

The Politics of Racial Disproportionality

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To understand why black children are disproportionately represented in the U.S. child welfare system we should frame the relevant facts and policies in terms of a political question: How does child welfare policy in the United States historically and today reflect and reinforce the disadvantaged political status of African American families, including African American children? Although black children were disproportionately excluded from openly segregated child welfare services 100 years ago, by 2000 they made up the largest group of children in foster care. We must look both inside and outside the child welfare system to explain this metamorphosis. There are so many black children of color in foster care both because of racial inequities in U. S. society and because of racial biases in child welfare practices—not primarily racial bias by people who work in the system, but deeper injustices in the role the child welfare system plays in U. S. society.

Which harms to children are detected, identified as parental maltreatment rather than family deprivation, and considered reason for removing children are determined by inequities based on race, class, and gender. By attributing poor families' hardships to parental deficits and pathologies, the system hides their systemic causes, devalues disadvantaged children's bonds with their families, and prescribes therapeutic remedies and foster care rather than social change and services. The racial disparity in the child welfare system reflects a political choice to spend more money on out-of-home care and less on in-home services as the system began to serve fewer white children and more minority children. Since the 1970s, the number of children receiving child welfare services in their homes declined dramatically, while the foster care

population skyrocketed. The services black children need come at an onerous price: their parents must relinquish custody in exchange for state support needed to care for them. Moreover, the spatial concentration of state disruption and supervision of families in inner-city neighborhoods has damaging community-wide effects, violates the proper relationship between families and the government in a liberal democracy, and helps to garner support for the system as it stands – a system which disserves all families. If we understand racial disproportionality as a political issue, we see that a radical transformation is needed from a system that relies too much on punitive disruption of families to one that generously supports them.