Experiences of Professionals of Color in the Child Welfare Workforce

Authors: Nina Williams-Mbengue and Anita Barbee, PhD, MSSW

> *"Entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions, have often denied that equal opportunity to individuals and communities. Our country faces converging economic, health, and climate crises that have exposed and exacerbated inequities, while a historic movement for justice has highlighted the unbearable human costs of systemic racism."*
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> - Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government, January 20, 2021

Many Americans are currently engaged in a painful examination of the nation's history of individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism. Leaders within the child welfare system are no exception. Some jurisdictions have stated that there is a critical need for systemic changes to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the child welfare workforce. In order to effectively address DEI, it must first be measured and understood.

Very little, if any, information is regularly collected nationwide on child welfare workforce demographics, including race, ethnicity, age, educational background and training of workers, tenure, and other important metrics. National data from the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) published in 2011 reported that 58% of child welfare caseworkers were White, 24% were Black, 15% were Latine and 4% are classified as other. Among professionals surveyed in the eight QIC-WD workforce intervention sites, these same general proportions of White and Black professionals held true although the Latine and Indigenous populations varied across sites. While there is little empirical evidence on the impact of the demographics among child welfare professionals on outcomes for American Indiana/Alaska Native (AI/AN), Black and Latine children, a diverse staff would likely better engage with and understand the community's concerns and service needs. Literature from social psychology reveals that explicit and implicit biases can affect racial interactions and that discrimination against AI/AN, Black and Latine persons affects their future behaviors and interactions (Barbee et al., 2022). Most importantly, individuals and systems can be changed to minimize the effects of biases and threats. As state and tribal jurisdictions develop data systems related to workforce, the standardized collection of workforce demographics data is essential to better understand the association between caseworker race and ethnicity and outcomes for children and families.

The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD) led a workforce analytics institute to support select jurisdictions with an interest in better using their data and measuring DEI. Sample questions to guide inquiry included: What is the racial and ethnic diversity of your applicant pool? What is the racial and ethnic diversity of your workforce? How do these compare? Does turnover vary by race or ethnicity? Does your workforce reflect the diversity of the children and families your agency serves? Some agencies had examined data related to children and families of color involved in the child welfare system, especially the over-representation and disparate treatment of AI/AN and Black children, and some had surveyed staff about their own experiences in the workforce. In general, however, there is a dearth of information on the experiences and perceptions of workers of color in the child welfare workforce (Lawrence et al., 2019).

This brief, aimed at child welfare decision makers, summarizes some of the latest studies and focuses on workforce development actions that jurisdictions can consider to address DEI at both the individual professional and child welfare system levels.

Examining Worker Perceptions of Discrimination

Workplace discrimination can be overt or covert, inter-personal, or organizational. Workplace discrimination has been examined in other disciplines, including mental and occupational health and medicine, but it has not been well studied in child welfare. A recent study focused on the perceptions of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) child welfare professionals provides insight to jurisdictions interested in addressing workforce DEI (He et al., 2021). Researchers used the Psychological Stressor-Strain theory to assess "the associations between every-day workplace discrimination, racial/ethnic identities and psychological well-being among public child welfare case-workers." The study used a subsample of caseworkers (most participants were female and BIPOC) from an organizational health assessment conducted in public child welfare agencies across multiple jurisdictions. Study findings indicated that professionals who identified as BIPOC reported experiencing greater everyday discrimination in the workplace than their White coworkers. BIPOC professionals were more than twice as likely to report feeling singled out because of their race and ethnicity compared to White professionals and were less likely to agree that promotions were fair and free of bias. White workers reported greater burnout while BIPOC staff reported lower psychological safety. Perceptions of discrimination were significantly associated with poorer job satisfaction and psychological safety and greater burnout.

Study authors recommend that agencies consider assessing current hiring and promotional practices to identify bias and inequity. One agency that the QIC-WD worked with to address workforce challenges, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) Family Safety Program, felt it was important to help child welfare professionals better understand their own explicit and implicit biases as they engage in casework. They decided to address it as part of their onboarding intervention. This study and the EBCI interventions are single examples of how the child welfare discipline is starting to examine worker perceptions.

> "If we seek true change to strengthen families and communities, prevent unnecessary family separation, and promote equity, each one of us must address implicit and actual bias and racism and confront it in every aspect of this system. That includes making sure that every single person a family touches in the system receives interdisciplinary training, including teaching collaborative justice and holistic defense, the intersection of public health and the justice system, collateral consequences, the importance of tradition and culture, social science, and, most importantly, compassion and empathy."
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> -Reimaging Child Welfare Through Tribal Perspectives and Practices

Unaddressed Racism

A 2022 study found that child welfare workers of color self-reported experiencing higher degrees of workplace racism than White workers (Chakravarty & Lawrence, 2022). This study used the Workplace Prejudice & Discrimination Inventory (WPDI) to measure child welfare professionals' experiences with racism in the workplace. Seventy percent of respondents self-reported as people of color. Most respondents were female public agency caseworkers. According to the authors, "study findings indicate that unaddressed racism affects the overall organizational climate, worker of color career advancement, and the inclusion of workers of color in leadership positions." They suggested anti-bias and diversity training coupled with "bias-free hiring process and formal career mentorship efforts." The study also suggests that agencies build positive diversity and inclusion work climates. Diversity climate is described as "employees' shared perceptions that an employer utilizes fair personnel practices and socially integrates underrepresented employees into the work environment." Inclusion climates are those in which "individuals of all backgrounds, not just members of historically powerful identity groups—are fairly treated, valued for who they are and included in core decision-making."

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[1] We attempted to align the items in the various scales although perfect alignment was impossible

Child welfare training programs, especially those in partnership with universities, offer great opportunities to design anti-racism training based on evidence and to develop more rigorous research and evaluation. It is critical to set clear, realistic training goals and to understand that training alone, in the absence of a comprehensive, well-planned, and evaluated strategy is not enough. Employees value what they are held accountable for and what is incorporated into performance measures. Relevant questions might include:

- Are workers held accountable for how well they work with clients of all social classes, races, ethnicities, and nationalities?

- Are workers encouraged in annual reviews to continue to develop professionally in their ability to be culturally responsive, to address implicit biases and to stand up to structural racism?

Leadership and Intent to Stay Employed

Two recent studies provide further insight into the experiences of child welfare professionals of color related to leadership and intent to stay employed. The first study used data from a multi-site survey of child welfare professionals and looked at factors related to intention to remain employed for White caseworkers and caseworkers of color. A significant implication of this study is that "to retain workers, organizations must improve job satisfaction regardless of race or ethnicity" (Zeitlin et al., 2022). In addition, the study found that perceptions of leadership influenced caseworkers of color's intent to stay employed more than it did for White workers. Study authors recommended "…improving job satisfaction for all workers, strengthening leadership practices, and support leadership development of workers of Color" as overall strategies for retaining a diverse and inclusive child welfare workforce. Job satisfaction can be improved when there is meaningful work, perceived organizational support, job embeddedness, and when employees are thriving at work, among other factors. Leadership training can be an effective tool in strengthening leadership practices but should be developed after a needs analysis is conducted to ensure that the training is responsive to agency needs.

The second study, using multi-state child welfare staff survey data, examined the representation of people of color in supervisory and managerial roles; those workers' intent to remain employed; and worker well-being and organizational experience to include agency climate, burnout, and job satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2019). The survey was conducted as part of a workforce assessment in three jurisdictions participating in the workforce excellence initiatives of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. The study indicated that child welfare professionals of color and White professionals did not differ in overall job satisfaction. However, people of color were more likely to be caseworkers while White employees were more likely to be supervisors and managers. Additionally, professionals of color had lower burnout, but were less likely to intend to stay.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The experiences and perceptions of people of color in the child welfare workforce can provide important insight for addressing the current workforce crisis. Child welfare researchers and evaluators are adding to the body of knowledge specific to measuring and addressing DEI in the child welfare workforce. The QIC-WD developed several resources on measuring DEI, including a short video on engaging in self-reflection before beginning this work, a tip sheet on measuring DEI for child welfare professionals, and a webinar providing more context around these tools. The studies highlighted in this brief, and the measurement tools they include, also continue to build the evidence about how to address DEI in the child welfare workforce. Despite this work, many questions remain for further exploration and understanding, including identifying effective strategies to address the issue and exploring the connections between addressing workforce inequity and the overrepresentation and disparate treatment of children and families of color. Additionally, there remains a critical need to systematically collect information on key caseworker demographics to address these and other child welfare workforce concerns.

References & Related Resources

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