

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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Project Significance



Black children have higher rates of involvement at multiple points in the child welfare system, including:

- Being involved in investigations of abuse or neglect
- Being placed into foster care
- Staying in foster care more than 3 years

Three Primary Permanency Options

Reunification

- Child returns to birthparent(s) – preferred when it is safe for child.

Adoption

- Adult (sometimes kin) assumes permanent care for child and gains all parental rights.

Guardianship

- Adult (usually kin) assumes permanent care, but birthparents retain some rights (e.g., visitation).



Comparison of Adoption and Guardianship

Adoption	Guardianship
Adoptive caregiver makes a binding commitment.	Guardian commits to be permanent caregiver.
Birthparents' rights are terminated.	Birthparents' rights do NOT need to be terminated.
Birthparents' visits are at the discretion of the adoptive caregiver – they can prevent visits.	Birthparents have a right to visit.
Birthparents CANNOT petition the court to regain custody.	Birthparents CAN petition the court to regain custody.
Youth aged 14 or older can veto an adoption.	Youth may prefer guardianship because they want their birthparents' rights to be protected.
Adoptive parents may be OK with being called Mom or Dad.	Guardian (usually grandma or aunt) often NOT OK with being called Mom or Dad.
Adoptive parents may want to keep birthparents away permanently.	Guardians may want the birthparents to get better and regain custody.

Research Questions

1. What values, principles, and practices do professionals apply to choosing 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?

Mixed Methods Research Design

Literature review

Permanency data analysis

Interviews with permanency professionals

Interviews with caregivers

Survey of permanency professionals

Survey of caregivers



Permanency Professionals Interviews

- 39 Illinois professionals working on permanency cases.
- Includes:
 - 13 permanency supervisors,
 - 11 permanency caseworkers,
 - 5 DCFS attorneys,
 - 5 guardians ad litem, and
 - 5 judges.



Highlighted Findings from Permanency Professionals – Interviews

Themes regarding selecting guardianship

1. Black family members do not want to take over title as "parent."

2. Black family members see potential for birthparents to change.

3. Staff understand **disadvantages** to children of terminating birthparents' rights.

4. Guardianship fits with tradition in Black families of support from **extended family**.

Permanency Professional Survey



- 267 permanency caseworkers and supervisors regarding guardianship and adoption
- Includes:
 - 158 caseworkers,
 - 68 supervisors, and
 - 41 other staff.
- 47% of the sample reported working in child welfare for 10+ years.

Highlighted Findings from Permanency Professionals - Surveys

Substantial proportions of caseworkers/supervisors reported that the best option for permanency depends on the specifics of each child's case.

Adoption somewhat more preferred for assuring child(ren) are placed in a permanent home, and guardianship for maintaining the child's relationship with birthparents.

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 than White families to favor guardianship over adoption.

Intro Caregiver Interviews



- Caregivers to at least one Black child with adoption or guardianship goal
- Interviews with 9 kin and 2 fictive kin caregivers of Black children.

Highlighted Findings from Caregivers – Interviews

1. Most caregivers have ongoing communication with birthparents and support children's relationships with their birthparents, whether there was guardianship or adoption.

2. 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 to adoption.

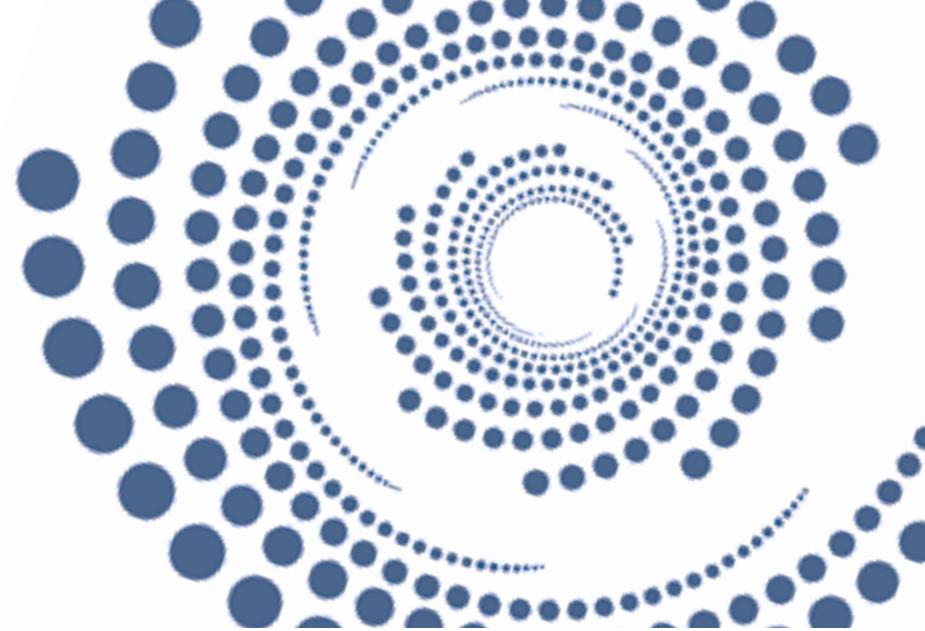
3. Caregivers who chose guardianship were not tentative and appear committed to caring for the children through early adulthood.

Highlighted Findings from Caregivers – Interviews - Continued

1. 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.

2. Poor communication from caseworkers led to holes in caregiver knowledge about their permanency planning.
For 3 of 11 caregivers interviewed, guardianship was not explained or offered as an option.

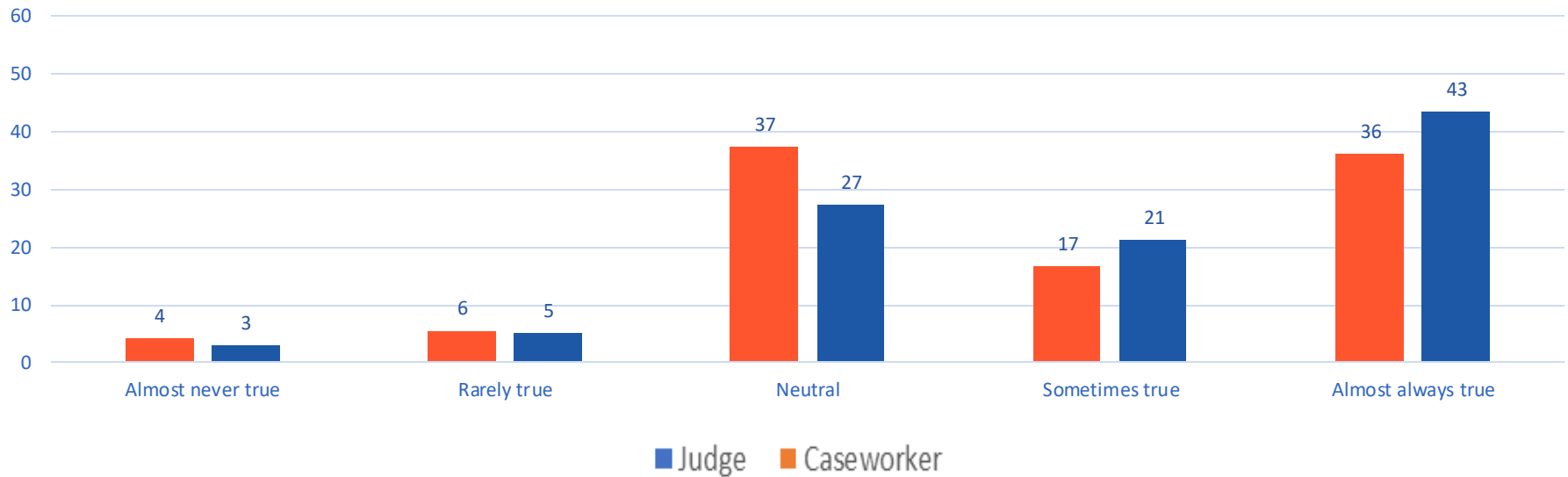
Intro Caregiver Survey



- Caregivers to at least one Black child with adoption or guardianship goal
- 137 caregivers completed the survey
- These caregivers shared their perceptions of the permanency process based on their experiences caring for 330 children, 93% of whom are Black.

Highlighted Preliminary Findings from Caregivers - Surveys

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



8% 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.



Some Implications for Building Robust System of Support for Permanency Planning

Guide permanency staff in tailoring permanency planning and decision-making to each child and family's circumstances.

Provide multiple communication strategies and supports to promote the use of subsidized guardianship.

Strengthen frequency and accuracy of DCFS' and private agencies' communication with family members in permanency planning.

Examine processes for completing guardianships, especially barriers for Black caregivers.

Some Implications for Reducing Race Disparities in Permanency Outcomes

Encourage proactive support to respect Black family members as capable caregivers of Black children.

Increase supports to elevate Black professionals' voices and advocacy for Black children in care.

Build out systemic change to address race disparities, e.g., more supports for Black families to advocate for their children.





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