

Foster care and race

Questions about why black children are removed from home more often than others deserve well-researched answers

Friday, October 07, 2005

A major Case Western Reserve University study confirms a disturbing perception that has lingered in inner-city Cleveland for years: Black children are far more likely to be placed in foster care than other children.

Thanks to that report by David Crampton, an assistant professor at Case, Cuyahoga County's three commissioners are paying attention.

In addition, a commission has been meeting for the last two years to talk about the disproportionate number of black children in foster care.

Whatever they do, the authorities should proceed cautiously, so as not to visit more calamity upon vulnerable young people.

It's particularly alarming that black children in the city and the suburbs have high foster-care placement rates. What's more, this is a national phenomenon, though no one has managed to explain why it exists.

One theory holds that black children are targeted simply because their high poverty rate makes it more likely that they visit public hospitals and attend public schools. Most youngsters are removed because they are not being cared for properly, not for physical or sexual abuse.

Still, poverty alone doesn't explain why foster placement rates are higher for poor black children than they are for poor children of other races.

And it leads one to wonder whether both white and black children are being done a disservice: Are black children removed simply because they are more visible to "the system"? Are child abuse investigators overlooking abused or neglected white children whose families don't have as much contact with public agencies? Might both situations occur?

Unfortunately, the effort to discover the truth has been hamstrung by a lack of participation from the Cleveland public schools and local hospitals. Apparently, they seldom attend commission meetings, but this issue is too critical for them to sit on the sidelines.

The same goes for Cuyahoga County's self-absorbed juvenile bench. Of the six Juvenile Court judges, only Allison Floyd bothered to attend the commissioners' forum and make a contribution.

In the absence of solid answers, the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services and similar agencies elsewhere that make judgment calls on families and foster care find themselves in an unenviable position: going on gut feeling in many cases when they decide which children stay with their parents and which to remove. A wave of notorious child deaths in the 1990s pushed frightened social workers to remove youngsters from their homes first and ask questions later. And most of those youngsters were black.

Is there another solution? A solution that doesn't say foster care is the only answer, a solution that doesn't punish healthy youngsters for living with a destitute but loving mother?

Just last year, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care reported that many states, including Ohio, have high removal rates because the federal government is more generous with foster-care dollars than with money for troubled families.

State and local officials should work to change that.

Meanwhile, Cuyahoga County's commissioners seem more than willing to go it alone - if they are presented with innovative yet reasonable ideas that promise to preserve families without sacrificing children. Child-welfare advocates must answer the call.

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Next Steps:

Cuyahoga County DCFS is

- Merging their longstanding disproportionality committee with local juvenile justices for several meetings to identify joint concerns and jointly plan how to impact this issue.
- Requesting seed money from the Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners to expand shared family care activities (a process by which a family whose child may have been removed and placed into foster care is instead placed in a home with a guest family that can support the at-risk family and keep the child at home).
- Requesting seed money to rehabilitate boarded up housing, and to train unemployed people living in areas with boarded up homes to do the rehabilitation themselves.
- Administratively adjusting their intake department to be geographically assigned.
- Continuing with System of Care activities that bring traditional services into neighborhoods where they are needed, as well as providing more informal services to families in addition to formal ones.

Researchers from the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University are pursuing additional research on disproportionality with both the state of Ohio and some specific counties who have expressed an interest studying this issue within their own systems.

PCSAO recognizes that we must provide leadership to change the trend of poor, often minority children, from being over-referred into our system, disproportionately coming into custody, and even having parental rights terminated at a higher rate. This long standing statewide dilemma needs new, additional strategies. The data certainly points to local examination for PCSAs to begin working with community members to identify neighborhoods that have concentrated pockets of poverty and few service resources. The PCSA can then provide local leadership along with the rest of the community, to bring prevention, diversion, and community services into that neighborhood. Logically, increasing such activities would result in reduced referrals into child welfare, and hopefully increased community based, in-home strategies for those families entering the child welfare system, vs. child removal.

PCSAO will continue this public discussion, not only with our own community, but with our service partners, the judicial community and youth and families themselves. Please contact Jessica at 614-pcsaojessica@sbcglobal.net for more disproportionality resources.

*****Please Note**

While DCFS is pleased with the affect and intent of the editorial, the following phrase in paragraph 11 is inaccurate: "In the absence of solid answers, the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services and similar agencies elsewhere that make judgment calls on families and foster care find themselves in an unenviable position: going on gut feeling in many cases when they decide which children stay with their parents and which to remove." In fact, a formal and thorough staffing process occurs before any child is removed from a home in Cuyahoga County.