RACIAL DISPARITIES IN CHILD WELFARE IN ONTARIO (CANADA) AND TRAINING ON ETHNOCULTURAL DIVERSITY: AN INNOVATIVE MIXED-METHODS STUDY


BACKGROUND

- Black youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system in Canada, which means that they are represented at higher rates in child welfare compared to their presence in the general population.
- In Ontario, Canada’s most populous province, the proportion of Black youth in care is 2.2 times higher than their proportion in the general youth population.
- Out-of-home placements have profound consequences on Black youth such as mental health struggles (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) and social difficulties (e.g., broken family relationships, school dropouts, criminalization).
- This study aimed to explore questions relating to child welfare caseworker’s training on ethnocultural diversity (i.e., differences in peoples’ cultural and racial backgrounds) in connection with the overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare in Ontario.

METHODS

- We recruited 15 caseworkers from a Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in Ontario and 9 Ontarian community facilitators to participate in focus groups on the reasons for the overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare.
- We also explored the presence of courses on ethnocultural diversity courses in the curricula of the 36 Ontarian colleges and universities offering social work programs.

CAS caseworkers provide services through the Children’s Aid Society, an institution which possesses the sole legal authority to protect youth who are at risk of experiencing or who are experiencing any form of abuse or neglect in Ontario.

Community facilitators are members of different community organizations (e.g., religious, cultural, educational) that help families navigate the CAS.
WHAT WE FOUND

What Community Facilitators Reported

• A lack of ethnocultural diversity training and competence among CAS caseworkers
  o CAS caseworkers work in a system that maintains and recreates racial disparities
  o Many CAS workers do not understand the cultures of those with whom they work, and they do not represent the communities they serve

• Ethnocultural diversity training should be mandatory at a university level
  o Regulatory and accrediting bodies for the social work professions should require universities and colleges to offer mandatory courses on cultural and racial issues.

What CAS Caseworkers Reported

• Inadequate training on ethnocultural diversity during and after college or university
  o CAS caseworkers would like to have better cultural competence to help them build trust with communities

• There is a lack of Black CAS caseworkers in Ontario
  o It is important to have an organization with diverse workers
  o Knowledge gained through lived experience could help improve services

• Learning through experience was reported as particularly important
  o Some caseworkers questioned the usefulness of ethnocultural diversity training, arguing that what they learn on the job may not be teachable in a formal setting
  o Other caseworkers believed training was important and that lived experience may not be enough to help all families

What We found On College and University Curriculums in Social Work

While Ontario is made up of 150 different ethno-cultural groups, of the 36 Ontario universities and colleges offering social work programs, only one in two programs had a mandatory course on cultural issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Efforts are needed to provide adequate training to child welfare caseworkers on ethnocultural diversity to tackle the overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare, starting with undergraduate training programs

• Governments in various Canadian provinces must act on the current lack of mandatory ethnocultural training and have a responsibility when it comes to the overrepresentation of Black youth in child welfare

• Universities and colleges must play a pioneering role in providing adequate training for caseworkers

• Child welfare agencies must commit to ensuring that all of their workers have adequate training on cultural and racial issues. They must also commit to providing ongoing training to their staff on antiracist and anti-oppressive practices.
The Vulnerability, Trauma, Resilience and Culture Research Laboratory (V-TRaC) directed by Dr. Jude Mary Cénat is pursuing a research program in youth and adults. The V-TRaC lab has three main research axes: (1) Vulnerability and trauma, (2) Racial disparities in health and social services, (3) and Global mental health. Their research aims to develop culturally appropriate assessment, prevention, and intervention tools that meet the real needs of individuals and communities.

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