



Maybe ignorance is not always bliss: The disparate treatment of Hispanics within the child welfare system

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Abstract

Previous studies indicate that the proportion of culturally diverse children to White children is increasing in public social service agencies. In addition, culturally diverse children are more likely to receive more intensive and punitive services, are more likely to stay within the system for longer periods of time and are reported more often to Child Protective Services. The purpose of the study was to explore how child welfare practices with Hispanic children are different from those applied with White non-Hispanic children. This study was a retrospective, two year, longitudinal, survival analysis of differential child welfare placement outcomes of White non-Hispanic and Hispanic children/families which had substantiated cases of abuse/neglect ($n=1001$).

Findings demonstrate that although cases reported for abuse/neglect are relatively proportionate between Hispanic and White non-Hispanic children, substantiated cases are more likely to occur with Hispanic children. These children are more likely to be placed out of the home more quickly and for longer periods of time than their White non-Hispanic counterparts. The current study demonstrates the need for increased cultural awareness among Child Welfare professionals, especially in terms of assessment and case decision making, and

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the need for the development of culturally sensitive training modules for CPS and case management personnel.

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1. Introduction

The history of oppression toward minority populations is reflected in the existence of institutionalized discrimination towards culturally diverse populations in social service agencies (Castex, 1994; Green, 1995; Kilty & Vidal de Haymes, 2000).

Services have often been denied to members of culturally diverse groups. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hispanics in the United States were legally discriminated against and excluded from receiving social services (Castex, 1994; Green, 1995). In addition, they have been brought into the child welfare system sooner than their White counterparts. Therefore, in order to provide better and more appropriate services, the focus of the current research is to examine the case characteristics of children in the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) and Child Protective Services (CPS); in addition, the relationship between ethnicity and length of time to enter state custody will be examined.

Due to multiple social and economic barriers, Hispanics have faced the problem of diminishing access to general social services, thus becoming an underserved population. Hispanics have been found to be at greater risk for mental health disorders; however, they are infrequent consumers of mental health services. Those Hispanics who do receive such services are more likely to dropout prematurely from treatment (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1987; Rodriguez, 1997; Sue, 2003). According to Hogan and Siu (1988), “the system responds more slowly to crises with culturally diverse families, Hispanic children receive less comprehensive service plans, and parents of color have been viewed as less able to profit from what the system has to offer” (p. 493).

Thus, the history of the institutionalization of social services to culturally diverse populations reflect not only their historical oppression, but also suggest the need to create culturally competent delivery systems (Devore & Schlesinger, 1991). Because the overrepresentation of culturally diverse children in the child welfare system is well documented, it is an appropriate context within which to study the problem of discrimination in the delivery of services to ethnically diverse children and their families (Harrison, Thyer, & Wodarski, 1996; Hogan & Siu, 1988; National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 1999).

1.1. Overrepresentation

Finch and Fanshel (1985) studied children in 31 agencies and found that non-Hispanic children were discharged from services at a faster rate than were Hispanic children. Jenkins et al. (1983), found that Black children were in out-of-home care a year longer than White

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