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“The Implications of Race on Child Welfare Outcomes and Permanency in the Greater New Orleans Area”

BACKGROUND: While racism and mistreatment of African Americans was once in the form of slavery and legal segregation laws, mistreatment is now perpetrated through institutional racism. The Child Welfare System (CWS) has suffered the effects of institutional racism and has negatively impacted minorities, especially African Americans. African Americans are at a greater risk for poverty, housing instability, and educational issues due to structural racism, negative biases, and limited availability of community resources. In the United States, Black children account for 23% of the foster care population while only accounting for 13% of the total child population (Children’s Bureau, 2021). Even though some claim that this significant overrepresentation of African American children in foster care is due to increased factors and not to inherent racial bias (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), other studies suggest that child abuse claims against African American families are 11% more likely to be substantiated (Maguire-Jack et.al, 2020). Previous research has found that that African American children have a greater chance of experiencing out-of-home placement changes, termination of parental rights, and lengthier foster care cases (Cantey et.al, 2022) and that Black parents have a higher probability of having their parental rights terminated than White parents when abusing substances (Sieger, 2020).

OBJECTIVES: This study aims to determine the effect of race on the length of time that the child spends in foster care and on the resulting legal resolution in the greater New Orleans Area. Demographic characteristics will also be examined to determine the association between these factors and the child’s outcome. It is hypothesized that African American children will experience longer case times and lower reunification rates than White children with similar case characteristics.

METHODS: A subsample of 72 White and 72 Black mothers were randomly selected from the LSUHSC Infant Team records, which has worked with families in foster care from 1998 to 2022 in the greater New Orleans Area. Data regarding the legal resolution, case length, housing, employment, and incarceration status was selected for and analyzed. The relationship between race and length of time was analyzed with an independent T-test, and race and reunification were analyzed with a chi-square test using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS: No significant statistical difference between case length and reunification likelihood with Black and White mothers was found. No difference between the type of legal resolution was found either, but some demographic characteristics produced a slightly higher percentages of Black mothers who did not reunify. With a larger sample size, there may be more evidence of disparities in reunification likelihood between different races.

CONCLUSIONS: Although national statistics show significant disparities between White and Black parents in the CWS, the cases examined by the Infant Team demonstrate little to no disparity. Psychological interventions by mental health professionals and collaboration with the court system may be the reasons for improved case outcomes.