

Examining African American fathers' involvement in permanency planning: An effort to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system

By: Tanya M. Coakley

Coakley, T.M. (2008). Examining African American fathers' involvement in permanency planning: An effort to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 407-417.

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Abstract:

Children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. In 2005 they comprised 53% of the 513,000 children in out-of-home placements in the United States [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2006). Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Retrieved on June 12, 2007 from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report 13.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report%2013.htm)]. On average, they stay in foster care longer than Caucasian children [Hill, R.B. (2006). Synthesis of research on disproportionality in child welfare: An update. Washington, D.C.: Casey—CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System. Retrieved April 11, 2007, from http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/pdfs/0226_CC_BobHillPaper_FINAL.pdf].

There is virtually no empirical research on African American fathers' involvement in permanency planning, which makes it difficult either to understand the relationships among fathers' involvement, agency practices, and children's permanency outcomes or to identify which types of efforts are most effective to involve African American fathers. This study examines the extent to which African American fathers' involvement in permanency planning influences children's placement outcomes using a secondary data analysis of 88 children's child welfare case records. Findings show that children were reunited with birth families more often and had shorter stays in foster care when their fathers were involved. This study contributes to the emerging research on fathers' involvement and explores agency practices that account for extended lengths of stay in foster care for children of color. Recommendations are provided for child welfare policy, practice, and research.

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Children of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. In 2005, there were 513,000 children in out-of-home placements in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2006). Of those, 53% were children of color: 32% were African American, 18% were Hispanic/Latino, and 3% were from other minority groups (DHHS, 2006). On average, children of color stay in foster care longer than Caucasian children (Hill, 2005 and Hill, 2006).

Recently, child welfare agencies across the nation have made innovative, though sporadic, programmatic changes in an effort actively to involve African American fathers in their children's permanency planning. This falls on the heels of growing community interest in how noncustodial¹ African American fathers' financial and emotional involvement affects children's development ([Johnson, 2002], [O'Donnell, 1999] and [O'Donnell, 2001]).

There is a shortage of empirical research on African American fathers' involvement in permanency planning, which makes it difficult to understand the relationships among fathers' involvement, agency practices, and children's permanency outcomes or to identify which types of interventions are most effective to involve African American fathers. A few qualitative studies, however, have begun to shed light on why African American fathers have not been involved. Some of the reasons lie with the fathers: their inability to provide financial support, incarceration, substance abuse, mental health problems, their bond with their children, or their relationship with the children's mothers. Others lie with child welfare agencies: policies and practices that do not take into account the impact of race-related social problems on fathers' willingness and capacity to contribute sufficiently to permanency planning efforts.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which African American fathers² involvement in permanency planning influences children's placement outcomes. The author hypothesizes that African American children who have been removed from their homes are reunited with their birth parents or placed with adoptive families sooner when their fathers are actively involved in the permanency case plan. The present study contributes to the emerging knowledge base on fathers' involvement and explores child welfare practices that account for extended lengths of stay in foster care for children of color. Recommendations are provided for child welfare policy, practice, and research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Involvement with child welfare agencies

Fathers' involvement is generally understood as participation in activities that support their children's development, such as financial support, childcare duties, communication, cooking, recreation, and transportation to various functions (Harris, 2002). According to Marsiglio (1995), children whose fathers are present in their lives are less likely to experience poor school performance, depression, and other psychosocial problems than those whose fathers are not involved. Researchers also found that positive relationships between mothers and fathers led to greater involvement from fathers (Curran, 2003 and Johnson, 2002), not only when their children were young but throughout their lives (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999).

The relationship between African American fathers and child welfare agencies is critical to how involved fathers become in permanency planning. The agencies' climate and practices often convey how open they are to working with fathers. If fathers do not feel comfortable, respected, or valued in their dealings with the child welfare system, then they might not choose to work with social workers toward permanency (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005).

By the same token, if social workers do not feel comfortable with fathers, then they are unlikely to involve fathers. Social workers' apprehension and unwillingness to work with fathers may be racially based or influenced by agency practices that are not culturally competent. According to

Leashore (1997), some Caucasian social workers spend less time working with African American fathers because of their negative perceptions about their race. This kind of discrimination is consistent with the disparities in how African American men are perceived and treated in the larger society compared to Caucasian men.

Using an experimental design, O'Donnell (2001) compared social work teams' practices with 241 children in kinship placements. He collected data from agency case records and questionnaires completed by social workers on their contact with fathers and on fathers' involvement over a 12-month period. Social workers reported that of the 132 one- and multiple-father households, 70% had never participated in case planning activities and 67% had never had a discussion with the social worker about obtaining custody of their children. Additionally, only 14% of the fathers actually took part in developing the written case plan.

In a similar study, O'Donnell (1999) conducted interviews with social workers from two child welfare agencies to assess the involvement of 74 African American fathers who had a total of 100 children placed in 91 kinship homes. The kinship families were randomly selected and then one child from each of those families was randomly selected for the study. Secondary data also were used to examine permanency outcomes. The findings show that social workers were unprepared to work with African American fathers because their agencies were not set up to include African American fathers in a useful way during the intake, assessment, and case planning. As a result, social workers did not regularly see fathers in person or make follow-up phone calls to them. In fact, they had more contact with the fathers' families than with the fathers.

O'Donnell's (1999) findings also suggest that fathers' behaviors influence social workers' views about involving them in permanency planning efforts. Social workers reported various challenges when they tried to involve fathers. Out of the 74 fathers, 49 (66%) experienced problems that hindered their ability to care for their children, most common among them drug abuse or alcoholism (55%), incarceration (26%), not cooperating with the agency (14%), inadequate housing (12%), and lack of interest in the child (12%).

The findings from the above studies are a basis for understanding the extent of challenges that are unique to African American fathers. Because of the underlying racial factors, these challenges warrant differential child welfare agency procedures to initiate and maintain African American fathers' involvement as well as to subsequently address the disproportionality of African American children in the child welfare system.

EFFORT TO REDUCE DISPROPORTIONALITY

Casey Family Programs, along with Casey—Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) Alliance for Racial Equity, launched a national campaign with select child welfare agencies to reduce the disproportionate numbers of children of color in the child welfare system (Hill, 2006). The Foundation selected Guilford County Department of Social Services (GCDSS)—Children's Division from North Carolina as one of the sites to conduct research and incorporate innovative programmatic changes toward that end (GCDSS, 2005).

The goal of GCDSS is to increase families' ability to keep their children safe and to promote permanent living arrangements for children with their own families. When it is not safe or possible for children to remain in their own homes, GCDSS ensures that children receive quality temporary care in licensed homes or facilities. The agency assumes custody and placement authority over children who have been adjudicated dependent, neglected, abused, undisciplined, or delinquent, and over those without parents or family members. In cases where children are placed in GCDSS custody, the agency strives to work with families toward reunification within one year, as mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. Children and families are linked to case management and treatment services as well as various community supports that could facilitate that process (GCDSS, 2005).

To ensure the safest and least restrictive placement options for children, GCDSS established a program called Team Decision Making (TDM). Team Decision making involves the input of parents, relatives, service providers, the Guardian ad Litem³, and substitute caregivers in case decisions about placement from the point of pre-petition until case termination. The three main goals of TDM are (a) to prevent children from entering custody, (b) to decrease the length of stay for children who must be placed in foster care, and (c) to increase reunifications with birth families. These goals and the Casey-CSSP disproportionality effort form the basis of the present study to examine how African American fathers' involvement influences children's permanency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and sample

This study analyzes secondary longitudinal data on children's permanency history and their fathers' involvement. The study was conducted from February 15, 2007 to May 2, 2007. Thirty child welfare agency records covering 88 children were selected from the Guilford County Department of Social Services Child Welfare Division using a nonrandom sampling method. Included in the study were case records from the Child Protective Services (CPS) and Foster Care Units from Greensboro and High Point North Carolina.

The GCDSS program manager and data analyst were primarily responsible for contacting the agency's records office, supervisors, and social workers to obtain closed records for fiscal year 2006 (October 1, 2005, to September 30, 2006). All of the case records were those of African American or biracial children with at least one African American parent. Study procedures were approved for exemption by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board.

Data collection

The present researcher collected data related to children and fathers from case records and a Microsoft Access file of select records from the *GCDSS One Case* database created by the data analyst. Accordingly, variables were selected to correspond with TDM points (pre-petition to case termination) and other variables were selected because of their relevance to permanency outcomes. A data collection tool developed by the present researcher was used to record, among other items, the occurrence of fathers' involvement during TDM time spans.

The main variable of interest, *involvement*, was based on social workers' case documentation that explicitly stated fathers' involvement or their compliance with the case plan. Fathers'

involvement was presumed when there was: (a) documentation of their presence during TDM points, (b) documentation regarding their productivity and contact with children, or (c) reference to their presence or productive actions in court documents. For instance, the court orders contained in the records include the names and roles of all parties involved with the case and present in court. Additionally, the court summaries include documented highlights of fathers' progress, if any, with the case plan.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software package. Frequencies were computed for demographic variables, such as *age*. Cross-tabulations and Chi-square analyses were used to examine the relationship between combinations of nominal and ordinal independent and dependent variables (e.g., involvement [yes = 1, no = 0]). Additionally, *t*-tests for independent groups were used for dichotomous independent variables and interval-level dependent variables. Pearson's *r* was also used to examine the correlation between two interval-level variables. Directional hypotheses were tested, with $\alpha = .05$. Results reported as statistically significant (i.e., $p < .05$) indicate that there is a significant relationship between the two or more variables and that, overall, the results are not due to chance.

Below GCDSS study results of children's demographics are compared to state, level (i.e., average for counties with similar size populations), and county data from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill statweb.unc.edu website. Data used from that website cover state fiscal year 2005–2006 (SFY05-06), which is the period from July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2006. This time frame was chosen to correspond with one full year of GCDSS study data from fiscal year 2006 (October 1, 2005–September 30, 2006).

RESULTS

Children's data

In the present GCDSS study, the 30 case records reviewed show that 88 children were involved in CPS or foster care. Children in this sample were either African American ($n = 87, 98.9\%$) or biracial ($n = 1, 1.1\%$) with a least one African American parent.

During SFY06, there were 24,597 substantiated reports of children who were in need of CPS or foster care services in North Carolina. Six hundred seventy-nine were from Guilford County for FY06 (statweb, 2007). Out of the 88 children in the GCDSS study sample, 43 (48.9%) were boys and 45 (51.1%) were girls. They ranged in age ($n = 49$) from 1.25 years to 19.33 years, with a mean age of 8.41 ($SD = 5.83$).

The children in the present study were either removed from their homes or involved with the child welfare system for the following reasons: neglect ($n = 50, 56.8\%$), parental drug problems ($n = 26, 29.5\%$), coping problems ($n = 13, 14.8\%$), inadequate housing ($n = 10, 11.4\%$), abandonment ($n = 8, 9.1\%$), child behavior problems ($n = 5, 5.7\%$), parental alcohol problems ($n = 4, 4.5\%$), physical abuse ($n = 3, 3.4\%$), and other issues ($n = 6, 6.6\%$). Responses usually included more than one category for each child.

The length of time children in the GCDSS study stayed in foster care ranged from 2 to 101 months, or 64 to 3,073 days. On average, children in this study stayed in foster care

25 months (757 days), which is comparatively higher than both the county cohort's median number of days ($N = 192$, $Mdn = 411$) and the state cohort's median number of days ($N = 6,085$, $Mdn = 373$). After foster care, the 88 children studied in the GCDSS study were placed as follows: with their mother ($n = 17$, 23.9%), father ($n = 10$, 14%), stepfather ($n = 1$, 1.4%), relative adoptive parent ($n = 9$, 12.7%), relative ($n = 3$, 4.2%), non-relative adoptive parent ($n = 17$, 23.9%), court-approved caretaker ($n = 3$, 4.2%), or other caretakers ($n = 11$, 15.5%), such as a worker from a residential facility. Missing data are not calculated or displayed in the graph (Fig. 1).

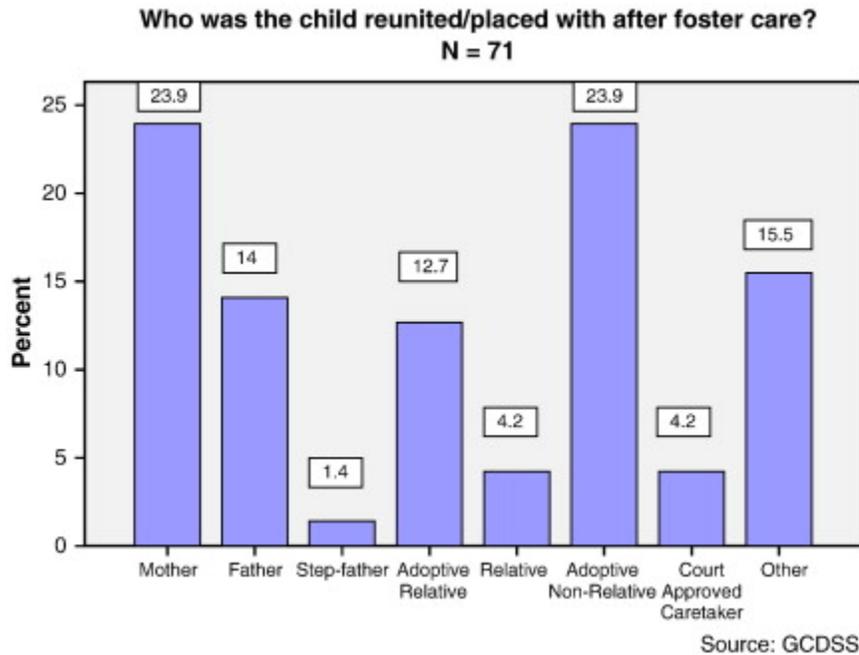


Fig. 1. Who was the child reunited/placed with after foster care?

Father data

Of the adult males named in the GCDSS study case records, 94.3% ($n = 83$) were the children's fathers, 2.3% ($n = 3$) were stepfathers, and 3.4% ($n = 2$) were the mothers' boyfriends. Data for some adult males are repeated to account for multiple children in the same family. All the fathers (that is, birth fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends) in the GCDSS study were African American, except for one, who was Hispanic/Latino. Again, some fathers are repeated in the data to account for multiple children.

While the majority of fathers did not enter into a case plan agreement ($n = 38$, 48.7%), some fathers did ($n = 22$, 28.2%). Cases in which fathers are deceased or children did not enter foster care are referred to as not applicable ($n = 17$, 21.8%). In addition, there was one unknown response (1.3%) (Fig. 2).

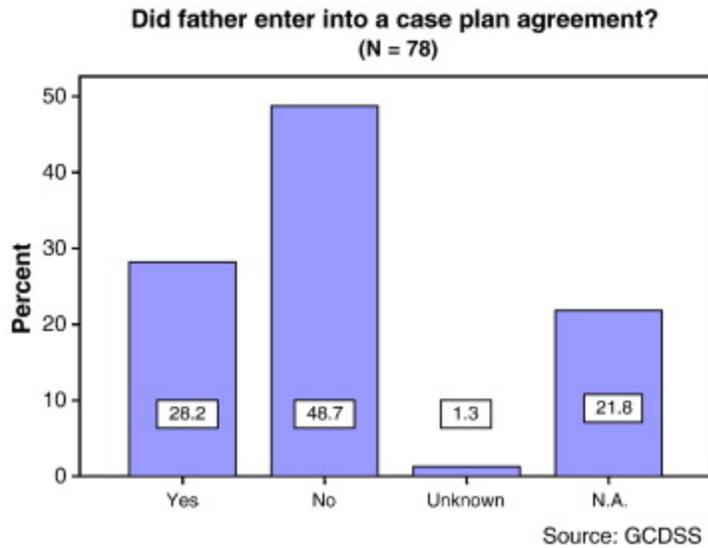


Fig. 2. Did father enter into a case plan agreement?

The majority of fathers in the study were not adequately involved with their children during foster care ($n = 50$, 61.7%). Seventeen were involved (21%). Again, cases in which fathers are deceased or children did not enter foster care are designated not applicable ($n = 13$, 16%). There was one unknown response (1.2%) (Fig. 3).

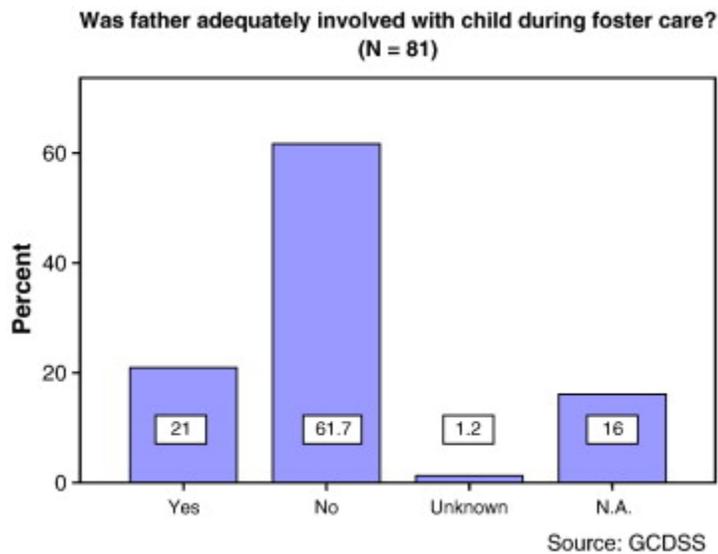


Fig. 3. Was father adequately involved with child during foster care?

Outcomes

When fathers were adequately involved with their children during foster care, children were placed with fathers in 17.5% of cases, versus never when the father was not involved.

Additionally, children whose fathers were involved versus those whose fathers were not involved were placed as follows: with mothers (0 vs. 24.6%), with stepfathers (0 vs. 1.8%), in relative adoptions (0 vs. 12.3%), with relatives (3.5 vs. 1.8%), in non-relative adoptions (5.3 vs. 22.8%),

in court-approved caretaker homes (0 vs. 5.3%), and other settings (1.8 vs. 3.5%). Results are statistically significant ($X^2 = 38.32$, $df = 7$, $N = 57$, $p = .000$).

Children whose fathers entered into a case plan ($N = 16$, $M = 23.88$, $SD = 10.01$) had shorter stays in foster care than those whose fathers did not enter into a case plan ($N = 21$, $M = 41.38$, $SD = 28.07$). These results are statistically significant ($t = -2.44$, $p = .020$).

Children whose fathers were adequately involved with them during foster care ($N = 10$, $M = 21.80$, $SD = 12.21$) had shorter stays in foster care than those whose fathers were not adequately involved with them during foster care ($N = 31$, $M = 35.10$, $SD = 24.95$). These results are statistically significant ($t = -2.24$, $p = .032$). Table 1 shows that there is no relationship between fathers' adequate involvement and the length of time it took to reunite children with mothers or fathers only. Additionally, the findings do not indicate that fathers' adequate involvement predicts whether or not the CPS case went to treatment or to foster care or was closed ($X^2 = 3.86$, $df = 2$, $N = 60$, $p = .145$), in part because of a considerable number of "unknown" responses (60%) that were due to missing data.

Table 1. Children's length of stay in foster care

Was the child reunited with mother or father?	Months in foster care mean (Std. Deviation)	F
Yes, father was adequately involved		
Yes, child was reunited with mother or father	15.00 (0.00)	3
No, father was not adequately involved		
Yes, child was reunited with mother or father	14.80 (10.62)	5
Yes, father was adequately involved		
No, child was not reunited with mother or father	28.00 (11.75)	6
No, father was not adequately involved		
No, child was not reunited with mother or father	39.76 (25.42)	25
Total	32.85 (23.27)	39

There was a statistically significant relationship between the number of siblings under a single case record and the length of children's stay in foster care ($r = .30$, $p = .036$). The number of children under one case record accounts for 9% of the variance in the length of stay in months. Additionally, the findings indicate that older children have longer stays in the foster care system.

Overall, fathers' involvement and their entering into a case plan favorably influenced various permanency outcomes. The findings support the main hypothesis of the present study, which is that African American children who have been removed from their homes are reunited with their birth families or placed with permanent families sooner when their fathers are actively involved

in the case plan. Additionally, children whose fathers were involved were placed with their birth mothers and fathers more frequently than children whose fathers were not involved. They also had shorter stays in foster care when their fathers entered into a case plan.

However, while fathers' involvement is related to how frequently children are reunited with their birth mothers and fathers, it is not related to how soon they are reunited with birth parents. Moreover, fathers' involvement is not related to whether children are placed with birth parents or in foster care immediately following a CPS substantiated report.

LIMITATIONS

The focus of this study is on African American fathers since African American children are overrepresented in the children welfare system. However, the sole use of case records for African American children and one biracial child in this study poses some limitations. It is not possible, for example, to determine if particular permanency issues are unique to African Americans or common for all father–child dyads, regardless of race. Including case records for children of all races and ethnicities would provide substantive information about the differences between the groups.

The use of multiple children with the same father from a single case record creates a further limitation. Some fathers were listed more than once to account for each of their children in custody. Their responses were not identical for each child in all instances, but this method resulted in an inflated number of father responses. In addition, the sample size of 30 complete case records with father and child information was likely too small to represent all characteristics of father–child dyads from FY06, and some data from the records for children and fathers were incomplete.

A future study might employ a random sampling method with a larger number of case records and then select only one child from each case record. That strategy would: (a) ensure a representative sample of child–father dyads, (b) make it possible to detect statistical significance in analyses, and (c) strengthen one's ability to generalize the findings beyond the sample. While the findings might have some limitations, they provide a helpful direction for practice, policy and research.

PRACTICE ISSUES

Involvement

Definition and measurement

Clearly, as the literature on fathers' involvement indicates, fathers' involvement encompasses a wide variety of behaviors and actions. However, in the case of the GCDSS case records, fathers' involvement in the child welfare system was primarily seen as their compliance with the case plan for children's permanency. Other types of involvement not outlined in the case plan, such as giving a birthday gift, were not considered adequate means of involvement. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, fathers' *adequate involvement* was defined and ultimately measured in terms of fathers' active participation in and compliance with the case plan. Defining involvement in this way was necessary for two reasons. First, this was how the agency based its decision either to continue working with the fathers or to move toward an alternative permanency plan that did not include the fathers. Second, in most cases the only ways to gauge information about

fathers' presence and actions were court orders and summaries that referred to the case plan agreements. Still, even these sources did not yield much information about fathers' involvement.

Case records also did not adequately summarize or rate the extent of conversations that social workers had with the birth fathers or family members about the birth fathers' whereabouts and intentions. This issue appears to be linked to agency procedures regarding initial efforts to contact fathers. Case records show that social workers used "reasonable efforts" via telephone, U.S. mail, and the newspapers to identify and locate birth fathers and eliminate other males named as possible birth fathers. Some of the original letters, however, were returned to GCDSS unopened. It is unclear whether fathers responded to the newspaper announcements. Inadequate father data limits our understanding of fathers' personal situations, strengths, needs, and the degree of their involvement.

Visitation

Interpretation and measurement

In the present study, it was difficult to glean specific information about fathers' visits and other interactions with their children because the case records contained limited references to fathers' actions outside of the GCDSS case plan activities. For instance, it was impossible to measure when and how often fathers had supervised and unsupervised visits with their children over the course of their stay in foster care, because the frequency of visits had not been tracked consistently.

In addition, there were some instances in which early court summaries documented that fathers visited their children while later summaries stated noncompliance with the case plan without specifying whether or not there was compliance with visitation. In order to address these issues for this study, data concerning fathers' visitation were measured at the nominal level (1 = "yes" or 2 = "no") and fathers received a score of 1 ("yes") to indicate that their visitations were sufficient only if there was no further documentation to the contrary in the court summaries or case records. When case record documentation indicated that fathers complied with visits but were noncompliant in other areas of the case plan, fathers received a score of 1 ("yes") for the variable *visitation*, but received a score of 2 ("no") for the variable *adequate involvement*.

Case plan

Compliance with case plan

The variable *entered into a case plan* is best interpreted as fathers' interest in the case plan or intentions to comply with the case plan. It does not imply fathers' actual compliance with the plan. This variable is measured at the nominal level (1 = "yes" or 2 = "no").

Findings from this study show that more fathers entered into a case plan than actually complied with one. These findings are consistent with other studies that describe fathers' waning participation during TDM activities and involvement interventions (e.g., O'Donnell, 1999). It may be that efforts to keep fathers motivated and supportive are needed at the beginning of fathers' child welfare contact while they are still interested in keeping their children out of the system and hopeful that they will have a useful role in their children's permanency plans.

Consequences of noncompliance

According to child welfare policy, fathers risk losing their parental rights when they do not comply with case plan goals. The rationale behind this policy is to promote children's well-being and permanence. However, this policy might also encourage biased practices that promote adoption over reunification with fathers.

The GCDSS study shows that for African American children in the child welfare system the second most common placement outcome after birth mothers is adoption (see Fig. 1). This finding is consistent with the steady rise in the number of adoptions in Guilford County and a steady decline in reunifications. Adoptive parents are screened, evaluated, and monitored for safety and quality before social workers consider placing children in their homes. As a result, adoptive parents present fewer problems to deal with than birth families, which makes placement with them easier and faster and therefore more conducive to achieving the 12-month permanency plan mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.

In contrast, the issues that birth parents must rectify before children can be placed with them are severe and often time-consuming. The findings show that after neglect, parental drug use is the most common reason why children are involved with the child welfare system (see Fig. 4). Treatment for and recovery from addiction is a lengthy process, yet drug use and other serious problems typically must be resolved or sufficiently managed within 12 months or else the plan moves towards “Relinquishing Parental Rights” (formerly “Termination of Parental Rights”). It is likely that the mandated time frame to complete case plan goals for serious and persistent problems contributes to increased adoptions as well as to premature placements with birth parents before they are able to maintain successful behaviors.

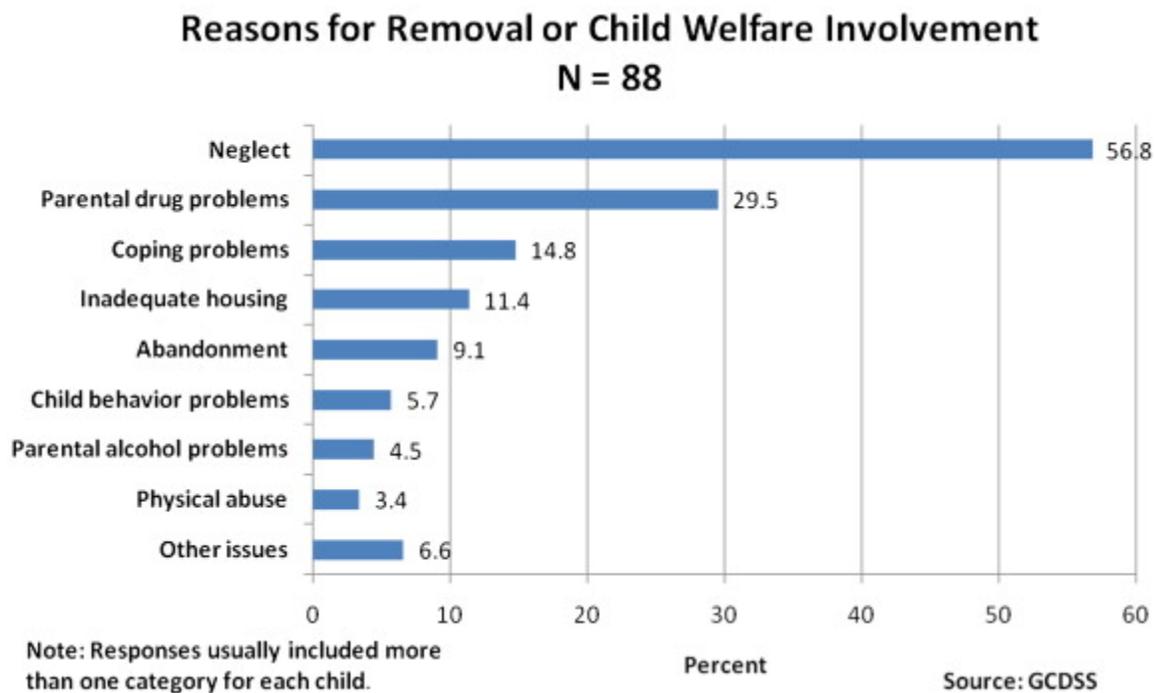


Fig. 4.

The GCDSS case records also indicate that fathers often relinquish their parental rights because they have not met the case plan goal to secure adequate housing for themselves and their children. Yet the case records do not specify whether these fathers lacked the resources to find adequate housing or whether they were unwilling to find adequate housing because they had no interest in having their children placed with them.

It should come as no surprise that African American fathers find it difficult to find adequate housing, given the well-established socioeconomic pressures⁴ that face African American males. That difficulty clearly has implications for father programs or the special services discussed earlier that strengthen African American fathers' ability to support their children.

On the other hand, some fathers choose not to live with their children. Whether this is because they prefer to assume the role of a noncustodial parent or because they prefer not to have contact with their children is unclear. The scope of the data in this study does not allow this researcher to draw conclusions. Certainly it is evident that fathers are initially interested in the permanency planning process, but for unknown reasons their progress is impeded or halted altogether. The differences between the two reasons for noncompliance—inability versus unwillingness—suggest a need to explore other acceptable, feasible ways that fathers can stay connected and contribute to their children's healthy development without necessarily living with them, as well as, most importantly, ways to avoid losing their parental rights due to socioeconomic factors beyond their control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that there were policy and agency procedures that limited social workers from fully involving fathers. Fathers and other male caregivers did not appear to be a viable resource for permanency, yet it was not evident that efforts had been made to understand and adequately address their needs. Child welfare agencies need to provide cultural competence training to social workers to work effectively with African American fathers with a special focus on racial and gender specific barriers. It is imperative to learn how African American fathers perceive the child welfare system and understand how they might interpret their role in their children's lives and its relevance to permanency. In cases where fathers cannot participate in permanency efforts because they are unknown, dead, in jail, or are not considered an appropriate resource for children, the agency can support surrogate males or other supportive adult male figures (e.g., grandfather or uncle) to become involved with children.

- In many of the cases reviewed for this study, fathers relinquished their parental rights because they could not fix multifaceted, multisystemic problems with underlying racial and societal causes in the relatively short time frame mandated by child welfare law. Child welfare agencies should therefore, examine the process by which fathers must relinquish parental rights because of racial and societal factors that put them at a disadvantage as well as their choice to remain a noncustodial father. Further, they can identify ways that fathers can be involved even though they have not met standards that dictate relinquishment of parental rights and apply these in cases where fathers desire to be involved and in cases that do not pose safety issues.

- In the case records, the documentation regarding fathers was of poorer quality than the documentation regarding mothers. Inadequate and inconsistent information about fathers led to difficulties understanding their personal situations, strengths, needs, and the extent of their involvement. To address those types of issues child welfare agencies need to establish a means to comprehensively track, assess, and monitor fathers and sociodemographic information as soon as families come in contact with the child welfare agency. Procedures also should be put in place to thoroughly document and validate various types of meaningful involvement, such as financial support, care-giving tasks, physical presence, emotional support, communication (in person, letters, e-mails, phone calls), and recreational involvement. Incorporating standardized measures would be efficient and effective ways to gather pertinent information from fathers on an ongoing basis.
- The lack of empirical knowledge on fathers' involvement makes it hard to know whether or not racially specific or culturally competent services have an effect on the disproportionate number of children of color in foster care (Courtney et al., 1996). Therefore, future studies should explore fathers' perceptions about barriers to their involvement and incorporate standardized measures to examine their involvement from the stages of pre-petition to termination.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest that fathers' involvement in permanency planning has the potential to help reduce the disproportionate number of children of color in foster care. However, securing African American fathers' involvement is much more complex than merely establishing a case plan and expecting compliance. African American fathers' involvement can be strengthened only by revising child welfare agency policies and practices to promote working with fathers in a culturally competent, strength-based manner. After a relationship built on respect and trust is established between the agency and fathers, further efforts can be made to learn about African American fathers' perceptions, motivation, and ability to provide safe, adequate care for their children.

¹Parents who do not have primary custody of their children or do not live with them full-time.

²In this study, “fathers” refer to adult males named in the case files as birth fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends.

³A court appointed volunteer to act as an advocate for children's rights.

⁴There is a vast amount of literature on socioeconomic issues that affect African American males, such as racism, oppression, and unemployment.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank Casey Alliance on Racial Equity, Guilford County Department of Social Services—Children's Division, Pamela Watkins, Mary Dowdell, Tyrona Ricks, and Marsha Wickliffe for their support.

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This study was funded by Casey Alliance on Racial Equity—Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) in an effort to address the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system.