



Race, Bias *in* & Power Child Welfare

- ┆ Between 1995 and 1997, the number of children taken from their parents and placed in foster care in New York City increased 52 percent, from 8,770 to 13,345.
- ┆ In New York City, African-American children are more than twice as likely as white children to be taken away from their parents following a confirmed report of abuse or neglect.
- ┆ One of every 10 children from Central Harlem is in foster care today.
- ┆ One of every 22 African-American children citywide is in foster care, compared with one of every 59 Latino children—and only one of every 385 white children.
- ┆ One of every four African-American foster children remains in foster care five years or more. Only one in 10 white children remains in the system as long.
- ┆ Neighborhoods where the population is largely African-American have been hardest hit by Giuliani administration budget cuts to community-based programs designed to prevent the placement of children in foster care.
- ┆ Foster care prevention programs are more readily available to white and Latino families than to African-American families, even as the need in black communities increases.
- ┆ An estimated 3 percent of the 41,198 children in foster care are white, 73 percent are African American, and fewer than 24 percent are Latino.
- ┆ Sixty-two percent of the executives and administrators of the city-contracted nonprofit foster care agencies are white, 27 percent are African American, 7.7 percent are Latino, and 3.1 percent are Asian.
- ┆ The 10 largest foster care agencies hold contracts worth a total of \$302.8 million a year, about half the entire foster care contract budget. They are all traditional, white-run charitable organizations.
- ┆ The nine foster care agencies established and operated by people of color in New York City hold contracts worth \$46.6 million a year and provide services to 4,782 children, or about 12 percent of all children in foster care.

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Introduction

THE RACE FACTOR IN CHILD WELFARE

Rosalie Douglas gave birth to a son at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in November 1996. Afterwards, she was given Tylenol with codeine as a pain killer. When a nurse asked her for a urine sample, Douglas complied, figuring the hospital needed it for routine post-natal tests. This test wasn't exactly routine, however. "Your urine tested positive for opiates," Douglas remembers the hospital social worker telling her the next day. "We're gonna have to call the state." Douglas lost custody of her newborn child to the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). The first six days of his life were spent as a ward of New York City. Douglas could only visit him in the hospital nursery. "I thought I was in a nightmare," she recalls. "I didn't know if he was going to be put in foster care."

By the sixth day, she hired an attorney and got a hearing in Family Court. Faced with the facts, the city could only concede its mistake. The drug test had come up positive because of the codeine, and the baby boy had tested negative. Douglas's son was returned to her that afternoon after nearly a week of emotional agony.

In the crucible of trauma and distress that is the New York City child welfare system, Douglas's experience seems relatively mild. Yet it is emblematic of a much larger problem. There was no reason for her to be subjected to a drug test in the maternity ward. She had received prenatal care. She had no history of drug abuse. But the authorities apparently had something else in mind: Douglas is poor. She is African American. She is unmarried. And she lives in Harlem.

As the research and analysis in this issue makes extraordinarily clear, African-American families and children are treated far differently by the system than white families and their children. Latinos, too, suffer from racial and ethnic bias. Asians may as well—but the state and city keep such inadequate data for that population that there is no way of knowing for sure.

This issue of *Child Welfare Watch* is the most controversial we've yet attempted. We aim to bring the issues of racism, ethnicity and discrimination

in child welfare to the attention of the public and the professionals working in the system, with the hope that serious problems will be acknowledged, addressed and eventually resolved.

This is a time of rapid change in child welfare. The number of children the city removed from parents and placed in foster care increased by 52 percent between 1995 and 1997—even as crime rates declined, drug use—especially of cocaine—was down, and the general standard of living even in poor neighborhoods had modestly improved.

The impact of this increase is falling disproportionately on African Americans and, to a lesser degree, Latinos. Three quarters of the children in foster care in New York are African American. Our research, and that of many academics, finds that black parents are far more likely than white parents to be reported for abuse or neglect, even when their children exhibit identical symptoms. When these reports are confirmed, black children are twice as likely as whites to be removed from the home. The list of such disparities is long. Just read page 1.

We are not arguing that children don't need protection. Some parents refuse to care for their children in a decent or humane way, and these kids often have to be placed in someone else's care. But too frequently, parents lose their children to the state inappropriately, when they could have been better—and more cheaply—served at home, with adequate housing, food, day care, drug treatment and other supports. Remember, fewer than 10 percent of the city's child welfare cases are the result of physical or severe emotional abuse. The rest of the cases are neglect, most often connected with the stresses of poverty.

In our view, racism is defined as the unfair control that one group places over another group due primarily to the belief that those to be controlled are inferior to others. The inappropriate removal of a black or Latino child from his or her parents is without doubt a racist action in a system controlled by whites. Whites enjoy certain

privileges. They participate in racism even if they are well-meaning and have no intention of behaving like a racist. White women, for example, are not routinely tested for drugs in the maternity ward. White social workers do not necessarily realize the latent racism that can motivate their efforts to "rescue" a black child.

Many minority leaders argue that because our child welfare system serves minorities and the very poor, it has become a series of interventions that ruptures families, rather than providing a support network that gives them what they need to survive and function healthfully.

Indeed, in several African-American communities, growing anger is directed toward child welfare authorities. Speakers at recent community meetings in Bedford Stuyvesant and Harlem drew some stark and painful parallels between modern-day child welfare and nineteenth century slavery. The child welfare system separates siblings, dismantles families and terminates parental rights; African-American children are a source of income for foster care agencies run by whites. It is a frightening metaphor.

The prevalence of this perception should serve as a warning to those who believe race is not a significant factor defining the methods and style of our child welfare system, and as a call to action for those who do understand its significance. Those of us involved in child welfare and other social service systems must ask ourselves again and again: Are my decisions influenced by racism and/or class bias? If so, how can I change it? These questions need to be asked by African Americans and Latinos as well as whites.

We had extensive advice from a large number of collaborators on this project, some of whom are listed on page 3 and others who are quoted directly in the text.

One of our African-American advisors, who asked to remain unnamed, put his concerns in a nutshell: "If more white kids were going into the child welfare system, it would change," he said. "The fact that white people don't go into the system says to me it is a bad place to be." ■

SCOPPETTA'S NEW PLAN

As we go to press, the mayor and the Administration for Children's Services have announced a new plan to redirect \$613 million in foster care contracts to agencies prepared to serve children and families in their own neighborhoods. Ideally, this will keep foster children closer to their biological parents, making reunification more feasible. It may also improve local services that can help keep families together in the first place, before they are broken apart. *Child Welfare Watch* has promoted elements of this approach in the past, and believes strongly in the models of community care established by such creative agencies as

Miracle Makers, Harlem Dowling and the Center for Family Life.

But ultimately, these changes may make little difference if ownership of the foster care system does not shift away from the white establishment that has controlled and operated the large majority of the system since its creation more than a century ago. Any true community-oriented reform must promote leadership and management from within the communities most closely tied to foster care and child welfare.

Child Welfare Watch plans to monitor the changes, promoting progress and pointing out flaws as they become apparent. ■

Recommendations and Solutions

proposed by the Child Welfare Watch Advisory Board

Acknowledging that race plays a major role in the way the system functions—and the ways in which it fails to function—is the first and most important step toward dealing with the problem. This is a system that serves African-American and Latino families almost exclusively. Yet its basic structure hardly recognizes this fact. Significant changes are needed, in both the larger scheme and in the small details. *Child Welfare Watch* recommends the following reforms:

* Neighborhood-based assistance should be available to all families as problems develop, not only after children have been placed in foster care. Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta has rightly proposed restructuring the child welfare system so it can better serve families and children in their own neighborhoods. But policies and programs must also be devised that reinforce the greatest strengths of the African-American, Latino and Asian communities. Government child welfare funding should promote and support the expanded participation of community-based organizations, local religious institutions and neighborhood associations in the important work of assisting families.

* To promote effective, safe and timely reunification of children with their families, our child welfare system must focus on supporting family strengths, rather than simply assessing and seeking to “cure” pathologies. This can only be achieved if we provide families in need with adequate, concrete services in their communities, such as affordable housing, job opportunities, high-caliber education, effective drug treatment and quality medical care, before they are overwhelmed with problems.

* Programs and services that provide alternatives to the removal of a child from his or her parents are in short supply in most communities of color. To avoid a continued increase in the number of children entering foster care, and to strengthen families, we must expand access to drug treatment, day care and other services in Central Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, Jamaica and other communities of color as rapidly as

possible. Children should only be removed from their parents when they are in danger of severe abuse or neglect.

* After confirmed reports of abuse or neglect, black and Latino children are more likely to be removed from their parents than white children. Standards of removal must be applied fairly, and child protective staff must be effectively trained to recognize and avoid racial, ethnic and class bias in their work.

* Rates of placement in kinship care have declined greatly in recent years. This trend must be reversed. Kinship provides stability and consistency to children, helps maintain community and cultural ties, and promotes biological parents’ involvement in their children’s lives. Policy and programmatic obstacles to kinship placement must be eliminated. And kinship parents should receive top-notch support services whenever they are needed.

* Locally based and controlled organizations are often better able to establish complex neighborhood support systems and promote culturally appropriate methods for working with families and children. The state and city government should revive efforts to develop and finance such organizations. And established church-based and predominantly white agencies should sponsor and financially guarantee the creation of new neighborhood-based agencies controlled and operated by people of color. These community agencies could enter the business as subcontractors chosen through some cultural competency-based criteria, and they

would have to be guaranteed wide autonomy on public policy, budgeting and programming.

* Commissioner Scoppetta, in pursuing his proposal to relocate child welfare services into the communities where families and children live, must not simply allow large established organizations to colonize these districts. ACS contracts must protect and promote the authority and funding of locally controlled and operated organizations.

* Both ACS and the nonprofit sector must strive to achieve racial congruity between agency management, directors, front-line staff and their clientele. All staff must receive extensive training to establish their cultural competence. Leaders and workers in child welfare must not only know details of their clients’ worldview—they must be able to act on that knowledge in a supportive and appropriate way.

* Foster children, on average, are spending far too long in care—but black children especially. To resolve this problem, every effort must be made to increase the involvement of biological parents in their children’s cases. Visiting arrangements must be improved; geographic separation must be reduced, and cooperation between foster and biological parents must be promoted. All of these elements of care must be measured and enforced in the course of city contract oversight.

* ACS should pursue each of these goals—and vigorously monitor whether or not they are being achieved. Child Welfare Watch will seek to do the same.

ADVISORS TO CHILD WELFARE WATCH ON THE RACE IN FOSTER CARE PROJECT INCLUDE:

- James Dumpson, New York Community Trust
- Alma Carten, New York University
- Lynn Brown, Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies
- Al Herbert, Lower East Side Family Union
- Sharonne Salaam, People United for Children
- Luis Medina, St. Christopher’s-Jennie Clarkson Child Care Services
- Gerald Mallon, Green Chimneys Children’s Services
- Errol T. Louis, Center for an Urban Future
- Lawrence Murray, Center on Addiction & Substance Abuse
- Megan McLaughlin, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies
- Esmeralda Simmons, Center for Law and Social Justice
- Zoilo Torres, Child Welfare Action Center
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Child Removals: Dislocating the Black Family

New York City child welfare authorities are more than twice as likely to remove African-American children from their families as they are to remove white children, once a report of abuse or neglect has been confirmed, according to internal state data obtained by *Child Welfare Watch*.

The government data reflect a stark racial disparity in the way families are treated by the city's child welfare system.

In 1996, two of every five African-American children in "indicated"—i.e. confirmed—abuse and neglect cases were removed from their parents' custody. Nearly half were removed in 1995. And nearly three in five were removed in 1994.

Meanwhile, only one of every five white children in confirmed reports of abuse or neglect was removed in 1995 and 1996, and one of every four in 1994. Families whose children are not taken away are usually referred to community-based social service programs, drug treatment or counseling. They are supposed to also receive continued oversight from caseworkers. Children were removed from Latino families at a rate almost one-and-a-half times that of white families—though not nearly as frequently as African-American families. The state does not gather data on Asian families in the child protection system.

Racial and cultural bias, as well as higher rates of poverty among African Americans, appear to be among the key factors underlying the disproportional

removal of children, according to academic researchers and child welfare practitioners.

The overall number of child removals has increased rapidly since the mid-1990s. Citywide, there were 50 percent more removals in 1997 than in 1995, a shift attributable to Giuliani administration policy changes and more numerous reports of suspected abuse following the widely publicized murder of 6-year-old Elisa Izquierdo by her mother. The city's child protection and law enforcement authorities have said current policy requires that they err on the side of caution whenever there is reason to question a child's physical safety in the home. Police are intervening more frequently than in the past—and a higher number of reports are resulting in removals.

The recent policy shift has had its most significant impact in African-American communities. About one of every 10 children from the majority black community of Central Harlem was in foster care in 1995. More recent data are not available, but given the overall increase in removals, the Central Harlem numbers have most likely risen since that time.

Overall, an estimated 73 percent of the children currently in foster care are African American. Fewer than 24 percent are Latino, and 3 percent are white or Asian.*

Citywide, about one of every 22 black children is in foster care, compared with one in every 59 Latino children—and only one in every 385 white children.

THE RACIAL FACTOR IN REMOVALS

The state data add new emphasis to previous academic research about the role racial bias appears to play in the reporting of abuse, as well as in the placement of children in foster care.

A comprehensive 1994 federal study of child welfare cases in all 50 states compared children's natural families based on a number of different characteristics—and found in every case that black children were more likely than white children to be removed from the home regardless of specific family problems. For example, even when there was no substance abuse problem in the home, black children were still removed 32 percent of the time while white children were removed only 21 percent of the time. Similarly, if a parent was employed, black children were removed in 36 percent of cases, Latino children in 34 percent of cases and white children in only 22 percent. This national study was commissioned by the federal Department of Health and Human Services and conducted by Westat, a private research firm.

A 1991 study of women whose newborns tested positive for cocaine in New York City hospitals reported that African-American women were 72 percent more likely than white women—and more than twice as likely as Latino women—to have their children

REMOVING THE CHILDREN

STEREOTYPES OF THE BLACK FAMILY

Black leaders in the advocacy and nonprofit fields charge that black children are removed from their families more often than white children, following a confirmed report of abuse or neglect, primarily because of age-old stereotypes about black families.

"It has been accepted that there is a fundamental problem with the black family," says Megan McLaughlin, executive director of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, who is black. "There are many people who believe that to save these children, they have to take them from their families. It is a sense that black families are already broken, and you're saving these kids from broken black families."

Demographically speaking, the structure of African-American families is very different from that of American society as a whole. More than half of all black families with children in New York City are headed

by a single mother, according to the 1990 census, and in Manhattan the number exceeds 60 percent. Nationwide, in 1992, only about 17 percent of families with children are headed by a single mother according to the Census Bureau.

Black families also have far lower incomes on average than white families in New York, partly because so many black households have only one parent.

Because of broadly accepted cultural assumptions that urban, single-parent households are much more likely to be weak and dysfunctional, single black mothers regularly bear the full brunt of child welfare intervention, charges Esmeralda Simmons, executive director for the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. She says policymakers and child protection officials need to understand that black families are far more flexible and resourceful—even in

taken away by authorities and placed with a foster care agency (Neuspiel et al., 1993). The authors—researchers at Albert Einstein School of Medicine and Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx—added that the placement of a child in foster care had no statistical relationship to whether or not the mother had a prior reported history of substance abuse. It is incorrect, therefore, to argue that the black women's substance abuse histories might have been worse, and therefore their children were removed at a higher rate.

Racial bias, however, was in all likelihood not the only factor underlying this disparity. The authors point out that the black women may have had less stable housing and inadequate access to prenatal services—two factors researchers determined were statistically related to the removal of a child.

Some observers close to the system say the infrequent removal of white children is also the result of a more tolerant response by child protective caseworkers and their supervisors. Workers, they say, often fear that white families will be much more likely than black families to cause legal trouble if a child is removed, quickly hiring lawyers and fighting back. "Black people often don't know their legal rights," explains a former Family Court

judge. "White people may be more likely to call their attorney."

"The average feeling among caseworkers is, if you remove a white child, you stand the chance next morning of facing the white parents with their lawyer," says Trevor Grant, a

families are more likely to bring an advocate of some sort to court with them—a social worker or neighbor, for example. Parents with such support "are likely to win over the judge and keep their kids."

AFRICAN AMERICAN	1994	1995	1996
Children in Indicated reports	7,231	7,832	11,189
First placements in Foster Care	4,218	3,490	4,268
Ratio of indications to placement	58.3 %	44.6 %	38.1 %
LATINO			
Children in Indicated reports	4,385	5,167	6,822
First placements in Foster Care	1,811	1,606	2,085
Ratio of indications to placement	41.3 %	31.1 %	30.6 %
WHITE			
Children in Indicated reports	1,347	1,447	1,551
First placements in Foster Care	334	291	329
Ratio of indications to placement	24.8 %	20.1 %	21.2 %

Source: NYS DSS Admission and discharge by ethnicity, 1/28/98; Ethnicity of abused/maltreated children in indicated reports, Table 10, BSIS SPSS Report, 7/17/95, 5/23/96, 4/6/97.

caseworker and supervisor at ACS from 1985 to 1991. "There's no similar fear in removing a black or Hispanic child from the home."

This restrained manner of dealing with white families extends into the courts as well, says an Administration for Children's Services attorney who works in Bronx Family Court. "If a white family or a middle class family comes in, the first thing the judge asks is, 'Why are you here?'" says the city attorney, adding that white

CITY DENIES RACISM IS THE CAUSE

Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta of the city's Administration for Children's Services says bias is not the cause of racial disparities revealed in the data. "I don't really think it's a question of racism, but of the economic circumstances people find themselves in and drugs," he says.

"Most of our kids are minorities," Scoppetta adds, pointing out that a high percentage of his agency's front-line staff are also minorities. "I don't think racism plays a part in removals," he says.

Some practitioners in the field, however, counter that the presence of black and Latino caseworkers does not necessarily alleviate the problem. "Being black does not automatically guarantee that you are free of racist assumptions," says Luis Medina, executive director of St. Christopher's-Jennie Clarkson Child Care Services. Medina, who is himself Puerto Rican, says that black and Latino caseworkers

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times of stress and adversity—than is conventionally believed. "Our definition of family includes extended family, our children's friends, elder siblings as the head of the household—all of this is acceptable, and it is a major strength of families at risk."

Some researchers have shown that when child welfare officials and caseworkers are more attuned to these kind of cultural issues they are more effective in working with families in the home. This would include more fully understanding a family's extended kinship network and promoting interaction with community resources including churches and neighborhood associations. It also means more fully understanding black parents' motives for physical discipline, which is far more common in black families than among whites and Latinos. Studies have found that African-American parents in general value obedience and ambition in their children more highly than white parents do, probably because of the extraordinary obstacles of racism and violence that these parents expect their children to face in American society. Therefore child welfare workers have to work with parents' passionate

concern for their children—and shift them away from abusive degrees of discipline. (Gray and Nybell, 1990; Pinderhughes, 1991; Allen, 1981).

Black leaders in the child welfare field say that too often, potential strengths, such as a mother's reliance on her extended family for support, are ignored.

"It's an insidious kind of thing," says Alma Carten, a professor of social work at New York University and a former child welfare commissioner. "It's not valuing different lifestyles of families.... People just make a set of assumptions. Poor African-American families don't meet the ideal family type."

Even more disturbing, some parent advocates and minority agency administrators believe the impact of stereotyping and bias runs deeper than race alone. "Not only are a majority of families in the system African-Americans—they are dark-skinned African Americans. And the Hispanics are dark Hispanics," says Jessica Crosby, administrator of the National Association of Former Foster Children, an organization that advocates on behalf of parents in Family Court. ■

Dislocating the Black Family *(continued)*

REMOVING THE CHILDREN

THE ROLE OF POVERTY

Poverty, drugs and the severity of abuse are critical factors in a government worker's decision to remove a child. One national survey of abuse and neglect cases in the mid-1980s found that children in families with incomes below \$15,000 were five times more likely to be victimized by their parents than those with incomes above that level (Pelton, 1994). Low-income parents are often under greater stress and are more poorly educated. And black and Latino families are far more likely to be poor than white families.

And indeed, median black family income in New York City in 1992 was only \$20,000, compared to \$32,000 for whites.

But median Hispanic family incomes are even lower—only \$12,094 for Puerto Rican families and \$18,000 for non Puerto-

Rican Hispanics. In New York, more Hispanic children are born into poverty than black children.

Yet as a proportion of the total population, far more black children are removed from their parents and placed in foster care.

A comparison of a black and a Hispanic neighborhood—each with similar incomes, similar poverty rates, comparable number of families on public assistance and very high felony crime rates—reveals an extraordinarily sharp divergence in the number of local children removed from their families and placed in foster care.

In Central Harlem, which is largely African-American, nearly one in 10 children are currently in foster care. In Hunts Point, which is largely Hispanic, the number is one in 19.

MANHATTAN DISTRICT 10 CENTRAL HARLEM

87.6 percent black
10.1 percent Hispanic
0.4 percent Asian
1.5 percent white

47.4 percent of households with incomes below \$10,000
75.7 percent of births into poverty
56.2 percent of children are on public assistance
8.6 percent of births received no prenatal care
16.6 percent of births were to teenage mothers (340)
47.3 felony arrests per 1,000 residents

31,390 children under age 18
2,031 abuse and neglect reports
1,064 confirmed abuse and neglect reports
3,015 children from this community are in foster care
9.60 percent of all children under age 18 are in foster care

BRONX DISTRICT 2 HUNTS POINT

18.9 percent black
78.9 percent Hispanic
0.2 percent Asian
1.4 percent white

65.9 percent of households w/ incomes below \$10,000
83.0 percent of births into poverty
62.0 percent of children are on public assistance
6.9 percent of births received no prenatal care
22.1 percent of births were to teenage mothers (548)
78.5 felony arrests per 1,000 residents

16,848 children under age 18
869 abuse and neglect reports
321 confirmed abuse and neglect reports
884 children from this community are in foster care
5.25 percent of all children under age 18 are in foster care

QUEENS DISTRICT 5 RIDGEWOOD/GLENDALE

0.5 percent black
14.5 percent Hispanic
5.1 percent Asian
79.7 percent white

25.4 percent of households with incomes below \$10,000
43.1 percent of births into poverty
22.1 percent of children are on public assistance
2.1 percent of births received no prenatal care
5.6 percent of births were to teenage mothers (198)
8.2 felony arrests per 1,000 residents

31,939 children under age 18
625 abuse and neglect reports
133 confirmed abuse and neglect reports
145 children from this community are in foster care
0.45 percent of all children under age 18 are in foster care

In most of the statistical categories, Hunts Point has even more problems than Central Harlem. Yet there were many more reports of abuse and neglect filed in Central Harlem than in Hunts Point—and three-and-a-half times as many children placed in foster care.

In each of these neighborhoods, a

child is equally likely to live with a single mother—so parental status is not a factor that differentiates them.

The quality of rental housing in both neighborhoods is as bad as it gets anywhere in the city, according to the Census Bureau's 1993 Housing and Vacancy Survey. Both neighborhoods receive a 74 percent "fair to poor" housing quality rating.

Meanwhile, in the mostly white Ridgewood and Glendale neighborhoods in Queens, where more than two-fifths of the children were born into poverty in 1994 and one-fourth of the households had incomes below \$10,000, fewer than one in every 200 children has been taken from his or her family and placed in foster care.

What is not measured in these statistics, however, are broader community and civic resources. More research needs to be pursued to determine what differentiates these neighborhoods other than ethnicity and race. ■

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often come down as hard or harder on people of their own ethnicity.

“There are black and Latino staff that are as insensitive to racial and cultural issues as whites,” Medina says. “We’re all exposed to the same institutional racism, the same stereotypes about inadequate black families or disinterested

black fathers. We’re all reading the same newspapers. We’re all watching the same television.”

*NOTE: Our estimate of the racial and ethnic composition of the foster care system is based on New York state data. The race and ethnicity of a rapidly increasing number of children in the system are listed as “other/unknown” (currently 20 percent of all cases are listed this way). In keeping with estimates provided to us

by a handful of major foster care providers, *Child Welfare Watch* distributed the “other/unknown” group proportionately among the other categories to reach our figures. A survey of foster care cases published by the United Way of New York in April 1998 offered a similar estimate.

City, state and nonprofit agencies should be producing more complete data about the children and families engaged with the system. And data on Asian-American clients should be tallied apart from the “unknown/other” category. ■

MINORITIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE REPORTED FOR ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Of the 21,022 children involved in confirmed cases of abuse or neglect in 1996, at least 53 percent were black and 32 percent were Latino. While poverty and drug use are clearly key factors in the number of reports filed against low-income minority families, researchers have found that racial bias and the simple circumstances of poverty also lead to more reports being filed against such families than against white and middle-class families.

Indeed, abuse and neglect among white and middle-class families often remains unreported and hidden because these families are much less likely than their low-income or minority counterparts to be in contact with government bureaucrats, law enforcement officers, and social service and welfare workers—officials who are all required to file reports when they suspect abuse or neglect. Therefore, statistics comparing income levels to abuse and neglect can be flawed.

When a family does come into contact with so-called “mandated reporters”—at hospitals and in schools, for example—an injury or other possible sign of abuse on a white child’s body is much less likely to lead to a report to government authorities than a similar injury on a black or Latino child, researchers have found.

Repeatedly, national research studies have found “that children from poor and minority families are more likely to be labeled ‘abused’ than children from more affluent and majority homes with comparable injuries,” according to the authors of an analysis of the Second National Family Violence Survey, a national statistical survey conducted in 1985 (Hampton, Gelles and Harrop, 1989).

“Factors such as race and social class are as (or more) important in determining which cases will be labeled child abuse than is the

nature of the injury or accident,” the authors concluded.

In another national study on the reporting of abuse and neglect, researchers found that when hospital staff identified cases of alleged child maltreatment, they called in child protective services for 91 percent of the Hispanic cases, 74 percent of the African-American cases—and only 60 percent of the white cases (Hampton, 1987).

More recently, a RAND Corporation survey of mandated child abuse and neglect reporters—public and private officials, physicians and others—used a broad array of fictional vignettes to determine in which circumstances each reporter would place a call to protective services. The researchers found that the respondents were “in every case” more likely to file a report of abuse or neglect against a low-income or black family (Zellman, 1992).

In a 1990 Florida study of 715 pregnant women screened for drugs at their first prenatal visit, positive results were obtained at nearly the same rate for black and white women (Chasnoff et al., 1990). The black women were four times more likely to have used cocaine or alcohol, while the white women were twice as likely to have tested positive for marijuana. The researchers found that, after delivery, hospitals were 10 times more likely to inform child protection authorities about black women who tested positive for drugs than white women.

While the choice of drugs (cocaine having more severe effects than marijuana) was probably a factor in the decision to make the reports, the study also noted that physicians tended to believe drug use during pregnancy was more common in poor minority communities—and therefore the physicians appeared more willing to intervene in minority families. ■

NOTES to tables on page 6:

Racial/ethnic data are from the 1990 Census; Total number of children is 1994 Citizens Committee for Children, Census and NYC Dept. of Health. Household income is 1993 Bureau of the Census, HVS; Foster care numbers are NYC Administration for Children’s Services, June 1995; Prenatal care data are 1994 NYC Department of Health; Births into poverty are 1994 NYC Department of Health; Births to teenage mothers are 1996 NYC Department of Health; Public Assistance data are 1994 NYC Human Resources Administration; Felony arrests data are 1994 NYPD; Abuse and neglect report and indication data are 1996 NYC Administration for Children’s Services. (Some of these data were culled from “Keeping Track” published by the Citizens Committee for Children, 1997)

Longer Stays, fewer services: Blacks in Foster Care

African-American children are much more likely than white or Latino children to remain a very long time—five years or more—in foster care, according to state Department of Social Services data obtained by *Child Welfare Watch*.

Of the 5,376 African American children placed in foster care for the first time in New York City during 1992, one-quarter were still there as of January 1998. Fewer than one-fifth of Latino children placed in care in 1992 were still in care in 1998, and fewer than one-tenth of the white children who entered the system in 1992 were still wards of the city six years later. Children's length of stay in foster care is generally considered one of the principle benchmarks for determining the effectiveness of child welfare services. About 75 percent of the children in the city's foster care system eventually return to their parents or to live with a relative, according to city officials. The remaining 25 percent are either adopted by a new family or age out of the system, moving out on their own between the ages of 18 and 21.

Overall, the average length of stay for children in foster care was just over four years in 1997, according to the most recent state data available.

These statistics echo findings of academic researchers, not only in New York but across the country. For example, a study of New York State foster children eligible for adoption in the late 1980s found that "children of color waited longer for placement and were less likely to experience placement than Caucasian children, who were adopted at about twice the rate of children of color." (Courtney et al., 1996)

Nationwide, African-American children placed in foster care spend much longer periods there than white children, according to a 1994 survey of open cases in all 50 states commissioned by the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Black children placed with non-relative foster parents spent 42 percent longer in care than whites, the authors found.

Often material poverty and substance abuse play an important role in delaying or preventing a child's return to the biological parents. But there are additional, closely intertwined reasons that revolve around issues of race.

Research based on comprehensive national data found that African-American kids had the least support from caseworkers when trying to make

contact with their biological families (Olsen, 1982) and that African American and Latino families were less likely than whites to have "specific service recommendations." Children of color in foster care had fewer visits with their parents and siblings, fewer services overall and less contact with caseworkers than white children (Close, 1983). Without such regular contact between the child, the parents and the workers, resolving a case becomes unlikely.

Of course, this early-1980s research might have little relevance today—but for anecdotal critiques that tend to support its findings.

"The darker the skin color, the greater the length of placement. I don't know what more we can say," says Luis Medina, executive director of St. Christopher's-Jennie Clarkson Child Care Services, a major New York foster care provider. He believes caseworkers often make misguided assumptions about black families' unresponsiveness, their problems with drugs or violence, or even their inadequacy as parents. "For society in general, the darker the skin color, the easier it is to believe certain stereotypes. That's certainly true in foster care agencies." As a result, he says, dark-skinned parents—especially fathers—are less likely than lighter skinned men and women to win the trust of foster care caseworkers and their supervisors. He says he believes this is why black children frequently don't return home as quickly as whites and light-skinned Latinos.

To counteract these attitudes, his organization holds rigorous diversity training sessions to help his staff—even black and Latino workers—overcome negative stereotyping and better understand how to engage biological fathers in the rearing of their children.

THE KINSHIP FACTOR

It's important to note, however, that there is also a positive explanation for some black children's longer foster care stays: kinship care. Children who are removed from their parents after they are abused or neglected, and who are then placed by the city in kinship foster care—that is, with family or relatives—spend an average of about five years in care, according to a 1998 study by Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), an organization which advocates for children and their families in

Family Court. This data is backed up by a report of the United Way for New York, published as this edition of *Child Welfare Watch* went to press. Kids placed with outside foster families spend an average of about four years in care, say the researchers.

The CASA study also found that African-American children are about 10 times as likely as whites to be placed in kinship care, and almost five times as likely as Latinos.

Kinship offers children major advantages, stability and continuity foremost among them. In about three-quarters of kinship cases, children remain in the same placement throughout their stay, compared to just over half of those placed in the foster boarding homes, according to CASA. They also maintain important family ties.

But CASA found problems with kinship care that mirror overall disparities in care for African-American children. For example, researchers found that the city's Administration for Children's Services retained management and planning responsibilities for a majority of kinship families rather than turning these cases over to the nonprofit sector—and when this happened, children and their biological parents were far more likely to face problems obtaining housing or other material assistance as well as substance abuse treatment. Families under the oversight of the public sector were three times as likely to need a court order in order to obtain necessary services, compared with those under nonprofit oversight, according to the study. What is more, when looking at both city and nonprofit agencies, the authors found that "[in] kinship families...[case]workers were less likely to be aware of available services, and when aware, less skilled in obtaining services, and finally, less cooperative in obtaining services."

And without such essential services, reunifying a child with his or her biological parents is often out of the question.

CASA's data on court involvement may be skewed because the organization's advocates generally work with cases active in Family Court. Yet the United Way study found similar differences. For example, kinship families almost never received special foster care payment rates for children with special needs, compared to more than 40 percent of non-kinship cases. So there are clearly broad differences between the way government and nonprofits view the two types of care.

**LAWYERS,
LANGUAGES**

Another factor that can swell the length of time a child spends in foster care is the shortage of adequate legal representation for low-income families. "Usually [low-income] families wait a for a whole year before they find representation," says Jane Golden, project director of C-PLAN, based at the New York City Office of the Public Advocate. "They need somebody to speak on their behalf. Everybody is represented but the parent."

Children are given attorneys through the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division, and the city has its own lawyers working in Family Court for ACS.

Latino and Asian families, meanwhile, sometimes suffer because of language barriers. Frequently, the caseworkers speak only English, and families face difficulties engaging with them and obtaining services. Two years ago, Asian-American advocates found that the city's child protection investigators sometimes went so far as to use bilingual children to translate in conversations with parents and

neighbors. The advocates charged this undermined both parental authority and powerful cultural values.

Ultimately, the disparities between the races revealed by longer lengths of stay in foster care is a measure of our society's lack of concern for the needs of families of color, says Megan McLaughlin, executive director of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. "I believe that if New York City had 40,000 white children in foster care, there would be a different level of concern," she says. "It would be dealt with very differently." ■

BLACK CHILDREN REMAIN LONGER IN FOSTER CARE

Year 1992	First admissions	Still in care, 1/98	% still in care 1/98
Black	5,370	1,340	24.9
Latino	2,203	436	19.8
White	406	37	9.1
Other/Unk.	1,896	378	19.9
Total	9,875		
Year 1993	First admissions	Still in care, 1/98	% still in care 1/98
Black	4,671	1,560	33.4
Latino	2,038	523	25.7
White	340	73	21.5
Other/Unk.	2,328	552	23.7
Total	9,377		
Year 1994	First admissions	Still in care, 1/98	% still in care 1/98
Black	4,218	1,936	45.9
Latino	1,811	660	36.4
White	334	104	31.1
Other/Unk.	2,179	701	32.2
Total	8,542		
Year 1995	First admissions	Still in care, 1/98	% still in care 1/98
Black	3,490	2,007	57.5
Latino	1,606	745	46.4
White	291	124	42.6
Other/Unk.	1,893	723	38.2
Total	7,280		
Year 1996	First admissions	Still in care, 1/98	% still in care 1/98
Black	4,268	2,739	64.2
Latino	2,085	1,253	60.1
White	325	181	55.7
Other/Unk.	3,045	1,704	56.0
Total	9,723		

Source: NYS Department of Social Services, Interim annual summary of characteristics of children in foster care, calendar year 1997, dated 5/4/98; also NYS Department of Social Services, Special data run on length of stay by ethnicity, dated 1/28/98.

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Preventive Cuts Hammer Black Communities

Central Harlem, Jamaica, Bedford Stuyvesant and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx have been hit harder than any other neighborhoods over the last three years by Giuliani administration cuts to community-based social services designed to prevent the placement of children in foster care.

Harlem, for example, has lost three nonprofit community programs that were part of the Family Rehabilitation Program, a successful city-wide initiative to help parents kick drugs and keep their families intact. Another agency in the rehab program lost all city funding and has survived on private donations.

And a child welfare counseling and case management program also closed. Yet Harlem is the neighborhood with the greatest need for these services—it has the highest rate of foster care placement and the highest rate of confirmed abuse and neglect reports in the city.

The Harlem cuts are characteristic of a much larger racial disparity in the provision of foster care prevention programs—social services that include parent skills training, homemaking services, and day care in addition to benefits assistance, drug treatment and counseling—all of which are meant to give new support to a family close to breaking apart or under severe stress.

Although the need for such help has increased as the number of confirmed reports—especially in black communities—has risen during the last few years, the total number of families receiving preventive services has declined markedly, from 14,405 in 1993 to 11,744 last year. City and state funding of preventive programs has declined by more than \$20 million since the mid-1990s, to \$127.5 million in Fiscal Year 1998.

Last year, about 43 percent of the children in prevention programs were referred to the programs by city child protective caseworkers. The remainder either joined voluntarily or were referred by schools and community organizations.

A statistical analysis of state data reveals that city-wide, preventive programs are more readily available to white and Latino families than to black families.

Child Welfare Watch calculated the number of children assigned to prevention slots as a proportion of the total number of children who were the subjects of confirmed reports of abuse and neglect from 1994 through 1996.

In 1994, the year before the program cuts began, many more African-American children entered prevention programs—a total of 8,873—than were subjects of confirmed abuse and neglect reports (7,231).

However, by 1996, far more African-American children were the subject of confirmed abuse and neglect reports—11,189—while only 7,532

As a result, there is a great demand for these programs. But the programs are not always available close to home.

“It’s the core services that are in shortest supply: the outreach, the home visits, the counseling,” explains Shawn Dove, director of the Rheedlen Center’s Countee Cullen Beacon Program, a major preventive provider in Central Harlem. His program has been at capacity for several years, primarily serving families from the blocks surrounding the center, he adds. “We’re on 144th Street, and a family can be on 150th and fall through the cracks of the system because they are six blocks away.”

Observers say that some preventive agencies that serve both blacks and Latinos may be engaging in “creaming,” in other words not working with clients they consider more difficult while accepting families who appear more likely to succeed without a massive commitment of staff effort.

“I suspect there is a screening-out mechanism that would make fewer African Americans, across the board, end up in preventive services,” says Freddie Hamilton, executive director of the Child Development Support Corporation in Brooklyn, a black-led foster care agency. Black families may be stereotypically viewed as more likely to become involved in drugs, posing complications in social service efforts, she says.

Certain preventive agencies may therefore try to keep their distance from some of these families.

Rosalyn Ferguson, chair of the Black Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, a coalition of service providers, parents and civic leaders, agrees. “There’s somewhat of a gatekeeper mentality, in that people are screened out,” she says. Latinos and whites may be more attractive clients from the perspective of some organizations, she explains. For one thing, immigrant families are often perceived as more motivated to succeed.

As fewer African-American children are placed in preventive services, more are being removed from their parents. Black leaders charge this changing emphasis within ACS is compounded by deeply embedded racial stereotypes.

“IF A SYSTEM OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES IS TO SERVE BLACK CHILDREN ADEQUATELY, IT MUST ABANDON THE RESIDUAL APPROACH IN WHICH CHILD WELFARE PROGRAMS ARE DESIGNED AND OPERATED PRIMARILY TO RESCUE UNFORTUNATE CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS HAVE FAILED THEM AND WHO HAVE THUS FALLEN THROUGH THE CRACKS.... THE PROGRAMS MUST BE BASED INSTEAD ON THE FACT THAT THE PRESENT SOCIAL ORDER IS NOT FUNCTIONING PROPERLY.... CHILD WELFARE MUST BE ORIENTED TOWARD PREVENTION OF CHILD-CARE PROBLEMS AS WELL AS TOWARD CURATIVE AND CORRECTIVE MEASURES; IT MUST FOCUS ON PRESERVING AND ENHANCING FAMILY LIFE FOR CHILDREN RATHER THAN ON RESCUING CHILDREN FROM FAMILIES.”

—Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne Giovannoni, from the landmark study “Children of the Storm,” published 1972.

received preventive services.

Latinos are comparatively better-served than African Americans. In 1996, there were 6,822 Latino children identified in confirmed reports of abuse and neglect—and 8,377 Latino children placed in preventive services.

By federal and state law, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the city’s first line of defense against abuse and neglect is not supposed to be the removal of children from their families. Except in cases where the child is clearly in danger of severe abuse or neglect, the city is not supposed to take the child away. It is instead meant to provide foster care prevention and support services designed to keep families whole and to help them care for their children properly.

“My sense is there’s an assumption in the institution of child welfare that whole segments of the population are incapable of caring for their children, so why give them preventive services?” says Zoilo Torres, director of the Child Welfare Action Center, a nonprofit that organizes parents and agencies. “The majority of families who suffer from this assumption are black.”

In the course of preparing this report, *Child Welfare Watch* spoke with several black parents whose children are now or were, at one time, in foster care who say they were never offered referrals to preventive programs. Torres says this is also true for many of the parents he works with.

With prevention programs at capacity, serving a fraction of those who need them, the removal of a child from his or her family is often the only “service” New York City offers thousands of troubled, low-income families.

“Families in black and Latino neighborhoods are requesting services, only to be told there are no services available,” says Esmeralda Simmons, executive director of the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College in Bedford Stuyvesant. There can be only one explanation, she charges: “People don’t think these families are worth the same treatment given to other people.” ■

TABLE 1	1994	1995	1996
AFRICAN AMERICAN			
1. Children in preventive placements	8,873	7,910	7,532
2. Children in confirmed abuse and neglect reports	7,231	7,832	11,189
3. Ratio preventive/confirmed	1.23	1.01	0.67
LATINO			
1. Children in preventive placements	6,624	6,317	8,377
2. Children in confirmed abuse and neglect reports	4,385	5,167	6,822
3. Ratio preventive/confirmed	1.51	1.22	1.23
WHITE			
1. Children in preventive placements	1,354	1,166	1,215
2. Children in confirmed abuse and neglect reports	1,347	1,447	1,551
3. Ratio preventive/confirmed	1.01	0.81	0.78

Source: NYS DSS Monitoring and Analysis Profiles

TABLE 2	1994	1995	1996
1. Children listed in confirmed abuse & neglect reports	13,853	15,555	21,022
2. Children placed in preventive services	20,960	19,478	18,830

Preventive services were designed to meet the needs of parents and children referred by child protective services, as well as others from the community who may be considered at risk of abuse or neglect. As a result, from the time preventive services were first funded in 1978 until two years ago, the number of children in prevention programs always exceeded the number of children who were the subjects of confirmed reports of abuse or neglect. But in 1996, for the first time in 18 years, the number of children listed in confirmed reports was greater than the number of children entering preventive service programs.

INTENSIVE REHAB WORKS

There has long been a debate about which types of prevention programs are effective, which actually serve the needs of families, and which fail to accomplish very much at all. A great deal of research is still needed to understand how these programs could best be targeted and designed.

Still, fewer than 10 percent of the city’s child welfare cases involve physical or severe emotional abuse—and for the rest, there is little doubt that for many families, well-run day care, homemaking assistance, substance abuse treatment programs and material assistance such as money and food can relieve the stress that leads to neglect.

One recent research study found a remarkable degree of success for an innovative program that combines intensive social service casework with drug abuse counseling and treatment. The majority of those it has served are African-American women. But for the last three years, it has been subjected to severe city budget cuts.

The Family Rehabilitation Program currently serves 585 fam-

ilies citywide, down from nearly 800 four years ago. The study, conducted by the National Development and Research Institutes and the city’s Administration for Children’s Services, found that mothers stayed involved in the program for at least 10 months, on average—a result the authors considered “excellent” and better than any other intensive program of its kind. They also found that women who stayed involved were more likely than those who didn’t to be drug-free, based on hair specimen testing; their overall drug use was cut 82 percent, according to the women’s own reporting; and they were much less likely to have lost any children to foster care.

“In addition to reductions in drug use, [there were] increases in employment and school enrollment, decreased involvement with the legal system, fewer psychological symptoms, improved family/social adjustment and perceived improvement in parenting competence,” the authors wrote.

The study, “Effectiveness of Comprehensive Services for Crack-Dependent Mothers with Newborns and Young Children,” by Stephen Magura et al., is available from NDRI, (212) 845-4521. ■

Who controls Foster Care?

Despite the fact that nearly all of New York City's foster children are people of color, the great majority of the men and women who decide these children's fate—the administrators and directors of city-contracted nonprofit foster care agencies—are white.

Employment data from 27 of the city's largest nonprofit foster care agencies reveal that 62 percent of their officials and managers are white, 27 percent are African American, 7.7 percent are Latino, and 3.1 percent are Asian.

By comparison, an estimated 3 percent of the 41,198 children in foster care are white, 73 percent are African American, and fewer than 24 percent are Latino.* The number of Asians is not sufficiently documented to be reported with any accuracy.

Government labor regulators do not compile data clearly outlining the race and ethnicity of the most powerful players in the child welfare industry—agency directors and top executives. The data obtained by *Child Welfare Watch* combines the most senior staff with middle management. Because we know anecdotally that proportionately more people of color serve in middle management than at the top of the executive pyramid, this data actually obscures the true degree to which blacks, Latinos and Asians are not included in the highest ranks.

The 27 agencies on the *Child Welfare Watch* list are nonprofits that provide a range of services including residential care, and were extracted from labor force data compiled by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Information covering these 27 agencies was the only data obtainable from the federal agency, although there are a total of 64 foster care agencies that contract with New York City (see note** below). The data were provided in aggregate by the EEOC, which would not provide reports on individual agencies, citing privacy concerns.

These 27 agencies include most of the city's largest contract foster care organizations, responsible for well over half of the children who are under the care of nonprofit organizations. Those on the list include Graham-Windham Services for Children and Families, Children's Village, New York Foundling, Jewish Child Care Association, Abbott House, Children's Aid Society, and Little Flower Children's Services, among others. None of the city's nine minority-run agencies are included. (About 28 percent of the children in foster care

are overseen by ACS casework staff rather than by nonprofits. We do not have data outlining the race and ethnicity of management in this section of the city agency.)

While the federal data do not separate top executives from middle management, anecdotal reports from people in the field indicate that most African-American and Latino managerial staffers hold mid-level supervisory jobs rather than positions in top management or on the boards of directors.

"The glass ceiling is at the upper level of management," says Luis Medina, the executive director of St. Christopher's-Jennie Clarkson Child Care Services and one of a handful of people of color who have broken the barrier to guide traditionally white-run foster care agencies. "Most agencies have only one or two people of color on their board."

On the next step down the ladder of employment, diversity improves for all groups except Asians. Of the agencies' professional staffers, 43 percent are white, 41 percent are African American, 13 percent are Latino and 3.2 percent are Asian.

Among service staff, people of color predominate. Sixty-eight percent of the agencies' service employees are African American, 25 percent are white, 6.5 percent are Latino, and 0.7 percent are Asian.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE / RACIAL CONGRUITY

Twenty-six years ago, in their book "Children of the Storm," Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne Giovannoni argued racism could not be eliminated from child welfare until whites shared power over the system with the black community—and in some places abdicated control entirely. There has been some progress: During the two most recent mayoral administrations, child welfare bureaucracies have at times been directed by African-American commissioners, and the top ranks at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) continue to include high-level African-American administrators.

But given the disparity in treatment of children and families by race and ethnicity, it is clear very serious problems remain. Many black, Latino and Asian leaders in the field say there can be no thoroughgoing reform until those

who manage both the policy and practice of the child welfare industry are immersed in the cultures of the families their organizations serve.

"Ninety-seven percent of the kids in the system are of color and twelve percent of the agencies are of color," says Denise Rosario, executive director of the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services, one of the city's nine minority-controlled foster care providers, which currently has 183 children in care. "We should move toward a system that is more representative of the people being served."

"Cultural competence" is a phrase commonly used in social work to describe skills that enable professionals to provide effective social services and devise good social policy for specific communities. Leaders and workers in the child welfare system must not only know details of their clients' cultural worldview—they must be able to act on that knowledge in a supportive and culturally appropriate way, experts say. This often comes most easily, they add, to those who are steeped in the life of the communities they serve.

"Our headquarters is right smack in the middle of the community we represent," explains John Wright, deputy executive director of Harlem Dowling-Westside Center, one of the city's largest minority-controlled foster care agencies. "That's where our kids come from, where our workers come from, and where most of our senior staff comes from. When I walk out to lunch I run into foster parents and biological parents. That educates me on some of the policy decisions I have to make."

In African-American communities, for example, Wright says, a good social worker who supports families' strengths (rather than attacking perceived pathologies) will recognize that "family" is often defined broadly to include friends, relatives and neighbors. Harlem Dowling's presence in the community—and the racial congruity between its staff and clients—means caseworkers have access to nearly everyone who has had a positive impact in the children's lives. They also know how to gain residents' trust more easily than outsiders with no local connections. That means they can more effectively help children and their parents, Wright says.

Rosario, Medina, Wright and many others in the field agree this sort of competence is too often lacking.

OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL

One solution to this problem is the development of high-quality African-American, Latino and Asian leadership at the helm of existing agencies. Another, more long-term solution is the establishment of strong new organizations controlled and operated primarily by people of color.

Currently, the nine foster care agencies established by people of color in New York City provide services to 4,782 children, or about 12 percent of all children in foster care. The largest among them are the Harlem Dowling-Westside Center, based in Harlem; Miracle Makers and the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council, both based in Bedford Stuyvesant; and Family Support Systems Unlimited in Fordham. All combined, these four agencies contract for the care of more than 3,500 foster children, receiving a total of \$37.1 million a year. The five others serve a much smaller clientele and receive a combined total of about \$9.5 million a year.

But large, long-established white agencies still dominate the industry. Last year, 23 of New York City's 50 largest government contractors were foster care agencies. The 10 at the top of the list—Little Flower, New York Foundling,

St. Christopher-Ottolie, Leake & Watts, Jewish Child Care Association, St. Vincent's, Graham-Windham, Catholic Home Bureau, St. Joseph Services, and Children's Village—hold contracts worth a total of \$302.8 million a year, about half the entire foster care contract budget. They are all traditional, white-establishment organizations.

These larger agencies can afford to roll revenues—and their often-substantial endowments—into new investment. They can also dominate political lobbying on industry issues, thanks to their ties to City Hall and Albany as well as to the state's mainstream religious leadership.

By comparison, small community-run groups have few resources and little clout.

"Minority foster care has been around for a short time. We have fewer resources, we have fewer dollars, we have less access," says Freddie Hamilton, executive director of one of the smaller minority-run foster care providers, the Child Development Support Corporation, which serves 420 children. "If the intention is to have minority groups providing services to these children, then we need to be able to have some access and support." After a pause, she adds: "If the intention is to squeeze us out, they're doing a pretty good job."

ACS Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta

recently announced a plan to refocus foster care services in the communities where children and their parents live, but Rosario and others say the city's proposal contains no safeguards for small agencies and does not address cultural or ethnic considerations. The new city plan should improve services—but it could also cause black and Latino groups significant problems because large citywide organizations are now moving into their neighborhoods.

"There are agencies that have set aside money to help them prepare for the ACS proposal," notes Melba Butler, executive director of Harlem Dowling. "How do you compete if you don't have resources?" Butler has already seen a recent increase in the number of large agencies, such as Catholic Guardian Society and Children's Village, staking out new space for offices in Harlem. "I am truly amazed at the number of organizations that have some small amount of square footage here so they can say they are community-based," she says. "Putting up a storefront does not make you Harlem-based." ■

*See NOTE on page 7

** NOTE: *Child Welfare Watch* continues to seek a more complete set of employment data covering all of the city's 64 foster care agencies. We filed a Freedom of Information Law request for this public data in early spring with the Division of Labor Services of the city's Department of Business Services, but thus far the agency has not complied.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Thirty years ago, Harlem Dowling became the state's first nonprofit all-black foster care agency. It grew out of the Harlem advisory board of a well-connected white adoption organization, Spence-Chapin, which spun Harlem Dowling off and provided it with steady funding for six years. As a result, the new group became firmly rooted in the community—and in the industry.

That level of commitment to diversity by mainstream nonprofit agencies has been almost unheard of in the years since. In fact, it wasn't until 10 years ago, after the state legislature mandated the creation of new child welfare organizations led by people of color, that anyone mounted a new concerted effort.

Following passage of legislation sponsored by Assemblyman Al Vann of Bedford Stuyvesant in the late 1980s, the state set up the Minority Foster Care Development Project. In its first incarnation, the government provided new community organizations up-front investment and generous foster care fees, both of which helped Miracle Makers and the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council get off the ground. In the program's sec-

ond phase, the United Way of New York City provided technical assistance and development support for four new groups: the Child Development Support Corporation, Concord Family Services, the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services and Family Support Systems Unlimited.

Although many of these groups have grown to become significant players in the foster care industry, the development project ended in the early 1990s and, in the years since, there has been no movement by the state legislature or the Pataki and Giuliani administrations to create new black or Latino organizations.

Agency executives and community leaders say that without support from government, larger nonprofits and religious institutions, establishing a new community-based foster care agency is all but impossible. The up-front investment needed to hire and train staff, recruit foster parents and develop group homes is prohibitive.

But the demand is mounting. "People are clamoring for it," says Freddie Hamilton, executive director of the Child Development Support Corporation. "I've had people all over the city asking me how to make it happen." ■

Gay & Lesbian adolescents in Foster Care

GUEST ESSAY

By Gerald P. Mallon, DSW

Among the black, Latino and Asian children in New York's foster care system are several hundred teenagers who define themselves as gay, lesbian or transgendered. Like other teens in the system, they tend to have lengthy, unstable experiences in the foster care system, drifting from one placement to another. But in addition to the many difficulties experienced by most older foster children, these young people often find themselves isolated and unwelcome, their needs unaddressed in foster boarding homes and group homes. In too many cases, they simply leave the system long before they should be out on their own.

Gay, lesbian and transgender young people of color experience a form of double discrimination within foster care, and resources to help them are in very short supply. During the last few years, I have tracked the experiences of more than 250 of these children as they have struggled to find appropriate placements. But today, New York City has dedicated foster care placements for a very limited number of gay, lesbian and transgendered teens. These slots are available only to older teenagers on a track for independent living, not for young children or those with severe special needs.

In too many group homes run by nonprofit agencies, gay and lesbian youths are exposed to harassment and physical abuse at the hands of other teenagers. And they are often emotionally abused by staff responsible for their care who are ill-trained in how to cope with these young people's needs, and who are aggressive in their efforts to "reform" the children's sexual identity.

"We have always had gay and lesbian kids in group homes," says one child welfare worker,

when asked about gay and lesbian youth in her agency's experience. "But nobody ever talked about them. There was never any training about how to work with them. Everyone always seemed to avoid the issue and there were no policies to guide us about how to work with these kids, so... I guess people either ignored them or just made up their own rules about how to care for them."

Cultural taboos, fear of controversy, and attitudes based on personal bias and heterocentrism—rather than on sound professional judgment—have kept child welfare administrators, boards and policymakers silent about the subject. Most professional education systems and child welfare training academies have not included adequate content about providing competent child welfare practice to gay and lesbian children, youth and families. In 1991, Green Chimneys Children's Services launched its own training efforts to begin to sensitize professionals in the field to the issues important to serving this population. Initial sessions were sparsely attended, but in the past seven years,

Green Chimneys has provided training to more than 35 nonprofit child caring agencies and to several departments within the city's Administration for Children's Services.

Although training is an integral part of providing competent practice with gay and lesbian persons, training alone is not sufficient to change the tide of ignorance. Competent child welfare policies formulated by those with authority to change the system are also required.

Professionals operating in the absence of clearly stated policies use personal experience as a guide. This can lead to actions and attitudes based on cultural, religious and societal biases. Written, formal policies help prevent discrimination, harassment and verbal abuse of gay and lesbian young people and those perceived to be gay or lesbian. By making child welfare agencies safe for these young people, we can prevent abuse, make them feel safe and prevent premature, unplanned self-discharges.

We should consider the following policy recommendations:

1. The Administration for Children's Services, in conjunction with state officials, needs to develop and support policies that require child welfare agencies to openly address and serve the needs of gay and lesbian young people and their families.
2. All child welfare agencies need to develop anti-slur policies for residents and staff in residential programs, as well as policies and procedures for dealing with homophobic violence and harassment. Clearly defined consequences for such infringements should be consistent with any sort of harassment or violence based on other forms of bias.
3. All child welfare agencies need to have policies of active outreach in hiring openly gay or lesbian staff—or gay- and lesbian-affirming staff—in all segments of the agency.
4. All child welfare agencies need to have policies that ensure that children of all sexual orientations are viewed as welcomed and valued members of the agency community. ACS should sanction agencies that discriminate against gay and lesbian young people.
5. ACS must take aggressive action to develop a continuum of care for all gay and lesbian youth and their families. This includes child protection, family support and preservation, as well as out-of-home care (including foster homes, therapeutic foster boarding homes, agency operated boarding homes, group homes and group residences). There are currently no programs designed to meet the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth with severe emotional difficulties. Nor are there programs available to such children between the ages of 12 and 15. These programs should be developed and funded at appropriate rates, and the city must work with the state to license them.
6. ACS should fund training for all of its staff and encourage nonprofit agencies to continue their training efforts.

Providing quality care cannot be thought of as a morality issue based on one's personal feelings about sexual orientation, but as a challenge to provide good care for every child in need.

Gerald P. Mallon is associate executive director of Green Chimneys and assistant professor of social work at Hunter College.

WATCHING THE NUMBERS

A five-year statistical survey: monitoring New York City's child welfare system

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
1 PROTECTIVE SERVICES					
A. Reports of abuse and neglect (The number of abuse and neglect reports continues to increase.)	52,513	48,547	48,213	53,953	56,131
B. Reports substantiated (%) (More than one-third of all reports were substantiated by investigators in 1996.)	30.4	30.2	30.0	33.1	DNA
C. Pending rate (Fiscal Year) (Number of new cases assigned each month to each child protective caseworker)	6.6	7.6	6.3	6.5	7.3
D. Average child protective caseload (The city continued to cut average caseloads in Child Protective Services in 1997.)	21.5	21.7	19.6	24.1	18.2
E. Number of child protective workers (Fiscal Year)	806	718	711	882	DNA
F. Child fatalities in cases known to ACS (Fiscal Year)	25	27	25	23	DNA
2 PREVENTIVE SERVICES					
A. Families receiving services (Cumulative)	14,405	13,675	13,156	12,407	11,744
B. New families receiving services (Fiscal Year)	13,097	12,701	13,455	11,485	12,506
C. Referrals from ACS (%) (Fiscal Year) (Percent of all new families receiving preventive services who were referred by the city's Administration for Children's Services. The city increased its rate of referrals last year.)	36	34	32	40	43
3 FOSTER CARE SERVICES					
A. Number of children admitted (Admissions to foster care are up 52 percent since 1995.)	11,276	10,380	8,770	11,035	13,345
B. Number discharged (The number of children leaving foster care for adoption, reunification or independent living.)	13,097	12,701	13,455	11,485	12,506
C. Total foster care population (The total number of children in care has been stable for three years.)	45,554	43,484	41,969	41,669	41,198
D. Average years spent in foster care (The average number of years children spend in foster care remains high.)	3.49	3.89	4.20	4.17	4.10
E. Children with reunification goal (%) (The percentage of children in foster care whose permanency goal is family reunification, as defined by their case manager.)	53.1	49.6	46.2	46.7	DNA
F. Average ACS foster care caseload (The caseload per ACS worker has dropped significantly since 1995.)	27	22	24	21	20.4
G. Percentage of siblings separated (The percentage of foster children separated from their brothers and sisters has not changed greatly, despite the increase in admissions.)	51	50	48	49	DNA
H. Recidivism rate (%) (The percentage of children who leave foster care for family reunification and then, within one year, return to foster care.)	12	13	13	11	DNA
I. Percentage of foster children in kinship care (The number of children in foster care with relatives continued its steep decline in 1997.)	42.7	43.6	41.2	36.5	33.8
4 ADOPTION SERVICES					
A. Children with adoption as a goal (%) (The percentage of children in foster care targeted for adoption peaked in 1995.)	40.0	42.9	43.9	41.2	38.3
B. Finalized adoptions (The number of finalized adoptions has increased 84 percent since 1993.)	2,227	2,732	3,886	3,043	4,087
C. Children with slow adoption progress (This number reflects the percentage of children with adoption as a goal who have not reached one of four specific "adoption milestones" within the last year. It has increased significantly as more children are targeted for adoption.)	DNA	58.2	60.4	62.7	DNA
5 MISCELLANEOUS					
A. Foster care funding, per child (Funding claimed by local governments per child in foster care.)	\$14,679	\$16,617	\$16,270	\$13,070	DNA
B. State preventive funding, per child (Funding claimed by localities per child in preventive services.)	\$2,686	\$3,093	\$3,197	\$2,695	DNA
C. Compliance with Section 153d (%) (By state law, certain tasks and milestones must be achieved within a specific time frame for each ACS case. These include proper judicial review, completion of a service plan and so on. In 1996, 80 percent of ACS cases complied with these requirements.)	87	88	84	80	DNA



Center for an

Urban FUTURE

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The Center for an Urban Future, the sister organization of *City Limits* magazine, is committed to incubating and promoting proactive public policies that are affordable, practical and humane. The Center seeks out open-minded New Yorkers willing to bend traditional ideological positions and forge sensible and equitable solutions to critical urban problems. It gives community leaders and on-the-ground practitioners a unique vehicle for sharing their ideas and experience with those more conventionally considered to be the "experts."

The New York Forum

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The New York Forum is an assembly of New Yorkers dedicated to the proposition that the urban problems of New York City and its adjacent region need to be re-thought and re-examined, with new solutions for problems that have defied solution until now, such as race, crime, education, literacy, child welfare, the regional economy and the efficiency and funding of government. All channels of public education need to be employed in pursuit of new solutions and improvements, along with a series of think-tank task forces and public forums.

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