RECOMMENDATIONS BOOKLET N°1

RECOMMENDATIONS

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE RACIAL DISPARITIES IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES IN ONTARIO

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Financed by: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
Racial disparities and the overrepresentation of Black children in child welfare in Ontario and Canada have been widely observed for years. Black communities, however, have waited a long time for solutions to address this major issue. Despite the observations and initiatives in recent years, few evidence-based solutions have been developed, let alone implemented, in the child welfare system.

This recommendation booklet is part of the project "Racial Disparities and Overrepresentation of Black Children and Adolescents in Child Welfare Care: Understanding for Better Action". This project is being conducted by the Vulnerability, Trauma, Resilience and Culture research laboratory at the University of Ottawa, in partnership with various community organizations and institutions involved in child welfare. It aims to develop and inform tools to prevent racial disparities and the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system. This first evidence-based booklet presents recommendations from the publications developed as part of this project.

These articles are based on research findings from child welfare caseworkers, community facilitators, and a systematic review of the literature. They have been published in top child welfare
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Even though there are at least 150 different cultural groups in Ontario, only 19 of the province's 36 social work programs offer a mandatory course on cultural issues experienced by racialized communities. Colleges and universities in Ontario and across Canada must ensure that all social work graduates have taken at least one course addressing the issues faced by racialized people in Canada. Training should address matters related to racial prejudice, racial discrimination and disparities, as well as systemic, institutional and interpersonal racism present in the Children’s Aid Society (CAS). It should also address strategies and practices used to eliminate them. These courses must also be evaluated. In the spirit of social accountability, universities should invite their alumni to respond to surveys to learn how training on these issues is helping them in their daily practice. Evaluating the impact of the training could also help universities learn about the emerging issues faced by professionals working in these communities. The Department of Families, the Canadian Association of Social Workers, and the Canadian Association for Social Work Education should not accredit a social work program that does not offer a mandatory cultural, antiracist, and anti-oppressive intervention course to its trainees. Each program must also provide a plan to evaluate the impact of the training on the practice of their alumni.
Recommendation 2

All Ontario and Canadian colleges and universities must offer a course for students in elementary and secondary schools on antiracist and anti-oppressive practices and racial issues.

Teachers tend to report children from racialized communities more quickly than other children to CASs. Reasons for reporting Black children are often based on stereotypes, conscious and unconscious biases, lack of knowledge of cultural issues and practices, and racial discrimination. Training on issues faced by racialized people, both in educational and other social settings, should also be offered to prospective and current elementary and secondary school teachers. Such tools will serve to educate teachers, raise awareness on issues related to racial bias and discrimination, and reduce existing racial disparities found in rates of reporting to CASs. These courses will also help teachers be more effective in their teaching and take an antiracist approach that is appropriate for all students.
**Recommendation 3**

CASs must ensure that all workers who interact with youth or families, or who are part of the decision-making chain, have completed antiracism, anti-oppression, and cross-cultural training.

To reduce racial disparities and the over-representation of Black children in CASs, caseworkers must be sensitive to the experiences of racialized people and knowledgeable about culturally appropriate practices. All caseworkers should be appropriately trained on cultural issues related to intervention in CASs before they begin their work. If not, CASs should provide training to fill the knowledge gaps of each worker and ensure this knowledge base is kept up to date on the latest anti-oppressive and antiracist practices. CASs must assess the cultural competency of each worker hired, and offer a customized training program to address any gaps. It is also recommended that all workers be annually anonymously evaluated and that training programs be updated according to the results and needs expressed by workers in the evaluation. Having adequately trained advocates is a necessary condition for the implementation of any policy aimed at reducing racial disparities in the child welfare system.
Recommendation 4

CASs must provide ongoing training to their caseworkers on racial issues.

CASs must provide mandatory ongoing training for their caseworkers. Training in antiracist and anti-oppressive practices must be mandatory prior to employment and throughout the career of practitioners. Every professional should acquire appropriate and up-to-date knowledge of cross-cultural, antiracist and anti-oppressive interventions, as well as knowledge of the ethno-cultural diversity of the region in which they work. Raising awareness could help stakeholders engage in proactive antiracism, especially by being more educated about issues related to unconscious biases and systemic and institutional racism.
Recommendation 5

CASs must involve racialized communities in agencies by giving them real power.

All CASs should establish an advisory committee (bilingual English and French, if necessary) to bring together community facilitators, parents, and racialized researchers to be involved in the training of social workers and stakeholders. These individuals will be able to share their personal and community experiences with CAS caseworkers to provide better perspectives on adapting care for families. Some CAS caseworkers have never had a relationship with the racialized communities they serve. The experiential learning process—that is currently common practice within CASs—is often biased by prejudice and lack of knowledge of communities. While a meta-cultural approach may seem sufficient, it is important to get to know the communities to better assist them. Advisory committees should work on different levels, but mostly on real-life examples cases presented by stakeholders anonymously and confidentially. Caseworkers should take this opportunity to ask advisory committees to provide new perspectives that may not have been thought of previously by CAS's. It is important that this work is mandatory to avoid the principle of double jeopardy (i.e. prosecuting a person more than once for the same offense).
Recommendation 6

The impact and effectiveness of multicultural, antiracist, and anti-oppressive training should be continuously evaluated.

Training on multicultural, antiracist, and anti-oppressive practices offered by colleges, universities, and CAS's should be evaluated. These institutions should assess the effectiveness and impact of training on the attitudes and skills of caseworkers and trainees, as well as their impact on reducing existing racial disparities. Depending on the results of these evaluations, appropriate modifications should be made to the training. Training should be integrated into the daily operations of CAS's and should also be periodically evaluated. Training is counterproductive if it is not integrated into relationships with families and if it cannot be evaluated, as it perpetuates institutional racism and racial disparities.
Recommendation 7

CASs should hire more caseworkers from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds.

Hiring racially diverse individuals as social workers and advocates would better reflect the diverse backgrounds of the children and families served by the child welfare system. This is a key factor in developing better practices to address racial disparities, over-representation of Black children, racial bias, and discrimination. This effort needs to be made not only for caseworkers within the CAS but should also apply to the hiring of managers, judges, and other professionals involved in the child welfare system. In addition, academic institutions must be involved and set clear policies for recruiting, training, and retaining workers from diverse backgrounds.
Recommendation 8
CAS's should try to keep children in their home environment as much as possible.

Rather than removing children from the care of their guardian(s), children should remain in their home environment (as long as their well-being is ensured) to facilitate the integration of families into their communities. To achieve this, CASs should develop partnerships with community and faith-based organizations that can serve as a bridge between CAS's and families to build trust. This will help CAS caseworkers to work in a more peaceful, supportive, and non-confrontational manner. In addition, improving the relationship between families and CAS's may relieve parents of significant stress by offering them a sense of security. It could reassure parents that they can count on their community to help them make positive changes in their lives and environment to maximize their children’s well-being. An improved relationship could also help parents to be more informed about their rights, and the role of CAS's. Today, Black communities have a very poor perception of CAS's: to many, they are racist institutions whose role is to undermine the well-being of Black children and families. No serious plan to eliminate the over-representation of Black children in protective services can be implemented in the current atmosphere and in the face of great distrust in CAS's from Black families. Moreover, youth placements should be rare, if not exceptional, and should be the last resort rather than an automatic response when it comes to Black youth and parents living in poor neighbourhoods or with mental health and substance use issues.
Training and protocols should include self-assessments by caseworkers and stakeholders and should make these professionals aware of racial discrimination and its consequences. In addition, protocols should include the adoption of antiracist and anti-oppressive investigations and placement practises, as well as the establishment of a clear contract on racial issues in institutional practice, which must be signed by employees upon hiring. CASs should have clear procedures for dealing with racialized communities and a set of questions to consider when recognizing whether an intervention is anti-oppressive and antiracist. CASs should also have their caseworkers complete a form after each intervention to ensure anti-oppressive and antiracist practises are put in place. The Department of Families should establish a clear protocol for working with racialized communities. It should require each CAS to provide a biannual report on the implementation of antiracist and anti-oppressive practices and its impact in reducing racial disparities.
Recommendation 10

Policies to reduce racial disparities and the overall number of Black youths in CASs should encourage the development of parenting practice training modules.

This training could be used as a prevention tool in the community for parents and expecting parents, but also as a method of intervention for families facing crises or problems of neglect and abuse. For example, parents could receive a booklet at the hospital after the birth of their child regarding safe and effective discipline methods to use with children of different ages. This type of education could also address the topics of physical punishment and the legal and educational limitations of these methods.
Recommendation 11

The Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) and each CAS should develop a clear plan to eliminate racial disparities and over-representation of Black children over a 10-year period.

It is important that these jurisdictions all mandate the elimination of racial disparities and the over-representation of Black children over the next 10 years. A plan with annual goals should be adopted by the OACAS and each CAS. This plan should be drafted by a joint body including CASs, Black community organizations, Black parents, school boards, and public health. Progress should be evaluated annually, and the plan should be adjusted as needed. Only by adopting such a mandate and evaluating progress on a regular basis can CASs hope to see concrete changes.
Parental mental health is a key factor in the over-representation of Black children in the child welfare system. While many non-Black parents with mental health issues receive the services they need to regain the ability to care for their families, this is less often the case for Black parents with mental health issues. Lack of support and inaccessibility of mental health services prevent Black parents from regaining the ability to care for their children. As a result, these children remain in CAS care longer. Therefore, it is critical to help Black parents access adequate mental health care to help them overcome the psychological problems they may face.

Recommendation 12

Create a mental health care service for parents and families within the child welfare system.
Without actions that can profoundly change these structural factors, it will be difficult to eliminate racial disparities in the child welfare system. Addressing structural risk factors, while difficult to change, is more likely to eliminate racial disparities in child welfare systems in a sustainable way. Structural programs should be put in place to eradicate poverty in Black communities. These programs should seek to separate skin colour from socioeconomic status, as this accentuates unconscious racial bias. Special attention should be given to parents living in poverty, who may hold stigmatizing attitudes toward mental health services because of previously experienced racial discrimination. Protecting children also means supporting parents.
For more information


The V-TRaC Team working on the project

*Racial Disparities and Overrepresentation of Black Children and Adolescents in Child Welfare Care: Understanding for Better Action*

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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. Our research aims to develop culturally appropriate assessment, prevention, and intervention tools that meet the real needs of individuals and communities.

To cite this recommendation booklet: