Racial Disproportionality

“The disparities in outcomes are so great that racial/ethnic inequities can best be described as a ‘chronic crisis.’”

Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, 2006
The System’s Racial Geography

- Child welfare agency involvement, especially placement in foster care, concentrated in poor African American neighborhoods.

- Poor and low-income black families concentrated in neighborhoods where agency involvement highest.

- Higher risk of growing up in neighborhood where state supervision prevalent.
Percentage of All Chicago Children | Percentage of all Chicago Children in Substitute Care
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Near West Side | 1.46% | 4.67%
East Garfield Park | 0.94% | 2.70%
Washington Park | 0.70% | 2.58%
Woodlawn | 1.15% | 2.70%
Grand Boulevard | 1.31% | 5.22%
Number of Children in Substitute Care Per 1000

- Near West Side: 49.8
- East Garfield Park: 44.9
- Washington Park: 57.4
- Woodlawn: 36.7
- Grand Boulevard: 62.0
- Chicago: 15.6

D. Roberts, Northwestern University
New Research Paradigm

- Impact of racial disproportionality beyond families involved in system.
- Identify the child welfare system itself as aspect of neighborhoods with community-wide impact on residents.
- Focus on neighborhood social dynamics versus accumulated individual outcomes.
Woodlawn Study: Research Questions

- Interviewed 25 African-American female residents; ages 24-56.

- How do high rates of child welfare agency involvement affect:
  - community life?
  - residents’ social networks, civic participation, and collective efficacy?
  - Attitudes about government and self-governance?
Findings of First Study

- All aware of intense involvement in neighborhood; most estimated number involved as at least half; main function child removal.

- Impact on social relationships
  - interference with parental authority
  - damage to children’s ability to form social relationships
  - distrust among neighbors
Ida, 46

The kids with the relatives are not affected as much because they are at least with people they know. I feel for the kids who are with people they don’t know in new communities. I think they can lose their background and culture and wonder who they are – it’s those kids who could really get into some trouble with drugs and stuff.
Anita, case manager for private agency

I think my friends, family, and neighbors call more than I do. Sometimes I think they have DCFS on speed dial like it’s an answer, a one and only answer. Even though they will say they think DCFS is overly involved they will be the first to call. It doesn’t really make sense, but they do.
Residents often use DCFS as a means of resolving family and community conflicts.

Suggests concentrated agency involvement has a significant influence on neighborhood relationships and norms.
Paradox: Is DCFS Too Involved?

- NO!: additional financial resources to families; monitor foster homes better.

- Key positive role: financial support for mothers, foster parents, and foster children.
Angela, 27

It does help them out financially, pay bills and stuff like that, they help them out, they do give them money for keeping the kids too.
Wanda, 56

The only [positive impact of DCFS] that I can think about is the resources that they do provide children or grandparents or other family members who take in their family members....A lot of people need them.

D. Roberts, Northwestern University
But a different kind of involvement

- More financial support with less disruption of family relationships.

- 10 respondents criticized agency’s narrow role, rooted in investigating families rather than helping them.
Michelle, 34:

The advertisement, it just says abuse. If you being abused, this is the number you call, this is the only way you gonna get help. It doesn’t say if I’m in need of counseling, or if my children don’t have shoes, if I just can’t provide groceries even though I may have seven kids, but I only get a hundred something dollars food stamps. And my work check only goes to bills. … I don’t want to lose my children, so I’m not going to call DCFS for help because I only see them take away children.
Exploring the Paradox

- How much economic support does DCFS provide families? To what extent do families rely on it to provide for children?
- How do parents and other caregivers view their reliance on DCFS for economic support and the impact on their neighborhood?
- What are the implications of 1) the economic crisis and 2) the decrease in DCFS cases?
- What are the implications for policy?

D. Roberts, Northwestern University