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## **The Disparities of African American Children in the Child Welfare System**

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## Abstract

Every year, thousands of children in the United States become a part of the child welfare system due to severe abuse or neglect by their caretakers and soon find that their lives take a drastic turn – all too often for the worse. Unfortunately, this turn for the worse occurs because there is a severe lack of qualified foster care providers that can care for these children during their time of distress. What is even more unfortunate, is that while it can be difficult to find foster care families for children of non-African descent, it has become very difficult for child welfare agencies to find foster care placement for African American children because there are just simply not enough African American families willing to become foster families. Furthermore, those foster families that are non-African American often times do not want African American children. Why is this?

While there may be many thoughts or ideas as to why foster care placement for African American children is significantly hindered, the purpose of this research project will be to answer the question of why and seek to find plausible solutions to the problem.

## Introduction

African American children in the United States entering foster care is increasing faster than the number of available foster parents, particularly African American foster parents, able to properly care for them. It is no secret that there is a severe overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, yet there have not been any viable solutions to this problem as the number continues to increase. Each year, thousands of children in the United States continue to enter into the foster care system due to neglect or severe abuse inflicted upon them by their caretakers. "Since both Federal and State laws discourage the removal of children from their families unless it is necessary to insure a child's safety, placement in foster care is an extreme step taken only when a child is in immediate danger or when attempts to help the family provide a safe environment have failed. Thus, the frequency of foster care placement is an indication of family dysfunction that is so severe that a child cannot remain safely with his or her family" (US Census Bureau, 2000). Unfortunately, child welfare agencies have become extremely overwhelmed with the ever increasing number of children that are in need of qualified foster care providers. Furthermore, while foster care placement for children of non-African American descent is often a difficult task, it has become increasingly more challenging for child welfare agencies to secure proper foster care placement for African American children. A brief look into the history of African American adoption and foster care will help to provide us with valuable insight relative

to the challenges that child welfare agencies face with regard to the foster care and adoption placement of African American children in the United States.

### *History of African American Adoption*

Historically, the adoption and foster care of African American children have typically lied within the hands of the African American community with little to no public assistance from any social welfare agency or state program. Since child welfare services were primarily provided by private, nonprofit agencies that exercised policies of racial exclusion, adoption and foster care services were typically unavailable to African American children. In response, the African American community implemented a process of informal adoptions of African American children as a means to care for the children in need of guardianship. This practice would later become known as "kinship care" and will be discussed later in this paper.

As early as the 1920's, "a commonly held belief [sic] was that similarities in physical attributes, intellectual potential, nationality, race and religion of adoptive [and/or] foster parents were paramount to [finding] a proper match" (Simon & Alstein, 1992). In 1959, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) published the first standards for adoption, which declared racial matching as a necessary element in foster care and adoptive placements. Since private agencies that traditionally provided adoption services to the Caucasian community only offered foster care services to

African American children, the number of African American children in the foster care system significantly increased over the next twenty years (Mc Roy, 1989).

### *Fleming Rule*

The Fleming Rule was implemented as an administrative response to discriminatory practices in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which is currently known as Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), under the Social Security Act of 1935. Since racial oppression was built into the creation of the AFDC program, rules such as 'home suitability clauses', 'man-in-the-house rule', and 'illegitimate child clauses' arbitrarily denied benefits to African Americans because their homes were seen as immoral. This view of immorality existed primarily because African Americans were significantly more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be the parents of illegitimate children and to allow men to live in the home that are not necessarily the biological father of the children in the home (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). As a result of the denial of AFDC benefits due to such clauses, many African American families could not afford to care for their children, thus resulting in the children removal from the home and thus placed into the foster care system.

In the effort to provide a measure of protection to African American families that were victimized by the mandated clauses within the AFDC program, the Fleming Rule was developed and implemented to ensure that the State holds the burden of responsibility to care for all families in need, and to ensure that the practice of racial

discrimination via "federally mandated clauses" would not be enforced. This would further ensure that all children will have their basic needs met and would receive equal services. The issues with regard to the Fleming Rule came into play during the implementation process where culturally insensitive Caucasian eligibility workers would tend to have negative views regarding African American clients. As a result of this, the number of African American children in out-of-home-care began to increase in the late 1950's and escalated in the 1960's due to the expulsion of AFDC benefits through state action, which ultimately forced many African American children into foster care (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). It was found that "approximately 51% of the [African American] children that were receiving AFDC benefits were either placed in foster care or receiving some kind of foster care assistance...and [sic] approximately 81% of the children that were placed in foster care were placed there because their parents were unmarried or because they came from broken homes" (1997).

Although the Fleming rule was implemented as a means to provide assistance to African American families, the destructive manner in which the implementation process was carried out caused far much more harm than good. As a result of the negative outcomes relative to the implementation process, the Fleming Rule continues to have an extremely profound effect with regard to the underlying causes of the disparities of African American children as related to the child welfare system.

### *Multiethnic Placement Act and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions*

In 1994, the Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was passed due to the overwhelming concern that racial matching policies had significantly contributed to the delay of placing children of color in adoptive homes, thereby discriminating against children and families on the basis of race. At the time, Congress found that there were over 500,000 children in foster care in the United States and that tens of thousands of these children were waiting for adoptive or foster care placement (MEPA, 1994). Along with these findings, several research studies in this regard have indicated that African American children tend to wait longer for both foster care and adoptive placements than any other group.

The purpose of the development and implementation of the MEPA is to establish that "federally funded agencies and entities may not categorically deny to any person the right to become an adoptive or foster parent solely on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent or child involved" (42 U.S.C. 5115a (a)(1)(A)) or "delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, or otherwise discriminate in making a placement decision, solely on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent or child involved (42 U.S.C. 5115a (a)(1)(B)).

Although the passage of MEPA was warranted, controversy ensued over the issue of limiting racial matching. Child welfare policy recognized race and ethnicity as



legitimate factors of consideration in evaluating a child's needs and the ability of a family to meet those needs. However, it has been argued that race matching policies have been taken too far and thus have a severely negative effect on children of color by delaying or denying foster care or adoptive placements. It is further argued that children have the right to be placed in homes of the same race and culture as much as possible.

Although African American children are believed to be at a great disadvantage relative to foster care and adoption placement, previous research lends truth to this assumption, given that findings are indicative that "the largest racial or ethnic group waiting for foster care or adoption is African American children (Brooks and James, 2002). While the reasons for this trend are currently being examined, there is an underlying premise or assumption that there are simply not enough African American families who are willing and/or qualified to become foster care providers. Furthermore, previous research has also established that foster care providers of Caucasian, Latino, or otherwise non-African American descent often do not wish to become foster care providers for African American children due to a lack of cultural understanding (Morton, 1999). According to Brooks, James, and Barth (2002), only about 5 percent of parents who indicate a willingness to care for or adopt African American foster children actually do so. Whilst there are a myriad of possible reasons with regard to African American children and their plight in obtaining foster care placement or adoptive

parents, it is imperative that the most significant issues in this regard are fully examined, and that plausible, as well as, feasible solutions are developed and implemented that will in turn cultivate a healthier outcome for African American children in foster care situations.

As we seek to find a resolve for issues regarding the foster care placement of African American children, we must first establish a working foundation in which to conduct our research. Therefore, we will seek to prove the following hypothesis: *“foster care placement for African American children in the United States is significantly hindered due to issues of race and culture”*.

While we will examine issues of race and culture in regard to the foster care placement of African American children, we will also examine additional underlying factors, such as, familial structure and function, racism, as well as, societal support that contribute to the greater need for foster care as related to African American children. This study will seek to delve deep within the core of the problems related to this issue and perhaps assist child welfare agencies in gaining further insight in regard to the problems related to the foster care placement of African American children. As a result, we will become better prepared to create ways in which to implement the necessary policies and procedures that will serve to promote the mission and goals of child welfare agencies in the United States.

## Literature Review

The problems within the child welfare system with regard to African American children are not new. Due to the myriad of issues that lie within child welfare agencies relative to African American children, several research studies have been implemented in the effort to seek amicable solutions to the disparities that African American children face within the child welfare system. The main research articles in which this study will examine are detailed below.

In the article, "The Increasing Colorization of America's Child Welfare System: The Overrepresentation of African American Children", Thomas Morton (1999) asserts that "although African American children constituted only 15 percent of the United States child population in 1995, they accounted for 28 percent of founded allegations of abuse or neglect and represented 41 percent of the child welfare population. They also represented 49 percent of the children in foster care and group care that year" (1999). Morton cites the above statistics in comparison to Caucasian children who "constitute 66 percent of the United States child population. Caucasian children made up 57 percent of substantiated allegations, 46 percent of the child welfare population and 36 percent of children in out-of-home care" (Morton, 1999). While approximately 43 percent of Caucasian children that enter the child welfare system exit in less than three months, African American children that enter the system are far less likely to exit the

system within three months. As a matter of fact, only about 16 percent of African American children exit the foster care system within three months.

Morton goes on to examine the issue of what he refers to as "cultural competence"; that is how well we understand cultures other than our own. Morton contends that, "the child welfare field has raised concerns about the cultural competence and responsiveness of its own system" (Morton, 1999) and that proper and timely interventions are not done appropriately due to a lack of understanding the family life of other cultures. He also believes that the child welfare system has a more extensive and invasive impact on African American families than any other ethnic group and therefore, a lack of cultural understanding is a contributing factor to the difficulty in foster care [and adoption] placement for African American children.

Brooks, James, and Barth (2002) discuss legislative responses to the issues of race in their article entitled "Preferred Characteristics of Children in Need of Adoption: Is There a Demand for Available Foster Children?" According to this article, public child welfare agencies are responsible for implementing federal and state policies aimed at reducing the number of children in out-of-home care. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 "was passed with the objective of reducing the number of children entering [foster] care." In 1997, the Adoption and safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) was passed and placed "additional emphasis on time limits, eliminated the absolute requirement to make reunification efforts, and promoted adoption as the preferred exit

from foster care when reunification cannot be achieved (Brooks and Colleagues, 2002). Brooks and Colleagues (2002) also point out that "racial matching policies and practices that require children to be placed in adoptive homes in which the parents are of the same racial background as the adoptive children have been singled out as a key barrier to achieving permanency for children of color". In 1994, the Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) "prohibited federally funded agencies from delaying or denying adoptive placement solely on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the prospective parent or child...this was predicated on the idea that racial matching policies contribute to delays in adoptive placement for children of color" (Brooks and Colleagues, 2002). The Interethnic Adoption Provisions repealed and replaced some aspects of MEPA thereby prohibiting the presumptive and categorical consideration of race, color, or national origin when making placement decisions.

While the MEPA focused on prohibiting categorical consideration of race, color, or national origin when placing children, research done by Ruth McRoy and Helen Grape (1999) suggest that skin color dynamics play a crucial role in the ability to locate foster care or adoptive placement for African American children. McRoy and Grape's article "*Skin Color in Transracial and Inracial Adoptive Placements: Implications for Special Needs Adoptions*", examines how and why skin color dynamics affect the chances of foster care or adoptive placements. The article addresses the underlying racial dynamics such as "racial identity formation, race socialization experiences, and

differences in characteristics such as skin color within families". McRoy and Grape assert that the issue of skin color may have a direct influence on which children are placed and which are not – whether it is transracial or inracial foster care/adoptive placement.

The article entitled "An Out-of-Home System in Crisis: Implications for African American Children in the Child Welfare System" by Annie Woodley Brown and Barbara Bailey-Etta (1997) helps to identify and establish the control variables of socioeconomic factors and familial structure in this study. Brown and Bailey-Etta assert that, "the number of children in out-of-home [foster] care is closely linked to the conditions under which the families function and the societal supports available to assist them" (1997). Brown and Bailey-Etta also contend that "an array of problems including racism, poverty, inadequate housing, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, incarceration, lack of appropriate support systems, and violence all combine to account for the growing number of African American children needing out-of-home care". Because families provide the basic socialization for children, familial structure is an integral part of a child's socialization and preparation for productive participation in society.

While the above article discusses the significance of family structure as an integral part of socialization, John P. Nasuti, Reginald York, and Kandel Sandell (2004) discuss role perceptions of foster parents in their article, "Comparison of Role Perceptions

*of White and African American Foster Parents*". According to Nasuti, York, and Sandell, African American foster parents are more likely than their [Caucasian] counterparts to feel responsible for facilitating the relationship between foster children and birth parents. [Hence], they are more likely to accept responsibility for the roles of agency partner and emotional developer of the child". African American foster parents are also more likely to provide kinship care, thus feeling more of a "responsibility to play a role in all aspects of their foster child's life, including those roles traditionally assumed by the agency worker" and will also accept the role of agency partner more so than their Caucasian counterpart. It is important to note, that this contradicts earlier research perceptions that African American foster parents feel alienated from child welfare agencies. Furthermore, as a result of African American foster parents gaining a perception of themselves as agency partners, they have become valuable assets to child welfare agencies because of their continued demonstration of increased willingness to participate as birth family facilitators, as well as, agency partners, thereby significantly increasing the chances for birth family reunification.

Dennis Dillon (1994) discusses the "aspects of practice that must be addressed in providing ethnically sensitive services to African American children and families in foster care" in his article "*Understanding and Assessment of Intragroup Dynamics in Family Foster Care: African American Families*". Dillon contends that "one of the ways in which we miss the mark in working with African American families is by oversimplification or

by making sweeping generalizations regarding African American families without regard to differences that exist within this group. Diversity within groups have rarely been considered in program development, policy-making, and implementation in the African American community, therefore, [sic] assessment and measurement instruments must consider intracultural diversity" (1994). Dillon further contends that "identity confusion is one of the most pervasive and volatile issues in dealing with African Americans...it involves [the idea of] self-concept as it relates to how one sees oneself and the feelings surrounding that personal and/or group image". In the foster care arena, it is important for agency workers and foster parents alike to understand self-perception as related to cultural identification and the manifestation of various social, environmental, and political experiences of African Americans and how these experiences have affected African American children, family and community.

Dillon also discusses what he refers to as a "degree of Blackness". This is the degree in which black pride and racial identification play a role in the child's and/or foster family's lives. Dillon offers an example of "an extremely black-conscious family matched with an ultra-assimilationist African American adolescent" (1994). This match could result in frustration from both sides because of the strong opposing viewpoints regarding black pride and racial identity. Therefore, agency workers must exercise a certain level of caution when placing African American children in foster families.



In an effort to address the dramatic increase of [African American] children entering into foster care, there are many children who are being placed in what is referred to as formal "kinship care". According to Scannapieco, Hegar, and McAlpine (1997) in their article *"Kinship Care and Foster Care: A Comparison of Characteristics and Outcomes"*, kinship care is defined as "out-of-home placement with relatives of children who are in the custody of state and local child welfare agencies". It is important to note that many children live with relatives that are not currently served by the child welfare system. The idea of kinship care is a relatively recent issue in regard to child welfare, and yet, it has become the "fastest growing service provided by the child welfare system". Generally caretakers who provide care for children via formal kinship care practices are paid Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which is a substantially lower amount of compensation than foster care pay. Therefore, families that provide kinship care tend to be low-income, single women and the children that are placed in formal kinship care are predominately African American aged seven to eight years of age. African American children make up a larger portion of children in kinship care than traditional foster care. Child welfare agencies have migrated towards this form of care because it has been found that not only is it easier to place children, (particularly African American children), into homes with relatives with whom they are familiar, but, there is also a less difficult transition with regard to the child's adjustment and overall well-being.

This research will seek to address the issues represented within the articles presented in this literature review and look into each issue precisely as it relates to the disparities of African American children within the child welfare system in the United States.

### *Methodology Overview, Limitations, and Findings*

#### *Overview of Methodology*

The main focus of this section will be to determine whether or not African American children face certain disparities within the child welfare system compared to non-African American children; and, determine the causes of such disparities in the effort to seek out plausible solutions for change. This study will largely utilize research that has been previously gathered relative to African American children and the child welfare system. This research will also utilize a survey that was developed and implemented by the researcher of this study. The focus of the survey and previous research were five main issues:

1. The issue of race as it relates to African American children in the child welfare system.
2. The issue of skin color as a significant factor in the adoption and/or foster care placement of African American children.
3. The issue of cultural competence as it relates to African American children in the child welfare system.
4. The issues of socioeconomic factors as related to African American families.

5. The issue of kinship care as a long-term solution to the problems within foster care placement for African American children.

Each issue will be addressed as it relates to previous research, as well as, a comparative of the survey findings and available government statistics.

#### *Limitations of the Current Research*

The primary objective of this study is to determine the disparities that exist within the child welfare system as it relates to African American children. This objective will be carried out via previous research on the topic and the implementation of a survey that was developed and implemented by the current researcher. Due to the research methodology used, there are certain limitations relative to this study that will be addressed at this time.

The first major limitation of the current research study is a lack of recent (government) data available to substantiate and/or confirm some of the findings of previous researchers and opinions of those surveyed. Federal, state, and local government statistics tend only to validate the numbers of African American children in foster care as of 2003 and the theories that African American children are indeed at a higher risks of being placed in foster care, are left in the foster care system for longer periods of time, and are less likely than their non-African American counterparts to be adopted or reunified with their families. Due to the lack of (government) data available

relative to some of the topics discussed within this study, we will focus on the most recent research related to those topics discussed.

Another limitation of this study exists relative to the survey implementation. The survey was implemented to two (2) foster care providers and one (1) foster care agency. Therefore, we are acknowledging that there are limitations relative to the scope of the survey, and because of this limitation, we will not use the results of the survey to generalize opinions throughout entire child welfare system.

### *Findings*

#### *Issue #1 – Race*

According to United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in 2003, there were 523,000 children in foster care in the United States. Of those children, 184,480 or 35% were African American. However, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) contends that there were 565,000 children in foster care in the United States and that approximately 66% of them were African American. It is important to note that DHHS acknowledges that the statistical numerical data may be discrepant because data from all states were not available and information from five states had to be estimated. The information provided by Table 1, (below) represents the DHHS statistical data regarding race as related to foster care in the United States ([www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb)).

**Table 1****The AFCARS Report - Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System****Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005 (10)****What was the race/ethnicity of the children in foster care?**

AI/AN Non-Hispanic	2%	10,260
Asian-Non Hispanic	1%	3,280
Black-Non Hispanic	35%	184,480
Hawaiian/PI-Non Hispanic	0%	1,540
Hispanic	17%	91,040
White-Non Hispanic	39%	203,920
Unknown/Unable to Determine	3%	13,360
Two or More-Non Hispanic	3%	14,310

*NOTE: Using U.S. Bureau of the Census standards, children of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Beginning in FY 2000, children could be identified with more than one race designation. Data from both the regular and revised submissions received by April 2005 are included in the information below. Missing data are not used in the calculation of percentages. Some percentages do not total 100% due to rounding. Some columns may not add up to the total number, due to missing data.*

According to foster parent Diane Williams (2006), there is indeed an issue relative to race within the foster care system, and that African American children are largely overrepresented in the child welfare system. Williams has been a foster care provider for over 20 years and currently has 7 children in her group home; all of which are African American. In previous years, the percentage of African American children versus non-African American children in her care was on average 70% African American and 30% non-African American. Despite these percentages, Williams believes that foster care placements should be "based on the ability of the foster parent to care for the child, and not based on the race of the child or foster parent...the best

interest of the child should be the most important factor" (2006). While Williams realizes that race is often a significant issue with placement, she feels that it should not be the overall focus of the foster or adoptive placement.

Foster care provider, Carolyn Smith (2006) agrees with Williams that African American children are largely overrepresented in the foster care system. Smith, like Williams, has been a foster provider for over twenty years and has witnessed first hand the effects of race relative to foster care placement. Smith, who happens to be Caucasian, has cared for numerous children over the years, African American children in particular. She says that often [African American] children are difficult to place because there not enough "resources to place them in homes of the same race...by this I mean that there is a severe shortage of qualified and/or willing African American foster parents" (2006). There are 6 children currently in Smith's care, 5 of whom (approximately 85%) are African American.

The institute of Black Parenting (IBP) reports that there continues to be a large number of African American children in the child welfare system awaiting placement in foster care or adoptive homes (2006). The IBP has served over 900 children since 1990, all of whom are African American. Therefore, IBP believes that there is a significant issue with regard to race and foster and adoptive care placement in the United States. An anonymous representative interviewed from IBP stated that "anytime there is a need for a social service agency to be developed and implemented specifically for an

individual race of people, in this case African American people, society needs to look at that...racism or issues of race as it is sometimes called, should not occur with regard to the care of our children in this country" (Anonymous, 2006).

Previous research relative to race and African American children suggests that not only is there a shortage of homes for placement of African American children, but they tend to remain in the foster care system much longer than their Caucasian counterparts. According to Richard Barth (1997), African American children are "more than twice as likely to remain in out-of-home care than to be adopted (33% v 16%), whereas Caucasian children are about twice as likely to be adopted than to remain in out-of-home care (24% v 11%). Tables 2 and 3 below illustrate this finding.

Table 2

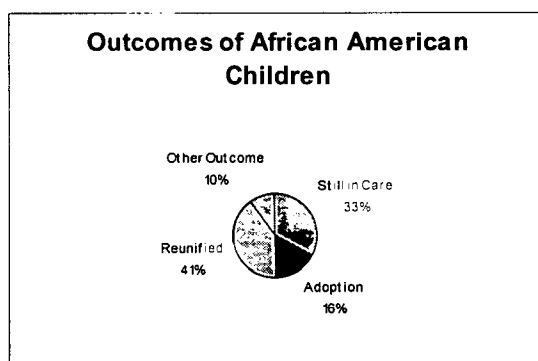
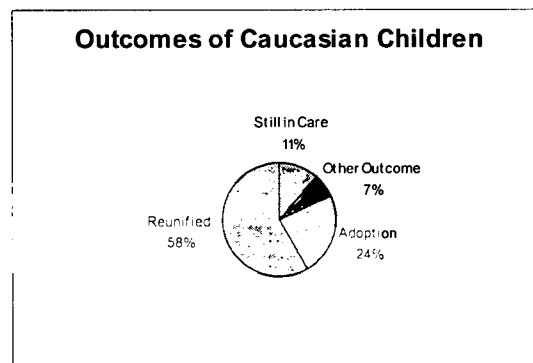


Table 3



*Outcomes at Six Years after Placement in Nonkinship Care by Ethnicity (Barth, 1997)*

### ***Issue #2 – Skin Color***

The issue of skin color as related to the foster care or adoptive placement of African American children is an issue that remains quiet although it exists. There are

no relevant government statistical data with regard to skin color as it relates to foster care or adoptive placement because this issue is new to the lime light. While previous research data is available from the early 1980's, we were unable to locate government data in this regard.

Foster care provider Diane Williams (2006), says that as far as she can see, the issue of skin color depends on the foster parents because "foster parents choose which children they want or do not want, except in emergency cases...if foster parents are choosing kids based on their skin color, then shame on them...all children need to be cared for whether they have an extremely light complexion or an extremely dark complexion, one is not inferior to the other".

The IBP reports that unfortunately, "the issue of skin color may influence which children are adopted and which are not" (Anonymous, 2006). This is true even within inracial adoptive placements as well. As many as 45% of African American couples who seek to adopt a child, specifically requested a light-skinned or mixed-race child, regardless of their own skin complexion" (IBP, 2006).

Previous research in this area, states that "when foster parents expressed preferences about skin color and hair texture of children placed in their homes, case workers responded by honoring those preferences...this practice was justified as a means to keep dark-complexioned children from experiencing rejection upon arrival at the home of potential foster parents" (McRoy, 1999). Further, the American Civil



Liberties Union (ACLU) found that social workers have previously "engaged in practices which resulted in favored treatment for children who have more Caucasian features" (McRoy, 1999). This was especially the case for Caucasian families who were willing to adopt a minority child. In these cases, often the families would request a biracial child, stating that a mixed child is easier to explain to others, whereas a darker skinned child would be awkward to explain to family, friends, neighbors, and even 'dinner guests'.

### *Issue #3 – Cultural Competence*

Government data with regard to cultural competence as it relates to agency workers, caretakers, and children is unavailable at this time. Therefore, this issue was evaluated via survey results and previous research.

When asked about the importance of cultural competence relative to foster care, Williams believes that additional training for non-African American foster parents caring for African American children should not be any different than training parents to care for children of the same race. While she agrees that on some level it may be important to expose African American children to their own culture, "the immediate issue is to provide a safe place for the child to be cared for...I believe that the foster parents who accept African American children into their home realize that there is a difference in culture and will try to provide the child with knowledge of their culture,

through special interest groups, extra-curricular activities, the arts, as well as, education" (2006).

Carolyn Smith however, believes that "cultural competence is important in helping non-African American foster parents to enrich the lives of the children in which they care for". Also, it is important that child agency workers are aware of the many challenges in which interracial foster care and adoption placement may have and that they are prepared to address these issues as they arise" (2006). Smith goes on to say that cultural competence will ultimately prove to be a significant attribute in the social development of the children in her care. Once the children are able to learn and understand about their culture and where they come from, they take pride in that and this leads to a foundation in which to build the child's self-esteem, growth, and self-respect" (2006).

Previous research in this regard tends to agree with Smith. According to Lynn Nybell, and Sylvia Gray (2004), agency workers "generally had a desire [to increase their knowledge] about the cultural backgrounds of the clients they served". Moreover, agency workers felt that there needed to be a "voice across racial lines and between management, staff, [and clients]". According to Nybell and Grey, training with regard to cultural competence is essential in the ability of social workers to understand the needs of African American children. However, the following table, (Table 4) illustrates that perhaps better training should be implemented in that regard.

Table 4

<i>Evaluation of Cultural Competence Training</i>					
	SA	A	D	SD	
Social work materials contain enough factual information on minority people.	0	0	36%	59%	
Studying African American culture does not help to gain non-deficit perspectives on social work.	9%	0	36%	59%	
The trainers were effective.	0	0	18%	82%	
The training was not relevant to my daily work activities.	0	0	32%	68%	

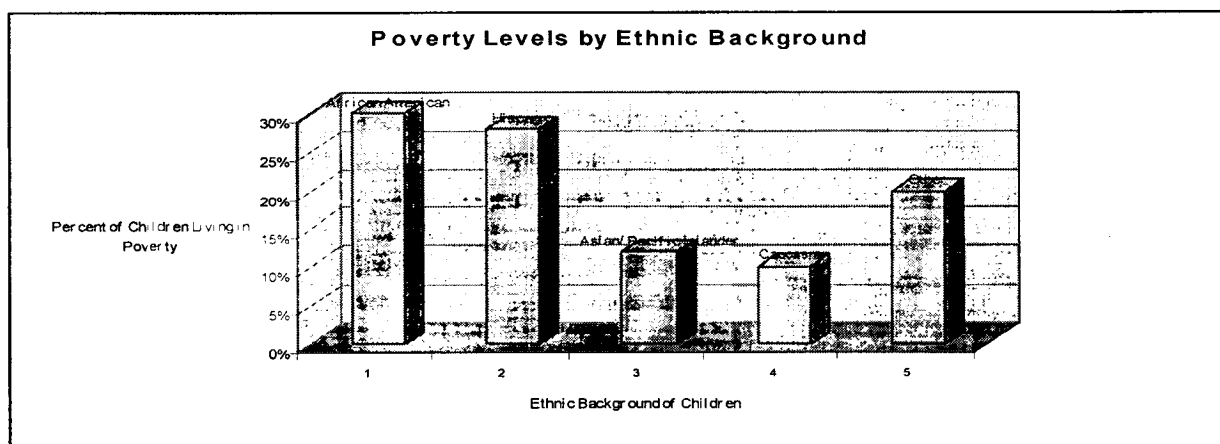
*Evaluation of Training (Nybell, Gray, 1990).*

*Issue #4 – Socioeconomic Factors*

According to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2006), "almost one third of African-American (30%) and Hispanic (28%) children live in poverty, while the rates are much lower for white (10%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (12%) children". ACF further contends that "abuse is 14 times more common in poor families and neglect is 44 times more common in poor families" (2006). [It is] further revealed that the incidence of child maltreatment in families with annual incomes under \$15,000 is 47 per 1,000, while the incidence falls to 2 cases per 1,000 in families with annual incomes above \$30,000. This suggests that the incidence rate is 26.5 times higher in lower income families. The greater incidence of maltreatment among low-income families combined with the over-

representation of families of color living in poverty suggests a plausible explanation for the disproportional representation of minority children in the child welfare system” (www.acf.hhs.gov, retrieved February 16, 2006). Table 5 below illustrates this finding.

Table 5



According to the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), reports of child abuse and neglect significantly increased between 1976 and 1992, with an estimated 40 percent of the reports substantiated (2006). The significant increase in reporting was largely attributed to the “increasing use of illegal drugs (especially among young inner city mothers); rising numbers of homeless families; and the growing numbers of children and families living in poverty” (GAO, 2006).

Research conducted by Annie Woodley Brown and Barbara Bailey-Etta (1997), suggests that “poverty, drug use, inadequate housing, and homelessness” are cited in many foster care placement cases. Further, “the incidence of child abuse and neglect [sic] is much greater for children from low-income families...” (1997). Brown and

Bailey-Etta also reveal that "children from families who were on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), were less likely to be reunified with family members or placed in permanent adoptive homes compared with those children whose families were not on AFDC". Brown and Bailey-Etta further contend that the "child welfare system has been used by society as a substitute for unavailable multi-service systems designed to serve poor families" (1997).

#### *Issue #5 – Kinship Care*

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) report that the number of children living with relatives who are not their parents has increased in recent years, especially among minority populations and that "African American children are more likely than Caucasian children to be placed with kin" (2000). States [have] increased their use of relatives as foster care providers for 18 percent of foster children in 1986 to 31 percent in 1990, according to data from 25 States submitted to the DHHS Inspector General's Office (1992). ACF research further reports that there were approximately "2.15 million children living with relatives without a parent present in 1994...among these arrangements [sic] two-thirds of care givers were the child's grandparents and about half were married. Of single relative care givers, more than 85 percent were female. Kinship care givers were much older than parents caring for their own children, and more likely to be unmarried, have less education, be unemployed or out of the labor force, be poor, or receive welfare benefits" (Administration for Children and

Families 2006). According to DHHS, there are seven states (California, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, and Utah) which were found to have policies that explicitly favor kinship care over foster care by non-relatives, and most allowed relatives to be licensed or certified and receive title IV-E foster care subsidies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998). Research further suggests that there are significant differences in social services available to both children and parents of children involved in kinship care as compared to foster care. Tables 6 and 7 below illustrate the services available to parents and children relative to kinship care vs. foster care placements by percentage.

Table 6

**Services Available to Parents of Children in Kinship Care vs Foster Care Placement**

	Kinship Care	Foster Care
Transportation	4%	25%
Mental Health Treatment	11%	25%
Substance Abuse	21%	15%
In Home Aid	2%	5%
Locate Housing	2%	9%
Crisis Intervention	0%	15%
Parent Education	2%	12%
Education	2%	3%
One Service	36%	19%
Two or more services	17%	34%

Table 7

**Services Available to Children in Kinship Care vs Foster Care Placement**

	Kinship Care	Foster Care
Medical Services	72%	76%
Mental Health Treatment	23%	32%
Education	38%	44%
Substance Abuse	11%	0%
Transportation	15%	29%
One Service	40%	39%
Two or more services	57%	56%

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reported in 1999 on open foster care cases in California and Illinois, as of September 1997 and found that the "quality of kinship care and other foster care was good and the experiences of children in both types of settings were comparable and GAO's review confirmed the generally held view that children in kinship care have more stability than children in other forms of foster care. Further, kinship care children in California spent about the same length of time in foster care as other foster children, while kinship care children in Illinois spent significantly less time in the system (GAO, 1999).

As we turn to the discussion of the research findings, we will keep in mind that there are many other issues related to the disparities of African American children in the child welfare system. While all issues associated with this topic could not be addressed within the realm of this study, it is the intention of the researcher to delve

into the core of the issues that have been addressed to find plausible solutions relative to the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system.

### *Discussion of Findings*

The issues in the child welfare system related to African American children are many. The purpose of this study was to find and evaluate the issue(s) that undermine the proper placement of African American children in foster care and adoption in the United States. This study evaluated five main issues within the child welfare system that have been hindrances to African American children in the child welfare system. The issues presented were race, skin color, cultural competence, socioeconomic factors, and the emerging practice of kinship care. The following discussion will explore each of these issues in the attempt to gain understanding of what federal, state, and local agencies can do to assist child welfare agencies in this regard.

#### *Race*

Disproportional minority representation in foster care has been documented in multiple studies, particularly for African-American children. Although the existence of minority over-representation in foster care is indisputable, the reasons for this phenomenon remain unclear. Some have suggested that minority children are less likely to be offered in-home services as an alternative to foster care placement. An investigation of the California child welfare system showed that African-American children are more likely than white or Hispanic children to receive foster care



placement instead of other services, even when factors such as age, maltreatment type, and neighborhood poverty were considered (Needell, et al., 2002). It is also reasoned that African Americans as a whole have higher incidences of reported child abuse and neglect; therefore, African American children are removed from their homes at higher rates than non-African American children when instances arise. As a result of this, racial differences in the length of stay in foster care and types of placements may also account for the over-representation of minority children in out-of-home care since African American children tend to have longer lengths of stay in foster care than their Caucasian counterparts.

Critics further posit that the child welfare system is not properly set up to support and serve minority families and children and because of this, caseworker decisions regarding cases where African American children are involved are influenced by race. While this influence may be done consciously or unconsciously, issues relative to race and racism exist within the child welfare system, which in turn, ultimately leads to increasing numbers of African American children entering into foster care. In the effort to curtail such influence, it is in the best interest of all involved for social workers to ask themselves if the decisions made regarding African American children were based on racial bias (Jordan Institute, 2001). Once the agency worker appropriately identifies the issues that tend to cause influence in this regard, they can take the

necessary actions to remedy such biases and influences so that the children that they serve will receive the best possible care that the child welfare agencies can provide.

### *Skin Color*

The issue of skin color relative to the child welfare system is relevant because historically, African Americans have internalized some racist skin color beliefs that have led to prejudiced attitudes toward dark complexioned children. While research continues to suggest that skin color is "still a significant factor that must be considered" (McRoy & Grape, 1999), skin color preferences continue to remain prevalent in the foster care and adoption practices of both inracial and transracial settings. Within inracial settings, it is said that "intrafamilial alliances and divisions may be related to skin color similarities and differences...and that being the lightest or darkest child may prompt positive or negative reaction" (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). With regard to transracial settings, it is important that "prospective transracial families recognize that they are not simply adopting a child from a different racial background, but that the child comes with an entire historical and cultural heritage that will [ultimately] influence how he or she will be treated by both blacks and whites" (McRoy & Grape, 1999).

There are several factors that influence how skin color will impact African American children and families with regard to foster care and adoption placement. The first factor is family and community attitudes regarding physical features such as skin color and hair texture. The second factor is skin color dynamics that are influenced by

the child's experiences with racism, teasing, and perceptions of acceptance in the family and community and the reaction of family and community to the child's placement in the home. The third factor is the attitudes of family and community members toward families who have adopted African American or biracial children with light complexions. Children who are extremely light complexioned are viewed as being "almost white" and is viewed in a more positive light by society. In fact, "some agencies encourage transracial placement of biracial children or extremely light complexioned children so that the child will be less visibly different than the other members of the family" (McRoy & Grape, 1999). The fourth and final factor is the degree to which African American adoptive families are assimilated in to mainstream white society and embrace its standards of beauty will influence the feelings of African American foster children regarding skin color and other physical characteristics.

If in fact the above mentioned factors are taken into consideration by child welfare agencies that have a responsibility for the placement of African American children in foster care, then the children that need homes will be better served, and hence, have better opportunities of being placed into an environment that will suite all of their needs – emotional, physical, as well as, mental needs, thereby allowing the children placed in foster care settings to feel accepted despite their unfortunate circumstances.

### *Cultural Competence*

While government data in this regard is limited, the issue of cultural competence as related to African American children in the child welfare system is quite significant. The ability to provide African American children with agency workers who have the ability to understand the complexities of the African American culture and to relate those complexities to foster care placement, is an enormous feat. Previous research indicates that "one of the ways in which we miss the mark in working with African American families is by oversimplification or by making sweeping generalizations regarding African American families without regard to differences that exist..." (Dillon, 1994).

Dennis Dillon (1994) contends that "being culturally competence [sic] requires skills in thinking cross culturally and considering differences within ethnic groups...one must operate from a knowledge base that is grounded in reality and addresses the plethora of ideas, values and lifestyles of their particular group". As related to the foster care and adoption of African American children, there must be a way to "look at the African American client's world through the eyes of each African American client" (Dillon, 1994). Therefore, the practice of cultural competence as it relates to the ability for agency workers in the child welfare system to think cross-culturally and effectively consider differences among ethnic groups should be further developed and implemented in a manner that is advantageous to all parties involved.

*Socioeconomics*

Our research indicates that the socioeconomic dynamics of African Americans place their families at a socioeconomic disadvantage compared to other ethnic groups. Therefore, the ability for African American families to provide adequate care for their children are lessened because of economic disadvantages that continue to remain prevalent within the African American community. As much as society would like to wish away this fact, African Americans are far less likely to have the same opportunities afforded them as their Caucasian counterparts. As a result of this, African American communities have become more vulnerable to such social ills as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and child neglect, thereby becoming more susceptible to involvement in social service systems, including welfare services and the child welfare system.

As the economy struggles, so does the African American community on a level that is completely different than other ethnic groups. The link between income and the incidence of abuse and neglect substantiates the premise that families with lower incomes tend to have a higher incidence of abuse and neglect. The issues of poverty and socioeconomic circumstances have been found to be primary reasons for the overrepresentation of minority children in the child welfare system. While research continues to validate this premise, little has been done to provide plausible and practical solutions to assist the African American community in achieving and

maintaining a standard of living that is above poverty level. While agencies and programs have been implemented to "assist" African American families, more often than not, the struggle to gain the funding and resources necessary to significantly assist in attaining employment, education, child care, and rehabilitation services within the African American community can be arduous and unbearable. Because of this, poverty has seemingly become an accepted part of the African American culture in this country and the end result is children are being removed from their parents care and placed into the foster care system.

### *Kinship Care*

The practice of kinship care is vastly becoming a first choice with regard to the placement of [African American] children in foster care. Historically, kinship care was the only means of foster care provided to African American children; now, due to a severe shortage of African American non-relative foster families, kinship care has emerged as a growing phenomenon. The purpose of kinship care is an attempt on the part of child welfare agencies to respond to a shortage of resources, while attempting to preserve family ties, provide continuity of care, and reduce the trauma of separation from parents (Ingram, 1996).

Currently, all 50 states view kinship care as a form of foster care and adhere to mandated federal policies with regard to the implementation of kinship care. While there is the current view that kinship care is an alternative to the child welfare system,

the system is undergoing a significant shift to become a service that is being both encouraged and funded by the federal government. Advocates of kinship care believe that kinship care should be treated as traditional foster care and equal services should be provided for both types of care. However, proponents of this kinship care believe that the use of public funds to support families caring for [their own] relatives is inconsistent with societal values of self-sufficiency in this country, which may ultimately be the basis for financial assistance being more readily available for traditional foster care providers (Ingram, 1996). Currently, children that are placed with kin are less likely to receive the same types of financial assistance, resources and services than those that are placed in traditional foster care settings.

### *Conclusion*

Everyday children are placed within the foster care system through no fault of their own; yet, these children are ultimately the ones that bear the brunt of suffering as a result of negligence on the part of adults. The examination and subsequent findings of this study as related to the issues that plague African American children and their subsequent plight within the child welfare system are unnerving. Issues such as race, skin color, socioeconomics, cultural competence, and kinship care are all matters that should not play a significant role with regard to whether or not a child is placed in a safe and loving foster care or adoptive home, yet, these issues are often the reason(s) for which placement in foster care and adoption is difficult. Therefore, our hypothesis that

foster care placement for African American children in the United States is significantly hindered due to issues of race and culture has been proved.

All children, no matter what their ethnic background, should be afforded the same opportunities to be properly cared for – with or without their biological parents. In order to ensure this, society as a whole, including parents, foster parents, and child welfare agencies, have a responsibility to make certain that children of all races, ethnicities, and cultures are cared for in an appropriate manner, and that the necessary resources and services are made available to assist them in being productive adult members of society whether or not they ultimately grow up in the homes of their biological parents.



## Appendix A – Tables

### Table 1

#### *The AFCARS Report - Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System*

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#### *Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005 (10)*

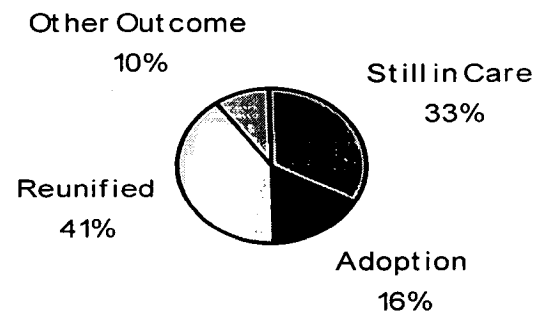
#### **What was the race/ethnicity of the children in foster care?**

AI/AN Non-Hispanic	2%	10,260
Asian-Non Hispanic	1%	3,280
Black-Non Hispanic	35%	184,480
Hawaiian/PI-Non Hispanic	0%	1,540
Hispanic	17%	91,040
White-Non Hispanic	39%	203,920
Unknown/Unable to Determine	3%	13,360
Two or More-Non Hispanic	3%	14,310

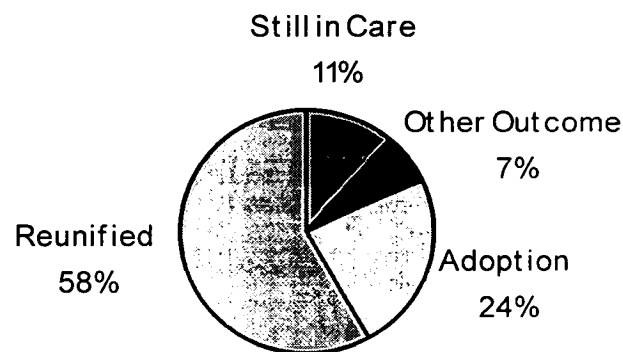
*NOTE: Using U.S. Bureau of the Census standards, children of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Beginning in FY 2000, children could be identified with more than one race designation. Data from both the regular and revised submissions received by April 2005 are included in the information below. Missing data are not used in the calculation of percentages. Some percentages do not total 100% due to rounding. Some columns may not add up to the total number, due to missing data*

Table 2

### Outcomes of African American Children

Table 3

### Outcomes of Caucasian Children

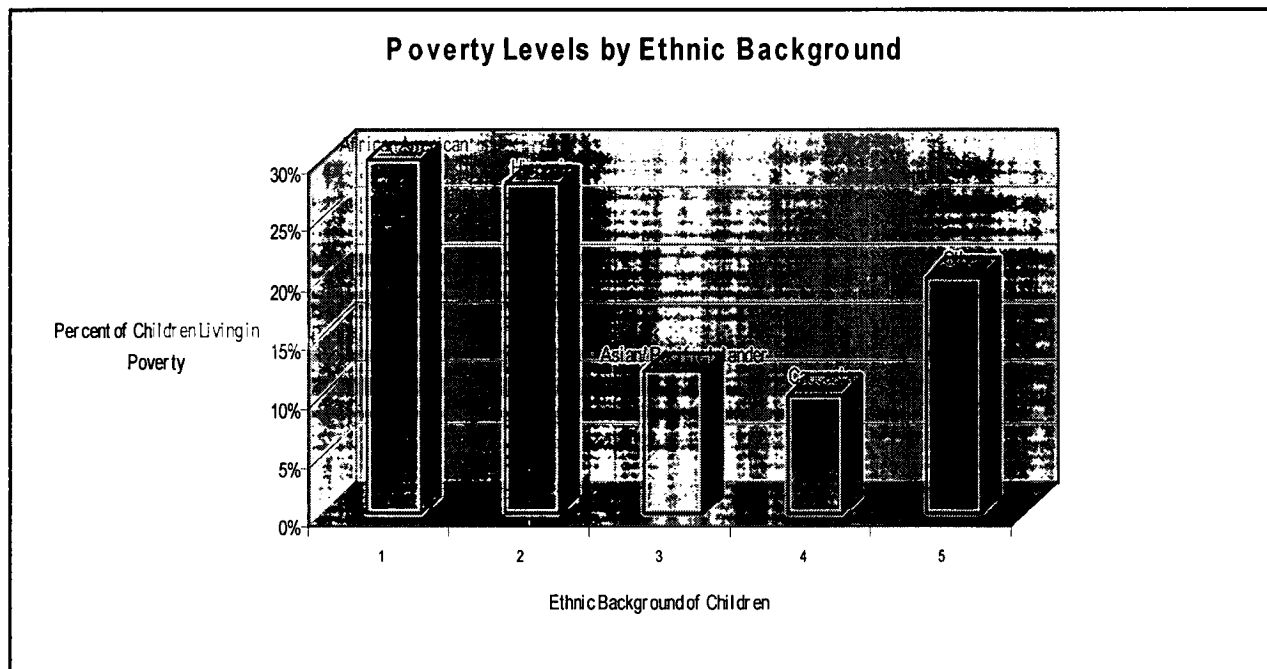


*Outcomes at Six Years after Placement in Nonkinship Care by Ethnicity (Barth, 1997)*

**Table 4**

<i>Evaluation of Cultural Competence Training</i>					
		SA	A	D	SD
Social work materials contain enough factual information on minority people.		0	0	36%	59%
Studying African American culture does not help to gain non-deficit perspectives on social work.		9%	0	36%	59%
The trainers were effective.		0	0	18%	82%
The training was not relevant to my daily work activities.		0	0	32%	68%

*Evaluation of Training (Nybell, Gray, 1990).*

**Table 5**

**Table 6****Services Available to Parents of Children in Kinship Care vs Foster Care Placement**

	Kinship Care	Foster Care
Transportation	4%	25%
Mental Health Treatment	11%	25%
Substance Abuse	21%	15%
In Home Aid	2%	5%
Locate Housing	2%	9%
Crisis Intervention	0%	15%
Parent Education	2%	12%
Education	2%	3%
One Service	36%	19%
Two or more services	17%	34%

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Education	38%	44%
Substance Abuse	11%	0%
Transportation	15%	29%
One Service	40%	39%
Two or more services	57%	56%

## Appendix B – Interviews

### *Diane Williams – February 18, 2006*

Q. How long have you been involved with providing foster care services for African American children in particular?

A. I have been involved for approximately 20 years.

Q. What types of foster care services does your group home/agency provide? (e.g. long term, emergency, short-term, or permanent).

A. All. In addition, I have adopted 1 child as a result of providing foster care.

Q. Approximately what percentage of the children in your home are African American?

A. Currently 100%...in the past it has been approximately 60% African American and 40% non African American.

Q. What is the approximate average length of time that an African American child spends in your home?

A. I have had children in my home from weeks to many years at a time, therefore it would be difficult to place an average time.

Q. How about non African-American? Approximately 4 years.

A. I have found that the length of time spent has been based on the age of the child at the time they entered my group home.

Q. Have you observed significant disparities within the child welfare system as it relates to African American children? If so, how?

A. Definitely. I do not believe that the agencies as a whole try hard enough to place them in families that are qualified to care for them. I believe that agencies tend to be pressured to meet certain quotas. However, the flip side is different social workers both African American and non African American social workers work hard to place children and will fight for the needs of the children. It all depends on how the social workers handle their caseload. I know for certain that African American children are left in foster care longer and have less chance for adoption. As far as the issue of skin color, it depends upon the foster care family because foster children are generally picked by the foster family, except in emergency cases.

Q. What do you feel is the most contributing factor to the child welfare system crisis specifically related to the care and/or placement of African American children?

A. Economic reasons...there is not enough money to pay foster families...there are other hardships such as unknown background of children and issues with biological parents that foster parents will not want to contend with.

Q. Do you see any long term solutions to the looming crisis within the child welfare system? If so, how? If not, why?

A. The government needs to invest more money into the child welfare system, which would call for a revamp of the entire system. Because I feel this is unlikely to happen, I do not see any long term solutions at this time.

Q. Do you feel that African American children should be placed in foster families of non African American decent? If yes, why? If not, why?

A. Yes. Because there is such a need and there are people out there with good hearts, I feel that they should be placed as long as the best interests of the child are taken into place.

Q. Do you feel that there should be special training for non African American foster parents regarding the issues and culture differences of African American children? If so, do you feel that it would help to foster better relationships between the foster parent and child?

A. No, the training should not be different relative to the race of the child.

Q. Are you willing to act as a liaison between the birth parents and child welfare agency to ensure the reunification of families?

A. Yes.

Q. Are you interested in becoming an adoptive parent?

A. Yes

*Carolyn Smith – February 15, 2006*

Q. How long have you been involved with providing foster care services for African American children in particular?

A. I have been involved for over 20 years.

Q. What types of foster care services does your group home/agency provide? (e.g. long term, emergency, short-term, or permanent).

A. I have provided all services in the past. However, I now provide mostly long term care.

Q. Approximately what percentage of the children in your home are African American?

A. Approximately 87 percent.

Q. What is the approximate average length of time that an African American child spends in your home?

A. On average 3 years at a time.

Q. How about non African-American?

A. Approximately 18 months.

Q. Have you observed significant disparities within the child welfare system as it relates to African American children? If so, how?

A. Yes. African American children are difficult to place because there are not enough resources available to place them in homes of the same race...by this I mean that there is a severe shortage of qualified and/or willing African American foster parents. This is a huge disparity in and of itself. Other disparities that I have observed are economical in that African American children are placed in foster care at a higher rate than other ethnicities.

Q. What do you feel is the most contributing factor to the child welfare system crisis specifically related to the care and/or placement of African American children?

A. Well, I think that there is not just one contributing factor, but the one factor that I have found to be most profound is the issue of race and the understanding of the African American culture within the child welfare system.

Q. Do you see any long term solutions to the looming crisis within the child welfare system? If so, how? If not, why?

A. I am unsure of the answer to this question. The bottom line is that more families should get involved with the foster care system and be willing to provide loving homes to those children who have no place to go. I think if it as doing on to others as you would have other do on to you.

Q. Do you feel that African American children should be placed in foster families of non African American decent? If yes, why? If not, why?

A. Yes. I believe that a person who can provide a good home to a child has no skin color. Race should not matter. It is the heart and intentions of the care provider that should be evaluated, not their skin color.

Q. Do you feel that there should be special training for non African American foster parents regarding the issues and culture differences of African American children? If so, do you feel that it would help to foster better relationships between the foster parent and child?

A. Yes. Cultural competence is important in helping non-African American foster parents to enrich the lives of the children in which they care for".

Q. Are you willing to act as a liaison between the birth parents and child welfare agency to ensure the reunification of families?

A. Yes.

Q. Are you interested in becoming an adoptive parent?

A. Yes



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