Pathways to service inequalities among Latinos in the child welfare system

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1. Introduction

While the disproportionate representation of children of color has been an enduring characteristic of the U.S. public child welfare system (CWS), limited efforts have been devoted to understanding and addressing the causal mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequity in placement, permanency, and access to culturally sensitive, evidence-based services (Roberts, 2002). Over the past few years, Latinos' experiences in the CWS have garnered more attention than in previous years (Ayón, 2009; Church, 2006; Church, Gross, & Baldwin, 2005; Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009; Garcia, 2009; Rivera, 2002). Such attention is warranted given that they are the fastest growing group in the CWS. In fact, the number of Latino children in foster care more than doubled from 8% (n = 32,000) of the foster care population in 1990 (Foster Care National Statistics, 2001) to 21% (n = 84,727) in 2010 (USDHHS, 2011).

Although Latino children are comparably represented at the national level (23.1% in the U.S. versus 21% in the CWS in 2010) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; USDHHS, 2011), there is evidence of disproportionality in some states. As of 2006, Latinos were overrepresented in 19 states, increasing from 10 states in 2000, and were underrepresented in a rate less than half their percentage of the population in nine states (Dettlaff, 2011). These outcomes underscore the need to systematically track the number of Latinos involved in the CWS on an ongoing basis and to identify the casual mechanisms that contribute to disproportionality, if it indeed exists, within states, regions, and local communities.

Only a few select studies to date have identified specific time points where Latinos are overrepresented, with the intention of identifying where to target the development and implementation of culturally congruent interventions. According to a study conducted in 2008 by the Racial Disproportionality Advisory Committee and the Institute on Public Policy in Washington State, “Hispanic children have a 34% greater likelihood of referral than White children and are seven percent more likely to have an accepted referral and 15% more likely to be placed in out-of-home care” (WSRDA, 2010, p. 58), Church et al. (2005) found that while reports of abuse and neglect in Utah are relatively proportionate between Latino and White non-Latino children, substantiated cases are more likely to occur among Latino children. Also in Utah, Latino children are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care for longer periods of time than their White non-Latino counterparts (Church, 2006; Church et al., 2005). Once they are placed in out-of-home care, they are less likely to be adopted (Courtney et al., 1996).
system rose from 12.2% in 2003 to an overwhelming 16.4% in 2009 (CAMIS, 2003, 2009). While there was no evidence of overrepresentation at the state level in 2009 (16.4% in the CWS versus 18% in the general population; Kids Count Data Center, 2009), research is warranted to understand the needs and experiences of the fastest growing group in Washington State's CWS, particularly in local geographic spaces where Latinos are heavily represented.

Fig. 1 also shows the prevalence of other groups of children in Washington State's foster care system. Unlike Latinos, the statistics reveal that African Americans, Native Americans/Alaskan Natives, and Caucasians experienced slight decreases in CWS involvement from 2003 to 2009 (CAMIS, 2003, 2009) while their representation in Washington State's overall populations has either remained the same or declined (Kids Count Data Center, 2003, 2009). These outcomes reveal a dire need to fully examine the question of whether or not the CWS is ensuring safety, permanency, and equitable access to services and resources for the growing Latino child welfare population and what services should be implemented to either prevent or, in some cases, eliminate disproportionality and disparity within specific geographic localities.

1.2. Service inequity among Latino youth and families in the CWS

Once Latino children enter the CWS, they are less likely to receive mental health services compared to Caucasian youth despite need (Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003; Hurlburt et al., 2004; Kolko, Seleryo, & Brown, 1999; McCabe et al., 1999). Regardless of race/ethnicity, unaddressed emotional and behavioral problems among foster youth are linked to multiple placement moves, delayed permanency, and negative developmental outcomes that persist well into adulthood (Burns et al., 2004; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Pecora et al., 2006; Southerland, Casanueva, & Ringeisen, 2009). At the same time, Latino parents, especially if monolingual Spanish-speaking and/or undocumented, are more likely to experience numerous barriers to accessing services to achieve reunification (Ayón, 2009). For example, inaccessibility to benefits and culturally sensitive resources, distrust of government officials, fear of deportation, and lack of social supports in the community have been identified as potential risk factors that delay reunification and subsequently prolong the length of time Latino children remain in foster care (Vericker, Kuehn, & Capps, 2007; Zambrana & Capello, 2003).

1.3. Gaps in research

While the number of Latinos in the CWS continues to grow, our understanding of developing, implementing, and disseminating evidence-based child welfare practices that are culturally responsive to Latino communities is limited (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). In particular, prior research in child welfare scholarship has not given much attention to cultural and contextual factors (e.g., documentation status, acculturative stress, cultural values and customs, access to timely and effective culturally sensitive services across systems of care) that might increase the capacity for service providers to engage in “best practices,” and resources to support clients in achieving case goals are limited and often inadequate (Lipsky, 1980; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Regardless of these challenges, caseworkers are the main agents of whether and how current policies and procedures are implemented (Lipsky, 1980). To that end, they can speak to whether they have the resources, support, and capabilities to enact policy and best practices to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being among Latinos in the CWS. Relying on their own lived experiences and observations, caseworkers are in a unique position to discuss areas of strength and resiliency, highlight what factors may account for disparate outcomes, and offer suggestions on ways to improve child welfare practice with Latino youth and families.

To date, only one previous study has been devoted to exploring pathways to services among Latino parents in the CWS, as described by the experiences of caseworkers. After interviewing 14 caseworkers in Los Angeles, Ayón (2009) concluded that Latino parents who are undocumented and non-English speaking experience numerous barriers to accessing services, thus profoundly impacting the parents’ ability to comply with court-ordered services to achieve reunification.

1.4. Why focus on eliciting the voices of caseworkers?

While, as highlighted above, there has been recent attention devoted to better understanding and documenting some of the challenges Latinos encounter in the CWS (Ayón, 2009; Dettlaff et al., 2009), more research is needed to examine, from the point of view of caseworkers, how challenges they encounter may impact case outcomes and accessibility to services. The current study focuses on caseworkers for several reasons. For one, caseworkers are expected to negotiate conflicting demands and expectations (e.g., ensure child safety through placing children in out-of-home care versus advocate for familial permanence) within an organizational bureaucracy where (1) caseloads exceed the capacity for service providers to engage in “best practices,” and (2) resources to support clients in achieving case goals are limited and often inadequate (Lipsky, 1980). To that end, they can speak to whether they have the resources, support, and capabilities to enact policy and best practices to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being among Latinos in the CWS. Relying on their own lived experiences and observations, caseworkers are in a unique position to discuss areas of strength and resiliency, highlight what factors may account for disparate outcomes, and offer suggestions on ways to improve child welfare practice with Latino youth and families.

1.5. Research aims

The current study expands upon Ayón’s (2009) research to elicit additional contextual data from frontline caseworkers that may explain why the Latino child welfare population is increasing and what steps should be taken to address barriers to accessing services. The primary research questions were (1) what barriers and challenges do Latino children and families experience while involved in any given stage of the CWS (reporting, investigation, foster care placement, length of
stay in care)? (2) What challenges do caseworkers encounter in ensuring safety and permanency for Latinos in the CWS? (3) What strengths may be emphasized to increase the likelihood of safety and timely permanency among Latino youth and families? (4) What needs to change to better serve Latinos in the CWS?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Focus groups were conducted at four Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) offices where Latinos are heavily represented geographically and in Washington State’s CWS. Criteria to participate included (1) having worked for DCFS for at least six months and (2) having worked primarily with Latino children and families in their caseloads. Caseworkers were recruited by the principal investigator. This process entailed briefly introducing the study’s purpose during staff meetings and informing them they would have the opportunity to voluntarily participate in a one-time focus group meeting to discuss the challenges they encounter in ensuring safety and permanency for Latinos who enter and remain in the child welfare system. After obtaining human subjects and supervisory and administrative approval from DCFS, the recruitment phase involved sending an all-staff e-mail announcement to caseworkers. If caseworkers were interested in participating in the study, they were asked to contact the principal investigator via phone or e-mail. Focus group meetings were then scheduled at a date and time that was convenient for caseworkers.

Focus groups were facilitated by the principal investigator and lasted between 60 and 90 min each. A total of 17 caseworkers (15 females, 2 males), who primarily served a rural community of Mexican families, participated in one of four focus groups. Overall, 12 (70.6%) identified as Latino, while the remaining five identified as Caucasian. The mean age of the caseworkers was 42 years. Forty-seven percent of the sample (n=8) reported having a master’s degree in social work, 35.3% (n=6) disclosed earning a master’s degree in another field, and 5.8% (n=1) reported having attained a four-year college degree. Twelve (70.6%) reported that they were bilingual in Spanish and English.

Participants had been working for DCFS for an average of 8.8 years in various roles and capacities. At the time of reporting, 12 of them were currently employed as child and family welfare service (CFWS) workers. Unlike Child Protective Service (CPS) workers, who are responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect and removing children from harmful environments when warranted, CFWS workers engage parents to comply with services on an ongoing basis to achieve reunification. The remaining participants either worked for CPS (n=2) or family reconciliation services (FRS) (n=3). FRS workers are largely responsible for working with teens and families on a voluntary basis to deescalate parent–child conflict and prevent the need for out-of-home placement. While each of these workers currently served in different capacities, many of them reported working in other units in the past and, thus, could speak to the various challenges and experiences from multiple positionalities.

Before recruiting participants, the study was reviewed and approved by the Washington State Institutional Review Board and participants received a $10 gift card to local stores as a small token of appreciation for their time.

2.2. Measures

All focus group meetings were conducted utilizing an interview guide (see Appendix A) informed by the Latino Child Welfare Research and Practice (LCWRP) Model. The LCWRP Model (see Garcia, 2009) provides a conceptual framework to aid in identifying areas that warrant further attention when examining the experiences of Latino youth and families in the CWS. Incorporating the physical, individual/social, institutional, socio-political, and subjective dimensions of environments, the model highlights factors that may contribute to CPS intervention and inequitable permanency outcomes among the Latino population. The current study focused solely on the subjective domain, which highlights the need to incorporate the voices of multiple stakeholders to understand the challenges that Latinos may experience in the CWS, to develop salient questions. The questions were asked with every intention of better understanding how caseworkers interpret and negotiate the lived realities of the experiences of Latino children and families who are involved in the CWS.

2.3. Analysis plan

Focus group interviews provide the opportunity to develop a theoretical understanding of cognitive, behavioral, situational, and environmental factors that impact decision-making (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). To that end, rigorous methods were implemented in order to understand, from the perspective of frontline caseworkers, challenges Latino children and families encounter in the CWS. Audio-taped sessions were conducted in English and transcribed by a qualified transcriptionist approved by the Washington State IRB. Content analysis of the transcribed focus group meetings was conducted following the procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The content analysis started with open coding, defined by Strauss and Corbin as the process of the conceptualizing, grouping, and labeling of common themes that emerge from the data. Next, in axial coding, “data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97). During this process, efforts are devoted to specifying categories (i.e., phenomenon) and the “causal conditions” that relate to each category.

In keeping with coding focus groups rigorously, Kidd and Parshall (2000) recommend using a combination of “broad-brush coding” for certain types of discourse (e.g., stories or exchanges between group members) and fine-grained line-by-line coding of substantive content (what they actually speak about). An additional step was taken during the coding phase in which all categories and themes generated by an individual focus group meeting were coded in one color. This helped discriminate areas of agreement and disagreement between focus groups.

An additional step was implemented during the analytic phase to ensure findings were credible and confirmable. Constant comparison involves verifying and substantiating an emerging conceptual idea or theme and returning to the raw data to disconfirm or corroborate evidence (Charmaz, 2006; Samuels, 2009). For the purposes of this study, themes that were generated were routinely checked against the focus group transcriptions (i.e., raw data). Finally, as recommended by Samuels (2009), memos tracking thought processes and rationale for generating each theme were documented in order to increase transparency of analytic decision-making.

2.4. Reporting of findings

Before delving into core themes that emerged during the focus group discussions, the matter of how findings were reported will be discussed. First of all, if one person during the focus group meeting brought up a new idea or topic of discussion, the principal investigator asked if others agreed with him or her. Unless otherwise noted, themes reflect a consensus or a majority of similarly held views and experiences within a focus group meeting. In some cases, only a select number of participants within a focus group meeting(s) discussed a salient issue. In those cases, the number of times a theme emerged across focus groups is reported.

Secondly, if a participant dominated the focus group discussion, the principal investigator asked if others agreed with him or her and if they had anything else to add. Most of the time, however, the
participants either asked clarifying questions in response to other participants’ comments or further elaborated upon emerging ideas.

3. Results

Three major themes emerged during the focus group discussions: (1) risk factors for initial CWS involvement, (2) institutional barriers to accessing and utilizing services across systems of care, and (3) barriers children and teens face in accessing and utilizing effective services in the CWS. What follows is a critical discussion of the core themes with pertinent categories and quotes that support them.

3.1. Theme one: risk factors for child welfare system involvement

During all of the focus group meetings, caseworkers spoke at length about some of the factors that lead to child protective service involvement among Latino children and families.

3.1.1. Acculturation and language barriers impact parent–child interactions

In three of the four focus groups, caseworkers reported that children tend to acculturate faster than their parents do. For example, they reported that Latino children tend to learn the English language faster than their parents do while attending school and interacting with peers. Consequently, children are “stuck between two cultures,” while their parents continue to hold on to “old-fashioned” values, beliefs, and customs. As one of the caseworkers reported:

There’s kind of a power struggle between the parents or the adults in the home and the teenagers, who are trying to blend in with our society, how it is today instead of how their parents grew up.

They use that language issue to push away from their parents.

Many scholars (e.g., Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980; Szapocznik & Williams, 2000) concur with the caseworkers’ conclusion that these situations create a power struggle between parents and their children who strive to blend into mainstream culture rather than adhere to “traditional” core values (e.g., “familismo,” which represents solidarity, cohesion, loyalty, and reciprocity among members of the immediate and extended family, and “respecto,” which denotes respect toward authority figures). While this “power struggle” is not described as a primary reason for ongoing CWS involvement, nearly all caseworkers agreed that it may directly impact parenting behavior, leading to ongoing conflict and placing the family at risk for ongoing disruption and instability.

A prime example is when children and teens threaten to call CPS or the INS if their parents attempt to discipline them. Participants in two of the focus group meetings highlighted that parents fear to discipline their children due to this form of manipulation. To make matters worse, workers revealed that monolingual parents are uncertain of information and messages that are ultimately communicated between them and other providers across sectors of care who may report the family to the INS. In these situations, educating parents about the use of force law (how physical abuse is defined) in the U.S. is of utmost importance.

3.1.2. What is child abuse and neglect?

During two different focus group discussions, caseworkers reported that some Latino parents may not know what constitutes child abuse and neglect, and that the lack of awareness may increase reporting of alleged maltreatment. This is explicitly articulated in the quote below:

It’s mostly the parent’s knowledge and understanding of what the rules are, what is abuse. Many parents go, “Hey. I didn’t physically beat my kid.” Well, that’s not abuse — but that’s not the only form of abuse. There’s neglect. Leaving your child alone while you go to work in the fields and they’re five, that’s a big no-no…. I’m there to educate them, not to condemn them or judge them on that call…. So I really try to empower the parent on what are the rules, what is neglect, what is abuse, so that they are more knowledgeable.

3.1.3. Gang involvement

In three of the focus group meetings, the subject of gang involvement emerged as another potential risk factor eventually leading to and prolonging CPS involvement. Caseworkers reported that since many of the young parents are involved in gang-related criminal behavior and eventually face incarceration, their young children end up in the foster care system. One of the caseworkers explained gang affiliation as an entirely different culture in which the parents are unable to open their minds to anything other than violence and, in many cases, are scared to relinquish their affiliation. Most caseworkers added that there are increasingly more cases that involve gang shootings, murders, and violent attacks in the neighborhood, and the idea of returning children to violent home environments is unthinkable.

In some situations, gang affiliation does not end with just parental involvement. Their children, as a result of ongoing exposure to gangs, drug use, and weapons in the community, also become members. One caseworker reported that many children claim “they were born a gang member” and do not know anything different from the lifestyle they have become accustomed to. Caseworkers within and across groups agreed with this and added that it is likely to increase CPS involvement and other negative developmental and psychosocial outcomes, such as poor mental health, poverty, substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, and lack of high school completion.

3.1.4. Intersectionality of risk factors

Gang affiliation and its association with other forms of violence are becoming more prevalent, as highlighted below.

Things are changing, I think in the last couple of years to be more intense — because I’ve been in this office for about two and a half years now. When I first started, there were issues mainly with domestic violence... and appropriate use of discipline or excessive use of discipline. But I think now a lot of my cases... are more gang-type, drug use, weapons that are dangerous to children in the home.

During two of the focus group meetings, caseworkers highlighted that domestic violence alone has escalated over the past few years. In one case example, even though the mother completed court-ordered services, her parental rights were terminated because she did not follow through in protecting herself and her children by adhering to the no contact order with the father. In many cases, the social workers agreed that Latina mothers tend to minimize domestic violence issues. Finally, a majority of cases, regardless of race/ethnicity, that lead to out-of-home placement involve parental substance abuse, poverty, and lack of stable housing.

3.2. Theme two: institutional barriers to accessing and utilizing services

All of the caseworkers discussed at length the types of institutional barriers Latino children and families encounter as they attempt to access culturally appropriate services and resources in an effort to speed up the reunification process.

3.2.1. Inability to access services in a timely manner due to agency and policy inflexibility

During three of the focus group meetings, caseworkers reported that clients are not able to access services in a timely manner due to (1) experiencing long waiting lists to be seen by a service provider and (2) limited agency operation hours. Caseworkers explained that their clients must work their daily 9 to 5 jobs. Unfortunately, many
agencies in rural communities are only in operation until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., placing their clients in a situation of having to sacrifice employment and wages in order to keep an agency appointment.

To make matters worse, the majority of caseworkers discussed how certain policies may unjustly speed up the process of terminating parental rights. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (1997) requires states to file a petition to terminate parental rights for any child who has been in out-of-home care for 15 of the last 22 months. ASFA requires that caseworkers develop a permanency plan to ensure that either (1) children safely return home within 15 months, or (2) arrangements are in place to terminate parental rights and place the child in a stable, long-term viable placement. Caseworkers reported that this policy does not take into account cases in which Latino clients are unable to immediately access court-ordered community-based services due to long waiting lists and limited operating hours. Rather, they are labeled and viewed in the eyes of the court as being non-compliant with services. Consequently, the likelihood of reunification decreases.

Other barriers include lack of resources to comply with parental visitation rights, as well as lack of transportation and insurance. The following quote speaks eloquently to these challenges Latinos (and possibly many other racial/ethnic groups) in the CWS encounter.

If you are a client with the department, you have to be rich…. If you want to pick up your child for a visit, you have to have a car. You have to have insurance and you have to have a driver's license. You have to be able to transport yourself… drive back and have money for the gas. I don't think that really — some of the policy is really unrealistic for some of our clients. You have to have a lot of money to do a lot of the stuff we're asking you to do. So I think there needs to be a little consideration, a little bending in the sense as to what is acceptable and what isn't acceptable. There's a lot of barriers… there's not a lot of consideration for our families who are poor.

3.2.2. Lack of cross-system collaboration

During one of the focus group meetings, caseworkers discussed at length another potential reason why Latinos encounter barriers to accessing services. All of the caseworkers agreed that there is lack of collaboration across child-serving systems of care (child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, and education). They noted oftentimes, due to service providers' adherence to the agencies' individualized missions, goals, and objectives, clients are left with the responsibility of negotiating multiple and sometimes conflicting service plans. In other situations, as highlighted in the quote below, the quality of services across systems of care may not be appropriate in meeting the needs of Latino children and families.

I think another thing that needs to change is just the — all the systems that are working to serve the client need to come together better. They all have their individual goals. So it — it's not always focused on the child or in the best interests of the child. It's more for their agency…. But that definitely has to change, because the services that we're offering are — they're not going to do anything. Like with drug and alcohol services especially, everything is about money. We have clients that are getting referred for intensive outpatient treatment when they clearly need inpatient.

3.2.3. Geography and service accessibility

A large majority of the caseworkers agreed that there is a dire need to take into consideration that each community is different in terms of its client needs and accessibility to services. For example, caseworkers noted that while there are a plethora of services available in urban areas (e.g., King County/Seattle), they struggle to offer Latino clients culturally sensitive services that adequately address their needs. Reportedly, however, while caseworkers are knowledgeable of a few Spanish-speaking therapists and providers who offer parenting education and assessments in Spanish, the long waiting lists for such services perpetuate and prolong service inequity.

3.2.4. Documentation status and lack of access to services

During all of the focus group meetings, caseworkers discussed the barriers undocumented Latino immigrants encounter to accessing services and resources. Stemming from fear of deportation and/or stringent immigration policies, caseworkers noted that clients often will not access services or apply for means-tested benefits (i.e., Medicaid, Food Stamps, cash assistance). One of the focus group discussions touched upon the issue of “mixed” households where in some cases children and/or parents who were born in the U.S. are eligible for services while their undocumented counterparts are unable to access them to reduce risk of harm as highlighted below.

We have an array of services. That doesn't mean that they're all there for every single family. I do have a family who's fantastic. But they (mother and her oldest daughter) are illegally here in the United States. Her oldest daughter… had gone through a devastating situation. Mom has now had to pick herself up, six kids, only 27 years old. She has tried to get mental health services, appropriately so. But they [Medicaid] only pay for [a limited number of services] because this child is illegally here…. So the two people that I need desperately to get help cannot get that help and there's no way of maneuvering that whatsoever.

Besides lacking access to means-tested benefits, case proceedings are often hindered due to undocumented Latinos' necessity to withhold pertinent information that may inform efforts to facilitate permanency and promote positive outcomes. Meanwhile, agency policy discourages caseworkers from asking clients directly about immigration status. Consequently, more time and energy must be devoted to asking “generic,” contextual-based questions (e.g., How long have you lived in the community? Do you know how to access resources in the community?) to inform case planning without jeopardizing the clients' current living circumstances as undocumented immigrants. While these practice methods are effective in most cases, caseworkers reported that they often still observe a high level of distrust, hesitance, and fear to fully disclosing the challenges the clients encounter. For example, while additional adult family members live in the same household without reporting their income to their Community Service Officer who allocates means-tested benefits, parents may not feel compelled to disclose who resides with them to their CPS caseworker either. Not knowing who lives in the same household and who may ultimately serve as a viable source of support for the parents and their children hinders the ability to capitalize on client strengths and resources.

Secondly, according to all of the focus group discussions, undocumented status may indirectly lead to children being placed in out-of-home care and/or the prevention of reunification. For example, caseworkers reported that more frequently than in previous years undocumented parents are getting pulled over by law enforcement for traffic violations. In these cases in which police profiling has typically ensued, they are immediately deported while their children remain in the U.S. and are subsequently placed in foster care. Caseworkers highlighted several examples of how the family is disrupted for years to come due in large part to institutional injustices that take hold once parents are deported and their children subsequently end up in foster care. First of all, caseworkers reported that relatives will not come due in large part to institutional injustices that take hold once parents are deported and their children subsequently end up in foster care. First of all, caseworkers reported that relatives will not come desparately to get help cannot get that help and there's no way of maneuvering that whatsoever.

When identifying extended family members… I've found in a lot of my families that a lot of the family members won't come if they're illegal. Because if you're bringing it to the home, it's easier for them to be spotted. The less attention that they have from
officers, law enforcement, government agencies, then the less likelihood it's going to be for them to be deported.

In other cases, caseworkers explained situations where they have worked diligently to advocate for the best interests of Latino foster children who have not attained legal citizenship in the U.S. While the state allocates funding to provide for their basic needs while in foster care, undocumented children still remain "illegal citizens" despite caseworkers' reported attempts to otherwise ensure they have the same rights and entitlements as any other child when they age out of foster care. Some caseworkers, for example, noted that they devoted their own time to working and collaborating with attorneys to see what can be done to ensure undocumented Latino children on their caseload gain citizenship status. Despite their efforts, they have not experienced much success in advocating for these children who are essentially stuck in a system that does not provide them the same rights and opportunities as native-born children in the U.S.

3.2.5. Language barriers across systems of care impact service delivery and case outcomes

Another primary factor that contributes to lack of access to services and equitable outcomes is language barriers. In each of the focus group meetings, caseworkers discussed at length that monolingual clients experience difficulty accessing services and resources across systems of care. For example, caseworkers highlighted that while interpreters are available during permanency hearings, all of the court forms are available only in English. In many cases, clients leave the hearing lacking clarity regarding what court-ordered services they are required to complete because they have no written documentation in Spanish to refer to. Caseworkers reported that more often than not there are no forms or information available in Spanish that explain DCFS policies and procedures. Others commented on the fact that letters notifying parents of the outcomes of a Child Protective Service investigation are not readily available in Spanish. One of the caseworkers added, and others agreed, that even translating forms would not be effective, given that some of their clients are illiterate.

Moreover, as discussed primarily among Caucasian workers, there were grave concerns about the lack of timely and appropriate interpreters who are readily available to assist with translation services. Oftentimes, they must schedule meetings to not only adhere to their clients' schedule, but also to that of the interpreters. To the clients' detriment, this delays case planning, intervention, and timely access to court-ordered services. And, when finally scheduled, the quality of translational services is often poor, according to the caseworkers. Specifically, the translators often put "their own twist or feelings into interpretation" rather than translating the conversation verbatim.

A lot of times when we contract out other interpreters... they paraphrase, when really in this type of service, it should be word-for-word interpreting... A lot of information is lost in the interpretation. So sometimes I think parents unfortunately have that disadvantage because they are just relying on that interpreter to give them all the right information. Maybe because they didn't do something, then they are not in compliance to a court order or a service plan that we created, but they didn't understand when or what they were actually supposed to do because it wasn't very clear through the interpreter.

In many other cases, access to services is delayed even further due to a lack of classes and services that are readily available in Spanish. For example, caseworkers explained that parenting classes are not offered as often in Spanish as they are in English. All too common, monolingual Spanish-speaking clients may wait up to six months before they attend a parenting class or an initial mental health intake appointment. Despite these institutional barriers, in the eyes of the court they are not in compliance with court-ordered services, and the likelihood of reunifying with their children in a timely manner decreases. In the following quote, one caseworker identified that reunification was hindered due to prolonged court hearings as a result of language barriers.

I had a case where the case was continued in court four times because... none of the defense attorneys spoke Spanish. So four times everybody was dragged to court, but the judge – the defense attorney had not had an opportunity to talk to their client. So, therefore, the kid stayed in care longer.

In addition to a lack of parenting classes in Spanish and delayed court hearings, caseworkers agreed that there is a lack of bilingual providers in the community who are (1) knowledgeable of cultural traditions and values and (2) able to conduct psychological assessments and sexual deviancy evaluations.

3.2.6. Extra demands and responsibilities impact accessibility to services and case outcomes

Bilingual/bicultural caseworkers reported there are extra demands and responsibilities they must negotiate when working with monolingual and undocumented clients. One of the bilingual workers reported:

I know I am spending a lot more time with undocumented clients. If we are identifying that CPS workers need more time to deal with these families, if we're the ongoing workers, we should get a case and a half credit for them. And we don't. Because we are dealing with special things.

Many others concur, noting specifically that they often provide translation services for other caseworkers who are unable to speak Spanish. One of the Caucasian social workers commented on the fact that it places undue hardship on bilingual caseworkers. Others added that if DCFS contracted with certified translators who are available during work hours, this would not be an issue.

An additional demand is that caseworkers must transport their clients long distance to access services and complete court-ordered evaluations and assessments that are not available locally in the area. Oftentimes an entire day is devoted to ensuring one of their clients obtains the services they need to guarantee reunification.

Other demands that surfaced in the focus groups included workers having to negotiate the responsibility of high caseloads and the impossibility of meeting stringent deadlines to complete paperwork and ensuring clients receive services that they “deserve.” Caseworker turnover also impacts productivity. When a case is transferred to a new caseworker, they have to (re)learn the case, meet parents again and establish rapport, and determine what services are most appropriate for the family. While all these “added” demands are necessary to ensure reunification, permanency, and child well-being, they impact how much “equitable” time caseworkers devote to advocating for each of their clients on their respective caseloads. Undoubtedly, this has a direct impact on efficient and timely service delivery to Latinos who face the added burden of establishing trust with a new worker.

3.3. Theme three: barriers children and teens face in accessing and utilizing effective services in the child welfare system

While the barriers outlined above focus on the general experiences of how Latino families interact within the CWS, this next section focuses specifically on the challenges Latino youth may encounter.

3.3.1. Foster care placement matching: barriers to accessing culturally competent care

Some of the challenges Latino children and teens encounter in accessing and utilizing effective services once they are placed in the CWS were discussed at length in each of the focus group meetings. For example, the issue of foster care placement matching stirred up
some heated discussion and highlighted one of the most contentious issues caseworkers encounter on a daily basis. While some caseworkers reported that they always ensure monolingual Spanish-speaking children are placed in bilingual/bicultural homes, the majority, as highlighted below, stated with conviction that it is not always possible due to lack of availability.

In the years I've worked for the department, I've seen it more than once that a child, a monolingual Spanish-speaking child, will be placed in a foster home where nobody speaks Spanish because there are no other foster homes available. You try to find relatives. You try to find a culturally appropriate home. But sometimes, you don't have any choice and you have to put the child into this particular foster home.... That poor kid is sitting there, and can’t communicate.

Not providing Latino children in foster care access to temporary (or long-term) caregivers who are able to meet the child’s cultural and linguistic needs has grave consequences. For example, some of the caseworkers spoke briefly about cases in which the child in question knew the Spanish language, but the loss of language eventually took hold as time passed on. They noted that without a doubt preserving the child’s culture while in foster care is one of the most difficult challenges they face as caseworkers.

As discussed in all of the focus group meetings, placing Latino children with relatives is the easiest way to ensure that the child’s language and cultural needs are met, and, as referenced in the quote above, in most of the discussions, many Latino family relatives are willing “to step up to the plate” to be a placement resource for the child. However, supporting them is a daunting challenge caseworkers face due to inadequate institutional and agency policies that support and stabilize culturally and linguistically appropriate relative placements. In many cases, for example, relatives do not receive much, if any, financial support to assist in meeting the child’s basic needs and/or funds to allow them to participate in extracurricular activities.

I think with placement, we have a lot of Hispanic relatives to choose from…. So you’re going to see a lot of the Hispanic kids in relative placement. Those relatives are going to be receiving lots less support in monetary ways and other ways. So that creates a huge challenge. It makes it harder for them to be the best support system that they can for that child. I don’t think that the state has ever been really prepared to deal with or understand the cultural aspects of Hispanic families.

3.3.2. Latino teens in foster care: barriers to accessing and utilizing services

In addition to the barriers to providing adequate care and resources for children in out-of-home care, caseworkers reported that Latino teens, in comparison to their younger counterparts in foster care, are the most challenging to work with, primarily due to lack of access to services across systems of care and/or their lack of motivation to engage in services.

Caseworkers reported that it is more difficult for service providers across other systems of care to work collaboratively to ensure that the needs of teens in foster care are met. In some cases, the caseworkers perceive other service providers in the mental health or education sector as presuming that the challenges teens face are not as important as the “poor little kids.” Rather, they assert that teens need more guidance and support given that they are more likely to experience poor developmental outcomes due to trauma (e.g., maltreatment, gang involvement, substance abuse, and mental health issues), lack of access to coordinat- ed and integrative services early on, and lack of appropriate foster care placements. While caseworkers spoke in reference to the Latino teens on their caseload, the following quote eloquently speaks to the multiple challenges teens in foster care often encounter, regardless of race/ethnicity.

The kids that are raised up, they have mental health issues. They’re drug affected. A lot of other things. They really haven’t had a positive role model in their life. A lot of times they’ve been raised in foster care. Unfortunately, we have good foster parents; we have bad foster parents. By the time they turn 18, they’re kind of out on their own. Some of them get to stay a little bit longer with their foster parents. Others get kicked out right around that month that they turn 18.

Given these challenges, caseworkers reported that DCFS is working diligently to ensure teens are better prepared to leave care and successfully transition into adulthood. Independent living services provide teens in foster care with the knowledge, skills, and/or supports to thrive, including, but not limited to, assistance in pursuing higher education, managing finances, transitioning into the workforce, and maintaining a healthy living environment. As explained by caseworkers, the Foster Care to Twenty-One program in Washington State offers teens and young adults the opportunity to continue residing in the same foster home they had been living in if they pursue a college education.

However, some of the caseworkers reported that the majority of Latino youth do not “aspire to engage in services or attend college.” Rather, they are more interested in immediate gratification (earning money and reunifying with family) and do not want to prolong their affiliation with the foster care system. For the most part, they described teens’ experiences in foster care as “embarrassing” due to the stigma associated with being labeled a “foster child” whose birth parents could not adequately address their basic needs. Due to these undesirable circumstances, caseworkers noted that these teens often run away from their foster care placements to reunite with birth relatives and other family members, knowing full well the maltreatment history they experienced while living with them. There are the “lucky ones,” however, who are in foster care, earn good grades and scholarships, and transition into adulthood easily on their own, but they are few and far between, as noted below.

The majority of them; they don’t want to pursue with any services. They just want to get out of the system and move on, do their own thing. I’m not talking about everybody because I have heard about some kids. Once they’re 18, they want to proceed and they want to stay in the system so that they can get further assistance. But the majority of my cases, they just don’t want anything to do with the department once they’re 18.

3.3.3. Negative developmental and child welfare case outcomes

In sum, all of the caseworkers agreed that the accumulation of risk factors coupled with barriers Latinos experience in the CWS may prolong permanency, delay reunification, and increase the likelihood that Latino children will suffer from negative developmental outcomes that often persist into adulthood (e.g., poor mental health, poverty, lack of high school education, criminal involvement, and substance abuse). To highlight an example, the following conversation between two social workers sheds light on the perplexing intersectionality of injustice and inequity.

Voice 1: In this area, social workers are dealing with gangs and a lot of domestic violence. A lot of these kids… may have been handling things for themselves for a while. The parents have not been home. There may be one parent. So they have a lot of issues by the time we start working with them because there’s trust issues.

Voice 2: Yeah. That’s one of the big things, is that a lot of the kids that are in our care, they have a lot of issues, a lot of baggage that they’ve brought. A lot of them have been coming to care since they were real tiny or have had a lot of contact with us and the parent — their parents
obviously have some deficiencies. By the time they’re teens, they have a lot of things going on, mental health, drugs, gangs. So, it makes it a lot harder to work with them.

Adding to that, as already discussed, Latinos are more likely to lack access to timely and culturally appropriate services to address risk factors, such as those mentioned in the brief excerpt above. This may subsequently prolong permanency and perpetuate the occurrence of negative developmental outcomes.

3.4. Protective factors

At the end of the focus group meeting, caseworkers were asked to discuss core strengths Latino children and families possess and to provide suggestions on what is needed to improve child welfare practice with Latino youth and families. These core strengths and practice suggestions were categorized and labeled as “protective factors.” As illustrated in the conceptual model that depicts the relationships between the core themes (see Fig. 2), it is possible that these salient protective factors may play a role in (1) reducing risk for initial CPS involvement, (2) addressing barriers Latinos might experience in the CWS, (3) increasing timely permanency and reunification, and (4) promoting positive child developmental outcomes.

3.4.1. Core strengths of Latino children and families

During the focus group meetings, all of the caseworkers readily identified core strengths Latino children and families possess. For example, they stressed that traditional values (e.g., familismo, respeto) promote health and well-being and “sustain” them. Due to the deep-rooted value and tradition of family, the caseworkers highlighted that when children are placed in the care and custody of DCFS, relatives are willing to be a placement resource as long as they do not risk deportation. Apart from care-giving responsibilities, relatives will often offer a helping hand without even being asked. For example, caseworkers reported that they assist with house cleaning, provide furniture, clothing, and/or food to support and sustain the DCFS-recommended relative placement.

While relatives are committed to “caring for their own” and ensuring the child stays within the family, birth parents are simultaneously deeply committed to engaging in services, if and when they are accessible, in order to facilitate reunification. One of the caseworkers and many others agreed that “they do not give up so easily” and ask for clarification as to what is expected of them when needed. However, in some situations, they may leave court proceedings without a clear understanding of what services they must comply with due to lack of translated court documents they can refer back to for reference. Fortunately, with the help and support of the caseworkers, coupled with the parents’ determination to ensure their children return home, many of them eventually gain more clarity. Moreover, during all of the focus group meetings, caseworkers reported that their clients’ friendly and approachable demeanor and their dedication to ensuring their children’s needs are met and cared for help promote rapport building and a positive helping relationship.

3.4.2. Caseworker engagement

Caseworkers can draw upon the strengths delineated above to effectively engage Latino parents and children to successfully complete court-ordered services. For example, many of the caseworkers noted, as highlighted in the quote below, that Latino clients are respectful toward social workers if approached respectfully and with good intentions.

I think if you approach them respectfully, they respond in kind. I’m not just talking about being polite and that kind of thing, but an understanding of their culture. I think it helps. I’ve seen… other workers who are not Hispanic and go out there with the right attitude, and Hispanic families respond to that. So, I don’t think it’s necessarily just from, for lack of a better way of saying it, a brown-on-brown kind of thing. If you approach a family with good intentions and a basic understanding or some understanding of their culture and a respect for that, they’ll respond better than having someone come in and use the authoritarian style.

Additional recommendations for effective engagement with Latino clients in the CWS were discussed at length. These recommendations

![Fig. 2. Pathways to service inequalities among Latinos in the child welfare system.](image-url)
include (1) practicing strength-based social work (e.g., approaching Latino clients with respect and humility), (2) possessing skills in community engagement (e.g., knowledge of and connection to culturally and linguistically appropriate community resources that supports their clients), (3) educating clients about their rights and entitlements to benefits, and (4) engaging in contextual social work practice (e.g., understanding and appreciating cultural differences and being open to learning what is important to their clients and what they value).

3.4.3. Caseworker recommendations to improve child welfare practice with Latinos

Finally, caseworkers were asked what would need to change to better serve Latino children and families while in the CWS. Their recommendations were grounded, more or less, in developing or refining organizational policies and procedures to provide them with the tools and resources they need to transform day-to-day practices. These recommendations included: (1) extending more time and supports to negotiate added demands (e.g., addressing language barriers, transporting clients long distance to access services and resources not readily available in the community, more time to establish rapport and trust) to effectively advocate for Latinos in the CWS; (2) ensuring staff adhere to agency mission, goals, and objectives; (3) hold staff retreats to build and maintain a positive organizational climate; (4) recruiting and retaining Latino caregivers; (5) hiring certified translators; (6) advocating for community representation to reflect the Latino population; (7) engaging in cross-system collaboration (e.g., sharing of information and resources); and (8) advocating more for Latino youth and teens to ensure their basic needs are met and they have access to tools and resources (e.g., Big Brother/Big Sister, independent living services, job training, college preparation) to successfully transition into adulthood.

Finally, during three of the focus group meetings, caseworkers wholeheartedly believed that successful completion of trainings and/or intensive workshops that provide employees with the skills to work more effectively with Latino children and families should be mandatory. For example, participants spoke at length about the “Undoing Racism” training series. The two-and-a-half-day training teaches individuals how to (1) analyze power, (2) define racism, (3) identify manifestations of racism, (4) learn from history, (5) share culture, and (6) organize to undo racism within systems and institutions and at the community level (James, Green, Rodriguez, & Fong, 2008). The workers reported that only a handful of caseworkers showed up to attend the non-mandatory training opportunity a few months before data were collected. This is unfortunate given that previous research showed that the training series is promising. James et al. (2008), in fact, reported that CPS workers are typically more open to discussion race and institutional racism regularly and are more sensitive in making case decisions as a result of completing the training. During three of the focus group meetings, all of the caseworkers stressed that ongoing education around cultural sensitivity and continued dialogue and reflection regarding personal biases and subsequent decision-making should be an upmost priority. Providing workers with time and space to attend a “mandatory” training on undoing racism training might help accomplish these goals.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore what factors might contribute to the growing number of Latinos in the CWS. Three primary themes dominated the focus group discussions: (1) risk factors for initial CWS involvement, (2) institutional barriers to accessing and utilizing services across systems of care, and (3) barriers children and teens face in accessing and utilizing effective services in the CWS. Finally, when asked directly, caseworkers identified numerous protective factors that may prevent out-of-home placement and/or facilitate the reunification process.

Fusing these themes together, it is hypothesized that the accumulation of barriers Latinos encounter in the CWS may play a significant role in the growing number of Latinos in the CWS and may be driving disparate outcomes in reunification rates and permanency outcomes. These barriers, as delineated in Fig. 2 and throughout this paper, include: inability to comply with services in a timely manner due to agency and policy inflexibility (e.g., limited community-based agency hours, long waiting lists, lack of bilingual/bicultural providers), lack of cross-system collaboration, lack of access to localized community-based services, language barriers and lack of appropriate and timely translation services, caseworker demands, lack of bilingual foster parents who are knowledgeable of Latino culture, and negative beliefs and attitudes about Latino teens need and/or willingness to engage in services. What follows is a brief discussion of (1) whether these barriers validate findings from the larger body of Latino mental health and child welfare services research, and (2) how findings may inform future directions for research, practice, and policy innovation.

4.1. Linking salient findings to inform research and policy innovation

A robust body of mental health research clearly documents that (1) lack of bilingual- and bicultural-trained Latino mental health providers, (2) limited operating hours, (3) complicated intake procedures, (4) lack of access to insurance, transportation, and monetary supports, and (5) lack of cross-system collaboration all contribute to and perpetuate disparities in service access and utilization among Latino children and adults (Gonzalez-Ramos & Gonzalez, 2005; Rivera, 2002). And, even when receiving care, Latino adults receive poor-quality mental health services (USDHHS, 2010) and are subsequently more likely to terminate services prematurely (JHH, 2005).

Findings suggest that these barriers also play a role in contributing to the growing number of Latinos in the CWS. All of the caseworkers in the current study agreed that Latino parents who are involved in the CWS encounter numerous barriers to accessing court-ordered services. Equally alarming, they stressed that these barriers contribute to not completing court-ordered service plans in a timely manner when, in fact, they are not provided fair and just opportunities to achieve reunification. As a few scholars emphasized (e.g., see Ayón, 2009; Capello, 2006; Suleiman, 2003) and as caseworkers in the current study discussed, ASFA requirements for a permanent plan to return home within 15 months is jeopardized because child welfare and community-based agencies lack the capacity to provide timely and appropriate services to parents in a language they understand. Suleiman (2003) goes as far to argue that this is a civil rights issue that warrants further attention.

To that end, efforts must be devoted to consistently and effectively offer services in Spanish. Capello (2006), in particular, highlights that lack of Spanish-language materials, limited bilingual/bicultural staff, and lack of sufficient on-site interpreters, as well as difficulties in recruiting, certifying, and retaining bilingual foster parents, are also a disservice to monolingual children who are placed in foster care. According to caseworkers, these circumstances increase the likelihood that Latino children will eventually lose their ability to communicate in Spanish and their deep-rooted ties to their native culture. Bausch and Serpe (1997) concur, adding that these circumstances increase the likelihood of experiencing ethnic identity conflict, not participating in cultural activities, and not being taught appropriate skills to cope with racism.

Current findings also underscore the need to develop policies and agency procedures to advocate for undocumented Latino youth and families who come to the attention of the CWS. Ayón (2009) found that non-English speaking Mexican families experience numerous barriers to services (e.g., long waiting lists, providers who lack experience in working with Mexican families, lack of transportation and insurance, inability to pay for services, limited Spanish-language
services). As Ayón concludes, and the current findings suggest, these barriers undermine undocumented parents’ ability to comply with court-ordered services to reunify with their children.

In our current anti-immigrant climate, some may question why more efforts should be devoted to advocating for undocumented immigrants who are involved in the CWS. As many of the caseworkers argued, children, regardless of the circumstances, deserve to be with their parents. The mission of DCFS is to ensure children are protected and to provide supports to ensure reunification ensues. When this mission is not upheld, grief is deeply felt and the loss associated with severing ties to native family, relatives, culture, traditions, and language is profound (Delaney, 2002; Festinger, 1983).

To make matters worse, information on the number of children of immigrants who are involved in the CWS and the ways in which culture and context influence safety, permanency, and well-being is lacking (Johnson, 2007). Previous research (e.g., Detlaff & Rycraft, 2010; Johnson, 2007) underscores the need to (1) develop policies that require the systematic data collection of demographic and service needs among the immigrant population in the CWS and (2) implement specialized training on immigration policy, eligibility for services, and acculturation dynamics for child welfare caseworkers. Training may include educating caseworkers and child welfare administrators on ways to support immigrant youth in foster care in attaining citizenship in the U.S. For example, the participants in this study were either not aware of or did not reference the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) statute, which is a relief option that allows undocumented dependent youth in long-term foster care to obtain an immigrant visa and apply for permanent residence before the age of 18 (Chen, 2000; Xu, 2005). Immigration policy and culturally sensitive practice are critical substantive areas that should be incorporated into new hire and ongoing staff trainings.

Lack of services in close proximity to where Latinos reside was another salient finding that emerged during data collection. In many cases, there is often a clear divide between the number of services that are available in rural versus urban areas, with the former lacking resources to support the community. Findings warrant further examination of how and where resources are distributed and allocated to ensure the basic needs of the community are met. All of the caseworkers agreed that lack of access to services and resources places an undue burden on their clients, and they agree that they do not have sufficient time to transport clients to other geographic urban areas where services are more readily available.

Smith and Donovan (2003), who interviewed frontline caseworkers, would argue that these organizational pressures (time limitations, lack of resources) perpetuate and prolong disengaging relationships between clients and providers. In particular, they concluded that when experiencing organizational pressures, caseworkers are more likely to focus on parents who are easier to help and attribute failure to parental resistance. These findings are in stark contrast to what the caseworkers reported in the current study. While they agreed that organizational pressures impact how much time they allocate to each case and often contribute to working long hours, they reported working diligently to motivate parents to engage in services to promote positive change and achieve reunification. Further examination of how organizational climate impacts case outcomes among Latinos is warranted.

Moreover, future research must be devoted to addressing the multiple forms of violence and trauma (child abuse, domestic violence, and gang involvement) that Latino children and families may experience. An emerging body of literature suggests that community violence, coupled with other forms of violence and trauma, may increase risk for experiencing mental health and behavior problems among maltreated Latino youth (Aisenberg, Garcia, Ayón, Trickett, & Mennen, 2007; Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008). To that end, uniform assessment of exposure to multiple forms of violence should be standard practice in child welfare case proceedings.

4.2. Linking salient findings to inform practice

As noted in Section 3.4.3, caseworkers provided pertinent recommendations to improve child welfare practice with Latino youth and families. Of these suggestions, caseworkers repeatedly cited the need to ensure Latino children and families have access to and utilize culturally competent services. McBeath, Briggs, and Aisenberg (2009) argue that “it is important for child welfare agencies to tailor service provision to the potentially different preferences and service expectations of culturally-dissimilar groups” (p. 117). Rivera (2002) offers the following recommendations to accomplish this goal: (1) agencies attempting to make themselves accessible to Latino communities should take a closer look at the ways of conducting community outreach and planning, implementations, and delivery of services; (2) children, families, and staff should participate in the process of gathering information about the community, its resources, cultural traditions, values, and migration histories; and (3) service providers must maintain open channels of communication. Rivera adds that face-to-face interactions between providers and clients are essential and help build confianza (confidence and trust), which implies pure friendship based on mutual trust, understanding, and appreciation. The implementation of these recommendations, along with caseworker suggestions to improve practice, would hold institutions more accountable in addressing disproportionality and ensuring timely permanency and positive developmental outcomes among Latino youth and families in the CWS. Current study protocol, for example, calls for sharing findings and holding informational meetings with line staff and supervisors. In a concerted effort to bridge the widening gap between social work science and practice, next steps may then involve organizing community team coalitions to implement and sustain practice recommendations within local communities and agencies.

Finally, research focusing on the contentious issue of disparities would be incomplete without highlighting the structural inequities that linger across all human services agencies. A careful read of the current data, for example, reveals the reflection of societal racism in the behaviors of institutional and individual entities serving Latinos in the CWS. The caseworkers identified overt signs of institutional racism when they provided numerous examples of how Latinos experience barriers to achieving familial permanency and stability (see Fig. 2). One of the caseworkers, for example, stated, “I don’t think that the state has ever been really prepared to deal with or understand the cultural aspects of Hispanic families.” This statement underscores one of the major findings of this study: that despite its best intentions, the CWS struggles as an institution to effectively serve Latino clients and falls particularly short of their ideals with regard to undocumented Latino families in the provision of translation services and in providing equitable access to community resources for Latino children and families. Undoubtedly, institutional disparities in the provision of services adversely impact the well-being, safety, and permanency of Latino youth in care.

In addition to the institutional factors that appear to contribute to racial and ethnic disparities, the discourse used by some of the caseworkers reveals a transmission of societal injustices into services directly through the worker’s professional practice. For example, some caseworkers stated that “Latino youth do not aspire to engage in services or attend college” and that they do not “want to pursue with any services... get out of the system and move on, do their own thing.” This mentality may undermine youths’ desire to engage in services and take advantage of opportunities that increase success as they transition into adulthood. Numerous scholars (e.g., Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Sue et al., 2007) argue that Latinos and other communities of color may progressively lose hope and aspiration to engage in services due to exposure to daily microaggressions. Defined as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 3), microaggressions may convey mixed messages regarding
whether providers believe or hope their clients can succeed, engage, and establish familial permanency. This study underscores the need to further examine how daily microaggressions impact case decision-making and the nature of the relationship between clients and providers.

4.3. Limitations

While the study adds a valuable contribution to understanding Latinos' experiences in the CWS, there are limitations to highlight. First of all, heterogeneity within each of the focus groups, whether based on race/ethnicity, gender, position, and length of time working for the agency, may have impacted what and how much participants were willing and able to report. For example, all of the participants in Focus Group C were Caucasians who did not discuss as much certain challenges Latinos might encounter relative to participants in other focus group meetings (e.g., barriers to accessing court-ordered services, risk factors, foster care placement matching). Did this pattern of reporting emerge in Focus Group C due to the inability to relate to the other participants who speak Spanish and do not have to rely on translators to engage with monolingual clients? Did the researcher's own identity as the only Latino in the room impact their level of comfort in reporting?

To ensure each participant had an equal opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences, study protocol involved asking if others agreed with new ideas and themes that emerged and if anyone wanted to expand upon those respective ideas during each of the focus group meetings. Furthermore, while they also had the opportunity to individually share experiences after the focus group meetings via phone or e-mail, none of participants contacted the principal investigator to engage in further discussion. These methods, however, may not have been sufficient to address all issues pertaining to inclusion and exclusion. As the sole facilitator, the principal investigator’s time was devoted to focusing primarily on content, framing questions, keeping the groups engaged, and establish familial permanency. This study underscores the growing numbers of Latinos entering and remaining in the child welfare system.

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Appendix A. Focus group guide

1a. What strengths do Latinos families possess that could help address the growing numbers of Latinos entering and remaining in the child welfare system?
1b. What are some of the positive aspects of working with Latino families in the child welfare system? What do you think works well in serving the needs of Latino families?
1c. How can these positive aspects help ensure safety and permanency?
2a. Tell me about the ages of Latino children you work with. Which age groups (i.e., infants, toddlers, preschool age children, preadolescents, adolescents) are the most difficult to work with? Why?
2b. What do you think works well in ensuring that the needs of Latino teens are met when they age out of foster care?
3. What challenges do you encounter in advocating for Latino children and families who are in the child welfare system?
4a. Tell me about the ability of Latino children and families to access and utilize services to prevent placement.
4b. Tell me about the ability of Latino children and families to access and utilize services to achieve permanency.
5a. What factors contribute to timely, safe, and successful permanency for Latino children?
5b. What factors hinder timely, safe, and successful permanency?
6. Tell me about your experiences in working with Latinos who have recently immigrated to the U.S.
7. To what extent do caseworker trainings cover content on issues related to working with Latino children and families in the child welfare system?

Prompts: To what extent do they cover content on Latino values and customs, immigration experiences, acculturation, racial bias, addressing language barriers and accessibility to culturally sensitive services and providers?
8a. What do you think needs to change to better serve Latino children and families’ needs when in the child welfare system?
8b. What do you think needs to change to better serve Latino teens when they age out of foster care?

Prompts: What supports do you need to improve child welfare practice with Latino children and families on your caseload? What needs to change within the organization?

What needs to change within Latino families? What needs to change within society?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

References


