

## **Studies: Disproportionate number of black children wind up in L.A. foster care**

*By Ben Baeder, Staff Writer @ReporterBen on Twitter Whittier Daily News*

*Posted:*

DailyNews.com

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Gallery: Cynthia Bradbury and her blended family

Eight out of every 100 children in Los Angeles County are black. And 29 out of every 100 children in foster care are black.

That jump in proportion, which is common statewide, is one of the most controversial discussions in the child welfare community.

And when black children go into foster care, they get stuck there 50 percent longer than children of other races.

During the 2000s, social work experts suspected that institutional bias and racism by social workers caused the high proportion of black children in foster care.

Leaders in the social work community made that assumption based on decades-old data that showed that black children were abused and maltreated at the same rate as children of other ethnic classifications.

County child protection agencies across the United States concentrated on training their workers to be racially sensitive.

But new studies show that black children die and are mistreated by family members more often than other kids. And instead of rooting out alleged racism, the county now faces a more nuanced and difficult task - getting into black neighborhoods and finding out how to best help children who are mistreated.

"There was no smoking gun," said Armand Montiel, who started as a frontline social worker and now is in charge of public affairs for the county's Department of Children and Family Services.

"It almost would have been easier to solve this if racism or bias were the case," he said. "We could target that with training or by weeding out workers who were biased. But that's not the case. It's much more complex. "

The county the last few years has ramped up its efforts to take a serious look at why so many black children end up in foster care.

But if racism is a factor, then the racism would come from a staff made up mostly of ethnic minorities.

The number of black children in foster care is almost identical to the percentage of black social workers.

Of the 3,179 county social workers who make up the county's front-line staff, 907 are black. The largest number of social workers, 1,390, are Hispanic. About 590 are white. Some 280 are Asian or Filipino. And 10 are American Indian.

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Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury plays with her son Xander, 2, Friday, January 25, 2013 as she gets him ready for bed in their Huntington Beach home. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)

(Story continues below)

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### A grim picture

By almost every measure, black children in Los Angeles County, and California as a whole, are at far higher risk than other children.

They are more likely to die than other children, and on average, they have more identifiable risk factors than children of other ethnic groups, according to recent data from researchers and

county reports.

Of the 350 to 400 of all children who die suspiciously of suspected abuse or neglect in Los Angeles County each year, 20-25 percent are black, according to the Los Angeles County Civil Grand Jury report released last June. That's far higher than their 8-percent share of the child population.

Very few of those deaths take place while children are placed in foster homes, according to county statistics. In fact, 90 percent of the deaths of children who have had contact with the county's Department of Children and Family Services die when they are living with their birth families, according to the Grand Jury report.

A look at neighborhood data shows that one Los Angeles County area stands out for its high child mortality rate - South Los Angeles.

The 2009 death rate for children in South Los Angeles neighborhoods was 23.3 per 100,000 children, according to the most recent statistics available from the Los Angeles Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Most of the rest of the county had a rate that averages about 15 deaths per 100,000.

On a national scale, the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect released in 2011 found that children in black families are mistreated at a rate about 1.7 times the national average.

"In nearly all cases, the rates of maltreatment for black children were significantly higher than those for white and Hispanic children," the study found.

With all those risks at home, it's no wonder that so many black children end up in foster care, experts say.

Those statistics match research findings that show a strong correlation between poverty and child maltreatment.

If there's any hope in making a dent in the number of black children in foster care, it can be found in new research that shows exactly what types of families are most at risk for having a child in need of protection, experts say.

Starting in 2011, USC researcher Emily Putnam-Hornstein and her mentor, Barbara Needell, took a novel

approach to characterizing the situations that end up with a child getting reported for maltreatment in California.

They took birth records and compared them to reports from the state's child protection agencies.

They came to a telling conclusion: Based on risk factors, they could almost predict which babies would be reported to child protective services before they turned five.

Things such as low birth weight, low income, a young mother, low education, and no father listed on a birth certificate were predictors of the child being reported to a child protection agency.

Putnam-Hornstein found that black babies were twice as likely to have a low birth weight than the rest of the children born during the study period. One out of five black children had no father listed on the birth certificate, a ratio almost four times higher than white children.

Further studies found that California residents probably weren't singling out black families and reporting them to child protective services.

In fact, when controlling for poverty, black children were less likely to be reported for child maltreatment than children of other races.

Putnam-Hornstein found that building racial sensitivity among social workers probably wouldn't cause a serious reduction in the number of black children in foster care.

"Our findings suggest that although working to address... biases is in no way inappropriate, in isolation, these efforts are unlikely to achieve the desired effects," she said.

Other studies show that black families use corporal punishment about 10 percent more often than parents from other ethnic groups.

Former foster child Marcellia Goodrich said she and other black foster youth were disciplined very severely in their birth homes. She was raised in South Los Angeles and now lives in Long Beach. She spent much of her childhood in foster care.

"I've been hit with a switch, a telephone, an extension cord," said Goodrich, 22.

Goodrich's childhood also had another risk factor, the lack of a father. Her father left when she was a baby and is now in prison, she said.

National data show that about 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock compared to a rate of about 40 percent for the general population.

Black men are also 5.8 times more likely than white men to be in prison or jail, according to national justice statistics.

(Story continues below)

Gallery: Cynthia Bradbury and her blended family

### **Age-old problem**



*Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury, of Huntington Beach, gets yogurt with her children Andrew, 17, Lilyana, 8, Olivia, 8, and Xander, 2, Friday, January 25, 2013 while the family was getting yogurt in their neighborhood. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)*

The leading voice for studying ways to reduce the proportion of black children in foster care is Dorothy Roberts, a University of Pennsylvania Law School professor who wrote the 2002 book "Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare. "

She was one of a host of child-welfare experts who during most of the 2000s believed that institutional racism was the leading cause of the high number of black children in foster care, an argument that has lost steam the last few years in the face of new data.

Roberts and her colleagues cited a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study of children ages 5-15 who were taken from their parents on marginal circumstances of neglect. The study shows that older children in marginal cases placed in foster care had poorer outcomes than children who are left home. In other words, foster care in some cases worsened a child's circumstances.

Roberts and others have said counties should heed the results of those findings and do a better job of working with black families to keep children in their birth homes.

"They assume that taking a child away from his or her family is better than leaving the children home," she said. "That assumption is made the most often about black families. "

Roberts says the issue is so complex that some in the social welfare world are tired of talking about it.

But Roberts maintains that the proportion of black children in foster care is important to discuss.

"When I started working on this subject, it had been how long, 20 or 30 years, since somebody had taken a serious look at this," she said. "My work was really a call for more research. "

The issue should be of concern, she said.

"If we saw these same numbers with white children, there's no way that society would find it acceptable," she said.

Other researchers say the last 10 years of efforts to target alleged racism were misguided and a waste of time.

Harvard Law School Professor Elizabeth Bartholet is generally considered the main critic of the "racism" argument.

"The bottom line is that there is absolutely no evidence of system bias," Bartholet said. "What we do have is overwhelming evidence that there are higher black maltreatment rates. "

### **Worry about children first**

Foster parents say race is too important in social work and that social workers should start worrying about children more than race.

Foster parent Cynthia Bradbury said a Los Angeles County social worker last year overtly talked about race when it came to Bradbury's foster son, Xander, 2, who is black. It was clear the worker did not want her to adopt Xander, she said.

Xander has a congenital heart defect that will kill him without a heart transplant.

Bradbury is a registered nurse, and she's white.

"She said he needed to be with a black family," Bradbury said of the social worker, who was black. "She asked: 'What are you going to do when you have an African-American teenager standing in front of you?' And I said would do the same thing I did with my own teenage son. "

Throughout Xander's case the social worker brought up race, Bradbury said. Bradbury said she felt like she was being harassed.

In a separate foster care case years ago, an 8-month-old girl was removed from Bradbury's home by Orange County social workers because another couple wanted a white baby.

"I loved that little baby, and I wanted to adopt her, but they took her anyway," Bradbury said.

County officials said race-based decisions are not allowed and that they would look into Bradbury's case.

On the other hand, there aren't many white and Latino couples knocking down doors to adopt black children out of foster care, said Johnston Moore of Long Beach.

Moore and his wife Terri are about to adopt their seventh child from Los Angeles' foster care system.

"When it's a cute little baby from Ethiopia, there are scores of families willing to adopt," Moore said. "But if it's a traumatized 7-year-old boy from Compton, everybody runs the other way. "

Issues of race and foster care need to be discussed, otherwise they will fester while policy makers focus on less-important topics, Moore said.

"There are some elephants in the room, but a lot of people don't want to talk about them," he said.



Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury gets her son ready for bed Friday

(Story continues below)

Gallery: Cynthia Bradbury and her blended family

### Critical report

One of the main reason so many black children are in foster care is the length of time they stay in foster care.

County statistics show that black youth stay in

*night, January 25, 2013 in their Huntington Beach home. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)* foster care 50 percent longer than children of all other ethnic groups. In Los Angeles County, the average foster care case lasts about a year and a half. But for black children, it lasts more than two years.

This month, the county unveiled a 46-page study of why black children linger in the system so long.

The report called into question all the practices of the Department of Children and Family Services, including asking hard questions about the department's commitment in some of the county's poorest neighborhoods.

Among other things, the study found:

- The office that serves South Los Angeles is 7 to 10 miles away from the neighborhood it serves and has no free parking.
- The social workers that serve black communities tend to transfer to other offices after about a year, handing off all their cases to transitional workers.
- Case loads are highest in the neighborhoods that need the most service.
- Services offered to help families reunify with their children are applied unevenly, if at all.

The report said the department needs to put an office in South Los Angeles and to evaluate whether social workers are simply checking off lists or actually trying to help parents change enough to get their children back. It asked the county to find a way to keep social workers in the same offices so families have continuity of service.

It also called for "racial humility" classes to help social workers become more understanding of black families.

DCFS spokesman Armand Montiel said county executives for years have been concerned about the rate of black children in foster care. The county has a 5-year-old taskforce charged with finding out how best to help the black children and families served by DCFS.

The department is planning to implement many of the changes suggested in the report.

"I think it's easy for us to say that this is a social welfare problem, or this is a law enforcement problem, or this is an economic problem and that we don't really have the power to change it," Montiel said. "Yet there's pressure on us, both internally or externally. We want to respond to that pressure. If we have to swim upstream, so be it. We're not content to leave things how they are. "

The county report echoes a state audit released in 2012.

The state audit found that DCFS offices in neighborhoods with the most black residents have higher rates of incomplete investigations and staff turnover.

For instance, the rate of incomplete investigations in offices that serve the South Los Angeles neighborhoods was three times higher than the department average.

Workers in those offices more often asked to get transferred or ended up quitting, according to the audit.

The state found that about 29 percent of social workers in the Compton DCFS office had less than two years of experience.

## **Poverty at the root**

Researcher Brett Drake of Washington University in St. Louis' school of social work said that poverty is the strongest factor correlated with foster care.

Blacks in the United States typically live in concentrated pockets of "crushing poverty" that whites generally don't experience, he said. When researchers control for poverty, the child maltreatment differences between white and black families disappear.

Black households earn three times less than their white counterparts, and a comparison of assets is even more disparate, Drake said. Race matters far less than economic status, he said.

Drake is skeptical of the movement to address the problem through racial-sensitivity classes.

Racism may be a tiny problem, but it's not nearly as destructive as poverty, he said.

Counties should focus on trying to find out exactly why black families are faring poorly in poverty-stricken black areas. And the battle, he said, starts with trying to make sure that black children don't grow up in extreme poverty.

"Blaming it all on bias is really the coward's way out," he said.



*Single mom and nurse Cynthia Bradbury, of Huntington Beach, picks up her 8-year-old daughters Lilyana and Olivia from their Huntington Beach school Friday, January 25, 2013 with her boys Xander, 2, and Andrew, 17. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)*

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### Continuing the discussion

Toni Oliver, the vice president for the National Association of Black Social Workers, said big-city social welfare agencies across the country have got to take a serious look at why so many black children are going into foster care and staying in foster care so long.

Some states, such as Texas, have made strides to make systemic reforms across different levels of the government, she said.

Oliver hoped researchers and welfare executives would set aside their philosophical differences and try to find ways to assist black children and their families.

Children should not have to grow up in foster care, she said.

"We cannot accept things the way they are right now - we just can't," she said. "This has got to stay constructive. It's just that when you start talking about race, everybody starts choosing sides. "

Since science helps researchers know what children are likely to be reported for abuse or neglect, Putnam-Hornstein posited that the government should seriously consider identifying young mothers with high risk factors and then give intense government services to help stabilize those same mothers. A change in the way at-risk mothers are treated might help families of all races and ethnicities, she said.

"It's not really clear to me that we are doing everything we can to target these families that have higher risk," she said.

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