African American disproportionality and disparity in child welfare: Toward a comprehensive conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

The disproportional representation and disparity experienced by African American children and families in the child welfare system have received increasing attention over the past three decades. A review of the literature for explanatory factors and conceptual frameworks reveals that, as with the general definitions of disproportionality and disparity, there is a need for increased precision and refinement of the current frameworks used to explain the occurrence of these phenomena in the child welfare system. In order to address these issues, an alternate conceptual framework is proposed, with explanatory factors organized into five major paths: 1) Disproportionate Need; 2) Human Decision-Making; 3) Agency-System Factors; 4) Placement Dynamics; and 5) Policy Impact. This comprehensive framework aims to enhance the theoretical basis relevant to future research, critical thinking, and analyzing responses to the issues of disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

1. Introduction

Racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system are complex social problems that have received increasing attention over the past three decades. According to recent studies, African American children continue to be overrepresented in child welfare reports, investigations and foster care entries, while facing disparities in reunification rates, placement duration and foster care exit (Derezotes, Poertner, & Testa, 2005; Foster, Hillemeier, & Bai, 2011; Magruder & Shaw, 2008 Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2007). Levels of disproportionality tend to increase at every subsequent stage after a maltreatment report is substantiated (Harris & Hackett, 2008; Hill, 2007). African American children (1) are more likely than youth of other racial/ethnic backgrounds to be placed in out-of-home care rather than to receive in-home services (Goerge & Lee, 2005; Hill, 2005; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007); (2) experience more frequent changes in placement (Foster et al., 2011; Huebner, 2007; Zinn, DeCoursey, Goerge, & Courtney, 2006); (3) are less likely to reunify with birth parents; and (4) tend to have longer stays in foster care (Close, 1983; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Harris & Courtney, 2003; Wulczyn, 2003). Disparities for African American children have also been extensively documented. Previous studies indicate that African American children and families receive fewer and lower quality services, fewer foster parent support services, fewer contacts by caseworkers, less access to mental health services and less access to drug

treatment services when compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Courtney et al., 1996; Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 2004; Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003; McRoy, 2004; Tracy, Green, & Bremseth, 1993; Urquiza, Wu, & Borrego, 1999).

Disproportionality and disparity are not new topics to the field of child welfare, yet many elements critical to forming basic conceptualizations and evaluating related approaches to these problems remain in an elementary state. Despite the volume of literature generated on this important topic, the field has yet to take a comprehensive approach to promulgating consistent operational definitions, explanatory factors and relevant theoretical frameworks for understanding the etiology of disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. Further development around these topics is critical to making significant advances, as a lack of progress may lend to more convolution, adding unnecessary friction to an already contentious debate. Given this context, this article will undertake an analysis of current definitions, explanatory factors and conceptual frameworks for disproportionality and disparity for African American children and families within the child welfare system. As with the general definitions of disproportionality and disparity, this article points to the need for increased precision and refinement of the current theoretical frameworks used to explain these phenomena in the child welfare system. In response, an alternate conceptual framework is proposed.

2. Definitions

Historically, there has been a failure to distinguish between disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare literature, with the terms often treated as synonymous and driven by the same

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processes. However, these terms carry distinct implications. More recently, using consistent operational definitions of disparity and disproportionality and avoiding use of the terms interchangeably has been deemed of primary importance (Wulczyn, 2011). Furthermore, over recent decades, the definitions of disproportionality and disparity found in child welfare literature have changed, as researchers have recognized the need for increased precision and the importance of refining terms in order to avoid confusion (Myers, 2010). The following section will define disproportionality and disparities as advanced in child welfare literature and provide a summary of the development of these concepts that has occurred over the past decade.

2.1. Disproportionality

General use of the term disproportionality refers to a population that is "out of proportion with respect to an appropriate reference population" (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007, p. 5). Hill (2006) provided one of the most commonly used definitions of disproportionality in the first comprehensive synthesis of research on the topic, defining disproportionality as "differences in the percentage of children of a certain racial or ethnic group in the country as compared to the percentage of the children of the same group in the child welfare system" (p. 3). Recently, Myers (2010) has used the concepts of unconditional and conditional reference populations, defining disproportionality as "the ratio of the percent of persons of a certain race or ethnicity in a target population (e.g., children who are substantiated for maltreatment) to the percentage of persons of the same group in a reference (or base) population" (Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010, p. 8). In conjunction with this definition, Myers explains that when the reference population refers to the overall child population, disproportionality can be understood as an unconditional ratio. However, when the reference population refers to the population that experiences a specific child welfare decision point, disproportionality can be understood as a conditional ratio. This important distinction is not evident in prior definitions. Furthermore, it addresses limitations identified in recent critiques of measures of disproportionality, which argue that using the general population as the reference group inappropriately inflates rates of disproportionality and that a more accurate measure would use the at risk population, i.e. the total child population of the previous child welfare decision point (Morton, Ocasio, & Simmel, 2011; Rolock, 2011). In defining disproportionality explicitly as a ratio that will change based on which reference population is used, Myers' approach reflects the trend to refine definitions and to use precise measurements that aim to avoid statistical conflation.

2.2. Disparity

Generally, disparity means a "lack of equality" (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Disparity is a between groups comparison for children in the child welfare system that does not depend on the group's percentage in the general population. In child welfare literature, the term disparity has not been used uniformly. Hill (2006) defines disparity as "unequal treatment when comparing a racial or ethnic minority to a non-minority." He also indicates that disparity "can be observed in many forms including decision points (e.g., reporting, investigation, substantiation, foster care placement, exit), treatment, services, or resources" (p. 3). In a later report, Hill (2007) refers to disparity as "unequal treatment through differences in services provided to minority children as compared to those provided to similarly situated white children" (p. 53). This definition places emphasis on the unequal provision of services to one group as compared to another.

Alternatively, Wulczyn and Lery (2007) define disparity as the ratio of the entry (or exit) rate for African American children to the entry (or exit) rate for White children. They also explain that "disproportionality of children in foster care is a function of disparity in the entry and/or exit process" (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007, p. 5). In this definition of disparity,

there is no mention of unequal treatment or of unequal provision of services among racial/ethnic groups.

Moreover, in defining disparity, Myers (2010) again includes the distinction between conditional and unconditional ratios. Myers defines disparity as "the comparison of the ratio of one race or ethnic group in an event to the representation of another race or ethnic group who experienced the same event" (Fluke et al., 2010, p. 8). As with his definition of disproportionality, Myers explains that the reference population in the denominator for both groups can refer to the overall population (unconditional) of the group, or it can refer to the population among the group who experiences a specific decision point (conditional). He explains that a disparity exists when the ratios being compared are not equal (Myers, 2010, p. 8–9).

These definitions demonstrate distinct conceptualizations of disparities. On one hand disparities are considered to exist in the system "inputs," such as differential treatment or inequities in services that are rendered to certain groups, while on the other disparities are said to stem from system "outputs" that are evidenced by race/ethnic-specific child welfare outcomes. While it may be assumed that differences in entry and exit rates are impacted by unequal treatment and differences in service provision, the differing definitions do not make any such connection explicit. Notably, Myers does not reference unequal treatment or entry and exit rates in his definition, rather, he highlights two options for mathematical computation of disparities that may produce very different results.

Notably, some researchers have emphasized the need for studying and reducing disparities rather than disproportionality (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2008; Hill, 2006). Disparities are thought to produce and perpetuate disproportionality (Anyon, 2011; Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2008) and reducing disparities within the system can be viewed as a means to reducing disproportionality (Hill, 2006). Generally, practitioners and academics in the child welfare field agree that disparities should be reduced. However, there is some debate regarding the utility of interventions aimed at reducing disproportionality. This view stems from the position that using the general population as the appropriate reference population does not account for the differential need for services that may exist among racial/ethnic groups.

Overall, the evolving definitions of disproportionality and disparity reflect a movement toward progressive conceptualizations, increased precision and refinement in measurement based on efforts to improve accuracy and consistency in child welfare research. Importantly, the various definitions of disproportionality and disparity have very distinct implications for research and interventions intending to address these issues. Overall, more studies are needed to understand if one particular definition is more accurate or has more utility, and should be adopted over the alternate. Given the current state of research, it is too early to dismiss any of the proposed definitions of disproportionality and disparity. Rather, they should be considered in conjunction and researchers should be explicit in their rational regarding the definitions and methods of measurement they choose to employ.

3. Explanatory factors

Over the past three decades, researchers have moved beyond identifying patterns of disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes, to considering explanations of why they might occur. Despite a lack of solid consensus in the field regarding the causes of racial disproportionality in child welfare, a number of explanatory factors are identified throughout research studies. Generally, most studies identify three or four factors that are based on empirical knowledge of risk factors for child maltreatment or child welfare contact, discrimination in historical child welfare practice, and inadequacies in child welfare system functioning. The following section will provide an overview of prevailing explanatory factors and discuss conceptual frameworks of disproportionality and disparity that have emerged in the literature.