

Understanding Racial Disproportionality in Finding Permanent Homes for African-American Children in Out-of-Home Care: A Study of Subsidized Guardianship

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INTRODUCTION

This research explores subsidized guardianship as a strategy for reducing disparities in permanency outcomes for Black children in foster care. Currently, Black children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and remain in foster care for longer periods of time than White children.

What is Subsidized Guardianship?

Guardianship is when an adult who is not the birthparent assumes the permanent care of a child. Typically, guardians are grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other relatives. Usually, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) provides a financial subsidy to a relative or licensed foster home willing to assume guardianship. The court must approve guardianship and retains jurisdiction over the child's case. Guardians provide day-to-day care and make medical, educational, and other major decisions for the child. In Illinois, subsidized guardianship can last until the child turns 21.

Why Subsidized Guardianship?

Guardianship is a family-centered option for a permanent home for children in foster care. Unlike adoption, guardianship does not require termination of birthparents' rights. This option can support ongoing connection with birthparents and kin caregivers.

AIM

This research aims to support better permanency outcomes for youth in care, with an emphasis on closing permanency outcome disparities for Black youth, by building knowledge about subsidized guardianship.

Research questions:

1. What values, principles, and practices do professionals apply to choose between adoption and guardianship for children and youth in foster care?
2. What factors facilitate and inhibit the use of subsidized guardianship?
3. What are caregivers' views about guardianship and adoption? What is their experience with agencies on permanency planning?
4. How does the race of children and their families affect permanency decision-making and planning?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

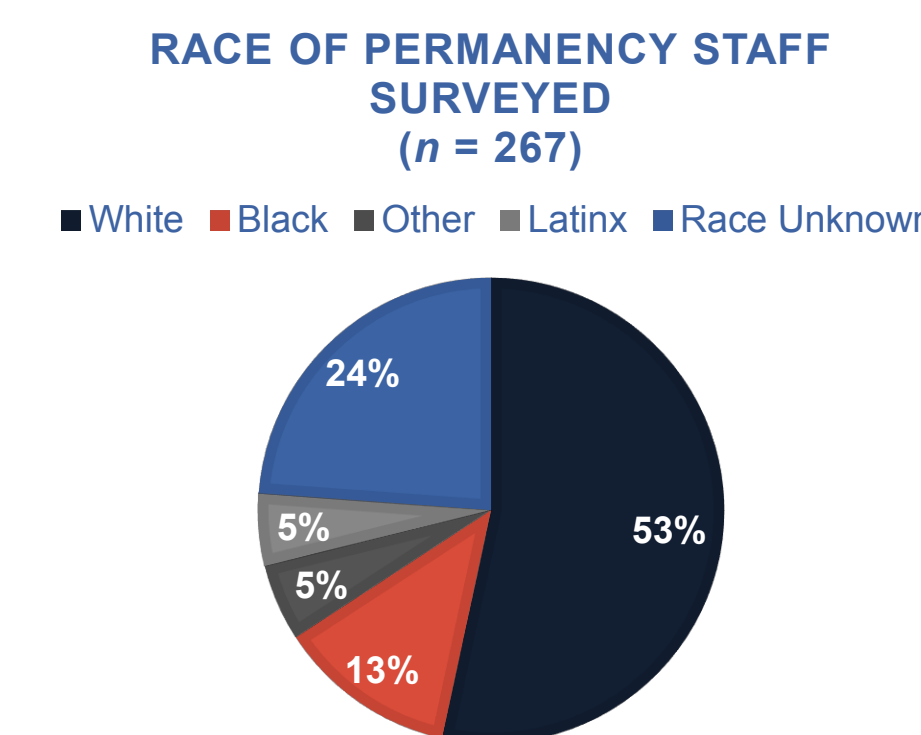
The research team extends gratitude to the caregivers and professionals who contributed their time and insight to this study. We are thankful to the Office of Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for sponsoring this research. We also appreciate the support and guidance we have received from our advisory board and Illinois DCFS.

METHOD

This mixed methods project gathered data from five stakeholder groups (permanency caseworkers and supervisors, DCFS attorneys, guardians ad litem, judges, and relative/fictive kin caregivers of Black children) on the values, principles, and practices the stakeholders apply or experience in permanency planning and decision-making for children in foster care. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and online surveys.

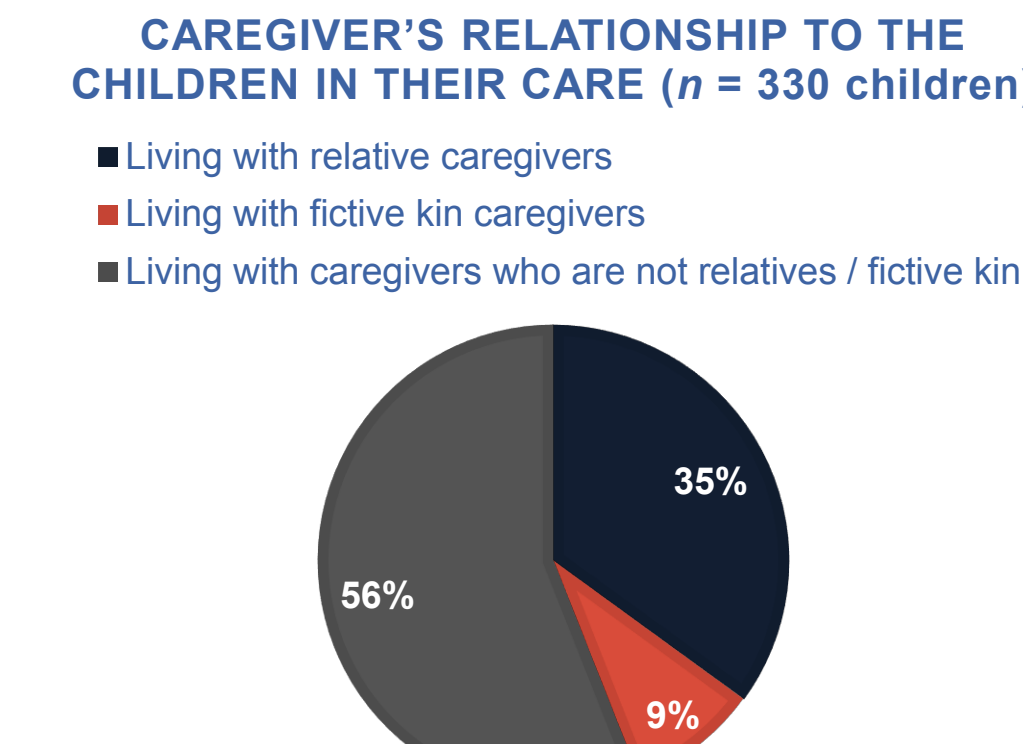
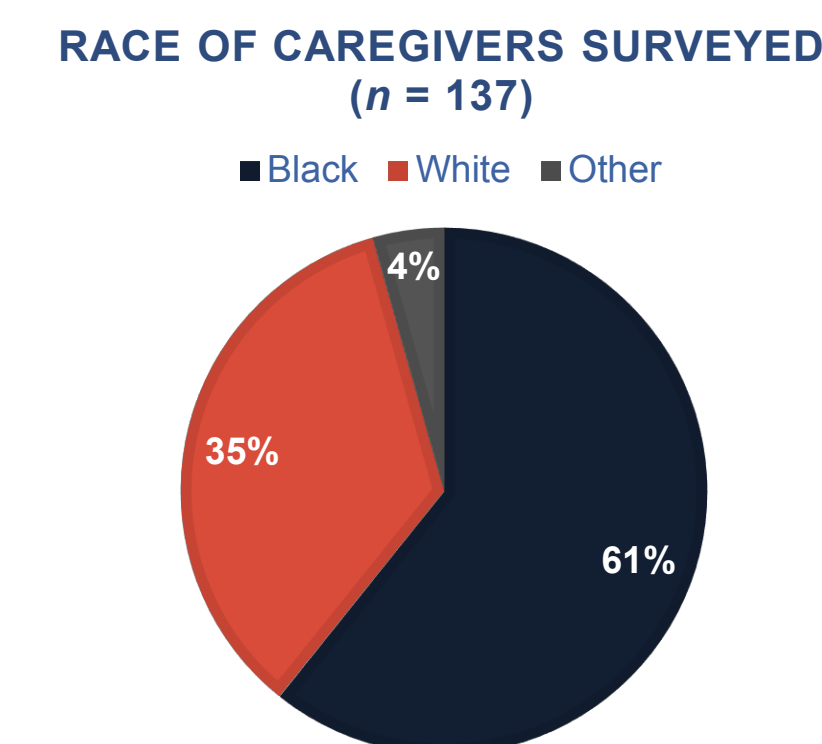
PERMANENCY PROFESSIONALS

1. **Interviews** with 39 Illinois professionals working on permanency cases. Includes: 13 permanency supervisors, 11 permanency caseworkers, 5 DCFS attorneys, 5 guardians ad litem, and 5 judges.
2. **Survey** of 267 permanency caseworkers and supervisors regarding guardianship and adoption (47% of the sample reported working in child welfare for 10+ years). Includes 158 caseworkers, 68 supervisors, and 41 other staff. Just over half, 52% were DCFS staff and 48% private agency staff.



CAREGIVERS

1. **Interviews** with 11 kin and fictive kin caregivers caring for Black children. Nine of the caregivers were Black, and two were White.
2. **Survey** of 137 caregivers caring for at least one Black child with an adoption or guardianship goal. These caregivers shared their perceptions of the permanency process based on their experiences caring for 330 children, 93% of whom are Black.



FINDINGS FROM PERMANENCY PROFESSIONALS

1. **Interviews:** Below are several themes from interviews with permanency professionals (n = 24).

Themes regarding valuing adoption or guardianship:

- **Staff Reluctant to Generalize or See No Difference in Outcomes Between Adoption and Guardianship:** Many participants felt that the value of adoption and guardianship depended on the case and had no overall preference.
- **Staff View Adoption as More Permanent than Guardianship:** Some participants felt that the permanent commitment of adoptive parents and the relative ease of ending a guardianship meant that children in guardian homes were more likely to return to foster care.
- **Staff Express Concerns about Future Problems with Birthparents and Families:** Some professionals thought that birthparents' involvement in guardianships might place children in unsafe or difficult situations.

Themes regarding selecting guardianship:

- **Age of Child(ren) Influences Permanency Decisions:** Older youth were often considered more appropriate for guardianship because of their ties to birthparents and their wish not to terminate parental rights.
- **Guardians Have Commitment to Existing Family Roles:** Grandmothers, uncles, or aunts who cared for these youth wanted to maintain their family roles and not take over parental rights or become "Mom" or "Dad."
- **Guardianship Helpful Option in Cases Where Birthparents Show Potential for Change:** Several caseworkers saw value in guardianship when birthparents were working on changes to make future reunification possible.
- **Understanding of Disadvantages to Children of Terminating Parental Rights:** Many professionals recognized that terminating parents' rights is not always in the best interest of the child, even when reunification is not possible.
- **Guardianship Engages Extended Family of Black Children, Which Improves Their Wellbeing:** Guardianship fits with a tradition in Black families of support from extended family to deal with the effects of racism.

2. **Survey:** Below are several themes from surveys of permanency professionals (n = 267).

Substantial proportions of caseworkers/supervisors reported no preference for adoption or guardianship, indicating that the best option for permanency depends on the specifics of each child's case. Preferences varied by outcome. For example, permanency staff tended to endorse adoption with respect to assuring child(ren) are placed in a permanent home; and favoured guardianship with respect to maintaining the child's relationship with birthparents.

Top three items based on the percentage of all survey respondents:

Perceived factors contributing to race differences in permanency outcomes:

1. Black families are more likely to experience challenges advocating for their child(ren) and family.
2. Many Black families have more difficulty meeting the requirements for guardianship subsidies.
3. Black families are more likely to favor guardianship over adoption.

Perceived differences in permanency planning with Black children and families as compared to White children and families:

1. Children are more likely to be reunified in White families than in comparable Black families.
2. Children are reunified more quickly in White families than in comparable Black families.
3. The courts give Black birth families less time than White families before terminating parental rights.

FINDINGS FROM CAREGIVERS

Many themes arose from the caregiver interviews and surveys; a few are shared below.

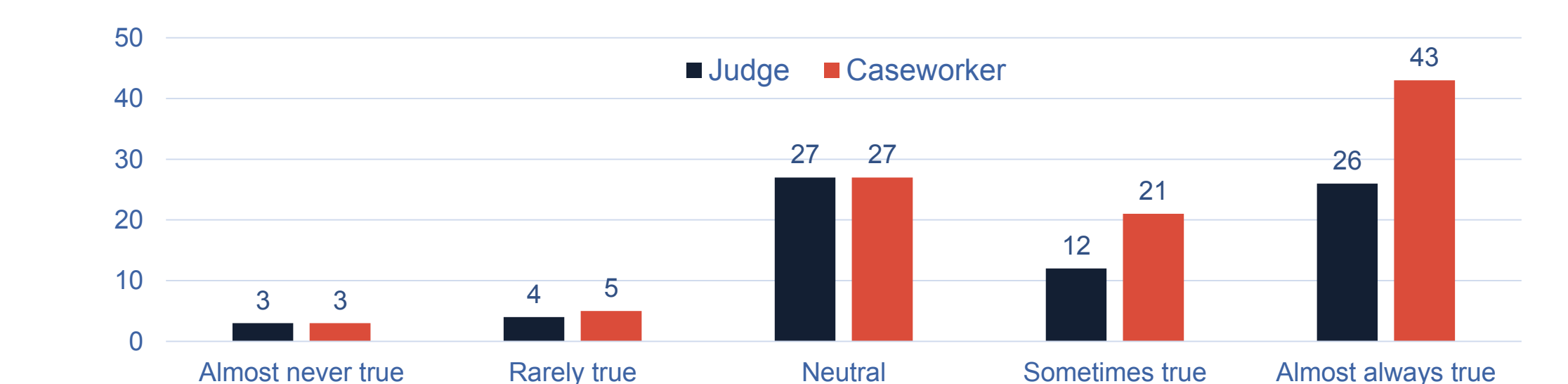
1. **Interviews (n = 11)**

- Caregivers expressed concern about: 1) the length of the permanency planning process, 2) turnover of casework staff, 3) caseworkers who are not fully knowledgeable, and 4) inappropriate caseworker practices.
- Caregivers who chose guardianship were protecting family relationships, allowing for the possibility that the birthparent(s) may become able to parent again, and responding to youths' preference for guardianship instead of adoption.
- Caregivers who chose guardianship were not tentative and appear committed to caring for the children through early adulthood.
- Two Black kin caregivers struggled to have their relative children placed with them rather than in traditional foster homes.
- Poor communication from caseworkers led to holes in caregiver knowledge about their permanency planning. For over a quarter of caregivers interviewed (27%), guardianship was not explained or offered as an option.
- Most caregivers have ongoing communication with birthparents and support children's relationships with their birthparents, whether there was guardianship or adoption.

2. **Survey (n = 137)**

Eight percent of caregivers felt that they, their families, or the child's birthparents were treated unfairly due to race by someone involved with their placement with DCFS.

Most caregivers perceived that caseworkers' and judges' approach to working with Black family members is culturally appropriate.



Caregivers identified the need for the following supports to improve outcomes for Black youth:

- Caregiver peer support,
- Support for dealing with experiences of racism towards caregivers and children,
- Training on issues specific to raising Black youth,
- Coaching on culturally relevant parenting strategies, and
- Support in maintaining ties to the child's culture and community.

IMPLICATIONS

- **Permanency planning and decision-making are most effective when tailored to each child and family's circumstances.** This individualization requires a substantial investment in permanency staff learning about child and family and use of this knowledge to advocate for them in court.
- **Multiple communications strategies and implementation supports are needed to promote the use of subsidized guardianship** as an effective permanency option for children in care and encourage proactive support to respect Black family members as capable caregivers for Black children.
- Since Black permanency staff are more able to recognize factors contributing to racial disparities in permanency outcomes for Black children, and they represent a minority of Illinois' permanency staff, **more support is needed to strengthen and support Black professionals' voices and advocacy for Black children in care.**
- Additional **strategies are needed to strengthen the frequency and accuracy of DCFS and private agencies' communication with family members involved in permanency planning.**
- Since many Black caregivers felt they were not personally treated unfairly due to race, **strategies to address race disparities should focus on system changes** (e.g., increased support to help Black families advocate for their children and re-examination of the processes and requirements for guardianship subsidies).