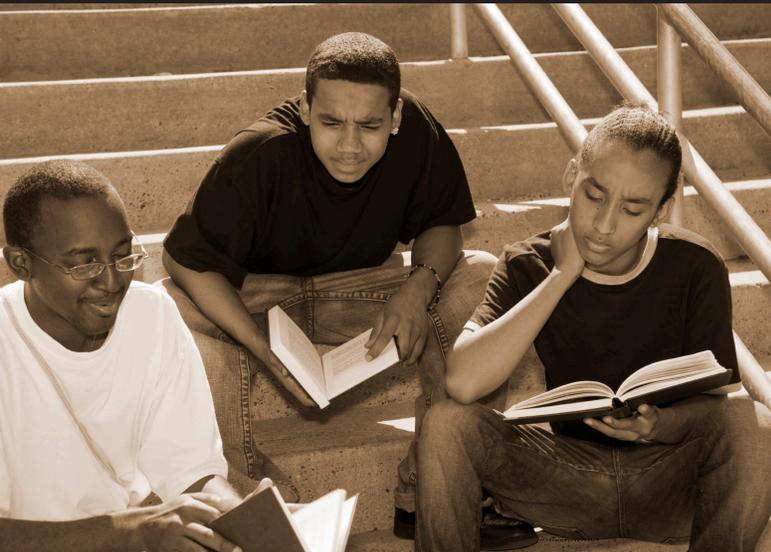


# CHANGING COURSE:

## Improving Outcomes for African American Males Involved with Child Welfare Systems

Authors: Oronde Miller, Frank Farrow, Judith Meltzer, Susan Notkin



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Center  
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## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper urges action on behalf of African American young men and boys who are involved with the nation's child welfare system. These young men's needs are urgent and often misunderstood. As a group they – and their peers involved with the juvenile justice and mental health systems – need to be recognized as attention is rightly turned to creating opportunities for the much larger group of young African American males in the population.

We argue that changed attitudes and high quality supports on behalf of the young men portrayed in this paper be given highest priority. The child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health systems can, at their best, offer the pivotal opportunities that help young males move along the pathway to education, employment and healthy family relationships. Conversely, if these systems are not effective, they can be way stations on the cradle-to-prison pipeline that blights too many futures.

This paper is a product of the national Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare. The Alliance is committed to improving outcomes for all children and families of color involved with child welfare systems. In that light, while not the focus of this paper, we also urge careful attention to the needs of young women involved with child welfare systems, for whom greatly expanded opportunities are equally important.

We thank The California Endowment and the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their support for this paper and for the Alliance. They have championed racial justice in many forms, early and consistently.

We also thank the many people whose bold thinking and actions contributed to this paper. We are especially indebted to the pioneering efforts, thoughts and careful review of our work by Rajah Gainey, Janice Gruendel, Brenden Hargett, Joyce James, Waldo E. Johnson, Lyman Legters, Erwin McEwen and Gregory Owens.



Frank Farrow  
Director  
Center for the Study of Social Policy

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**G**erald is a 17-year-old African American male who entered care when he was 12. He and his younger brother were removed from their mother's home late one night and placed in separate foster homes. Gerald has experienced six placements during his time in care, staying at one of two familiar group homes during each transition. Gerald maintains that he has never been told why he and his brother were removed from their mother's home and just wants to go back home. Gerald is unlikely to graduate from high school and there are no plans for his adoption as he continues to be moved toward emancipation from foster care, still with no understanding of why he cannot return home...

There is more to Gerald's story. But his situation and the challenging life outcomes affecting many African American men and boys involved with child welfare systems demand urgent action.

While attention has been given to documenting many aspects of the disparate experiences of African American males, relatively little attention has been given to African American boys and young men who are involved with the nation's child welfare systems. Even less attention has been given to identifying the policy and practice strategies that can help to improve experiences and outcomes among this highly vulnerable group.

This paper, produced with support from The California Endowment and the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of the broader work of the [Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare](#), begins to fill that gap.

Over the last year, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), which manages the Alliance, has reviewed data and research literature, talked to young African American men who are in – or had been in – foster care and identified initiatives and strategies that are showing promise.

This paper is a product of that work and is intended to:

- Summarize what we know about the situation of African American males involved with the child welfare system
- Outline an approach to more effective action to improve outcomes for these boys and young men
- Recommend specific steps that state and local public system leaders, policymakers and funders can begin to take *now* to move toward that goal

The report also highlights examples of agencies and interventions that have demonstrated success in engaging with and supporting improved outcomes for African American males.

### CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

The experiences of African American males in the child welfare system are similar to those of African American males within the broader society. They are more likely to attend underperforming schools, are at increased risk of entry into the juvenile justice system and are less likely to live in communities with opportunities and institutional investments that promote child and adolescent well-being (and thus successful preparation for adulthood). What distinguishes this group of African American males is that the child welfare system is *designed* to provide for their safety, permanence and well-being, yet it frequently fails them by not understanding and responding to their cumulative life experiences; especially the unique influences of race, racism and culture.

#### What the Data Tell Us

- African American males are over-represented in the foster care system. During 2012, the most recent year for which foster care data are publicly available, African American male children were 2.5 times more likely to be in foster care than their non-African American male peers. The foster care rate for African American male children is 10.73 (per 1,000) compared to 5.24 for all males.
- Adolescents (age 13-17) comprise the largest group of African American males in foster care. This contrasts with the age distribution for *all* children, which trended slightly younger.
- The placement experiences of African American males are troubling, with greater use of congregate care (21 percent in group homes and other institutional settings in 2010 compared with 15 percent of all children) and more frequent placement moves.
- Exit to permanent families is less likely for African American males than for other children.
- The percentage of African American males who “age out” of foster care each year has almost doubled during recent years, from seven percent in 2001 to approximately 13 percent during 2010. The rate of

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African American children “aging out” during 2010 was higher than that for children of all racial/ethnic groups combined. By the time African American males exit foster care, they’ve been in care longer than most of their peers, an average of 28 months compared to 22 months for all children.

### **In Their Own Words: What African American Males Tell Us About Their Experiences**

- Based on the experiences of the young men reflected in this paper who spent some portion of their lives in foster care, it’s clear that many did not know why they’d been removed from their parents’ homes or separated from their siblings, nor what would have to happen in order for them to return home. This, they acknowledge, contributed to their early anger, fear, lack of confidence in the professionals and others trying to help them and hesitance to accept their new placement in foster care.
- African American youth behavior has been identified as a major barrier to permanence, yet young men tell us that their behavior is often misunderstood and based on negative stereotypes that fail to account for the trauma in their lives.
- Counseling and therapy is of little interest and benefit to many African American youth, reflecting what some researchers describe as “cultural mistrust” between African American youth and many mental health professionals.
- For many of the African American youth whose experiences are reflected in this paper, their cumulative experiences in the child welfare system reinforced their isolation and their feeling that their presence was a burden to the professional adult figures to whom they were most closely connected. As one of the young men noted, “Everywhere I went, it felt like I was either ignored or I was a problem.”

### **AN APPROACH TO EFFECTIVE ACTION**

The full paper is designed to spur ideas, discussion and action among child welfare system leaders, organizations committed to this work and other partners working to improve outcomes for African American males. The framework outlined in the paper includes the important actions to be taken by child welfare agencies and their allies:

- Establishing an overarching organizational commitment to race equity that is embedded in the agency’s vision, mission, values and operations.
- Incorporating a focus on improving children’s cognitive, social and emotional well-being as well as economic and educational success and family stability as benchmarks for success.
- Understanding and responding to the complex ways in which structural racism shapes the experiences and well-being of African American males, including both implicit bias and explicit forms of racism.
- Implementing a developmentally appropriate practice strategy that is trauma-informed and reflects research about the protective and promotive factors that can help youth overcome adversity and thrive.
- Creating or strengthening partnerships between the child welfare agency and community groups, including schools, private organizations and advocates.
- Creating ways for the voices, aspirations and input of African American youth to be visible and influential in all aspects of programming and accountability.
- Reinforcing and sustaining the work by making permanent structural and systemic changes that include a results orientation, data collection and greater accountability, administrative infrastructure and human resource development.

### **WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NOW**

While we urgently need more knowledge about the interventions and strategies that are the most effective, we know enough for multiple stakeholders to take immediate action. Public systems leaders, private organizations, philanthropists and others can and must begin to bring about change now through the following priority actions:

- Gather, analyze and use additional information about the experiences and well-being of African American males involved with child welfare. We must examine and disaggregate data about child and family experiences by race, age and gender; conduct new research and continue to document the interventions and policy strategies that are effective.
- Develop and implement trauma-informed

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engagement strategies that respond to the unique experiences of African American males, including the influence of structural racism and structural violence on their developmental pathways.

- Adopt strategies for addressing systemic barriers to permanency and well-being for African American males, focusing on reunification whenever possible, and strategies that promote consistent and nurturing relationships with family members and kin while children and youth are in foster care.
- Engage the full range of system and community partners that collectively support the well-being needs of African American males. Implementing an approach to well-being for African American males necessitates the direct and active involvement of multiple child – and family – serving systems and organizations, including schools and institutions of higher education, employers and employment resources, juvenile and family courts, health and mental health professionals, among others.
- Invest in community-based supports that expand opportunities for African American males and their families. Foundations, the federal government and state and local policymakers should put resources into strategies that improve well-being and successful preparation for adulthood, especially education and employment and strategies that connect young men to lifelong families for African American males in foster care and those who are transitioning to independence.
- Create a formal community of learning and practice innovation focused on improving system responses to African American males and their families. A network of agencies and organizations committed to improving outcomes for African American males would support information sharing about effective system strategies and policies that promote responses to, and thus outcomes for, African American males involved with child welfare.
- Invest in strategic communications to reduce stereotypes held by various stakeholder groups and improve public perceptions about the experiences and potential of African American males.
- Link efforts undertaken on behalf of African American boys and young men involved with child welfare to the growing movement to improve life chances for African American boys and young men in many other spheres of life, such as health care, early care and education, grade-level reading, school success and employment, both nationally and in local areas. These linkages can help ensure that these vulnerable young men's lives are positively affected by initiatives such as My Brother's Keeper and other philanthropically-supported initiatives which focus on African American boys and young men.

## INTRODUCTION

The disparities affecting African American men and boys are increasingly visible and increasingly urgent. Equity gaps in education, criminal justice, health, socio-economic status and many other areas of community life are by now well documented. When viewed together, the patterns of disparity paint an alarming picture of diminished life chances for African American males, among other boys and men of color (Davis, Kilburn & Schultz, 2009). These inequities need not be inevitable and action to address them is imperative.

Much of the literature describing the experiences of African American men and boys has been deficit-focused, arguing that individual and cultural factors account for the inequities. There is a growing appreciation, however, that the forces that shape the lives of African American males are far more complex than frequently acknowledged. The cumulative and continuing effects of structural racism and geographic isolation have had (and continue to have) profound effects on the well-being of - and the opportunity structures available to - African American males (Trammel, Newhart, Willis & Johnson, 2008). This underscores the importance of a coordinated and concentrated focus on African American men and boys by public and private agencies and community partners, within a broader focus on improving opportunities and life outcomes for all boys and men of color and indeed for all children and families of color.

The educational inequities experienced by African American males are extensively documented. While the academic performance of African American children has improved over time, the achievement gap between the performance of African American males and their white peers persists (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). African American males remain more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to participate in school clubs, more likely to be suspended from school and more likely to be retained in the same grade than their white peers (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz & Casserly, 2010). They are also more likely than their white peers to be targeted with zero tolerance and related school disciplinary actions, even for similar behaviors (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Bryant, 2013; Easton, 2010; Gordon, Piana & Keleher, 2000; Lhamon & Samuels, 2014).

Disparities in rates of juvenile justice system involvement

for African American males have similarly been well-examined. Despite concentrated efforts for more than a decade to eliminate racial inequities in rates of detention and incarceration, African American youth continue to be confined at disproportionately high rates (Bell & Ridolfi, 2008; Bradford, 2013; Gottesman & Schwarz, 2011).

What's much less studied are the inequities that face African American males involved with state and local child welfare systems. During the last decade, a growing number of child welfare researchers and administrators have sought to understand the extent and nature of disparities experienced by African American children – or more broadly, children of color – who come to the attention of child welfare (Farrow, Notkin, Derezotes, & Miller, 2011; Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2011; Green, Belanger, McRoy, & Bullard, 2011). Within these efforts, however, little attention has been given to the particular experiences of African American males. Even less attention has been given to the strategies and interventions that reduce these inequities and support improved well-being for African American males.

This paper begins to fill these gaps by addressing what we know about the experiences of African American males involved in the child welfare system and lays the groundwork for more intensive and effective action by child welfare leaders, community coalitions and local, state and federal policymakers. In doing this work, CSSP reviewed the literature and research, spoke with African American young men who grew up in foster care and who participated in meetings convened by CSSP and AIR (supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, DHHS), and profiled promising efforts by public systems leaders, program innovators and community partners.

Specifically, this paper seeks to:

1. Summarize what is known about the situation of African American males involved with the child welfare system.
2. Outline an approach to more effective action for improved outcomes for African American males.
3. Identify specific steps that system leaders, policymakers and funders can take now to make a difference in the outcomes for African American males in state and local child welfare systems.

## I. AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

African American males who become involved with child welfare systems are not wholly different from other African American males. They belong to families who care about them and communities that want to see them succeed. They have friends who depend on their companionship, and caring adults who provide them with information, guidance and support. While their involvement with child welfare may distinguish them, they are still growing young people – children and adolescents who are trying to make sense of the world they live in and find their place in it while developing the skills they need to thrive.

African American males involved with child welfare also reflect the broader challenges experienced by many African American males. They are at increased risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system, more likely to attend underperforming schools that produce poor educational outcomes, more likely to live in economically distressed neighborhoods and less likely to live in communities with institutional investments and other opportunities that promote healthy child and adolescent well-being (and thus successful preparation for adulthood).

Children come to the attention of child welfare agencies when there is a concern about their parents' or caregivers' ability to keep them safe and/or protect them from harm and injury. Rarely is it something the child actually did that causes child welfare's intervention, which often contributes to the child's confusion and trauma, especially for those who are separated from their families and placed into foster care.

In the course of doing this work, CSSP spoke with and reviewed the stories of African American adolescents and men with current or past child welfare system involvement. Based on the experiences of those who spent some portion of their lives in foster care, it's clear that many young men did not know why they'd been removed from their parents' homes or separated from their siblings, nor what would have to happen in order for them to return home. This, they acknowledge, contributed to their early anger, fear, lack of confidence in the professionals and others trying to help them and hesitance to accept their new placement in foster care. Not all experiences are negative. For too many, however, their outcomes reflect involvement with a child welfare system that doesn't fully understand their life

experiences, and in turn inadequately responds to their developmental and individual needs.

*Gerald is a 17-year-old African American male who entered care when he was 12. He and his younger brother (by four years) were removed from their mother's home late one night and placed in separate foster homes. They maintained a close relationship despite the fact that they have never been placed in the same foster placement. Gerald has experienced six placements during his time in care, often staying at one of two familiar group homes during each of the transitions. Gerald maintains that he has never been told why he and his brother were removed from their mother's home and insists that he still wants to go back home. When asked about it, Gerald became quieter than usual for him. He also maintains that he deliberately disrupts his placements when social workers begin talking about adoption. He doesn't have anything bad to say about the foster parents he has lived with, but insists that he does not want to be adopted. That he wants to return home. There don't appear to be any substantial efforts made to discuss with Gerald what adoption – or permanency in general – means. Nor why he deliberately disrupts his placements. With no significant notes or documentation to suggest otherwise, it appears the social worker has accepted this as an acceptable and unremarkable routine pending Gerald's emancipation from care.*

For several decades, African American children have experienced disparate rates of involvement with the child welfare system and disparate outcomes resulting from their involvement. The Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, which is managed by CSSP, has documented these trends, the complex contributing factors, as well as promising policies and system strategies that contribute to improvements (Farrow, Notkin, Derezotes & Miller, 2011; Fluke & Hardin, 2011).

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### PREVALENCE AND AGE DISTRIBUTION

During 2012, the most recent year for which foster care data are publicly available, African American male children were 2.5 times more likely to be in foster care than their non-African American male peers. The foster care rate for all male children in the U.S. was 5.24 (per 1,000 children in the population), compared to 10.73 for African American male children and 4.27 for non-African American male children, as shown in Table 1.

Even while the number of African American males in foster care has decreased by 33 percent during the last seven years (from 91,107 children during 2005 to 61,139 during 2012) – mirroring a decrease of the numbers in foster care for all children (from 487,041 children during 2005 to 379,421 during 2012) – the disparities in foster care involvement and outcomes have persisted, as identified later in this section.

The age distribution of children and youth in foster care is particularly important as child welfare professionals must be familiar with the particular developmental processes unfolding during each developmental stage and the types of supports most needed during each.

The average age of African American males in foster care in 2012 was 10, with adolescents (age 13-17) comprising the largest group of African American males (34 percent) followed by young children ages 1-5 (32 percent) and pre-adolescents ages 6-12 (28 percent). Infants comprised approximately six percent of all African American males in care during 2012. See Figure 1.

This differs from the age distribution for all children, which trended slightly younger. When looking at *all* children, those ages 1-5 (34 percent) comprised the largest group, followed by adolescents ages 13-17 (31 percent), pre-adolescents ages 6-12 (29 percent) and infants under one year (7 percent).

These age distributions are not static. Just seven years before, during 2005, approximately 40 percent of all African American males in foster care were adolescents, while 25 percent were young children ages 1-5.

These age trends can create challenges in addressing the needs of older youth in foster care. During interviews with child welfare administrators conducted as part of this work, several noted that their workforce is largely

**TABLE 1 – CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2012**

Race / Ethnicity/Gender		Child Population	Foster Care Population	Foster Care Rate (per 1,000 children in child population)
African American Children	Female	5,508,000	55,232	10.03
	Male	5,717,000	61,339	10.73
	Total	11,225,000	116,571	10.38
Non-African American Children	Female	30,705,000	125,591	4.09
	Male	32,178,000	137,259	4.27
	Total	62,883,000	262,850	4.18
All Children	Female	36,213,000	180,823	4.99
	Male	37,895,000	199,598	5.24
	Total	74,108,000	379,421	5.12

Data Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, US Department of Health and Human Services. AFCARS data made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect Data, Cornell University

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accustomed to working with younger children and often have difficulty supporting older youth. Similarly, they reported that large numbers of contracted service providers are also accustomed to serving younger children and needed additional coaching and supervision to enhance staff knowledge and skills related to older youth engagement.

## MALTREATMENT EXPERIENCES

Just as age and developmental stages are important, understanding the maltreatment-related experiences children and youth have had – and their impact on well-being – is essential for designing approaches with African American males. Reported maltreatment rates (including child abuse and neglect) among African American males have declined slowly yet steadily during the last nine years, paralleling a national trend for children in general.

The majority of all maltreatment experiences among African American males are neglect-related (approximately 62 percent), with physical abuse accounting for approximately 18 percent, sexual abuse

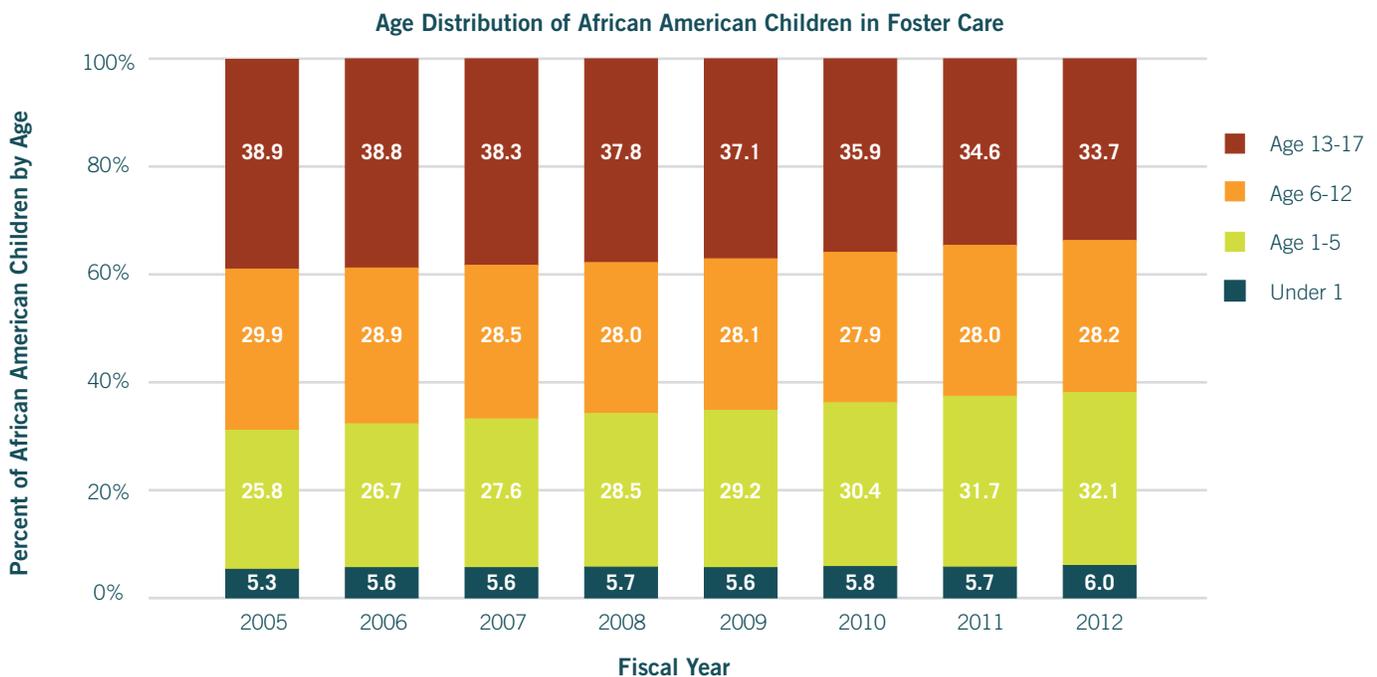
approximately three percent and a combination of “other” maltreatment forms including psychological maltreatment, medical neglect, abandonment, threats of harm to a child and congenital drug addiction accounting for the remainder. While neglect remains the most common form of maltreatment for all African American males, it’s slightly more prominent during the early years (up to age three). Physical abuse, on the other hand, while accounting for less than one-fifth of all maltreatment experiences among African American males, tends to be more prominent during the older years, especially among youth ages 8-15 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

## PLACEMENT EXPERIENCES

While best practice now supports that kinship placements are often preferable while children are in foster care, fewer than one-quarter (23 percent) of African American males were placed with relatives during 2010, a slightly lower rate than for all children in care.

Relative placements for African American males have

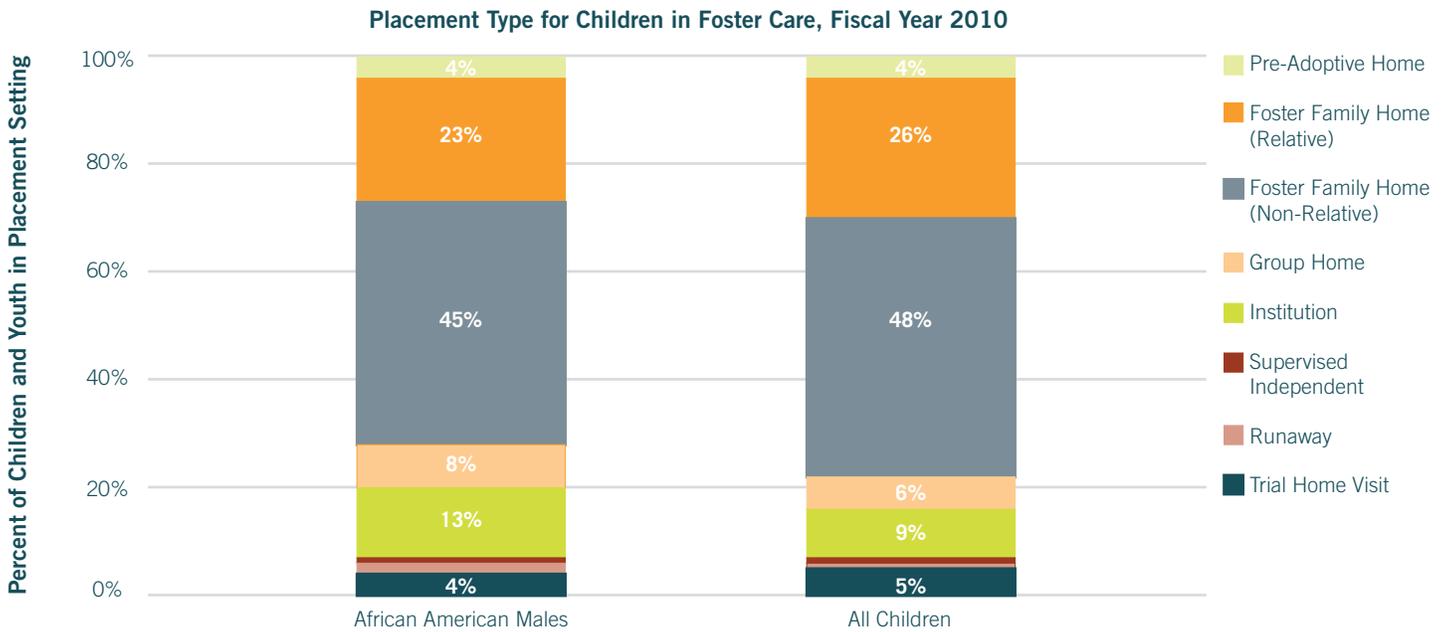
**FIGURE 1 – AGE DISTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, 2005-2012**



Data Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, US Department of Health and Human Services. AFCARS data made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect Data, Cornell University.

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**FIGURE 2 – AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE PLACEMENT TYPES, FISCAL YEAR 2010**



Data Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, US Department of Health and Human Services.

declined consistently during the last decade, down from 27 percent in 2001 (McIntosh, 2011).

Meanwhile, African American males are almost 30 percent more likely than other children and youth in foster care to be placed in congregate care (group homes or other institutional settings). While approximately 15 percent of all children and youth in foster care were placed in group homes and other institutional settings during 2010, the rate was 21 percent among African American males, as shown in Figure 2.

A key point noted by the youth with whom we talked is the frequency of placement changes. While African American males' specific behaviors are almost never the cause of their initial placement in foster care, they become a significant factor in their placement and treatment options. Among all African American males who exited foster care during 2010, 38 percent experienced at least three or more placement moves during their time in care. Almost one in every four changed placements at least four or more times. This is especially noteworthy as placement stability significantly affects youths' ability to form enduring relationships,

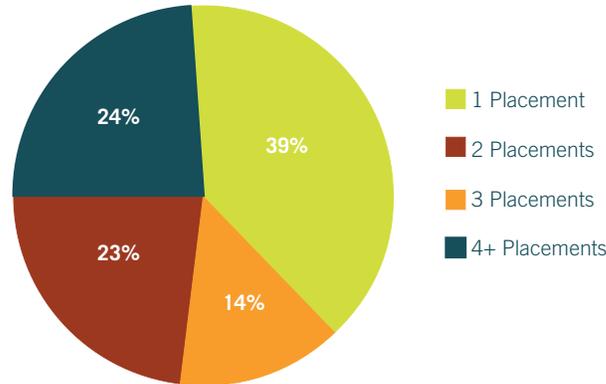
avoid the occurrence of behavioral problems, improve school success and reduce the length of time in foster care (Pecora, 2010). See Figure 3.

According to the youth we spoke with, regardless of the placement setting they were frequently unwilling to open up and share information about themselves with complete strangers. Inevitably, they said, a conversation about "rules" was among the first conversations they had in most new placements, be it with a foster parent or in a group home or institutional setting – a conversation that tended to lead the young people to shut themselves off completely. It wasn't lost on them that there was almost always a focus on behavioral expectations before any discussion about their own interests, likes and dislikes. While this specific experience may not be especially unique for African American males, it remains noteworthy because it reinforces a theme in their interactions with professionals and other adult authority figures – what African American males experience as a pre-occupation with behavioral control and punishment and little freedom to be children, explore and express their individuality and learn from their mistakes.

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**FIGURE 3 – AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE PLACEMENT CHANGES, FISCAL YEAR 2010**

Number of Placements for African Males Prior to Exiting from Foster Care, Fiscal Year 2010



Data Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, US Department of Health and Human Services

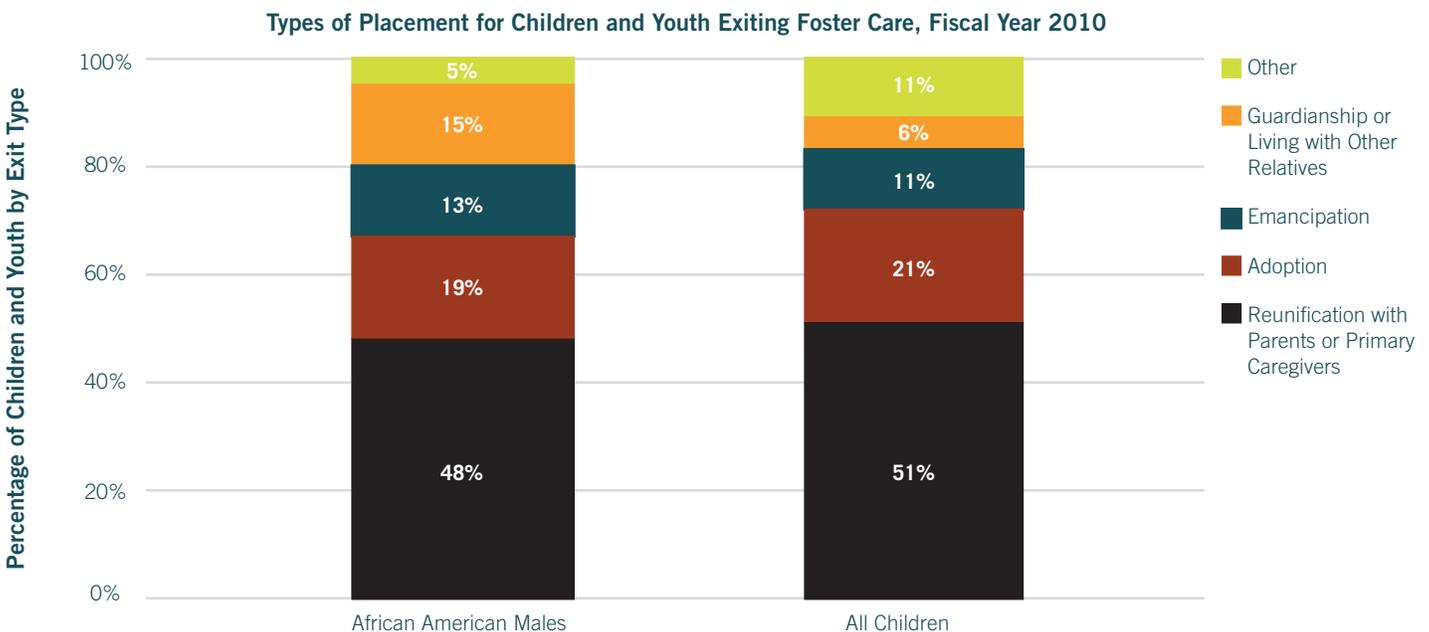
## EXIT PATTERNS

While exit patterns have remained relatively stable in recent years, they are nevertheless cause for concern. Compared to general permanency exit trends for all children in foster care, African American males are less likely to exit foster care for reunification with a parent or primary caregiver or for adoption. See Figure 4. In

addition, while definitive data are not available, there is ample anecdotal evidence that as young black males age in foster care, they are more likely to run away and/or become involved with the juvenile justice system.

One of the most alarming trends in these data is the percentage of African American males who “age out” of foster care each year – meaning they grow up in

**FIGURE 4 – AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES EXITING FOSTER CARE, FISCAL YEAR 2010**



Data Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, US Department of Health and Human Services.

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foster care and leave as a young adult without having a permanent family. The percentage has almost doubled in recent years, from seven percent in 2001, to approximately 13 percent during 2010. The rate of African American children “aging out” in 2010 was higher than that for children of all racial/ethnic groups combined.

Often, by the time African American males exit foster care, they’ve been in care longer than most of their peers. In 2010, the average length of stay for all children was approximately 22 months. For African American males it was 27 percent higher – approximately 28 months. The research regarding the life chances of youth exiting foster care is particularly dismal, with these young people experiencing higher rates of homelessness, joblessness, substance abuse and involvement in the criminal justice system, and all with comparatively lower rates of high school graduation, GED completion or college participation (Courtney et al., 2007).

### ASSESSMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE PLANNING

In a CSSP study of the youth who remained the longest in foster care in one Ohio County (a population that was overrepresented with African American males), many of the stakeholders identified the youths’ behaviors as the primary reason for their lack of permanence, but failed to acknowledge the system’s responsibility for assessing and addressing the underlying triggers for those behavior issues. There is a significant need for professionals within systems to understand a youth’s cumulative experiences, assess the impact of those experiences on development and provide supports that would be most effective in promoting his healing and broader well-being. These services must also reflect an understanding and appreciation of the experiences of growing up as a black male in this country.

African American youth who were contacted as part of this work consistently reported that counseling and therapy were always a part of their child welfare and mental health service plan, yet they found little value in those sessions. They rarely opened up to therapists during their first couple of sessions because they didn’t know or trust them. Too many of their therapists, the youth shared, would either cut the sessions short

without much engagement, or would spend more time talking than listening. Their collective sense was that the therapists were more concerned about getting specific pieces of information that helped them make a clinical diagnosis, not trying to understand who they really are, or their dreams and aspirations. Research suggests this specific experience among African American males involved in foster care is directly related to a “cultural mistrust” of mental health officials (Scott & Davis, 2006).

*Lawrence is 16-years-old and has been prescribed with anti-depressants since he was 13. He acknowledges that he has rarely taken them, and never for more than a couple of weeks in a row. He has consistently complained to his two prior caseworkers about having to take the medications and claims that no one has really taken him seriously. Lawrence rarely talked about his prior experiences with the psychiatrist, neither sharing his concerns, interests or any other notable information about his day to day experiences. He also volunteered that the psychiatrist didn’t seem to mind, never really trying to pull any more out of him. According to Lawrence, when he was in a particularly “good” mood, he would even make up stories to share with the psychiatrist just to see his reaction.*

*After consistent pleading by his foster parents to his caseworker, Lawrence was assigned a new psychiatrist approximately eight months ago. The new doctor met with the caseworker and foster parents to discuss Lawrence’s experiences and progress. He has now been taken off all but his allergy-related medications. Lawrence says many caseworkers “don’t have a clue, and don’t care to” because of their refusal to listen. He went on to explain that most kids just go silent when they meet with therapists, feeling there’s no need to keep saying the same thing over and over again. “We act up because something is wrong, not because we’re crazy. Deal with what’s wrong and stop giving us all these drugs.”*

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It should be noted that some strategies, while well intentioned, may not be helpful, especially if they fail to respond to the unique experience of being African American and/or male in a given environment. In fact, some strategies can unintentionally produce worse outcomes. An example of this is found in the experience of adolescents (94 percent of whom were African American and/or Hispanic) whose families moved from high poverty communities (Kessler et al., 2014) to low poverty communities. The intervention, encouraging families to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods, was associated with increased depression, PTSD, and conduct disorder among adolescent boys and reduced depression and conduct disorder among adolescent girls. The researchers suggest this may be attributable to the different level of receptivity experienced by girls in their new environments compared to their male counterparts.

What this study suggests, supported through our conversations with African American males, is that neighborhoods and social environments can be experienced very differently by males and females, with resulting effects on their social and emotional well-being. While more research may clarify the major factors operating in the experiences of the adolescents involved in the discussions from which this paper is drawn, these findings support the assertion by youth we talked with who consistently reported being treated differently and unfairly by professionals and other adult figures.

The African American males reported that their contact with social workers was mixed and inconsistent. Youth reported not hearing regularly from their social workers unless something was wrong, or when there was a court hearing or another formal case review coming up. Likewise, they said that reaching their social workers was difficult, with calls going to voice mail, and responses to their calls taking a couple of days. A similar pattern of involvement existed with school officials, with greater likelihood of involvement if there was a problem. For many of these youth, their cumulative experiences reinforced their isolation, having a lack of support and feeling that their presence was a burden to the professional adult figures to whom they were most closely connected. As one of the young males noted, “Everywhere I went, it felt like I was either ignored, or I was a problem.”

### **Child Welfare as a Pathway to Criminal Justice System Involvement**

The inadequate responses of agencies and organizations to the behavioral challenges of African American youth have consequences beyond the actual formal child welfare system. Research reveals that child welfare involvement too often serves as a “gateway” to juvenile justice system involvement for many African American youth (male and female), contributing significantly to similar patterns of racial disparity (i.e., disproportionate minority contact) observed in juvenile justice systems. African American youth in foster care are much more likely than their peers to be arrested or detained when compared to other youth involved with child welfare, and are more likely to be formally processed in the juvenile justice system, thus creating greater risk of deeper levels of juvenile/criminal justice system involvement (National Juvenile Justice Network, 2013).

Moreover, involvement in child welfare more than doubles the likelihood of a youth who has been arrested having a formal delinquency petition filed in juvenile court, as compared to their non-foster youth peers who are more likely to have their charges dropped (Models for Change, 2011). Thus, disproportionate rates of foster care involvement increases the likelihood of deeper levels of juvenile justice system involvement among African American youth. In King County, Washington, for example, African American youth in foster care become involved with the juvenile justice system at an earlier age, are detained more frequently and for longer periods of time, and are more likely to recidivate than their non-African American peers (Halemba & Siegel, 2011).

The experiences of African American males involved with child welfare suggests a profoundly traumatic experience (removal from their families and being placed in foster care) being thrust upon young males whose prior life experiences included maltreatment and disproportionate over-exposure to structurally-induced stressors related to poverty, overcrowded and poorly performing schools and being targeted for behavior-

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related concerns. Youth acknowledged the impact of this trauma and their struggles with the anger that they often carried with them. They were generally angry most of the time, but not necessarily at any specific person. They just knew they were angry at everything that was going on, and that so few of the professionals seemed to relate to or understand what they were experiencing.

On those occasions when the youth did “act out,” they reflected that those were just moments when they could not behave differently. Something about those moments reinforced that no one seemed to care or understand them, thereby triggering their behaviors. In those particular moments, they were tired of being looked down upon, talked down to, having to explain themselves or going along with whatever people were telling them to do. In many of these instances, they knew the consequences would mean a change in placement, being arrested, not being able to visit their parents or siblings and/or even being placed on more medications. In those moments, however, they lacked any ability to do anything differently and just didn’t care. In retrospect, the youth said they realize that they actually did care a lot and that was why they acted out. What these young men really wanted was for others to care as much about them and their future.

Much of the available data about the experiences of children in foster care - African American males included - describes movement through the system. Far less data sheds light on their overall well-being during that movement. The additional insights from our discussions with African American males and child welfare professionals are instructive, and begin to paint a portrait of a system in which African American males feel misunderstood, invisible and/or on the receiving end of unnecessarily punitive, harsh and unfair discipline-related practices.

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There is an urgent need for communities and public system leaders to join efforts to change policy and practice in order to significantly alter and expand the range of available, accessible and appropriate supports to ensure healthy development and successful futures for African American males, and all boys and men of color.

Expanding our understanding of what both the data and the stories behind it tell us about the unique experiences and challenges of African American males involved with child welfare and related systems of care is an important beginning, but it's not enough.

What follows is an outline of an intervention framework for achieving better outcomes for African American males involved with child welfare and related public service systems. This framework has emerged based on (a) the ideas generated through a series of meetings exploring the experiences and needs of African American males involved with child welfare and related systems of care (b) our review of the literature and selected programs that have shown success in supporting improved well-being among African American males and (c) direct input and advice from young African American men who have been involved with these child and youth serving systems.

The framework focuses on what child welfare agencies and their allies can do. It acknowledges that these actions must occur within an even larger set of activities to assure that adequate health care, opportunities for educational success, and pre-employment and employment resources, particularly, are available for these young people.

Our intention in putting forward this beginning framework is to spur discussion and change. While there is still more to know to determine the range of strategies and interventions that are the most effective, we know enough *now* to take action.

The proposed framework envisions action by child welfare agencies and community leaders in several important ways. It urges them to:

- Establish an overarching organizational commitment to race equity that is embedded in the agency's vision, mission, values and operations.
- Incorporate a focus on improving child and family cognitive, social and emotional well-being as

benchmarks for success.

- Understand and respond to the complex ways in which structural racism shapes the experiences and well-being of African American males, including both implicit bias and explicit forms of racism.
- Implement a developmentally appropriate practice strategy that is trauma-informed and reflects the research findings about the protective and promotive factors that can help youth overcome adversity and thrive.
- Create or strengthen partnerships between the child welfare agency and community groups, private organizations and advocates in order to secure access to good health care, early childhood supports, a good education and preparation for jobs and careers.
- Create ways for the voices, aspirations and input of African American youth to be visible and influential in all aspects of programming and accountability.
- Reinforce and sustain the work by making permanent structural and systemic changes regarding a results focus in service delivery, data collection and accountability, administrative infrastructure and human resource development.

### **ESTABLISH AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT TO RACE EQUITY**

A first step to achieving better outcomes for African American males involved with the child welfare system is for the child welfare agency – and potentially its community partners – to make an overall organizational commitment to racial equity. Such a commitment recognizes inequity in the experiences and outcomes of specific groups of children and families. This commitment also recognizes - and aims to undo - the systemic and structural barriers that produce a pattern of inequitable access to opportunities, resources and experiences that help families and communities thrive.

The commitment to equity must be shared throughout an organization and embedded within its vision, mission, values and all operations. In this respect, the desired organizational commitment is distinguished from a leadership priority which can be held and acted on by a few people for a period of time. This notwithstanding, the role of leadership is critically important to the execution

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of any organization's priorities as this commitment to equity must start at the top *and* must be adopted by a broad-based and larger leadership team.

An organizational commitment must be operationalized through focused attention to practice, programs and interventions, policy, and organizational values and culture. There is no single silver bullet strategy that will work to undo inequities. And these challenges cannot be solved without other public systems and institutions, community-based organizations, the families who have been involved and policymakers. Together, all stakeholders must identify the range of systemic barriers to better outcomes and help develop and implement strategies to eliminate them. Progress must also be monitored over time.

Two examples of this organizational commitment to racial equity and the actions that can flow from it are seen in work in Texas and in Fresno, California.

### Texas Department of Family & Protective Services, Texas

Over the last decade, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission have developed a comprehensive approach to reducing racial inequities in the rates of involvement of African American children and families with child protective services. Based on the level of inequity between the experiences of African American and Native American and children and families and their white peers documented in a 2005 legislatively mandated assessment of Child Protective Services enforcement actions, the department developed a multi-year organizational strategy for reducing the inequities and improving the system's response to African American children and families.

With financial support and specific requirements outlined in Senate Bill 6 by the 79th regular session of the Texas Legislature, this strategy was guided by the Texas State Strategy, a partnership of Texas Child Protective Services and Casey Family Programs, with a focus on reducing disproportionality for both African American and Native American children and improving outcomes for all populations (James, 2013). The following elements guided the Texas model:

- *Data-driven strategies* that required public

agencies to collect, research, analyze and proactively share data on system outcomes by race and ethnicity.

- *Leadership development* that enhanced the skills of both systems and community leaders.
- *Culturally competent workforce* that had the understanding and skills to review and examine its work through an anti-racist and humanistic lens.
- *Community engagement strategies* that recognize the strengths of grassroots community, seek its ideas, and incorporate them into the change process.
- *Cross-systems collaboration* that encouraged data sharing, training and discussions with systems, institutions and agencies that serve the same populations.
- *Training defined by anti-racist principles* that trained staff and partners in principles that addressed inequities and encouraged justice.
- *An understanding of the history of institutional racism and the impact on poor communities and communities of color* that allowed all staff to have a common analysis of racism and history that led to current outcomes.

During the implementation of this model, Texas officials achieved a statewide reduction in rates of foster care placement for all children after the conclusion of a child protective services investigation. Placement rates declined for White children, African American and Native American children during this period, with the most significant decline for African American children. This trend was most pronounced in the specific counties where the model was fully implemented. Evaluators found no corresponding increase in rates of repeat maltreatment, suggesting that children were being safely maintained within their families of origin rather than removed and placed in foster care (Baumann et al., 2010).

### Fresno County (California) Department of Social Services (DSS)

Building on several years of analysis of the extent and nature of disparities in rates of foster care involvement for African American children, Fresno County's efforts were enhanced with the completion of an Institutional

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### Institutional Analysis

At the invitation of a local public system, CSSP's Institutional Analysis team combines quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to understand system contributors to racial disparities. Information is collected from case-based analyses, focus groups with practitioners and family members, observations of specific steps in case processing and interviews with practitioners, family members, advocacy groups and local, state and national experts in the field. The team at CSSP provides all of the tools needed to complete a local analysis, and partners with agency staff and other key stakeholders to complete the actual analysis.

*Center for the Study of Social Policy*

Analysis (IA) of its child welfare system. Employing qualitative and quantitative research methods, the IA seeks to identify the specific ways in which key features of institutions contribute to poor outcomes for specific groups of children and families. Specifically, participation in the IA allowed the Fresno County agency to: (a) understand the impact of the system on outcomes for African American children and families, (b) deepen their partnership with the community, and (c) demonstrate an explicit commitment to addressing institutional racism.

From the IA report (Weber, Morrison, Navarro, Spigner & Pence, 2010), Fresno County DSS leaders learned that:

- DSS lacked sufficient policies, protocols and supervisory practices to prevent negative assumptions of African American families from impacting worker-client interactions.
- Decisions about families were being made by DSS caseworkers without fully understanding the strengths and challenges of each family and the community in which they live.
- DSS workers were not regularly acknowledging, exploring or treating the trauma, depression and anger that characterizes the emotional life of many youth involved in the foster care system.

The additional insight from the IA about key institutional contributors to poor outcomes for African American children and their families directly informed Fresno County DSS' goal of designing a more intentional system improvement strategy, one that would more directly contribute to improved experiences and outcomes for African American children and their families. The long-term departmental strategy that emerged to accomplish these goals included:

- *Implementation of a practice model* emphasizing the identification and coordination of family supports, full engagement of relatives and extended family members in supporting the child and family and the identification and healing of multi-layered experiences of child and parent trauma.
- *Involvement of community* through the engagement of key community advisors, the use of cultural brokers to support family assessment and service provision, as well as the involvement of community partners in Team Decisionmaking and ongoing agency quality improvement efforts.
- *System alignment* of contracts and service providers (including visitation services, mental health providers and drug courts) as well as a decrease in the use of specialized caseworker assignments and the implementation of family finding and enhanced kinship care strategies.

### Fresno, California's Cultural Brokers

"Cultural brokers" are community representatives that work with child welfare agencies to help bridge the cultural divide between the community and the public child welfare agency. While their specific role may vary from one jurisdiction to another, cultural brokers often help parents and family members understand the agency's concerns, policies and procedures, as well as directly support families in getting connected with needed supports and services.

- *Strategic planning* with a focus on the agency's mission and values, the implementation of

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enhanced supervision and coaching strategies and a responsiveness to secondary trauma throughout the organization.

- The application of *implementation science* principles and strategies throughout all of the agency's continuing system improvement efforts.

The Fresno County Department of Social Service's explicit commitment to improving outcomes for African American children and their families resulted in a steady reduction (33 percent) in the proportion of African American children entering foster care between 2009 and 2012, down from 14 percent to 9.7 percent of all entries. During the same period, there was a 14 percent decrease in the proportion of African American children in foster care, from 17.2 percent of children in care to 14.8 percent (Himes & Osikafo, 2013).

### FOCUS ON IMPROVING CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING AS A BENCHMARK FOR SUCCESS

Organizations working effectively with children and families share an underlying commitment to their improved well-being. For many years, child welfare organizations have focused heavily on safety outcomes and improving policies and practices that help children and their families move more efficiently through the system. The consistent research on the shockingly poor outcomes and significant life challenges faced by many youth after exiting foster care has revealed that current efforts are insufficient and have failed to guarantee that the children the state has intervened to protect are succeeding and thriving. The poor outcomes for many children and youth, and in particular for those of color, have generated increased attention to the need for system strategies to promote healthy development throughout childhood and to ensure successful transition into adulthood for youth involved with child welfare.

A child and adolescent well-being framework requires organizations to expand their attention beyond the traditional measures of system process and efficiency (for example, timeliness of investigations, timeliness of court and other administrative hearings, rates of entry into and exit from foster care, length of stay in foster care). While these measures are important, an expanded focus on child and family well-being

requires organizations to also pay attention to *how well* children are doing throughout their time of involvement with child welfare. The range of well-being outcome measures correspond with each of the key domains of child and adolescent development, including cognitive functioning and schooling experiences, physical health and development and social, emotional and behavioral functioning (Samuels, 2012). Given the central role of family members in shaping the experiences of children, well-being measures must also focus on the nature and strength of children's relationships with their family (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013a).

An organization's focus on well-being must also factor in the unique experiences of specific racial and ethnic groups. Race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression significantly shape the developmental experiences of children and families, as well as system responses to them. As the historic and contemporary experiences of racism in the United States continue to shape African American children's developmental experiences and outcomes, each well-being measure highlighted above should be regularly analyzed – and interpreted – through a lens of race and ethnicity in order to identify specific challenges and opportunities to improve system responses and other needed supports.

### Illinois' Family-Centered, Trauma-Informed, Strengths-Based Practice

The Illinois Model of family-centered, trauma-informed, strengths-based practice has effectively taken on the challenge of understanding and supporting the improved well-being of children involved with child welfare. This model was developed by officials at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and is built upon evidence-informed interventions for youth and their families who have experienced adverse experiences and/or trauma. It emphasizes the protective capacities of strengths and the resilience of children and families (McEwen, 2011). While Illinois' model is not exclusively focused on African American children and youth, it is particularly responsive to the experiences of many African American males, specifically the disproportionately high levels of exposure to interpersonal violence (i.e., gun violence, assault, abuse and neglect, etc.), as well as chronic exposure

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to toxic stress. The Illinois model's comprehensive well-being approach includes a focus on the following key functions:

- *Assessment* – A detailed assessment of child well-being, including the nature and implications of trauma exposure and the protective strengths, interests and aspirations of children and youth.
- *Decision-Making* – Specific information most useful in making decisions about placement, reunification or other permanency goals, as well as the frequency and structure of visits with parents and extended family members.
- *Service Provision* – Trauma-informed treatment provided by staff with training in evidence-based approaches, use of a statewide provider database to match children and families with the most appropriate services in their local communities and additional supports needed to support healing and healthy development.

Illinois' innovative trauma-informed strategy has been particularly effective in supporting youth in foster care who have been detained by juvenile justice officials. Specifically, this trauma-informed strategy has significantly reduced the number of incarcerated foster youth, with correspondingly low recidivism rates (McEwen, 2011).

### **UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO THE COMPLEX WAYS IN WHICH STRUCTURAL RACISM SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES AND WELL-BEING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES**

African American males are consistently portrayed in distorted and frequently negative ways throughout multiple public media forms (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011a). These depictions include an exaggerated image of African Americans as athletes and entertainers, with comparatively few examples of African Americans as experts on any variety of topics unrelated to sports and entertainment. Further, African American males are over-represented in media coverage of poverty and crime when compared to actual rates of poverty and rates of criminal offenses by race. The cumulative effect of these depictions is a societal stereotype of African American men as violent, irresponsible and overly aggressive (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011a).

### **Toxic Stress**

Toxic stress is defined as exposure to extreme and uncontrollable events or conditions (violence, abuse, neglect, etc.) that, if not experienced in the context of supportive relationships and environments result in physiological changes (Easterbrooks, et al, 2013; Middlebrooks and Audage, 2008; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014).

These frequently reinforced stereotypes can greatly influence the attitudes and perceptions of child welfare professionals, educators, judges, law enforcement personnel, school officials and others about African American males.

Public perceptions of African American males and perceptions about the prevalence, extent and consequences of racism in the lives of African Americans vary widely by race. These varied perceptions directly influence the judgments of professionals in their interactions with African American males. This influence, frequently operating at an implicit level, can lead to unnecessarily negative, even tragic, encounters between professionals and African American males (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011b). Such influences and attitudes may include:

- Increased fear and perceived threat when around African American males
- Reluctance to engage African American males
- Belief in the relative lack of utility (uselessness) in providing supports to African American males
- Lack of trust in what African American males say
- An assumption of African American males' involvement in some form of criminal activity

The pervasive negative societal perceptions and attitudes about African American males also become entwined with social structures. Structural violence is a form of violence that puts these stereotypes into action and can be described as a form of "systemic injury directed at a group or geographic area" (Silverman, Sumner & Frampton, 2011). This violence is frequently manifested in national and local policies that divest resources from

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community institutions that support African American males, restrict job opportunities for African American males and that promote disproportionate rates of incarceration of African American males (Silverman, Sumner & Frampton, 2011).

The underlying stereotypes lead many in society to rationalize the negative and differential treatment of African American males by formal systems (i.e., school, police, courts, etc.) and are frequently invoked to resist demands for reform. In effect, negative societal perspectives and stereotypes about African American males: (a) create the conditions that keep many African American males disconnected from more positive youth development, educational and employment opportunities, and (b) fuel punitive system responses that keep disproportionately high numbers of African American males under some form of formal institutional supervision, both of which reinforce the negative public perception of African American males as involved in delinquent and criminal behaviors (Lawrence, Sutton, Kubisch, Susi & Fulbright-Anderson, 2004; Rich et. al, 2009; Goff et. al, 2014; Fulbright-Anderson, Lawrence, Sutton, Susi & Kubisch, 2005).

Organizations working with African American males must directly challenge this form of structural racism, helping African American males to understand and make sense of their experiences, and simultaneously working to undo individual, institutional and structural injustice. An organization's engagement with African American males should prepare these young men to interpret and respond to their experiences and the conditions of their environment in ways that seek justice, yet still promote their own social and emotional well-being.

### IMPLEMENT A DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE STRATEGY

Organizations committed to improving the experiences and well-being of African American males do not leave success to chance, and do not assume that one practice approach alone can be responsive to the needs of *all* children and families. Each organization's practice approach must be designed and/or tailored to meet the racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and experiences of children and youth in their respective community.

These important considerations notwithstanding, research findings can help identify key elements of effective practice and healthy youth development that should be embedded in an organization's practice strategy with African American males.

### Strengthening protective and promotive factors, while reducing risk factors

Research on healthy child and adolescent development highlights the importance of conditions, organizational strategies and youth experiences that not only reduce the risks to healthy development (*protective factors*), but also strengthen those factors that actively support well-being (*promotive factors*). This perspective, operationalized in the work of CSSP's Youth Thrive™ initiative (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011), is anchored in five research-supported protective and promotive factors:

- *Youth resilience* – Resilience refers to one's process of managing stress and individual functioning within the context of adversity and trauma. Researchers have concluded that the ways in which youth respond to stress are more important than the actual stressors in determining a youth's social and emotional well-being (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013b). Organizations working with African American males must assist them in developing healthy responses to the stressors of daily life, as well as the experiences associated with living in environments with high levels of toxic stress, racism and oppression. Likewise, active organizing efforts through which youth can support one another and advocate for improvements in policy and programs can promote greater resilience and social and emotional well-being.
- *Social connections* – Youth draw upon their social relationships with people and institutions to support their need for knowledge and skills, and to gain a sense of belonging and purpose. Research shows that children and youth who are unable to develop healthy relationships are more likely to experience poor academic performance in school, greater mental health problems and delinquency. Caring and supportive adult and peer relationships significantly increase the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes and buffer the effects of

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various health risks (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013c). African American males who have transitioned successfully out of foster care report at least one caring adult relationship and long-term relationships with peers as primary factors contributing to their success. The frequent foster care placement moves for African American children and youth, however, have a significant destabilizing and undermining effect on building these critically important relationships.

Children and youth also need access to opportunities and experiences to master the developmental tasks associated with healthy childhood and adolescence, including those that promote positive risk taking. Organizations play an important role in specifically developing (or connecting children and youth to) the structured opportunities and experiences to acquire the developmental competencies that help them thrive (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013c). African American males especially, report limited opportunities to participate in structured extra-curricular activities and other structured programs that provide these opportunities and promote positive youth development. Organizations and communities must create more opportunities for African American males to participate in these healthy developmental activities, including covering related costs and providing transportation as needed.

- *Concrete support in the time of need* – All children and youth need support to help them through each stage of their development. Help may include material supports such as a safe place to live, healthy food and nutrition, transportation, as well as any range of mental health, academic support and other specific services that minimize the stress of normal developmental transitions. (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013d).

It's common for youth to be reluctant to ask for help, perhaps because of the stigma attached to some supports and services, or the fear of losing more control over their lives. Youth may also distrust service providers and professionals because of prior negative experiences. This is particularly true of African American youth, many who have

had negative experiences with unresponsive and unsupportive professionals. Organizations can be instrumental in helping African American youth understand help-seeking as a form of self-advocacy and as an integral part of healthy growth and development.

- *Knowledge of child and adolescent development* – Having accurate information about adolescent development is essential because beliefs about youth influence how we perceive and treat young people. This is particularly important given the recent advances in the fields of developmental psychology and neuroscience. We now know much more about the brain's uneven development and how it helps to explain why youth often engage in risk-taking behavior or make decisions based on emotions rather than logic. Maltreatment and other forms of toxic stress, combined with the trauma of removal and separation from family can disrupt adolescent development. Too often the behavior of African American boys who have been exposed to these traumas are interpreted as intentional acts of defiance and signs of a youth's not caring about the consequences of their actions. They need to be supported by programs, caregivers and professionals who understand not only about adolescent development but the impact of trauma on that development (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013e).
- *Cognitive and social-emotional competence in children and youth* – Together, cognitive and social-emotional competence represent the key developmental tasks that lay the foundation for healthy identity and a successful, productive and satisfying adulthood. These include such developmental tasks as cognitive flexibility, future orientation, self-regulation, executive function and planning. Some of the key social-emotional developmental tasks include self-awareness, self-concept and self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-improvement and mastery, personal agency and the presence of positive emotions. Positive social relationships also support healthy identity development among children and youth, including a healthy racial and cultural identity as well as healthy development of gender identity and sexual

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orientation (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2013f).

One of the challenges experienced by a significant number of African American males is the frequency of placement moves, directly affecting academic performance and ability to sustain close and meaningful relationships with peers and other supportive adults. Additionally, African American males frequently report limited understanding or appreciation by their caseworkers and other professionals about the importance of race and culture in their daily lives, and a lack of responsiveness to their questions and concerns related to gender identity and sexual orientation. Effective organizations must be mindful of – and responsive to – these important developmental considerations impacting the lives of African American males.

### **PLAAY, Philadelphia**

Youth-serving organizations can play a critically important role in reinforcing these protective and promotive factors among children and youth. PLAAY (*Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth*) is a youth development program in Philadelphia designed as a racial and cultural literacy intervention to improve academic outcomes and reduce behavioral disruptions among African American males. The intervention includes many activities that reinforce the protective factors for young people, including athletic activities, martial arts, cultural pride reinforcement, parent engagement and a combination of individual and group counseling for participating adolescent youth. The racial and cultural literacy anchoring of the PLAAY intervention includes media literacy (decoding messages and images related to African American males in all major media forms), use of a violence alternative/cultural socialization curriculum, a culturally relevant atmosphere that encourages debate and cultural expressiveness and the teaching of history, culture and academic skills. PLAAY participants achieved increased rates of school attendance, levels of homework completion and school engagement, while showing decreasing rates of school assaults and referrals to the principal's office (Stevenson, 2013).

### **Awareness and Responsiveness to Early Trauma**

The developmental issues unfolding throughout childhood and adolescence are greatly impacted by significant or distressing life events. Trauma refers to the emotional reaction people form to distressing or life-threatening events, or in reaction to prolonged (chronic) exposure to such conditions or experiences. Children and youth involved with child welfare and related systems have experienced any number of traumatic experiences prior to becoming involved, and involvement with these systems is in itself a traumatic experience. The effect of a traumatic experience can activate a “fight or flight” response within the brain aimed at self-preservation and survival. The prolonged over-stimulation of the brain in this manner can lead to significant changes in brain development and personality, ranging from hyper arousal (constant state of being anxious and on edge, a more common reaction among adolescents) or dissociation (becoming detached and withdrawn, a more common reaction among younger children). While these patterns are characteristic of all children and youth experiencing severe adverse experiences in early childhood, they play a particularly strong role in the early experiences of African American males (Rich et al., 2009)

African American males (among boys and men of color more broadly) are routinely and disproportionately exposed to traumatic interpersonal events (e.g. gun violence, assault) and living conditions characterized by toxic stress (Cooper, Masi, Dababnah, Aratani & Knitzer, 2007). An even larger number of African American males, however, are exposed daily to the more subtle forms of trauma, including the experiences of poverty, discrimination, criminalization and an enduring state of being invisible and unseen and/or being explicitly and negatively targeted and stereotyped. These cumulative experiences have a profound effect on the social and emotional well-being of African American males (Leigh, Huff, Jones & Marshall, 2007).

Research and practice experience suggests that many of the behavioral challenges involving African American males involved with child welfare and related systems are behaviors that have been adapted because of the functional role of the behavior in navigating specific circumstances and conditions (Scott & Davis, 2006;

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Rich et al., 2009). Organizations and their staff must be able to effectively assess the traumatic experiences of African American males, and implement trauma-responsive strategies that promote awareness, healing and healthy development. Similar efforts should be made to share information about trauma and trauma-responsive strategies with children's parents and other relatives as they continue to care for their children.

### ■ Guilford County, North Carolina

The Guilford County Department of Social Services in North Carolina has worked to transform its clinical interventions and supports for African American males who come to the attention of the child welfare system. The system transformation approach in Guilford County includes an intensive focus on identifying culturally proficient and responsive mental health practitioners with a track record of effectively assessing and engaging African American males, and a process of intensive training and skills development for child welfare case workers and supervisors. While this intensive training approach focuses on understanding the impact of trauma on the development of all children and adolescents, it has been particularly effective in helping professionals understand the multiple forms of trauma most frequently observed in the experiences of African American males and their families. The efforts in Guilford County have improved placement stability, decreased the presence of behavioral challenges among African American males and decreased the use of psychotropic medication among African American males in foster care (Hargett, 2013).

### **CREATE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN THE CHILD WELFARE AGENCY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS, ORGANIZATIONS AND ADVOCATES**

Most children and youth who become involved with child welfare and similar systems have existing relationships with family and others in the community and continue to live within community settings. Indeed, most also return home when they exit foster care. Organizations must continue to keep youth connected to positive community programs and experiences. In doing so, effective approaches must extend beyond the walls of the child

welfare agency and must emphasize positive youth development in a family and community context.

Supports and services (formal and informal) for children, youth and families are coordinated and funded by a host of systems and public agencies and consequently cross-system collaboration does not often occur. These include child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, housing services and, of course, school systems and – for older youth – resources that prepare them for employment and careers. Child-serving systems and organizations need formal interagency forums that allow officials from each of the respective child- and youth-serving systems to meet regularly and to identify and resolve barriers, including solvable funding barriers that impede families' and children's timely access to needed supports. The result should be an easily understood process for families to access supports for their children when needed.

Organizations must also be familiar with the range of formal and informal supports and services available to children, youth and families within the community. These may include churches, after school enrichment programs, fraternal and civic organizations with positive youth development programs, community-based mentoring programs, rites of passage programs as well as local youth athletic programs. To the extent possible, all of these resources should be identified and organized within a repository or database and drawn upon as needed to support children and youth.

A growing number of agencies and organizations are making concerted efforts to identify community members who can serve as liaisons between themselves and the specific neighborhoods or racial and ethnic communities within which they work. These individuals, called cultural brokers or cultural consultants, exist in a community, and help organizations understand the perspectives, sensibilities and concerns of families and community members while simultaneously helping community members understand the sensibilities, responsibilities and obligations of child welfare and other related child-serving systems. The specific nature of their roles varies, yet frequently includes participation in training and other professional development activities for agency staff, consultation with agency leaders and planning groups about organizational policies and practices, as well as joining agency staff

## II. AN APPROACH TO EFFECTIVE ACTION

as they directly support children and their families. These strategies have been particularly beneficial to agencies and organizations that recognize the need to better understand the experiences of families in communities within which they work. Successful examples of this approach can be found within the Fresno County Department of Social Services (Himes & Osikafo, 2013), the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (Miller, 2009), as well as the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (Sturdivant, 2011).

Effective organizational approaches must be a part of broader community strategies to support families and children in their own homes and communities in order to prevent problems and stress before they become too great. Service organizations and the private sector should also work to build pathways of opportunity for African American males through high quality schools, job skills training and workforce development programs that prepare young people to thrive economically, and jobs that provide a livable wage and benefits. Many of these pathways don't currently exist for large numbers of African American males, or are severely constrained.

Finally, in some communities the child welfare agency has joined or partnered with, community coalitions representing the interests of people of color to work specifically toward equitable child welfare outcomes. This strategy recognizes that even with well-intentioned and proactive child welfare leadership, it can be important for leaders of communities of color and other advocates to mobilize around this agenda. The resulting entities can be informal coalitions or more formally organized groups, and their activities can include analyzing the relevant data about child welfare outcomes for children and families of color; recommending strategies for action, including negotiations about strategies with child welfare leadership; creating public visibility around inequities to further increase the likelihood for change; and taking steps to hold child welfare agencies accountable for achieving equity. The Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare has documented these strategies in several jurisdictions, including King County, WA (King County Coalition, 2014).

### The Inua Ubuntu Initiative

The Allegheny County Department of Human

Services in Pennsylvania has developed a unique and culturally-centered model for organizing community members to support the needs of African American males who come to the attention of child welfare. The department's *Inua Ubuntu* initiative was developed to decrease the overrepresentation of African American males in the child welfare system in and around Pittsburgh. This system transformation effort organizes and prepares key elders and advocates living within the same communities from which many African American children come, to partner with caseworkers as they engage African American males and their families. Specifically, this group of organized community elders and advocates assist in assessing the individual and family circumstances of African American males who come to the department's attention and identifying any supports and assistance needed by the child and family. They work in partnership with the social worker to support the youth and family until the child can return home. The *Inua Ubuntu* initiative's achievements have included an increased rate of relative placements (use of kinship care rather than traditional 'unrelated' foster care placements), and strengthening relationships between children and their families when children are removed (Sturdivant, 2010 & 2011).

### The Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities, Chicago

A growing number of fatherhood programs are similarly beginning to focus on the experiences of African American men who have either been involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system themselves and/or have children involved with one of the systems. The Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities organization in Chicago is one such program organized to directly support needs of fathers (e.g. child support payment responsibilities, housing, mental health, life skills, preparation for employment, among others), while simultaneously working to reconnect them with and/or strengthen their relationships with their child(ren). The program is based on a foundation of positive youth and family development, and works with a host of formal institutions and other community organizations that provide supports to fathers (Lawrence, 2013).

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### **ENSURE THAT THE VOICES, ASPIRATIONS AND INPUT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH ARE PRESENT AND VISIBLE IN ALL ASPECTS OF PROGRAMMING AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Consistent and genuine engagement of youth in the planning and decision-making processes that affect their lives is a key attribute of quality youth-serving agencies. The same principles that guide authentic youth engagement in their own planning can transfer to the full engagement of youth in an organization's continuous quality improvement efforts and strategic planning.

Involving youth in discussions about their futures, as well as sharing input on the policies and practices of the organization, can be a challenge for some adults and organizations. It is important that a youth's involvement be authentic, meaning that it not be limited to sharing their stories and experiences with professionals, which can sometimes be experienced as a "show-and-tell" exercise.

Authentic youth engagement presumes the goal of preparing the youth and adults within an organization for the involvement of youth as full partners. To accomplish this, formal structures are needed to ensure youth have dedicated opportunities for planning and providing input, including youth boards, advisory councils and youth representation on strategic planning and other planning and decision-making teams within the organization. A Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative issue brief on youth engagement (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012), which draws from *The Green Street Guide to Authentic Youth Engagement* (Hoffman & Staniforths, 2007), recommends the following key elements to guide authentic youth engagement:

- Relevance – engaging youth around issues that are most relevant to their lives
- Accessibility – inclusivity and the engagement of a broad cross section of youth
- Consistency – becoming a champion that consistently involves youth as regular practice
- Authenticity – formal involvement of youth with clear roles in planning and decision-making
- Hands-On, Action Learning – offer projects that allow for a range of developmental learning opportunities for youth
- Local Projects – have a local focus for youth action projects with (frequent) face-to-face participation

- Scope – provide an evolving capacity for youth to participate in a range of opportunities
- Recognition and Respect – honestly and openly respect youth opinions, allowing air time and space to share their perspectives in discussions, and recognize their contributions.

### **MAKE PERMANENT STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC CHANGES TO REINFORCE AND SUSTAIN THE WORK**

The elements of a strong approach, as outlined above, must include organizational and systems changes essential for effective and accountable child welfare services. The forces that lead to poor outcomes for African American males can be deeply embedded in the way that systems function, as well as broader societal factors. While a full systems analysis of the improvements that child welfare agencies can make to improve outcomes for African American males is beyond the scope of this paper, these would include, at a minimum:

- A results-based approach to service provision, ensuring that the well-being of children, youth and families are the measure of success, in addition to measuring the effective provision of services.
- Effective use of data, reported by race, ethnicity, gender and age, which allows for a nuanced understanding of the experiences and needs of African American males and other specific groups of children and youth.
- Accountability systems that keep improved outcomes for African American males – and children and families of color more broadly – as a central focus among organization staff, contractors and other key partners.
- High levels of professional development that provide staff and contractors with the information, skills and leadership competencies that support more effective engagement and advocacy with African American males and their families.

More detailed analyses of these types of system changes are included in several of CSSP's reports on Institutional Analyses conducted in partnership with child welfare agencies (Weber, Morrison, Navarro, Spigner & Pence, 2010; Weber & Morrison, 2012a; Weber & Morrison, 2012b). These systems changes make the difference in whether innovative approaches to improving outcomes for African American males can be planned, implemented and sustained.

### III. NEXT STEPS: ACTIONS TO TAKE NOW

**W**hile we continue to need new knowledge about the interventions and strategies that are the most effective, public systems leaders, private organizations, philanthropists and others can and must begin to bring about change now through the following priority actions:

- *Gather, analyze and use additional information about the experiences and well-being of African American males involved with child welfare.*

Federal, state and local child welfare officials—as well as researchers—need to analyze and disaggregate data, by race, age and gender in an effort to gain a more detailed understanding of African American males’ experiences while involved with child welfare. The information should go beyond process measures and include data on children’s education-related experiences and outcomes, social and emotional well-being, physical health and dental status, and competency development for future economic success. Officials within other child-serving systems should make data available that expand the field’s understanding of the experiences and well-being of African American males who are involved with child welfare systems.

The federal government, through the Administration of Children, Youth and Families and the Department of Justice, can provide leadership by preparing a special report on African American males in the child welfare system, thereby establishing a priority for this population within the field and drawing needed attention to the system and decision-making factors that expedite the pathway for African American youth from foster care to the juvenile/criminal justice system. Data beyond the numbers are needed to chronicle the qualitative experiences, aspirations and challenges facing African American young men and boys and to provide the insights essential to ensure that new action strategies get it right.

- *Develop and implement trauma-informed engagement strategies that respond to the unique experiences of African American males.* Effective strategies for working with African American males must recognize and respond to trauma. As a most basic step, child welfare officials should expand training opportunities for staff, supervisors

and other key partners focused on recognizing and understanding the effects of trauma, as well as an ability to use effective trauma-responsive engagement strategies with youth and families. These efforts should factor in considerations of how race, racism, ethnicity, culture, structural violence and over-exposure to toxic stress impact the developmental experiences of African American males.

- *Adopt strategies for addressing system barriers to permanency and well-being for African American males.* Given the data about disparities in “aging out” and lack of permanency for African American males, specific efforts should be undertaken immediately to identify existing system barriers to permanency for African American males in foster care, including a special focus on missed opportunities to achieve safe reunification with family or adoption. Focused attention must also be given to promoting permanent and stable connections (with family, other committed adults and community) for older African American youth and adolescents in foster care. African American adolescent males who are at high risk of “aging out” of foster care without the adequate supports must be supported in multiple traditional and non-traditional ways to make a successful transition to adulthood. Immediate attention must be directed to improving specific system policies and practices that impede permanency and broader well-being among African American males.
- *Actively engage the range of system and community partners that collectively must support the well-being needs of African American males.* Child welfare officials can lead the way, but implementing an approach to well-being for African American males necessitates the direct and active involvement of families, of course, and of multiple agencies and organizations, including schools, juvenile and family courts, youth development agencies, the health and mental health community, housing, employment and training and others. Of particular importance are community groups or organizations who have a mission to advocate for or serve African American males and judges who have significant influence on all aspects of African

### III. NEXT STEPS: ACTIONS TO TAKE NOW

American males' experiences with child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Given increased national attention to this issue in 2014, this is a good time for child welfare leaders to proactively reach out to these other parties and join in collective action on behalf of African American males.

- *Foundations, the federal government and state and local policymakers should increase investment in community-based supports and opportunities for African American males and their families.* Policymakers should target additional resources toward the development and expansion of system initiatives and programs that have shown success in improving the well-being of African American males, including expanded academic support programs, mentoring programs that connect African American males and other boys and young men of color to caring and supportive adults and specific interventions that promote improved social and emotional well-being.
- *Create a community of learning and practice innovation focused on improving system responses to African American males and their families.* A community of learning and practice innovation should be developed among community-based organizations and child-serving agencies that are committed to improving the well-being of African American males involved with the child welfare system. Such a network would support information sharing about effective strategies and policies that promote improved responses to, and thus improved outcomes for, African American males involved with child welfare. These networks would be poised to continue collaboration for future innovation.
- *Invest in strategies aimed at improving public perceptions about the experiences and potential of African American males.* Foundations and other funders should invest in a strategic communications strategy that highlights the strength and integrity found in the experiences of African American men and boys and, among other boys and men of color. A primary goal of this strategy is to change the predominantly negative public narrative about the life chances and opportunities for African American males who have been in foster care to one which recognizes the strengths and potential of these

young men. The end goal is to help increase public will for expanded supports and culturally relevant services for African American males and their families.

- *Join the broader local, state and national efforts on behalf of African American males in the child welfare system that are underway.* As stated at the beginning of this paper, the poor outcomes for African American males involved with child welfare reflect and are a symptom of even broader challenges for these young people. Actions taken in the context of child welfare systems should recognize this and draw strength, visibility, momentum, ideas and partnerships from related efforts to achieve bright futures for all African American men and boys. Specifically, it is critical to link efforts undertaken on behalf of African American boys and young men in child welfare to the growing movement to improve life chances for African American boys and men in many other spheres of life such as health care, early care and education, grade-level reading, school success and employment, both nationally and in local areas. These linkages can help ensure that these vulnerable young men's lives are positively affected by efforts such as My Brother's Keeper and other philanthropically-supported initiatives which focus on all African American men and boys.

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