, 2023), Black children are 80% more likely to be reported to CPS than White children, meaning that for every 1 out of 100 White children reported to CPS, 1.8 Black children are reported. Disproportionality persists from the point of initial CPS contact throughout the continuum of child welfare system involvement, with Black children representing 14% of the total child population in 2021, but 22% of all children in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2023).

Last semester, The Field Center hosted a Community Symposium on this topic and what big data can tell us about it, featuring guest lecturer Dr. Brett Drake, Professor of Data Science for the Social Good in Practice at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. He presented the findings of his recently co-authored research study which examined fifteen years of national child maltreatment reporting data.

The central argument made by Drake et al. (2023) is that while Black children are more likely to be reported to CPS than White children, these rates are proportional to, and even slightly lower than, the rates of need and risk among Black children compared to White children. They approximate the level of risk by looking at universal national data on identified risk factors associated with child maltreatment, such as poverty, single-parent households, low educational attainment, and teen births. The findings show that Black children experience these risk factors at two to three times the rate of White children, higher than the rate at which Black children are reported to CPS. Based on these findings, Drake et al. (2023) argue that Black children are not overreported to CPS relative to their risk, and that child welfare experts and policymakers should redirect their focus to expanding supports for Black children and families so that they are less likely to experience risk factors associated with maltreatment in the first place.

During the Community Symposium attended by child welfare scholars and practitioners, Dr. Drake prefaced his presentation and position by contending that the child welfare system does underserve families when it comes to preventing the conditions that put children at higher risk for neglect, and he acknowledges many of the flaws in the current form of the child welfare system. Amidst calls to abolish the child welfare system as it disproportionately impacts Black children and families, Dr. Drake cautions that this will not address the root causes of neglect in many cases. Rather, he proposes that we implement policies that combat child poverty and systemic racism such as a federal child allowance and increasing the federal minimum wage.

My fellow interns at the Field Center and I are appreciative of the learning opportunities that events like these create. As someone hoping to engage in policy work after graduation, I am grateful to have the opportunity to weigh different arguments and think about what sorts of policies and practices could best address issues in child welfare, since those analytical skills are crucial for that kind of work.

References

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