

# Not So Black and White Issues in Child Welfare

## Part II: Communities & Race in Child Welfare

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### Introduction

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**It's early twentieth century Chicago. Neighborhoods experiencing high reports of maltreatment are predominately occupied by European immigrants. Fast forward a hundred years...**

Today the same neighborhoods continue to experience high reports of maltreatment but are now predominately occupied by African Americans. (1)

Racial geographic phenomena in child welfare are not limited to Chicago. In 1997, 1 in 10 children in Central Harlem, New York had been placed in foster care. (2) Some child welfare leaders explain that racial geographic phenomena in child welfare occur because poor families and families and children of color live in "disadvantaged communities" at disproportionately higher rates. Many studies have shown that the impact of race on maltreatment rates is significantly reduced when community risk factors such as poverty are controlled. (3)

These findings suggest that services, practices, and policies aimed at neighborhood conditions can also affect racial phenomena in child welfare. Some child welfare leaders have based their racial equity reform strategy on this community principle. When applied to a community, this strategy requires two parts: (1) identify the conditions in the neighborhood that affect child maltreatment and (2) deliver services and programs directed at these neighborhood

### References

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### PAGE 2

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### PAGE 4

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conditions.

## How do neighborhood conditions impact child maltreatment?

Generally, high concentrations of neighborhood conditions such as poverty, crime, increased child care burden, vacant housing, overcrowding, bars and stores selling alcohol, unemployment, and residential instability are positively associated with high child maltreatment rates. (1) However, the effects of neighborhood conditions vary depending on the type of maltreatment.

Adverse neighborhood conditions correlate with child neglect more than physical or sexual abuse. Specifically, poverty has the strongest association with neglect, “somewhat less for physical abuse, and moderate for sexual abuse.” (2) In addition, housing conditions such as overcrowding and residential instability have stronger associations with neglect than abuse. (3) The density of stores selling alcohol is positively associated with physical abuse rates, while the density of bars is significantly associated with neglect.” (4) These findings suggest that neighborhood conditions can increase maltreatment rates.

Not surprisingly, *neighborhood conditions can also decrease maltreatment rates*. The effect of poverty on maltreatment is weaker in communities where neighbors know each other and are more likely to support each other’s parenting. (5)

Neighborhood conditions can promote children’s resiliency against maltreatment, too. A 2010 public health study found that a caregiver’s perception of a neighborhood support system moderated aggressive behaviors in twelve-year old children who had experienced neglect; however, it did not find the same effect for the children who had experienced physical abuse. (6)

## How do neighborhood conditions impact racial disparity in child welfare?

A recent University of Chicago Chapin Hall study suggests that neighborhood conditions such as poverty impact children of color differently than white children. (7) Research indicates that higher poverty rates for white children were strongly associated with higher reported white child maltreatment; however, higher poverty rates of Black children were *not* associated with higher reports of Black child maltreatment. (8) Instead, higher poverty rates of Black children were associated with *lower* reports of Black child maltreatment. (9)

The difference between reported child maltreatment among races was greatest in counties with lower poverty rates. In other words, white child maltreatment may be more likely to be reported in high poverty communities while Black child maltreatment may be more likely to be reported in low poverty communities. Research has not explained why

## Summary of Part I: Race in Child Welfare 101

### Racial Phenomena Categories:

#### Disproportionality

Disproportionality is the percentage of a group’s population within a system relative to the percentage of a group’s population within the general population (i.e., over- or underrepresentation).

#### Disparity

Disparity is the unequal treatment of a minority population relative to a majority population within a system (i.e., discrimination).

#### Theoretical Explanations:

**Biased Decision-Making** theorists believe that racial disproportionality occurs due to the aggregation of discriminatory practices and policies.

**Risk Factors** theorists believe that racial disproportionality reflects differential maltreatment rates among races largely linked to the disproportional rates of child maltreatment risk factors.

#### Current Trends & Research

- Research has overwhelmingly shown children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.
- Recent studies have shown different maltreatment rates among races because families and children of color experience maltreatment risk factors at disproportionately higher rates.
- Other studies have shown evidence of discrete racial disparities in child welfare.

poverty has different effects among races – the study’s author concludes that more research is needed. (10) [Click here to read the Chapin Hall study.](#)

## How should neighborhoods and child welfare work together?

Most child welfare leaders agree that child welfare reform is

not sufficient to overcome neighborhood conditions such as poverty, crime, and unemployment. Although most child welfare leaders recognize that neighborhood conditions affect child maltreatment, they disagree on how child welfare should deliver programs and services partly because they value the impact of neighborhood conditions differently.

## **Intense Agency Involvement**

Some child welfare leaders, such as Harvard's Elizabeth Bartholet, advocate increasing agency surveillance and decreasing barriers to removal in high poverty areas. These leaders believe that CPS should intensely monitor children's safety and parents' compliance with court ordered programs and services. Proponents of intense agency involvement focus on neighborhood conditions that increase child maltreatment rates and are skeptical that reunification can be achieved when these neighborhood conditions persist. If the child is reunified with the parent(s), they believe that the child welfare agency should provide follow-up services.

To facilitate intense agency surveillance, Bartholet argues that barriers to removal should be reduced. She and other policy leaders believe that accelerating termination of parental rights and removal would enable CPS to direct more resources to surveillance and prevention programs such as mandatory in-home nurse visits beginning at the prenatal period through preschool. This approach is also aimed at reducing the amount of time Black children remain in foster care because studies show that Black children remain in foster care longer than white children. Prolonged stays in foster care can have negative consequences for the child in the future such as educational deficiencies, higher incarceration rates, higher rates of single-motherhood and high unemployment. Proponents of intense agency involvement believe that deferring court involvement of families identified as low risk for serious maltreatment will have limited impact on reducing the number of families in child welfare because they believe most child welfare cases involve very serious maltreatment.

## **Differential Response System**

Northwestern's Dorothy Roberts and other child welfare leaders advocate for a differential response to child maltreatment. In a differential response system, a family is assessed and identified as high, moderate, or low risk for serious maltreatment. Families identified as high risk enter the traditional court process -- the children are either already removed or removal is imminent. Families identified as moderate/low risk are referred to voluntary services or informal court proceedings where they agree to participate in programs and services directed at their specific needs.

Differential response advocates like Roberts value neighborhood conditions that decrease maltreatment rates such as informal neighborhood support networks. They argue that intense agency involvement in communities has negative consequences on informal neighborhood support

networks. A preliminary study in Chicago found that residents reported that intense agency involvement in their neighborhoods had profound effects on social relationships including interference with parental authority, damage to children's ability to form social relationships, and distrust among neighbors.<sup>(11)</sup> These findings suggest that intense agency involvement may hinder a community's ability to build informal neighborhood support networks. Consequently, community members come to rely on intense agency involvement for needed support.<sup>(12)</sup> Differential response advocates argue that a differential response system is a more effective and efficient delivery approach because it limits the negative consequences of intense agency involvement and prevents unnecessary removals.

Historically, the prevalence of risk factors and high maltreatment rates were used as an excuse to increase removal rates in American Indian and African American communities. Differential response advocates are concerned that families and children of color living in impoverished communities are at high risk for discrimination and unnecessary removals. A University of Michigan study found that people living in impoverished communities are more vulnerable to unfair treatment perhaps because they have reduced access to problem-solving resources.<sup>13</sup> Relying on such data, Roberts and her colleagues argue that a differential response system is more objective and protects against discrimination because it identifies families according to risk of serious maltreatment.

## **How will the redesigned Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare deliver services and programs?**

In July 2011, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) issued two Requests for Proposals to implement a redesign of the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW). The redesign incorporates a differential response system authorized by recent legislation. Under the redesigned system, families at risk for imminent removal can be deferred from formal court procedures and instead receive Intensive In-Home Services (IIHS) while the child remains in the home. These services will include teaching problem-solving skills to family members and connecting families to formal and informal community supports. To receive IIHS services, a family must either (1) initiate contact with BMCW or (2) enter a formal agreement with BMCW and District Attorney when the court has jurisdiction and the District Attorney referred the case to informal disposition.

For IIHS to be effective, families must embrace participation. Families may hesitate to initiate contact with BMCW to request IIHS because they fear that they may not receive IIHS and instead their child would be removed. IIHS could be underutilized if the District Attorney's Office does not consistently refer low/moderate risk families to informal disposition rather than the formal Child in Need of Protection and Services (CHIPS) process. Once a family agrees to IIHS, the family is considered an equal participant in the

service planning process. If the family does not cooperate with IIHS, removal of the child(ren), referral to Children's Court and criminal prosecution for maltreatment remain as responses. The threat of prosecution and removal may create an incentive for families to fully cooperate. On the other hand, families and community members could become less willing to share information with IIHS providers when they believe the information could be misunderstood and used to facilitate removal. IIHS providers should be mindful of the program's goal when sharing information with BMCW. Ideally, IIHS providers should cultivate trust with communities by communicating to families its goal to prevent unnecessary removals as well as providing effective, timely services. Without an open exchange of information with families and their communities, IIHS providers could struggle to provide the most effective services for families.

The success of differential response in Milwaukee County will depend upon the District Attorney's use of discretion in deferring CHIPS proceedings in low/moderate risk cases and effective trust-building in the community by BMCW and its contracted IIHS providers. If the institutional partners and families collaborate effectively, the differential response model can birth a truly community-based child welfare system; if not, the BMCW redesign might function more like an intense agency involvement model rather than a differential response system.

## Conclusion

Child welfare is often viewed as an individual matter regarding a single family in isolation. Judges are required to answer one legal question: what is in the best interests of this child? Case managers are charged with delivering services and placement of each individual child. Policy makers and the public hear about emotionally charged cases. While this occurs, neighborhood conditions affecting individual families are also impacting child maltreatment patterns and racial phenomena in child welfare generally.

Neighborhood conditions indisputably affect maltreatment rates. However, it is critical to remember that the positive or negative effect of the same neighborhood characteristic can differ depending upon the type of maltreatment and the racial identity of the neighborhood. In this way, neighborhood issues that generally affect child welfare can still affect families and children of color disproportionately. Hospital and community health center locations, residential zoning ordinances regarding vacant housing or occupancy limits, liquor licensing patterns in neighborhoods, employment services, unemployment benefits, the existence of neighborhood coalitions and community organizing groups, distribution of community block grants, and the child welfare service delivery system may be among conditions that affect children of color disproportionately.

As policymakers, child welfare professionals, and community members we all should think critically about how decisions regarding neighborhood development and safety can impact child maltreatment and racial phenomena in child

welfare. When evaluating these issues we must remember the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child." We must ask, are our community development efforts empowering or harming our village and families who are raising children?

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