

# The Racial Geography of Child Welfare: Toward a New Research Paradigm

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This article examines the community-level impact of concentrated child welfare agency involvement in African American neighborhoods. Based on interviews of 25 African American women in a Chicago neighborhood, the study found that residents were aware of intense agency involvement in their neighborhood and identified profound effects on social relationships including interference with parental authority, damage to children's ability to form social relationships, and distrust among neighbors. The study also discovered a tension between respondents' identification of adverse consequences of concentrated state supervision for family and community relationships and neighborhood reliance on agency involvement for needed financial support. The author discusses the implications of these findings for a new research paradigm aimed at understanding the community-level effects of racial disproportionality.

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Racial disproportionality is now recognized by many researchers and government officials as a critical issue in child welfare policy and practice (Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell, & Park, 1998; Derezotes, Poertner, & Testa 2005; Hill, 2006). An understudied aspect of racial disproportionality, however, is its *community* impact. Many poor African American neighborhoods have very high rates of child welfare agency involvement, especially placement of children in foster care. Researchers have yet to investigate the sociopolitical impact of this spatial concentration of child welfare supervision—the system’s “racial geography.” By conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews of 25 residents of an African American neighborhood in Chicago, this study aimed to better understand how intense child welfare agency involvement affects community and civic life.

*Neighborhood* is used to signify the geographical site of study, and *community* is used to signify the social relations that neighbors engage in with one another. In short, this study focused on the impact of concentrated child welfare agency involvement in the geographical space of a neighborhood on the community relationships within that neighborhood.

The residents were all aware of intense child welfare agency involvement in their neighborhood and identified profound effects on family and community social relationships, including interference with parental authority, damage to children’s ability to form social relationships, and distrust among neighbors. The study also discovered a tension between respondents’ identification of adverse consequences of concentrated state supervision for family and community relationships and neighborhood reliance on agency involvement for needed financial support. This article explores the implications of these findings for a new research paradigm for understanding the community-level effects of racial disproportionality and identifies themes that can serve as a starting point for future studies and policy change.

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## The Racial Geography of the Child Welfare System

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Most of the children in foster care in this country are children of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2006). Black children are especially overrepresented in the child welfare system: they make up about one third of the nation's foster care population, although they represent only 15% of the nation's children. A black child is four times as likely as a white child to be in foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 2000). Children of color not only enter foster care at disproportionate rates, but they also remain in care longer, experience a greater number of placements, and are less likely to be reunified with their parents or adopted than white children (Hill, 2006). The Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity recently concluded, "[T]he disparities in outcomes are so great that racial/ethnic inequities can best be described as a 'chronic crisis'" (Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, 2006).

Although alarming, national and state statistics do not reveal the spatial dynamics of racial disproportionality. In the nation's cities, child protection cases are concentrated in communities of color. Many poor black neighborhoods in particular have extremely high rates of involvement by child welfare agencies, especially placement of children in foster care. For example, in 1997, one out of 10 children in Central Harlem had been placed in foster care (Katz, 2000). In Chicago, most child protection cases are clustered in a small number of zip code areas, which are predominantly African American (Children and Family Research Center, 2006; Testa & Furstenberg, 2002). State custody of children has a *racial geography*.

The Illinois child welfare system has a very high level of racial disproportionality. Although in 2003 black children were only 18% of the state's population, 68% of children in foster care were black

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(USDHHS, 2007). Woodlawn, the site of this study, has one of the highest rates of foster care placement in Chicago. At the end of 2005, almost 200 of approximately 9,000 children in the neighborhood were in state-supervised substitute care (Children and Family Research Center 2006). The vast majority of Chicago neighborhoods experience less than half of Woodlawn's placement rate of twenty-one per one thousand children. A few other poor African American neighborhoods such as Grand Boulevard and the Near West Side have double Woodlawn's rate. In no white neighborhood in Chicago are children placed in foster care at a level even approaching that of these black neighborhoods.

Most studies of the child welfare system use individual children and families involved in the system as the focus of analysis. Researchers evaluate the effectiveness of child welfare policies and practices by measuring outcomes for individual children and then accumulating the data (e.g., Potter & Klein-Rothschild, 2002; Ryan, Garnier, Zypfur, & Zhai, 2006). Studies of racial disproportionality similarly report racial differences in outcomes or test for the significance of race in predicting outcomes for individual children involved in the child welfare system (Courtney et al., 1998). Researchers cannot understand the effects of concentrated child welfare agency involvement on relationships at the neighborhood level, however, by aggregating individual child welfare data. Racial disproportionality affects not only children's chances of being placed in foster care but also children's chances of growing up in a neighborhood where state supervision of families is prevalent. Understanding the community impact of racial disproportionality, then, requires a new research paradigm that focuses on neighborhood social dynamics.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest among social scientists in the impact of community-level social dynamics on individuals and the community-level effects of social policies (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Sampson, 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Inspired in part by social science research on neighborhood effects on child develop-

ment, social work theorists and practitioners have increasingly adopted community-based approaches to child welfare decision making and service delivery (Usher & Wildfire, 2003; Weil, 1996; Wharf, 2002). Even these neighborhood-oriented approaches to child welfare, however, leave out a crucial aspect of the relationship between communities and the child welfare system—the impact of the child welfare system itself on neighborhoods that experience high rates of agency involvement. Researchers have yet to investigate the sociopolitical impact of the spatial concentration of child welfare supervision in these disadvantaged neighborhoods. Although experts have asked how community strengths, norms, and partnerships can be integrated into child welfare practice (e.g., Hosley, Gensheimer, & Yang, 2003), they have not asked how agency involvement affects community strengths, norms, and relationships.

In *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, Roberts (2002) theorized that concentrating state supervision of families in black neighborhoods has negative community-wide effects on the role of parental and governmental authority in residents' lives. She argued that placing large numbers of children in state custody—even if some are ultimately reunited with their families or placed in adoptive homes—interferes with a community's ability to form healthy connections among its members and to participate fully in the democratic process. Such intense regulation also contradicts the vital role families play in a democratic political system of fostering citizens' moral development free from state control (McClain, 2006). This study begins to investigate empirically the effects of concentrated child welfare agency involvement on neighborhood relationships and civic participation.

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## Method

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Because there is no research on the neighborhood-wide effects of concentrated child welfare agency involvement, in-depth individual interviews were used for data collection. Such interviews enable

researchers to gain a deep understanding of respondents' subjective experiences and attitudes and to uncover critical issues and themes (Weiss, 1994). These themes may be used to develop hypotheses and to construct future comparative, ethnographic, and quantitative studies to further understand the impact of the child welfare system on neighborhoods (Newman & Massengill, 2006). Thus, the purpose of this study was not to provide statistically reliable findings about the impact on African American neighborhoods, but to discover what residents of one such neighborhood suggest are critical areas for future research and potential policy change.

During the summer of 2005, the author and a research assistant conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews of 25 African American women, ages 24 to 56, who had resided for at least five years in Woodlawn, a predominantly African American neighborhood on Chicago's south side. A snowball recruitment method, starting with referrals from service providers and community organizations in Woodlawn, was used, followed by soliciting additional names of potential participants during interviews. A majority (14) of the respondents had some personal involvement with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS): as foster children, as foster parents, or as siblings or cousins of those placed in foster care. Four had close friends whose children were removed by DCFS. None of the respondents admitted to being investigated by DCFS or having their own children placed in foster care. Six of the respondents were familiar with DCFS through their employment: three were child care workers, two provided counseling services to DCFS, and one was a case manager for a private agency.

The interviews were semistructured and permitted respondents to speak freely about their experiences with DCFS involvement in Woodlawn. The interviews took place in the offices of an afterschool program at a community center located in a Woodlawn housing project and at local restaurants. Pursuant to Northwestern University Institutional Review Board approval, respondents signed an informed consent form prior to the interview and their names

were kept confidential. All names used in this article have been changed to preserve respondents' anonymity. The interviews were coded into 50 general themes related to the impact of DCFS on family and community life, social networks, and civic participation and analyzed by the author to highlight significant implications for research, policy, and practice.

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## Findings

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### *Awareness of Agency Involvement*

The study found that all but one of the respondents were aware of intense DCFS involvement with families in their neighborhood. Indeed, 17 respondents estimated the number of Woodlawn families under DCFS supervision to be at least half:

Over half of the community I would say. Yeah, it's a lot.

My God, probably thousands.

I'm gonna say 90 percent.

I wanna say, probably seven out of ten.

I think it's a lot. I would say like 60 percent.

From 60th to 67th, State to Stoney Island, even with it being 150 cases just in that little vicinity, 150 apartments or families or whatever, or everybody in the whole three-flat.

It's definitely common because people always getting their children taken away.

I think everyone in Woodlawn knows someone in the system.

Fourteen respondents understood the main function of DCFS to center on removing children from their homes. Tiara, a 24-year-old whose friend was investigated by DCFS, stated, "I try not to know what the initials stand for, but I do know that in this neighborhood, to me, DCFS is the people that take your kids if you are not taking

care of them correctly." Christina, also 24 years old, with a friend involved with DCFS, agreed: "It just seems like they're all about taking the child out of the home. You know I've never really known of a situation where if someone told on the family and they let the child stay and deal with the problem." Similarly, Regina, 29, with a friend whose children were placed in foster care, stated that DCFS "take[s] the children from bad mommies and daddies."

A smaller number of respondents (9) focused on the helpful role of DCFS in protecting children. Vickie, 38, whose mother and aunt were placed in foster care and raised by a woman whom Vickie considers her "grandma," described DCFS in these positive terms: "Basically trying to protect. . . . It's basically helping families out. It also helps if a child is being abused or neglected." Michelle, 34, expressed both views. On one hand, she stated, "As far as I know, it comes to children's aid when they are being abused, and also when, well my instance, my nephew was left alone because his mom was going out of town and his father was incarcerated. So that's how I ended up with him for a year." On the other hand, Michelle explained that some residents are reluctant to solicit help from DCFS because the agency overly relies on child removal: "I don't want to lose my children, so I'm not going to call DCFS for help because I only see them take away children. . . . I think that everybody fears that I don't want to lose my children. . . . I wouldn't wish DCFS on anybody."

For similar reasons, Tamisha, 34, whose friend was investigated by DCFS, explained that she would not contact DCFS to seek help for another friend with a substance abuse problem:

She do have three younger kids and I think she needs some help for them, so I've been trying to talk to her, letting her know maybe you need to go in a rehab place and have one your family members take your kids or something. . . . But personally, me just picking up the phone, calling DCFS, I couldn't do it. It would be on my conscience knowing that I made this phone call and this girl probably never see her kids.



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## Impact on Social Relationships

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The respondents identified profound effects of the high level of DCFS involvement on both family and community social relationships. Key social effects of the concentration of DCFS supervision included: interference with parental authority, damage to children's ability to form social relationships, and distrust among neighbors. The respondents' perception that residents often use DCFS as a means of resolving family and community conflicts suggests that concentrated agency involvement has a significant influence on neighborhood relationships and norms.

### *Interference with Parental Authority*

Eleven respondents observed that DCFS involvement in Woodlawn generally interferes with parents' authority over their children. First, they noted that children who have been placed in foster care lose respect for their parents because their parents do not have custody of them. This lack of respect often continues when children are reunited with their families. Aisha, 24 years old, who had several relatives involved with DCFS, described the relationship between a mother and her 20-year-old daughter who spent time in foster care.

She was taken away from her mother. Well, she's staying with her mother now, but she still get checks and stuff from [DCFS]. . . . Like the respect—being away from your mother like that, if you haven't been put in a good home, the respect that you have for your parent is little. If you don't have anybody teaching you moral decency or you don't have God in your life, your respect for that person who birthed you is little. It's very, very little.

Aisha saw the same impact of foster care on another neighborhood family.

Well, her children are beginning to grow more rebellious. They're not living with her anymore, so they feel like they

don't have to listen to her as much. Her little boy is like, "what can you tell me? I'm not even in your household. What can you possibly tell me?" . . . He's about eight or nine. He had a little bit more respect because he was staying under her roof, but now he has very little respect for his mother because he is not there with her. And he feel like she don't have any say so.

Second, these respondents noted the general impact of DCFS involvement on parents' ability to discipline their children. Vickie stated, "A lot of people, when they hear the word DCFS, a lot of people get scared. Because it's to the point of okay, if I discipline my child this way or whatever, you all are gonna call on me, because I discipline my child. How can you all tell me how to raise my child?" Regina felt that DCFS had a "50-50" influence on parental discipline: "A parent is going to be a parent, especially if they come from the South. So they give less than a heck about DCFS sometimes because you got to raise your children sometimes the way you know how to raise them. You know, you still got to cut the corner so you won't get in trouble because the rules are so strict now when it come down to discipline."

Respondents reported that children's awareness the agency's potential power over parents increased the threat to parental authority. Six interviews included stories of children who reported false accusations of maltreatment to DCFS to avoid their parents' rules or to rebel against parents who disciplined them.

This girl that I know, her kids just got took from her a few months ago, when she lived over here. And she's going to the programs, you know, parenting class and things like that now. But now she only has visitation with her daughter, not her son because he's the one did all the allegations. He's nine, in the school. . . . He's like, "No, no, no, I'm scared of my mom, she gonna beat me." I've never known her to beat him. And we live right across from each other.

But this is what his allegations were, so they took her kids from her. (Francis, 48)

I had a friend who recently . . . her child went to school mad at his mother and told his teacher some things and the teacher called DCFS and her children were taken away from her. They went to her house, her house was pretty decent, but I think with the child's testimony and the teacher, that, yeah they took her children away. (Aisha, 24)

Tiara similarly reported that a boy retaliated against his mother for forbidding him from watching television by telling DCFS about his mother's drug use and poor choice of companions.

Now he rebellious now, he was always on punishment because he don't like to do his homework and class work. He felt like yeah, I'm fixing to get her now. "My mama smoke weed. She be with Lou and Lou a pig and sleazy. . . . You see how she looked at me, she's gonna whoop me this time. I'm fixing to get in trouble. I ain't going home with her ass, not today after school. Y'all take me." I guess he thought he was gonna get [the DCFS caseworker] to take him to the swimming pool or with his favorite rapper on BET [Black Entertainment Television].

An interesting contrast to these respondents' perception of DCFS interference in parental discipline is the observation by Pamela, a 27-year-old with custody of her younger brother, that some relatives rely on DCFS to step in when their authority fails:

[My grandmother] wants to give my niece up, she wants to put her in foster care. . . . [My niece is] almost twelve, so she's actually twelve in December. She wants to put her in foster care because she said she's flippy at the mouth, she not doing what she supposed to do in school.

Parents calling DCFS to report their children's misconduct is the reverse of children calling DCFS to report their parents' maltreatment. These respondents' perception that residents often turn

to DCFS to resolve parent–child conflicts suggests that DCFS may have a strong influence on the norms governing family relationships in Woodlawn.

### *Damage to Foster Children's Social Relationships*

Eighteen respondents described the instability, disconnection, and uncertainty experienced by children placed in foster care. For example, Lauren, 26, whose father's stepdaughter was placed in foster care, observed,

Really, you splitting the family up. That does impact the family because the kids they need to be with their moms. If that's the only thing they know, then they go somewhere else and they ain't gonna be right. If they used to one environment and you put them somewhere else and they go place to place to place to place, it's a big impact.

Christina, 24, echoed this sentiment:

I think they could come in and try to help first before they just take [children] away because that could be a big effect on a child too to snatch them away because no matter whether the situation or the environment is bad or not, they're used to it.

Ida, 46, a child care provider who cared for brother's children for one year, stated,

The kids with the relatives are not affected as much because they are at least with people they know. I feel for the kids who are with people they don't know in new communities. I think they can lose their background and culture and wonder who they are—it's those kids who could really get in to some trouble with drugs and stuff.

Francis, 48, whose daughter had been reported to DCFS, expressed similar concerns:

I think those kids was traumatized. Especially ones that were with foster parents. You know, because it's different rules when you with other people that you have to follow,

whereas your mother might be more, a little more lenient with you.

Eleven of these respondents noted that the psychological injuries caused by foster care placement hamper children's ability to form healthy social relationships later in life. As Aisha stated,

The child's gotta go through all this ridicule, being tossed about, your mother is nothing, your family is nothing, you been taken away. And it kinda makes the child feel like unwanted. And that why we have a lot of men and women growing up today very rebellious and very hurt and doing a lot of things out of their hurt because of the suffering and ridicule that they dealt with as a child. [Foster children] don't have any sense of security. . . . Unless they be put in a very good family, they're very insecure about themselves and it affects their relationship as an adult also. Very shy or even if not shy, just insecure about . . . their ability to have relationships because they never had no relationship with their parent.

Beverly, 38, who was in foster care as a child and later adopted her niece, agreed,

In some of the [foster] homes, they're not stable themselves. . . . [DCFS] figured that they just got a place for them to stay, that kind of thing, that's fine, but kids have emotional needs just like we do. And if you're not getting the positive emotional needs and stuff in the house, you're gonna get it somewhere, because you're looking for that attention. Your mama already rejecting you because she ain't doing her thing, daddy rejecting you, so a lot of the guys who are out here, they end up with the gangs and stuff, a lot of girls who are out here just let the guys do whatever they want to do to them. Why? Because they're not getting the emotional stability at home.

Because so many Woodlawn residents have been involved with the foster care system, the social disabilities the women described

likely have a considerable impact on community relationships. Four respondents explicitly tied the detrimental effects of foster care on individual children to the interests of the broader community. For example, Tamisha held the community accountable for children's bad foster care experiences:

That's my biggest thing that I have with DCFS. Either you gonna place them somewhere good or somewhere bad. And if you place them somewhere bad, then you feel like you failed yourself, the community. Like, okay we was all riled for them to take this child from this person, but for you to take him and then put him into a foster home and they getting mistreated, then the community got to get back together and try to fight to get the child back.

Aisha described the impact of family disruption on the community's civic life in especially powerful terms. She believed that people who are separated from their families by state child welfare workers have difficulty joining with other residents on community projects.

When you are taken away from your family, that is a form of separation and they learn from that growing up to be separated. I can't really explain it, but it's not really set in them to be united, or to be one, or to come together to do anything because they've been separated I guess. Yeah, like we can never come together to do anything over here. . . . It definitely has an effect on the community because bringing separation like that, I don't know what it does, but we cannot as a people and as a community come together. No, we have not come together on anything. That's why nothing is accomplished here.

### *Distrust Among Neighbors*

Another effect on community relationships that the respondents discussed is the distrust among neighbors created by pervasive DCFS surveillance of families. Nine respondents observed that it

is common for residents to call DCFS to report their neighbors for child maltreatment, destroying a sense of trust among them. As one put it, “[DCFS] disrupts the community . . . I would say it’s a trust thing.” Anita, a case manager for a private child welfare agency, humorously described the intensity of neighbors reporting neighbors:

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

As a result, these respondents explained, residents must look over their shoulders for fear that a neighbor is noting a parental misstep or that an observant stranger is a DCFS caseworker. Cassie, 27, observed,

I mean, [DCFS] shouldn’t cause a problem, but if somebody calling DCFS on you and they come knocking at your door and you wondering why they at your door and you wondering who called them, then that’s a problem. That’s a big problem. . . . That’s why you got to watch what you do and what you say and all this, ‘cause you don’t know who you could be talking to. She could be DCFS, writing down stuff, taking notes, all of that, and you don’t know who she is. So you have to be careful. You have to be very careful.

Seven respondents reported that DCFS involvement in Woodlawn also caused tension among neighbors by generating gossip about families under agency supervision. Both children placed in foster care and their parents are subject to derision by neighbors.

Everybody talk, especially over in here, so, talking behind the backs, you could walk down the street and hear, “Oh girl, her kids got taken yesterday.” Now do you even know why her children got taken? (Regina, 29)

Kids gone or you see them mostly now with the old lady down the street or old lady in Calumet City, sometime be far away. Or with the mom and then you know now everybody know your business, because they know damn well your mama don't babysit. (Tiara, 24)

If they see [DCFS] taking your kids from their home, the other kids in the community get to talking and you know how people can be, so negative—"oh she got her kids taken." Yeah, so it's a big fact for the community. (Tamisha, 34)

Eight respondents reported that the common use of DCFS as a means of retaliation heightens the sense of suspicion among neighbors. They stated that frequently, residents falsely accused others of child abuse for the purpose of seeking retribution against them. "I think friends and neighbors would call out of spite or revenge, but I don't see people calling for any other reason," said Ida. Lauren stated, "If you did something wrong in the past and now you're trying to turn your life around and it could be somebody saying you did it [maltreated your child] just to get back at you." Aisha similarly reported, "My cousin had her children put in the DCFS out of jealousy because a friend called the DCFS on her."

According to Tiara, "I think personally that people are using DCFS as revenge now. They're revenging. You can argue with somebody, they call DCFS on you." She gave this illustration:

Teachers are even using it for revenge too. If you even went to school with these teachers and they made it all right in their career and now they're teaching in your community and your kid is one of their students, that if she didn't like you unknowingly all this time since high school . . . you got teachers that set you up at the end of the school year.

These respondents' sense that DCFS is commonly used as a means of problem solving and recrimination is a compelling sign of the agency's entrenchment in neighborhood culture. It suggests



that intense state supervision damages community relationships not only by creating distrust among neighbors but also by encouraging a destructive alternative to productive mechanisms for resolving neighborhood conflict.

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### **The Paradox of Neighborhood Involvement**

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Given their identification of family and community disruption caused by the concentration of DCFS supervision in Woodlawn, respondents might be expected to believe that DCFS is too involved in their neighborhood. Yet a majority—13—of the residents interviewed stated that DCFS should be *more* involved in Woodlawn. Moreover, four of the seven respondents who felt that DCFS was too involved in Woodlawn were service providers and not those receiving agency services. The key to this apparent contradiction lies in the agency's dual role as both investigator of and provider for neighborhood families (Pelton, 1997). Although respondents criticized the agency's damage to neighborhood relationships, they nevertheless recognized neighborhood reliance on DCFS to meet the material needs of its struggling families. These women saw a need for more DCFS involvement in their neighborhood for two reasons—to supply additional financial resources to families and to monitor foster homes better, mainly because of the negative effects of financial incentives for taking care of foster children.

#### ***DCFS as Financial Supporter of Families***

Seventeen respondents identified DCFS as an important economic resource for mothers, foster parents, and foster children. Angela, 27, who had been in foster care, explained,

They're doing a good job [in Woodlawn]. . . . Because it does help them out with their, you know, financial wise, pay bills and stuff like that, they help them out, they do give them money for keeping the kids too. . . . Because I

know the case workers are so nice because, like I said my husband, his mom had adopted kids and she get \$2,500 to the kids, a month alone.

Similarly, Tamisha praised the support DCFS offered when her teenaged friend's baby was hospitalized for radiator burns:

DCFS did tell her, if you find your own apartment, we'll pay your first month rent, your first month security. So that's a good thing. . . . I think they paying her rent up until she get 21, she's 18 now. . . . So it's a good advantage. She called me, she was like, "Well, they gonna pay my rent up for a whole year." So it's good.

Likewise, Francis reported that her daughter had a positive experience involving financial assistance:

You can get some [caseworkers] that will help you. They helped [my daughter] get an apartment, furniture, you know, everything they did. You have to know how to work these agencies. . . . She helped us with a lot of programs that a lot of people don't know about. You know, because a lot of workers won't tell you about the different programs that they have for you to help you. . . . A lot of people don't know that if you cooperate with them, they'll help you more.

Others described DCFS's financial role in less positive terms:

I would say the only people that's probably benefiting the most out of DCFS is the foster parents. That's it. And that's only because they getting a little financials that they do get, because they don't get anything. . . . They're not really helping no one over here. I'm serious. If they were helping these people over here, all these girls would have jobs. People would be moving outta here, using this as a stepping stone and not trying to pass these apartments [in the projects] down to their children. (Whitney)

I personally don't think they are helping anyone with the exception of money. I just would not go to DFCS for help.

There are more better ways we can help in our community and not just Woodlawn. (Noelle)

Most of the children DCFS removes from parents are placed with relatives. Kinship foster care is a significant source of financial support for relatives' care giving because foster care stipends are much larger than TANF benefits (Gibbs, Kasten, Bir, Duncan, & Hoover, 2006). As Wanda observed, "The only [positive impact of DCFS] that I can think about is the resources that they do provide children or grandparents or other family members who take in their family members." Pamela, 27, was grateful for the agency's financial support of the younger brother she adopted: "DCFS helped me out with him a lot. He don't have to sell no drugs, his money go completely on him. I give him all his money because it's his. DCFS is all right."

### *The Negative Impact of Financial Incentives*

Despite the gratitude for financial assistance expressed by some respondents, 10 respondents commented on the negative impact of financial incentives to become a foster parent. They claimed that foster parents often took poor care of children because they were in the business "just for the money." Estelle, a 45-year-old child care worker, complained,

I know people who . . . just used the children, you know, just 'cause they get paid, you know. I mean, you know, if you want a child, you take care of the child and you should want it from the heart instead of just because you get the money. I know it's a lot of people who are just using the children.

Aisha similarly observed,

A lot of people do it just for the money. A lot of people are taking these people's children for the money. Not that they care anything about the child. I know from my grandmother that sometimes that people do not care about the child as long as that check is rolling in every month, they will let the child stay there.

Francis, 48, whose daughter was the subject of a DCFS investigation, also questioned foster parents' motives:

Because foster people, they don't give a care about them kids. All they want is the money, you know. And then a lot of times you see foster kids with foster parents, and the kids look like some thrift store reject, you know. And you get money for these kids, ain't no way they should look like they look, you know.

Pamela similarly noted,

I mean that's what I think is real hard, to find them a right home because some of these people is money hungry. They probably just want to get the kid's check because it's probably so much money and I think yeah, I think it's best for them to find them a nice home. Don't just throw them off with just anybody. You have to basically really know them from front to back.

Paradoxically, respondents believed that DCFS should be more involved in foster homes both because some foster parents were interested only in the money and because the agency did not support foster parents enough. Beverly, who was involved with DCFS as both a foster child and the adoptive mother of her niece, expressed dual sentiments about the agency:

I don't think they're involved enough. Why? Because I believe that what they need to do before they even put children in other people's homes, relative or whoever. My thing is I think they need to observe the person's house, the person whose house they're going to put the children in, at least a month before. Why I say that, because a lot of people get these kids, they start this for the money, the kids are still being neglected, and I don't think DCFS is going out checking on them enough. . . .

There's another lady over here, she got her nephew and she was complaining about how they weren't sending her

no money, like \$80 she got. First she had one baby, she wasn't getting nothing for that baby. . . . You need money to take care of these kids. I'm not asking for a million dollars, but give me something to work with. And that kind of thing people have problems with, with the DCFS. The money thing.

### *Changing the Role of Child Welfare Agencies*

Although most respondents expressed the need for more DCFS involvement in Woodlawn, many made it clear that they preferred more financial support with less disruption of family relationships. Ten respondents condemned the agency's narrow role rooted in investigating families rather than helping them. Christina, Michelle, and Lauren, for example, wanted more family assistance but criticized its required linkage to investigation and child removal. As Christina put it,

I think they don't have to just come around when there's problems. They can come around and do different things in the community, whether it's talk to all the children at the nearest YMCA or anything. I mean the only time I know of DCFS coming around is if there's actually a problem. Like no one really knows about DCFS unless they know somebody that has a problem. They don't know them on good terms.

Michelle poignantly observed that the agency responded only to allegations of child abuse instead of family need:

The way I see it is that [people in Woodlawn] don't look like DCFS can really help them. Like I said, the advertisement, it just says abuse. If you being abused, this is the number you call, this is the only way you gonna get help. It doesn't say if I'm in need of counseling, or if I'm in need of my children don't have shoes, if I just can't provide groceries even though I may have seven kids, but I only get a hundred something dollars food stamps. And my work check only goes to bills. I can't feed eight of us all off a

hundred something dollar food stamps. So I'm saying, they don't know that DCFS can help them in a positive way. They only do negative things, they only take my children away. I think that is the big issue. I don't want to lose my children, so I'm not going to call DCFS for help because I only see them take away children.

Lauren expressed optimism about Woodlawn's ability to find less disruptive alternatives to DCFS involvement: "I hope, you know, that it get better and everybody can come together. Like I say, as one united we ain't gotta worry about shipping nobody nowhere."

Although most respondents expressed the need for increased DCFS support for families, seven respondents concluded that the risks posed by greater DCFS involvement outweighed any benefits families might reap.

Well, if DCFS did get [more] involved, I think it would be worse. . . . Because I mean, it's already bad. Then it would just get worse. . . . I mean, yeah, [DCFS] could support [parents] . . . to help them raise their kids right and do what's right for the kids. But DCFS, like I say, people tell me they ain't nothing to play with. . . . Like they will take your kids from you, in other words. (Cassie, 26)

Interesting to note is that most of the respondents who felt that DCFS was too involved in Woodlawn were service providers and not those receiving agency services.

These problems can be worked out in the community. These problems don't need their [DCFS] help other than in some extreme circumstances and families do need help with having money for support, but I wouldn't call. (Ida, child care provider)

I guess DCFS can help by doing preventive measures and helping people with resources to be better parents, but they would never do that even though I think it would be cheaper and beneficial in the long run. (Ella, therapist)

I believe DCFS is too involved. . . . Because I don't think they give families a chance. I don't think they give families a chance to help resolve some of the situation. I think they're too quick to react and too quick to pull families from homes. In a sense, to me, I think it's modern day slavery. (Pearl, counselor)

Anita, a case manager for a private agency stated, "I think my friends and family think there is too much DCFS involvement." She also observed, however, that the agency's intense presence in Woodlawn reflects residents' own requests: "I don't think Woodlawn is targeted. I mean DCFS responds to calls, so they are as involved in a community as much as people call. So someone in Woodlawn is calling."

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### **Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice**

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This study's findings may be used as a starting point to develop a new research agenda that investigates the community-level impact of racial disproportionality. A chief limitation of this study was its small sample size and qualitative methodology, which did not yield statistically significant or generalizable findings. In addition, this study's interview method provided only limited information about possible effects on residents' civic participation. The purpose of this study, however, was to identify key themes and issues that can be used to generate additional hypotheses and to construct comparative, ethnographic, and quantitative neighborhood studies. A quantitative study comparing civic participation in neighborhoods with varying rates of foster care placement, surveys of large, random samples of neighborhood residents, and ethnographic field work within neighborhoods would be useful for examining in greater depth the effects of intense agency involvement on neighborhood social dynamics and civic life.

The findings of this study also have important implications for policies and practices developed to address racial disproportionality. First, the respondents' identification of profound effects on

neighborhood relationships, norms, and conflict resolution shows that racial disproportionality has negative consequences that have not been measured and addressed by policymakers. Programs designed to reduce racial disparities in child welfare should include examination of the impact that intense agency involvement has on neighborhoods. This community-level impact provides added reason for states and localities to identify racial disproportionality as an urgent crisis and to resolve to eliminate it.

Second, this study shows that child welfare agencies are an increasingly vital source of public support for poor and low-income families, especially in African American neighborhoods. It is therefore critical that efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of children of color in foster care include programs that provide needed social services and economic assistance to their communities. The residents interviewed in this study made it clear that, although they wanted less disruption of family and neighborhood relationships, they also needed continued state support for neighborhood families. Finally, this study's findings reinforce community-based strategies that some states and localities have employed to address racial disproportionality (Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, 2006). It is important to make communities where agency involvement in concentrated central partners in developing policies and practices and to focus attention on community-building initiatives that expand the resources available to families. This study's findings also support proposals to reform child welfare agencies' dual function that ties services for families to investigation, coercion, and child removal. To end racial inequity and improve the welfare of all children, we need to transform the child welfare system into a community-based institution that generously and noncoercively supports families.

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