SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION CONSORTIUM
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Race Equity: Nassau and Onondaga County

Report

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Introduction

Racial disparity within the child welfare system has been a persistent issue. In many states, there have been concentrated efforts to make child welfare decision making more equitable. Particularly, in New York State, where 35 counties have an over-representation of black children in their foster care system, considerable effort has been made at the local, state and regional levels to eradicate racial disproportionality within the last 10 years. In 2009, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) with support from Casey Family Programs, provided grants to thirteen counties in the upstate region to develop strategies to reduce the over representation of black children in their child welfare systems. Data has shown that at least two counties have been able to significantly and positively impact the disparity in their foster care system, Nassau County and Onondaga County. OCFS became interested in what strategies were implemented in those counties with hope that it could inform and mobilize other counties. The Social Work Education Consortium was contracted to prepare a comparative case study with both counties, using document analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups and field visits as the basis for developing a description of the experiences and practices in Nassau and Onondaga Counties. The findings from the case study provide the basis for making some interpretations that might explain their success in reducing foster care entry for black children.

Research Questions/Interview Questions

Two professional staff and two doctoral students worked together as the research team for this case study. The research team formulated the central guiding question for the project as well as interview questions for executive leadership and each focus group prior to data

collection. The guiding research question was, "*This County has been able to lower their rates of black children in foster care. In your experience, during 2010-2014, what may have caused the decrease?*" All the other interview questions (See Appendix A) were developed centered on this guiding question and also based on the existing data from each county. The leadership teams in both counties reviewed the interview questions and provided their feedback.

Methods

This study used a Comparative Case Study Approach with two New York State counties. Comparative case studies are useful for examining two or more cases in order to produce more generalizable knowledge about causal questions on how and why particular organizations, programs or policies found success or failure (Goodrick, 2014).

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University at Albany. Researchers conducted themselves and participants respectfully and ethically. The principal investigator spoke with the Commissioners of each participating county to inform them of the project and obtain consent. Subsequently, each commissioner mobilized their leadership team in order to bring others (assistant directors, supervisors, and caseworkers) onboard the project.

This study was a yearlong project, from January to December 2016, which consisted of gaining the IRB approval for the project, appraising the child welfare racial disparity literature, creating the data collection protocol (i.e. interview questions, focus group discussion topics), and analyzing data using the qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.TI. The data collection protocol was reviewed by the Director of Strategic Partnerships at the OCFS as well as the senior leadership from each participating county.

Nassau and Onondaga Counties showed noticeable improvement in the ratio of black children who were being placed in out of home care. In Nassau County, in 2010, black children were 14-15x more likely to be placed in foster care compared to Caucasian children. In 2013, black children were 11x more likely to be placed in foster care compared to Caucasian children (OCFS, 2015). Likewise, in Onondaga County, in 2011, a black child was 6x more likely to be placed in out of home care. Within the next year, 2012, the county had cut that in half, where black children were 3x more likely to be placed in foster care (2015). This is a significant reduction as OCFS data reported that statewide the foster care system was comprised of 75% Black or Latino children (2009).

Study Participants

The participants in this study consisted of employees in each child welfare agency who had involvement with the decision making process, in terms of removing a child and placing them in foster care. Leadership in each county sent out an invitation to their staff and encouraged them to join the focus groups. Participants included, Commissioners, Directors of Service, Assistant Directors of Services, Staff Development Coordinators, Supervisors, and frontline Caseworkers. All participation was voluntary. Each participants provided unique perspectives of the decision making process in Child Protective Services (CPS): Commissioners provided insights into their agency structure and organizational policies; Directors and Assistant Directors provided information on their experience with implementing and overseeing programs; Staff Development coordinators gave overviews of what trainings have been provided to their counties; Supervisors offered perspective on directly supporting their caseworkers in their practice and decisions; and caseworkers

provided examples of their close relationships with families in crisis and managing the weight of decisions.

Data Collection Procedures

During a 2-month period, the research team traveled to each county to conduct 90-minute in-depth face-to-face interviews and 90-minute focus groups. The following table shows how the data collections strategies were delineated by participant.

Participants	Data Collection Strategy
Social Service Commissioners	**Face-to-face In-depth Interview**
Directors of Service	**Face-to-face In-depth Interview**
Staff Development Coordinators	**Face-to-face In-depth Interview**
Assistant Directors of Service	**Focus Group**
Supervisors	**Focus Group**
Caseworkers	**Focus Group**

Analysis

The collected interviews and focus groups were transcribed for content analysis. In total, there were over 700 minutes of audio collected from interviews and focus groups, which resulted in 84,000 words on 175 pages of transcriptions (See Appendix C). The qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.TI was utilized to code and organize the collected data. Each member of the research team imported their transcriptions in the ATLAS.TI program and, using software prompts, they coded all data from each interview and focus group. In examining this breadth of data, there was an iterative and recursive process of coding and familiarization with commonalities and variations. The analysis was done utilizing a 3-prong coding system which included, *preliminary coding, neighbor coding, and selective coding.*

After the preliminary round of coding, each member created *Code Neighbors*. Code Neighbors are a thematic grouping where ATLAS.TI groups codes and notates where they are found throughout the transcript and shows if they are similar to other codes. As this process continued, a master codebook (See Appendix B) was created which housed every code that emerged from the data. There were approximately 20 codes that emerged from the data. The principal investigator examined the codebook and established main themes through *Selective Coding* (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010).

Findings

This project sought, through qualitative inquiries, to investigate what factors contributed to the decreases shown in these counties. The findings discussed in the following section are organized by main themes, which were identified thorough selective coding. The research team suggests that each theme below made significant impact on the lowering of racial disparity in Nassau and Onondaga County. Some themes are shared between the two counties, and some are unique to a particular county.

Common Themes from Both Counties

Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR)-Pilot Project Grant

With support from Casey Family Programs, there was a DMR grant provided to 13 counties throughout NYS (G. Owens, personal communication, November 22, 2016). Onondaga and Nassau were both recipients of that DMR grant. The grant amounts varied depending on the county. The DMR grant was awarded in order to support activity planning, training, technical assistance, data collection and implementation of strategies that reduce the over-representation of Black and Latino children in out-of-home placement (OCFS, 2009). In

all interviews with Social Service Commissioners, and Directors of Service, they viewed the

DMR grant as the impetus to their work on racial disparity issues. A commissioner explained

their reaction to receiving the grant:

> "We were aware of the racial disparity in our work, though how we were going to approach it was still up in the air. It made us all very happy to receive our grant awardee letter from OCFS which really introduced the DMR work."

Training: Staff Development

The data found that both Nassau and Onondaga counties prioritized staff development

throughout that past 5-7 years. Three trainings repeatedly came up during data collection; The

Race Equity Learning Exchange (RELE) by Katib Waheed, and *Knowing Who You Are* by

Casey Family Programs, and *Bridges out of Poverty* by Denise Schaller. Not all trainings are

mandated, though Mr. Waheed's course, RELE and the *Knowing Who You Are* training was

mandated for all directors, assistant directors, supervisors and caseworkers. The staff

development coordinator commented:

> "People were on time and we didn't have to hunt people down. It was a great opportunity to learn what others' experiences have been."

Focus group participants reported that Bridges out of Poverty was *"tremendous."* One

assistant director stated:

> "Bridges out of Poverty really taught me how to reach some people. My assumptions were off, and I remember being struck by that. How do we reach them? Teach them? It taught us how to give clients something to build on their own."

Caseworkers are the ones on the frontlines and their perspective of the trainings were

important to note. For the most part, caseworkers felt that they gather valuable information

from the trainings, but it is important to follow up and hold everyone accountable to the

information that they received. Nassau County has put committees in place to follow up with

caseworkers and supervisors in an effort to facilitate continual learning. A director of service

stated:

> "In terms of follow-up, we also have a workgroup for caseworkers and supervisors, and then we have a stakeholder's group/executive group where we meet monthly. That group discusses DMR and RELE (training). And with RELE, we created a third day follow-up to the 2-day training, we broke down the objectives into flow charts that outlined how we could make changes and reduce the inequity. We are now creating action plans, what we can change, time for change, and we are developing that with the active group."

Community Services

Nassau County Department of Social Services and Onondaga County Department of

Social Services offer numerous resources and programs to families in the community. The

quantity and type of services provided by each county was noted *twenty* times throughout the

individual interviews and focus groups. One Onondaga County caseworker discusses the

quantity and types of services available to families in need, as well as the role that

caseworkers play in linking families to these resources.

> "We have a lot of services…we do a pretty good job as an agency putting information out to our workers about what's available to our families and then connecting our families to those things before we're even getting to the point where we would have to do a removal."

This statement emphasizes both the abundance of services available and the preventive nature

of some of these services. Both aspects are central to understanding the connection between

community services and reduced racial disparity rates for children entering foster care in

Nassau and Onondaga counties.

Services, Programs and Resources

Exceptional Family Resources, a comprehensive manual of different programs and

services, is a resource guide given to each caseworker at Onondaga County Department of

Social Services (DSS). The 73-page manual details various community agencies that offer

specific services to families and community members in need. Counseling, early childhood

education, after school programs, behavioral health, financial support, insurance, legal and

advocacy help,   housing, vocational and continuing education, transportation, trainings and

emergency services are amongst the many resources available. Onondaga County

caseworkers also mentioned many other resources in addition to the services listed in the

manual. Refugee services, the Syracuse Community Health Center and "Give to Others" are

amongst the services that caseworkers identified as helping families in need that were not

listed in the *Exceptional Family Resources* manual.

Nassau County offers similar services, as presented in the *Nassau County Department

of Social Services Annual Report 2015* and on the department website. The services include,

domestic violence, housing, employment, medical, daycare, and community outreach, legal,

financial, and emergency services. Despite the large amount of services one must be aware of

when helping families and individuals, there is recognition that these services are necessary to

achieve agency goals. A caseworker stated:

> "But when it comes down to it, we realize that our goal is child focused: reducing
> risk, increasing safety."

Offering a variety of community services to children and families is one way that caseworkers

can reduce risk and increase safety. It is possible that the increased availability of community

services has spread to all families in the community, including African American and Latino

families.

Preventive Services

Preventive services are unique in that they aim to provide support to families in the

community in an effort to prevent children from being removed from the home. Some

preventive services are voluntary whereas others are mandated. However, all preventive

services aim to prevent removal. Nassau County and Onondaga County caseworkers, Assistant Directors and Directors all mention the pivotal role that preventive services play in child welfare. One caseworker notes the importance of addressing current problems to prevent future removals.

> "We need to nip this in the bud now before 6 months, a year, 5 years down the road we get to the point where the children are no longer safe in their environment."

And another director links preventive services with the decrease in the number of children in foster care.

> "Our number of children in foster care decreased dramatically over the years. So why is that? Maybe it's because we are providing better services to the family, we're giving them more preventive services…we're more into maintaining families and giving them   the skills that they need."

Preventive services are used throughout Nassau and Onondaga counties to "stabilize the family" and provide the necessary resources, programs and skill-building "before we're even getting to   the point where we would have to do a removal." Purchase Preventive Services, Family Support for Student Success, Family Connections, "Let's Go to Kindergarten," and Family Support   Center are amongst some of the specific programs mentioned that aim to prevent removals.

Family Assessment Response (FAR)

Family Assessment Response (FAR) is a preventive service that both Nassau and Onondaga counties offer to families. When a child abuse report is made and sent to the county,   districts with a FAR program can select to assign the case to FAR instead of pursuing a formal CPS investigation. FAR counties have specific criteria for which cases can be considered for a FAR response. FAR is a voluntary program that one director describes as "service-oriented rather than being investigation-oriented."

> "It [FAR] helps reduce the number of cases that are being investigated and it helps give more services to families that might have issues that don't rise to the level of abuse and neglect."

In Onondaga County, one supervisor noted that "every single one of our new employees has been through FAR assessment response training." This training focused on family engagement principles and working with the family to link them with appropriate services. In Nassau County, a caseworker and a director indicated that FAR is implemented in areas targeted by DMR.

> "[FAR results in] less kids getting removed, less kids getting trapped in the investigation process, more families that get helped and less recidivism."

Another aspect of FAR, explained by a director, allows caseworkers to use various styles of questioning, models and principles that will help each family meet their unique needs and build the skills necessary to prevent children from being removed from the home and placed into foster care. The premise, according to a director of service, is that "every parent has these skills"; FAR caseworkers work with each family to enhance these skills and expand their resources. Both Nassau and Onondaga counties have seen a reduction in the rates of African American and Hispanic children who are placed in foster care.

Community Collaborations

Collaborating with other systems in the community that impact children and families is a concept that was emphasized in individual interviews and focus groups conducted in both Nassau and Onondaga counties. In fact, community collaborations were mentioned *16* different times throughout the transcripts. In Nassau County, there is a focus on the importance of giving a voice to each community agency and coming together to share ideas. Large stakeholder meetings are known to occur in Nassau County. Here, many community

agencies (i.e. Department of Juvenile Justice, Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Office

of Minority Affairs, Hispanic Counseling Center and others) come together to discuss

potential solutions to the problem of racial disparity in foster care. A director explains,

> "And we tried to just get different people to kind of put a voice to, "How do they
> think we need to approach it? And how can everybody kind of get together to try to
> reduce racial disparity?"

Other events, such as community trainings and the event, "Make it Happen," also bring

community agencies together to directly address the racial disparity in foster care. "Make it

Happen" specifically focused on the DMR zip codes in Nassau County. Members of the

clergy, school districts and numerous community organizations were brought together to

brainstorm ways to reduce racial disparity in these particular zip codes. As one director states,

"You can't do it on your own." Collaborative partnerships promote community involvement

and investment.

School-Based Initiatives

While Nassau County focused on various community agencies partnering together to

address racial disparity, Onondaga County focused specifically on school-based initiatives.

Programs such as "Say Yes", Family Support for Student Success, and the Syracuse Promise

Zone were identified as school-based initiatives. The purpose of these initiatives is to have

families and schools partner together to try to match specific services and interventions to the

needs of both the caregivers and the children in an effort to reduce risk and increase safety.

After school care, medical, behavioral and mental health treatment are amongst the many

services that school-based initiatives can offer to families. A caseworker stated,

> "Our schools and our families love this program…we put a lot of money into
> [school- based] services into our community and I think it makes a big difference."

Case Practice Development (CPD)

The way in which families have been more actively engaged in making decisions and preventing removals is highlighted in both Nassau and Onondaga counties. In the past, families were not as involved in this process. Many caseworkers and directors in both counties indicate that there was more of a "quickness" to remove children or send them to foster care when there was not an immediate relative willing or able to take care of the children. However, focus group members indicate that this casework approach has changed. A supervisors explains,

> "It's not just a "safe" or "isn't safe." If it is unsafe and that is clear, what can be done differently? What are mitigating circumstances? What can we help the family in identifying what they are not able to identify on their own? How can we help support movement in the situation so that risk can be reduced?"

Caseworkers are spending more effort and time on engaging in a thorough assessment that helps families identify strengths and alternative resources to prevent removal.

In addition, the willingness to come together with other workers and agencies to provide services to at-risk families and to prevent removals was referred to several times by different focus group members in both Nassau and Onondaga counties. Collaboration appears to occur often but, particularly, when families are refugees or do not speak English as a first language. One caseworker explained why she regularly collaborates with a Spanish-speaking caseworker.

> "I go to [coworker's name] a lot of times, like she said, when they not English speaking families and I don't know how to explain to them from my perspective, you know, because I can't convey it to them in their language. So I go to [caseworker's name] and tell her, "Talk to them, explain to this family that they're at risk of foster care.""

Collaboration is typically followed by a family meeting of some kind in which further resources and solutions are explored to prevent the removal of children from the home.

Caseworkers are also expected to complete a thorough investigation based on all of the facts and surrounding circumstances of the case before making a removal decision. The decision-making is deliberate; it is based on careful thought and assessment. Caseworkers remark on their willingness to take their time in locating family strengths and resources before placing children in foster care. One caseworker states the importance of being thorough, "crossing all T's and dotting all I's," to delve further into the case in determining whether a case should be closed or whether a child should be removed. This willingness to be thorough, coupled with adopting less rigid thinking, is valued by some caseworkers.

> "I think we tend to not think of things just so black and white…Just thinking out of the box and not focusing anything on race…I don't even think half the time I look at what the race is when I get a case."

Looking at the facts and circumstances of the case and identifying strengths and resources appears to be the focus for the caseworkers who participated in this study. This way, they deliberate based upon the unique circumstances of each case rather than allow bias to cloud their judgment and lead their decision-making. This is all a part of the development of case work in each county.

Family Meetings, Family Recruitment and Alternative Resources

Family meetings, identifying family strengths and resources, and identifying 'suitable others' are aspects of CPD that are referred to over *40* times in the transcripts. Family meetings typically include the caseworker, the family, and the caseworker's supervisor, though others may also be included (i.e. other staff members, additional family members, pastors or other family supports). The purpose of these meetings is for the family to have more input and involvement in their own case, thus allowing for more solutions. It also facilitates the chance for the family to provide insight into their own situation, as well as

identify alternative resources and "suitable others" that may be able to step in to prevent foster care placement. Caseworkers are taking a more active approach to developing a comprehensive assessment of family challenges and resources.

> "Resources are very important. We really gotta know where the fathers are, where the family members are, if there are teachers or friends that are involved…"

Other participants note that the "family meetings and the engagement meetings are huge" and that it is becoming more common practice to allow parents, "the opportunity to give some other resources that maybe we haven't come up with on our own."

There is consensus across Nassau and Onondaga counties that the number of children in foster care has decreased as a direct result of the increase in focus on family meetings, family recruitment, and finding suitable others. One caseworker from Nassau County passionately shared her belief that once family meetings were established, the number of children of color in foster care decreased "immediately"; she snapped her fingers and stated, "Like, faster! Then reunifications happened and it was amazing. What we were doing- it was crazy!" A supervisor from Onondaga County also commented on the connection between the recent push to find suitable others and the decrease in the number of foster care placements:

> "But we also have, I think, a lower number of kids in care because we have a large number of relative placements. We tend to engage families more and investigate before kids come into care and finding those relatives so kids don't have to come into care."

Aside from the general talk about family meetings and family recruitment, Family Finding Units and KinGap are mentioned several times as specific examples of programs that aim to find suitable others instead of placing children into foster care. Using kinship care and Family Finding Units means that instead of being placed into foster care with a stranger, children are

able to stay with people they already know, though this is not always the case. One caseworker

discusses the importance of exploring kinship and other family resources.

> "In the event we have to remove, we would prefer for the child to be with a family
> member or a friend or someone they're familiar with than to put them into foster
> care. I stress the importance of obtaining as many resources as possible because it's
> devastating to remove a child from the home…to remove them and put them in with
> strangers is even more devastating. I think that's the most important- to try to find
> the resources, family resources and friends."

Caseworker Characteristics

Though case practice development has been identified as one possible strategy for the

decreased racial disparity rates in foster care, there is another factor related to caseworkers that

may also be contributing to this reduction. The collaborative nature of some of the

caseworkers coupled with their willingness to take initiative and to conduct thorough,

deliberate assessments   are caseworker characteristics that should not be overlooked. These

characteristics were never named or directly mentioned by any participants. However, it

became clear in reading the transcripts that some caseworkers possessed unique characteristics

which made them more   effective in their work.

Initiative

Caseworkers in Nassau and Onondaga counties take initiative to provide families

the services and care that they need to prevent their children from being placed in foster

care. There were *nine* different instances when caseworkers discussed their willingness to

go above and beyond their job description to provide services to families and children at

risk of foster care placement. Several caseworkers mentioned how they have gone out to

get groceries when the family had no food and lacked the transportation and means to get

food. Another caseworker explained how she tries to work around clients' schedules,

especially when the client is employed and has difficulty accommodating DSS hours due

to their own job schedule. Caseworkers are sensitive to the family situations and maintain

a caring, supportive stance as they work with families in an effort to prevent removals.

> "Me knowing it's hard for them to get out of care, it makes me work harder on the
> front end before putting them into care…let's be more proactive with families, put in
> services, then you're doing less removals, you're having less kids in foster care.
> Black, white, purple, green or orange."

This willingness to "go the extra mile," as one participant states, is a special characteristic that

caseworkers mention. They do not give this trait a name, nor do they speak of this trait with

any expectation of reward or praise.

Distinct Features of Each County

In addition to the common factors described above, our analysis identified factors that

were distinctive to each county. In comparison, the unique features of Nassau County are

related to the internal characteristics of the DSS while those of Onondaga County are related to

the external systems in which the DSS is situated. We discuss two factors in each county.

Nassau County

Blind Removal Meetings. Blind removal meetings (BRM) are one of the key features

of Nassau County child welfare practice. The blind removal process has been implemented

since 2010 as part of the Disproportionate Minority Representation effort. Since then, the

Commissioner, Directors, supervisors, and caseworkers all reported that the blind removal

process has contributed to decreasing the number of children of color being removed. Data

revealed that between 2011 & 2013, black children removed via BRM decreased from 56.7%

to 42.1% (DSS Report, 2014).

Blind removal meetings were created to facilitate unbiased decision making. It includes

a decision-making process in which all personal and demographic information on a family is

removed from the paperwork that is distributed during the meeting. Therefore, a caseworker

that is investigating the case and his/her supervisor do not disclose personal information while

they present the case to the Directors, Assistant Directors, and representatives from home

finding, foster care, and legal units. The decision is made without names, locations, race,

ethnicity, or any information that describes the family beyond information about current and

past allegations and risk factors. In this way, the discussion is focused on the factors related to

safety and risk factors, such as mental health, substance abuse, stressors on the parents, and the

number of kids in the family.

Our data analysis shows that the outcome of the blind removal process is closely

related to increasing staff awareness of institutionalized racism and implicit bias. A person at

the upper-level administration explained that the blind removal approach has significant

implications in the field of child welfare:

> "This particular field is very, very subjective because it's a very emotional field.
> There's no one that doesn't have emotions around child welfare. And it's very hard
> to leave all your stuff at the door when you do this work. And I don't know that
> everyone is very good at it. So I just thought if you could take the subjectivity of race
> and neighborhood out of it maybe you might get different outcomes."

Other interviewees and focus group participants also shared several moments when they

realized that their internal beliefs and biases could affect the foster care decision processes.

One example is as follows:

> "Once you hear certain towns, right away, automatically you think the worst of that
> particular community. And it's probably about six towns that I can think off the top
> of my head that they think is like, "Oh my God." So I think that the name and the
> address have a lot, and also the next part of it is the presentation of the
> [case]worker."

Although the initial implementation of blind removal meetings met with apprehension

among the staff, eventually employees were able to see the effect of it over time, and as a

result, there was a strong sense of agreement and support for this approach during our interviews and focus groups. The blind removal approach is reported to reinforce the values of self-examination and cultural diversity, which have also been promoted through a variety of staff trainings.

      Workforce Diversity. Another outstanding aspect that was unique to Nassau County was workforce diversity. Nassau County has made earnest efforts to promote a racially and culturally diverse workforce to accommodate a community that has been growing in diversity. The commissioner discussed organizational efforts to assess representation of diverse groups within the workforce as below:

> "We see it even in our staff over the last 7 or 8 years; 85% of our promotions have been for minority workers, black and Latina. One-thirds of our entire staff has been promoted over the past 8 years. So I believe that disproportionality refers not only to child welfare, but it's in our society. And every opportunity that we have to address it in the agencies that we run, and the programs that we run, and among our colleagues, it's important for leaders to help their staff understand."

As of 2016, Nassau County's workforce collectively speaks over 40 different languages; and the DSS displays brochures and program information are translated into six different languages.

Some caseworkers also echoed that workforce diversity impacts the cultural competence of the DSS services. Some of their comments reflect the benefits of having a diverse workforce, such as "people identify themselves with people that look like them." and "when you have a more diverse workforce, the family is able to trust you more." At the same time, however, caseworkers further underscored that bilingual workers must exhibit appropriate attitude and skills in their working relationships with clients. Merely having multilingual speakers on staff is ineffective if the staff lacks empathy and treats clients with contempt. These insights from caseworkers demonstrate that while workforce diversity is a

first step, adequate training for the workforce must follow in order to fully optimize the strengths of workforce diversity.

Onondaga County

OnCare System of Care. Onondaga County has a uniquely collaborative system of care and support for children and youth. In 2009, Onondaga County was awarded a $9 million, six- year grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to develop a local system of care. Based on the grant, Onondaga County has been developing partnerships with major systems that serve children and youth, such as schools, mental health, juvenile justice, special education, foster care, and child welfare. The target population is children and youth (ages 5-21) with serious emotional and behavioral challenges, with a special focus on youth in residential care, multiple service systems, out-of-home placements, or mental health system.

The System of Care has contributed to streamlining services provided by various agencies. As part of their efforts to integrate services, Onondaga County developed an access team, which comprises frontline workers who help clients navigate the system. Instead of having to go through multiple agencies and assessments, clients only need to make one phone call to reach right places. One upper-level administrator explained how the phone call works:

> "If you have a child that needs PINS [Persons in Need of Supervision], you call our access team. If you have a child that needs mental health services, call the access team. If you are in a crisis mode, call the access team."

As a result, the services have become easier for families to navigate. Furthermore, the administrator commented that the System of Care makes it easier for families to "not only engage with services but also remain in services when they needed it." In addition to

collaborative governance and service delivery, some discussions also confirmed that the

System of Care helped to promote family-driven and community-based approaches.

Court System. In Onondaga County, the characteristics of the leadership in the court

system were identified as a major factor affecting racial disparity. Both supervisors and

caseworkers pointed out that their Family Court judges have played a critical role in foster care

placement outcomes. How judges rule, what their tendencies are, and what kind of values their

decisions are based on typically have significant impact on the final decisions. Given that these

cultures are different county-to-county, supervisors and caseworkers in Onondaga County

recognized that their judges were distinctively supportive. Some of the descriptions of the

judges include, "thinking outside the box," "social worky," "cooperative," and "remembering

past cases and showing an interest." One focus group participant drew a comparison as

follows:

> "The judges we have right now are very committed to knowing more about why these
> families are coming in the way they are. Whereas, I know I've been to other counties
> and won't name them, but where they could care less and they're just there to say,
> "This is this, and this is this," you know? Making people's life decisions in the blink
> of an eye. But here I think the judges really get to hear about what exactly is really
> going on and take each case as a unique because each case is unique – it's a family –
> there are so many different aspects to each family. A plan that works for this family
> might not work for that family. They're open to listening to it, I think, more than
> others."

These characteristics of judges not only have strengthened the relationship between the court

system and social services but have also contributed to reducing foster care placements. Focus

group participants pointed out that judges encourage alternative caregiving and relative

placement as opposed to foster care placement. In addition, there has been a legal push for

children to remain with family. These movements in Onondaga County remind us that the

actors in the legal system play a critical role on foster care decisions, and therefore the

relationship between the court system and social services must be considered in the conversations concerning racial disparity in foster care.

Discussion

This study identified what factors contributed to the decrease in racial disparity in Nassau and Onondaga counties. Findings indicate that the *Disproportionate Minority Representation Grant* awarded to both counties became the catalyst for change in their child welfare organization and practice. In addition, Onondaga was awarded a second grant to implement a new System of Care in their county which targeted youth 5-21, and focused on improving and coordinating services to vulnerable children and families. The implementation of the System of Care has also facilitated the county's efforts to reduce racial disparity.

In the child welfare system, it is understood that *preventive services* are paramount to the strengthening of families and facilitating their stability. The FAR program is a unique prevention program which aims to keep low-risk families out of the child protective system. The prominent discussion around preventive services for families suggest that it has made a large impact on the decrease in racial disparity in both counties. Caseworkers and directors in both counties reveal their belief that FAR has been helpful in reducing the racial disparity rates of children in foster care. All clearly state their belief that the addition of these services provides the help and resources that families need to manage their own problems and prevent removal. The availability of these services and programs to disadvantaged families seem to be a key component of reducing racial disparity in foster care.

Without communication and coordination between all systems of care, children can easily fall through the cracks. In addition, minority families who have unique needs may not

be able to receive those services due to lack of *community collaboration*. Findings show that each county has spent time prioritizing collaboration between service providers. In particular, Onondaga has strong school community programs which take advantage of the fact that school-aged children spend the majority of their day at school. These partnerships help to meet the unique emotional, social and behavioral needs of children while keeping them connected with the school system. Nassau's monthly purposeful engagement with community partners keep two way communication pathways open. Participants were clear with their impression that these community collaborations were essential in reducing racial disparity in foster care in both counties.

     Case Practice Development, which describes the development of casework in the counties. Caseworkers are putting more time, thought and effort into alternatives to foster care. Leadership, middle managers and caseworkers are discovering the importance of exhausting all services to mitigate harm before removing a child from their home. This developmental practice model has helped to decrease the racial disparity in foster care in Nassau and Onondaga counties, by providing viable alternatives for black children (i.e. kinship care, family and team meetings, in- home services, court-ordered services, etc).

     Lastly, *blind removal meetings* were the result of the DMR grant awarded to Nassau County and this innovative strategy has made a positive impact on child welfare decision making. This demonstrates that Nassau has made particular efforts in examining "selves" in order to break down the meaning of racial disparity and that the increased awareness of internal biases in turn have contributed to reducing the disparity.

Implications

Among the prominent themes that emerged from the data, there are specific system-wide initiatives that seem to have greatly impacted racial disparity in the foster care system. There are wide implications for this study. This study suggests that resources (DMR Grant and Oncare-Systems of Care Grant) were intricately important to the initiation and implementation of strategies, such as, Blind Removal Meetings (Nassau County), community collaborations (Nassau and Onondaga Counties, and ongoing caseworker professional development (e.g. trainings) in both counties. This study provides evidence that counties need support, in the form of resources, and a willingness to engage broadly with community partners in an open manner to adequately and consistently impact racial disparities within child welfare. The breadth and consistency of the community engagement that is ongoing provides a larger platform for working across systems to impact disparity within the larger community. With many other counties still struggling to move the needle on this issue, targeting funders who will invest in this social injustice is crucial. Supporting leaders who are willing to invite community partners to the table to work on addressing important service integration and collaboration within systems serving vulnerable families will provide a strong return on the funding investment.

Conclusion

Racial disparity is a complex issue that requires multiple layers of strategy to decrease and eventually eradicate this inequity. This study shows that if there is a chance to ameliorate this social injustice, a variety of strategies need to be in place. Collaboration on the part of all systems that impact families is essential to ensuring continuity of care and a thoughtful delivery of services. With the strategies and programs presented in this paper, it is the hope that other

counties are mobilized to replicate the work that has been done in Nassau and Onondaga county. With continued support from community stakeholders and state leadership, this study suggests that racial disparity can be improved statewide and racial equity is a propitious ideal in child welfare.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Race Equity Project – Focus Group Questions for Caseworkers

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. What abilities do you think are necessary to implement foster care placement decisions? *(i.e. cultural competence, individual characteristics, relationship with clients, knowledge of agency policies, etc.)*
    a. What resources (agency policies, strategies, webinars, trainings, literature) were you offered from your agency to improve your abilities during this period?
    b. In regards to racial disproportionality, which has influenced your decision making the most and why?
    c. Are you satisfied with the resource? How could it be improved?

2. What resources (individual experiences, relationship with clients, trainings, webinars, agency policies, and literature) were most effective in developing your cultural competence?
    a. What are the reasons you believe this to be effective? How could it be improved?

3. How do you think your institutional/organizational environment plays a role in bringing about racial equity during this period?
    a. How has the environment effected your placement decisions?
    b. Did you have any institutional/organizational supports or supervisions to facilitate decision of permanency/reunification?

4. How have you assessed family safety and risk to place children into foster care?
    a. Have you had your own strategies to assess family safety and risk, if so, what professional development resources (webinars, trainings, literature) have influenced your assessment the most and why?

5. What do you think about other factors contributing to racial equity in child welfare practice? *(e.g.: family strengths, caseworker engagement, improved practice strategies)*

Race Equity Project – Interview Questions for Caseworkers

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. What is the most important value that guides your foster care placement decision?

2. Who do you think influences you the most when you make foster care placement decisions? *(e.g. supervisor, family members, client, mentors, co-workers, etc.)*

3. Who do you consult with when it comes to foster care placement decision-making process? *(e.g. peers, supervisors, others in / outside your organization, etc.)*

4. Have you experienced peer pressure (or group pressure) in making foster care placement decisions?

5. What are the agency policies that influence your foster care placement decisions?

6. How do these policies play a role in your decision making when you are placing African American youth in foster care?

7. What are your supervisor's expectations when it comes to foster care placement?
     a. What are your supervisor's expectations when it comes to placing African American youth in foster care?

8. How do you decide when to place a child in foster care?
     a. In what ways does race play a role in your decisions about placing a child in foster care?

9. Your county has been able to successfully reduce racial disparity in foster care. Can you think of some factors that may have reduced racial disparity in your county during 2009-2014?
     a. Did you make conscious effort to reduce racial disparity during that time?
     b. If so, what strategies do you use to reduce the racial disparity?
     c. What makes these strategies effective?
     d. What strategies do you consider ineffective in reducing racial disparity?
     e. What did you learn from implementing these strategies?

10. What can you tell me about the effect that mandatory and involuntary trainings have on your decisions regarding placement of African American youth in foster care?

11. What else helps to guide your decisions regarding placing African American youth in foster care?

12. What are some barriers that hinder you from reducing racial disparity within foster care?
      a. How do you deal with these barriers?
      b. What do you think would be helpful in eliminating these barriers?

13. What else do you think I should know about how your county has managed to reduce racial disparity?

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Race Equity Project – Interview Questions for Commissioners

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. Could you briefly describe the foster care placement process in your county and who is involved in the placement decision-making process?

2. Can you think of some factors that may have reduced racial disparity in your county during 2009-2014?

3. What policies were in place during this time period that directly or indirectly influence foster care placement decisions?
      a. How long had these policies been in place?
      b. Had there been any changes to these policies right before or during the time period in question? If yes, please explain.

4. In what ways do you think these policies impact racial disparity in foster care placement?

5. Does your county mandate training? If so, who must attend and what are the topics?
      a. Are there different training mandates depending on the staff title/position? If yes, please explain.

6. What trainings do you offer to staff that are not mandatory?
      a. How many staff have attended them?
      b. Can we see attendance rosters for these trainings to get a sense of the number of people who attend involuntary trainings, the types of trainings that attract more people, the types of training that attract specific titles/positions, etc.?

7. What are your thoughts on the connection, if any, between staff trainings and the decrease in racial disparity within foster care in this county?

8. What other programs, activities or strategies did your county implement during this time period that may explain the decrease in racial disparity within foster care?

9. What other factors do you think play a role in the reduction of racial disparity within foster care in this county?

10. Do you think blind review affects the foster care placement outcomes? If so, how?

11. What else do you think I should know about how your county has managed to reduce racial disparity in foster care?

Race Equity Project – Interview Questions for Directors of Services

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. Could you briefly describe the foster care placement process in your county and who is involved in the placement decision-making process?

2. Can you think of some factors that may have reduced racial disparity in your county during 2009-2014?

3. What policies were in place during this time period that directly or indirectly influence foster care placement decisions?
      a. How long had these policies been in place?
      b. Had there been any changes to these policies right before or during the time period in question? If yes, please explain.

4. In what ways do you think these policies impact racial disparity in foster care placement?

5. Does your county mandate training? If so, who must attend and what are the topics?
      a. Are there different training mandates depending on the staff title/position? If yes, please explain.

6. What trainings do you offer to staff that are not mandatory?
      a. How many staff have attended them?
      b. Can we see attendance rosters for these trainings to get a sense of the number of people who attend involuntary trainings, the types of trainings that attract more people, the types of training that attract specific titles/positions, etc.?

7. What are your thoughts on the connection, if any, between staff trainings and the decrease in racial disparity within foster care in this county?

8. What other programs, activities or strategies did your county implement during this time period that may explain the decrease in racial disparity within foster care?

9. What other factors do you think play a role in the reduction of racial disparity within foster care in this county?

10. What else do you think I should know about how your county has managed to reduce racial disparity in foster care?

11. Do you think blind review affects the foster care placement outcomes? If so, how?

Race Equity Project –Focus Group Questions for Supervisors

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. What's the goal of your agency in terms of foster care placement?

2. What do you think are necessary abilities of caseworkers for foster care placement decisions? *(e.g.: cultural competence, individual characteristics, relationship with clients, knowledge of agency policies, etc.)*
> a. What resources (webinars, trainings, literature) did you offer to improve the abilities during this period?
> b. In regards to racial disproportionality, what professional development resources (webinars, trainings, literature) have influenced your staffs' decision making the most and why?
> c. Are you satisfied with the resource? How could it be improved?

3. How have you tried to support your staff to be racially sensitive?

4. What resources (individual experiences, relationship with clients, trainings, webinars, agency policies, and literature) were effective in developing caseworkers'/your cultural competence?
> a. What are the reasons you believe these to be effective? How could they be improved?

5. What programs, activities or strategies did your county implement during this time period that may explain the decrease in racial disparity within foster care?

6. What other factors do you think play a role in the reduction of racial disparity within foster care in this county?

7. Do you have further recommendations to reduce racial disparity in this county?

Race Equity Project – Interview Questions for Supervisors

Guiding Question: This County has been able to lower their rates of racial disparity (black children) within foster care. In your experience, during 2009-2014, what may have caused those changes?

1. Could you briefly describe the foster care placement process in your county and who is involved in the placement decision-making process?

2. Can you think of some factors that may have reduced racial disparity in your county during 2009-2014?

3. What policies were in place during this time period that directly or indirectly influence foster care placement decisions?
>   a. How long had these policies been in place?
>   b. Had there been any changes to these policies right before or during the time period in question? If yes, please explain.

4. In what ways do you think these policies impact racial disparity in foster care placement?

5. Does your county mandate training? If so, who must attend and what are the topics?
>   a. Are there different training mandates depending on the staff title/position? If yes, please explain.

6. What trainings do you offer to staff that are not mandatory?
>   a. How many staff have attended them?
>   b. Can we see attendance rosters for these trainings to get a sense of the number of people who attend involuntary trainings, the types of trainings that attract more people, the types of training that attract specific titles/positions, etc.?

7. What are your thoughts on the connection, if any, between staff trainings and the decrease in racial disparity within foster care in this county?

8. What other programs, activities or strategies did your county implement during this time period that may explain the decrease in racial disparity within foster care?

9. Do you think blind review affects the foster care placement outcomes? If so, how?

10. What specific strategies do you see your caseworkers implementing that you believe are effective in reducing racial disparity within foster care in this county?
>   a. Are these strategies taught to all caseworkers? Where and how do they learn them? b. Do some caseworkers do certain things that are not taught but are particularly effective? What are they? c. Tell me about some strategies that you consider to be ineffective in reducing racial disparity in foster care.

11. What obstacles have you encountered that hinder caseworkers from reducing the racial disparity within foster care?

     a. How do they impede progress?

     b. What do you think would be helpful in eliminating these barriers?

12. What other factors do you think play a role in the reduction of racial disparity within foster care in this county?

Appendix B

Master Codebook

Improving Racial Equity in Child Welfare – A Qualitative Study:

Master Code Book

Codes, Definitions and Examples

Code	Description	Example	Location
Preventive Services	Services that the community provides to families in an effort to prevent removal.	Substance Abuse Treatment "Let's go to Kindergarten" "Imagination Library"	Nassau Co. FG/AD; page 7 Onondaga CPS Director, Caseworkers
Decision-Making Process	The organizational procedure that occurs each time a child is removed from their home.	Blind Removals	Nassau; CPS Director & Supervisors, Children's Services Director
Staff Development	Trainings, courses or webinars provided to staff	RELE – Katib Waheed Bridges Out of Poverty	Nassau; Supervisors, Caseworkers
(1) Diversity, Cultural sensitivity	Centered around racial equity, cultural competence and poverty/oppression.		Nassau; CPS Director & Supervisors, Children's Services Director, Caseworkers Onondaga; Supervisors, Caseworkers
(2) Family engagement	Centered around family/relative engagement and legal training (**Note**: Onondaga supervisors discussed this aspect of training a lot more than diversity/cultural sensitivity).		Onondaga; Supervisors, Caseworkers Nassau; Caseworkers
Community Collaborations	Partnering with other systems that impact children and families in the community.	"Make It Happen"	Nassau; CPS Director, Children's Services Director

(1) School-Initiativ	Schools are providing resources, services programs to children families in an effort to risk and increase	Family Support for Student Success; Syracuse — Onondaga;
Case Practice Development	The instance where caseworker practice has developed into a more thorough assessment of child safety, family resources & more widespread options to prevent removal. Family Finding Units KinGap FAR	Nassau Onondaga
(1) Family assessment response (FAR)	A separate unit in CPS, which is distinguishable from the investigative track that engages families in depth. This started as a pilot in NYS. Some states have opted out now, but both Nassau and Onondaga implement FAR.	Nassau; CPS Director & Supervisors, Children's Services Director, Caseworkers Onondaga; Supervisors
(2) Family meetings, family recruitment and alternative resources	Caseworkers actively search and engage alterative to foster care (e.g. relatives, kinship, godparents, neighbors, etc.)	Nassau; Children's Services Director, Supervisors, Caseworkers Onondaga; Supervisors, Caseworkers
(3) Caseworker Characteristics	Individual characteristics of caseworkers utilized to prevent removals.	Nassau; Caseworkers
(A) Collaboration	Willingness to come together with other workers to provide services to at risk families and children to prevent removals.	Nassau; Caseworkers
(B) Initiative	Willingness to go above and beyond the job description to provide services to at risk families and children.	Nassau; Caseworkers
(C) Deliberation	Willingness to launch a thorough investigation based on facts and all surrounding circumstances of the case before making a removal decision.	Nassau; Caseworkers

Workforce Diversity	A workforce that is made up of varying ethnicities, cultures and races. (**Note**: Supervisor focus group in Onondaga admitted that they do not have workforce diversity. They didn't interpret this in anyway that it may have in impact on racial equity, but they mentioned that they do not have many African American caseworkers. Also they did not have anyone readily available for large refugee populations).	Nassau County's workforce collectively speaks over 40 different languages.	FF w/ Commissioner page 4 Nassau; Caseworkers Onondaga; Caseworkers
Inter-organizational structure and culture	The level of coordination and trust among various departments.	Shared space Lunch and laugh Mandatory training	Nassau; Supervisors
System of Care	A streamlined process that makes easier for families to approach, engage in services and remain in services.	Oncare (e.g. making one phone call)	Onondaga; CPS Director
Role of Judge (Court System)	The judge encourages caseworkers to look for alternatives.		Onondaga; Supervisors, Caseworkers
Interim Support before Placement	A place where children and youth stay before the foster care decision is made. During this time, both the kids and families take time to stabilize. They also receive one-on-one services (e.g. therapy). The ultimate goal is to return the kids to their family.	Family Support Center	Onondaga; CPS Director

DMR	Project/Committee that works on diversity/disproportionate minority representation issue.		Nassau; CPS Director & Supervisors, Children's Services Director, Caseworkers
			Onondaga; CPS Director & Supervisors, Caseworkers
Awareness	Acknowledgment of potential biases at an individual level. There are mandatory learning opportunities for improving self-awareness. Some foster care decision-making process is blinded.	Blind removal Diversity/ cultural sensitivity training DMR	Nassau; CPS Director & Supervisors, Children's Services Director, Caseworkers Onondaga; Caseworkers
Educational Stability	An initiative launched in 2014 that aims to keep youth in foster care in the same school that they were in prior to placement to honor educational continuity and constancy.		Nassau; Children's Services Director