Family Characteristics, Decision-making, and Case Managers in Florida

Anna Yelick, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND

There is an inherent responsibility of child welfare professionals to make sound decisions regarding suspected child maltreatment. It is important for child welfare professionals to make informed decisions, as those decisions can have significant consequences for the whole family. Non-clinically relevant factors, such as race and income, have influenced decision-making among child welfare professionals, arguably leading to a disproportionate number of minority children involved in the child welfare system. According to AFCARS, Black children make up a quarter of the children in the foster care system (24%), which is disproportionate to the number of Black children in the total population (14%).

Research suggests that this disparity is pervasive, permeating all levels of the system: reporting, investigating, reunification, and re-entry. The primary research question for the study was: how are the removal decisions of case managers affected by the family characteristics (family structure and race) for families involved with case management services?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a non-probability convenience sample to recruit 54 participants from several case management agencies throughout Florida. The survey was administered to each participant once, using a web-based software, Qualtrics, which distributed the survey and collected responses. This study utilized an experimental vignette methodology. A vignette is characterized as a short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation representing a systematic combination of characteristics to elicit a realistic, "true" decision. The construction of the vignette was based on recommendations by Taylor and Sieracki and colleagues. The Florida Safety Decision-making Methodology was consulted to ensure adequate information was presented to assess family functioning. In 2014, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) adopted the safety decision-making methodology, which incorporated the Family Functioning Assessment (FFA). The FFA assesses safety within the home to help identify appropriate recommendations and services. The FFA is used for initial investigations and ongoing cases to assess any threats that result in an unsafe environment for the child. The vignette for this study described a scenario of a family investigated for child maltreatment, with the child's family structure as the primary independent variable: 1) two-parent family, or 2) single-parent family; and race a second, moderating variable: 1) Black (Non-Hispanic) family; or 2) White (Non-Hispanic) family. This 2 x 2 factorial survey design was developed using a single vignette with two experimentally manipulated variables randomly assigned to each participant. There were three dependent variables utilized: 1) the FFA Safety Decision (safe or unsafe); 2) the FFA Caregiving Protective Capacity (sufficient or insufficient); and 3) the removal recommendation (in-home services or out-of-home services). There were two groups of confounding variables collected: professional experience and personal factors.

KEY FINDINGS

The overall findings of this study suggest that family structure may contribute to biased removal decisions, a result that is amplified by race. The findings point to White, single parent households as being at risk of receiving a removal recommendation, even when the safety decision—used as a mediating variable—was safe.

**Family Structure and Removal Decision**

To examine the relationship between family structure and removal decision, a chi-square analysis and logistic regression were utilized.

The results of the chi-square analysis yielded a statistically non-significant p-value ($\chi^2 = 3.47, p = .06, d = 1$); however, the Cramer’s Phi indicated a medium effect ($\phi = .25$), suggesting the data may trend toward family structure influencing the removal decisions of case managers.

The 2 x 2 tabulations table indicated that for respondents who selected an out-of-home removal decision ($n = 14$), 71.4 percent viewed the single parent vignette. Using a logistic regression model to examine the mediating effect of the safety decision, the relationship between family structure and removal decisions became significant ($p < .05$), with over a .50 probability of recommending out-of-home services for children said to be from single parent families when the safety decision was safe.

**Racial Composition and Removal Decision**

To examine the relationship between racial composition and removal decision, a chi-square analysis and logistic regression were utilized. The chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 1.170, p > .2, d = 1$) indicated there was not a statistical difference in the removal decisions of case managers based on race. Additionally, the Cramer’s Phi indicated a small effect ($\phi = .147$), indicating that racial composition was not clinically significant either.

The logistic regression also yielded non-significant results when examining the effects of the safety decision on the relationship between racial composition and removal decision in the mediated model ($p = .22$).

**The Interaction of Family Structure and Racial Composition and Removal Decision**

Finally, to examine the relationship between the interaction of family structure and racial composition and removal decision, a chi-square analysis and logistic regression were utilized. The chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 4.432, p > .2, d = 3$) indicated there was not a statistical difference in the removal decisions of case managers based on the interaction of family structure and race. The Cramer’s V approached a medium effect ($\phi = .286$), indicating the data may trend toward a relationship between removal decision and the interaction of family structure and racial composition. The 4 x 2 tabulations table indicated that of the 14 respondents who identified an out-of-home removal decision, 50 percent ($n = 7$) had viewed the vignette describing a White single parent family, a proportion much greater than the other vignette.
types (White two-parent = 14.3%, 

- Black two-parent = 14.3%, 

- Black single parent = 21.4%, 

n = 3). Furthermore, of the respondents who viewed the White single parent vignette (n = 16), 43.8 percent (n = 7) selected an out-of-home removal decision, a greater proportion than the other types (White two-parent [n = 12] = 16.7%, 

- Black two-parent [n = 15] = 13.3%, 

n = 2; Black single parent [n = 11] = 27.3%, 

n = 3). The logistic regression analysis for the mediated model, with safety decision mediating the relationship, the White, single parent vignette resulted in a significant p-value (O.R. = 2.394, p < .05) with a probability of having a removal decision at .99 for respondents who viewed the White, single parent vignette even though the safety decision was safe.

DISCUSSION

While the relationship between removal decisions and safety decisions was not a primary focus of this study, given the practice model, it was examined during the bivariate analysis stage. The results indicate that a statistically significant difference occurred between the safety decisions of case managers and removal decisions of case managers (p-value < .05, $\varphi = .316$). This was a surprising result as the practice model used within the Florida child welfare system states, “Florida’s practice model includes the expectation that when children are safe…affirmative outreach and efforts will be provided to engage families in family support services…” (p 1-2),$^{11}$ indicating that when a safety decision results in a “safe” outcome, the child should remain in the home. CFP 170-1 further advises “When children are determined to be unsafe, safety management and case planning is non-negotiable” (p 1-2)$^{11}$ suggesting that the safety determination should inform the removal decisions, with safe decisions resulting in services provided to the family and unsafe decisions resulting in children being removed from the home. Given the results, which potentially have clinical significance even with a small sample size and underpowered analysis, this relationship needs to be further explored as the practice model is used as the structured decision-making tool in the child welfare system in Florida and therefore, should reduce biases and decisions based on heuristics. Additionally, the results become statistically significant when safety decision acts as a mediating variable among two of the relationships examined: the relationship between family structure and removal decision; and the relationship between the interaction of family structure and race and removal decision. These results are contradictory to the safety methodology. This could point to the need to further explore how case managers make decisions and what aspects of the safety assessment are utilized when recommending out-of-home services. The results from this study provide some insight into the intersectionality of diversity. While more research is needed in this area, the data point to a possible greater understanding into decision-making: that biased decision-making does not just occur because the family is non-White, but because the family is non-White and is headed by a single parent. As with studies examining income and race factors related to decision-making,$^{15,18}$ biases may occur because the family is experiencing multi-layered discrimination based on race, family structure, and income.$^{14}$ It is likely that the decision-making process will never be perfect because of human error;$^{16,17,18}$ however, that is what makes decision-making research so valuable—providing on-going assessments to ensure the safety and well-being of both children and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three primary recommendations based on this study.

1) Given that the practice model should be used as a guide in the decision-making process, the first practice recommendation is additional training on the use of the practice model, specifically the safety decisions and the subsequent removal decisions when examining an ambiguous risk case.

2) Disparity within the child welfare field is still a considerable concern, particularly in Florida with current numbers suggesting Black children are still disproportionately more likely to be in foster care compared to White children.$^{19}$ The second practice recommendation is cultural sensitivity training regarding non-White families and the often-multiple levels of discrimination these families face.$^{20}$

3) Research on decision-making highlights the use of heuristics. Heuristics are utilized during the decision-making process as a method to fill in missing pieces of information.$^{21}$ Heuristics are prone to biases;$^{22}$ therefore, the third recommendation is training on the use of heuristics in the decision-making process and how to use heuristics to complete gaps in information without increasing biased decision-making.

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$^{19}$ Washington. DC: NASW Press.
