

**Episode 54 - Joyce James, LMSW-AP and Carlyne Rodriguez, MSW:  
Addressing Disproportionality: Promising Practice Innovations**

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University of Buffalo School of Social Work is making a difference every day through that generation and transmission of knowledge. Promotion of social justice and service to humanity. We offer MSW and PHD programs continuing education programs and credits online courses licensure exam preparation professional seminars and certificates and much much more. To learn more about the Eubie School of Social Work please visit [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). Hi from Buffalo home of 70 degrees September days and great sleeping 50 degree nights. I'm your host Peter Sobota. What can happen when social workers collaborate across organizational boundaries to pursue common goals. In this episode Carlyne Rodriguez and Joyce James share their experiences and data as they explore how much why and how to address minority groups overrepresentation in Texas's child welfare system. Our guests discuss how they looked at existing data in a new way hypothesize why disparities exist and how they seize the political moment to gather support for remedial interventions with tactics that are likely familiar to social workers Rodriguez and James discuss the training leadership development and community engagement framework they developed attempting to bring about change in the disproportionality they identified in their literature and data review. They discuss how policymakers and practitioners and social work educators are responding to their collaborative efforts and common on how they believe social workers can address disproportionality in their unique areas.

[00:02:16] Rodriguez and James conclude with a reflective discussion about the impact of their long term collaboration. Joyce James L. MSW AP is the deputy commissioner for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Ms. James has received national recognition as the founder of Hope helping our people excel. A community initiative addressing the issue of overrepresentation of African American children into the Department of Family Protective Services. Ms. James has received numerous awards including the Betsy Rosenbaum Award presented to a public child welfare leader who has demonstrated a commitment to advancing child welfare issues on behalf of children and families. Ms. James is also a private child welfare consultant Carlyne Rodriguez MSW is director of Texas strategic consulting for Casey Family Programs in Austin Texas. Casey is the nation's largest operating foundation dedicated to providing improving and preventing foster care. Dr. Adjoa Robinson is assistant professor at Eubie School of Social Work. She is also the cohost of our podcast series. She interviewed Ms. James and Ms Rodriguez by telephone. This is Adjoa Robinson host of Living Proof podcast series. And today my guest star Joyce James deputy commissioner for child protective services. Texas Department of Family Protective Services in Austin and Carlyne Rodriguez senior director of Texas strategic consulting for Casey Family Programs in Austin. Thank you both for joining me today. Joyce James what is disproportionality what's the scope of the problem and why should it be important to practitioners and policy makers to understand this issue disproportionality which is often referred to as overrepresentation and always like to say that it's a new name for an age old problem.

[00:04:14] It is the overrepresentation of a particular race or ethnicity within a system. And we are referring of course to child protective services. And it's as compared to the representation of that population in the general overall population. And in Texas we have disproportionality as it relates to African-Americans as well as Native Americans although we have a very small population of Native Americans. And just to give you a sense of the magnitude of the problem. African-American children make up approximately 12 percent of their Texas child population and they represent

approximately 33 percent of the children who are in the waiting for a permanent seat within the foster care system. And what I'm saying about the magnitude of this problem and why it's important for practitioners disproportionality exists more African-American children in every child welfare system in every state in the country. And so it's a huge issue. It's been around for a long time and it's an issue that we all have to be concerned Ms. Rodriguez Carolyn Rodriguez what was the impetus addressing disproportionality in Texas. Well we had been partners with the Department of Family and Protective Services around a series of reform issues that were coming up around kinship care and also around transition of young adults out of the foster care system. And when Joyce James became the assistant commissioner for child protective services given her own history of having worked on and looked at this issue in the region that she had led for quite some time in the East Texas area. She really wanted to take a look at this issue at the state level and use some of the similar approaches to doing so for example engaging community around looking at resource capacity.

[00:06:28] What data was telling them about who they were serving and who they were not serving and what the outcomes were and really begin to look at that across the state. And so in the course of this state strategy work that we were engaged in with the department we sat down very quickly after Joyce became the assistant commissioner and began to look at adding the issue of disproportionality to our work plan. And I think it was really out of a sense of urgency that surely there was more that we could know about what the data at the state level would tell us about the disparities in outcomes for the youth by race and ethnicity which we really had not known before. And so the strategies that were put in place were really to address that sense of urgency about ensuring equity for all youth and families that were served by the department. And I'd just like to add this is Joyce James that part of the move toward addressing disproportionality in Texas you know had to do with a commitment to looking differently at our data. And part of the work that I had initiated at the regional level before coming to state office was to begin pulling data by race and ethnicity to really take a closer look at our system to help us in identifying any inequities. What were the challenges the barriers. You know why was it that we were seeing the disparities that we were seeing related to certain groups by race within our system and so doing that work at the regional level.

[00:08:12] Mr. Rodriguez mentioned really that next natural step was to begin to use that model to look at data across the state and actually what we saw at the state level mirror what we saw at the region. That in every region in the state of Texas. When we looked at the data we saw disproportionality for African-American children and it was just you know real timely in that we were already partnering with Casey Family Programs to add the youth as one of our strategies in that case had already been doing this work across the country just not in Texas. And so it was really timely for them and they were actually really eager to partner with them and expand its work effort across the state of Texas. Carolyn there had also been a fairly developed model for looking at the issue at the community level when the work was done in the East Texas region and we had sort of a natural progression to include that in our work as we came up with an expansion plan which would be to begin to assemble community members community leaders and the leaders of other Child and Family Services systems to help look at the issue and hear from them about the needs of their community. That along with parents and young people who had actually experience the foster care system to authenticate what the needs really were as it related to access and their experience of having been part of not only the child welfare system but other systems as well. So Joyce James one of the things you mentioned was the disparity and why the disparity. Did you find some answers about that in looking at data. We realize for example the magnitude of disproportionality when you looked at for example the representation of African-American children in the general population.

[00:10:21] And then you looked at removal rates for them. We looked at things such as which families by race and ethnic we're receiving services in their own homes. And then looking at the children who were in the foster care system waiting for permanency when we looked at that and

looked at the same types of data elements for Anglo children and for Hispanic children we did not find the same level of disparity. And you know just to say that's part of what is what happened in Texas at the state level in engaging in that work at the regional level and then partnering immediately with Casey Family Programs at the state level. We were really positioned when the Texas governor actually issued an order for investigation of our system. We were positioned with that data and it actually led to a requirement for us to do an assessment of our enforcement actions and if they were disproportionate against any particular group we were actually required to develop a remediation plan. And so we found those disparities actually in our assessment we found for example you mentioned the factors. We found that for example poverty was a strong predictor of whether or not a child would be removed from their home. We know that African-American families in our state are disproportionately poor. But even when we took into consideration factors of poverty and single parent households we still had the disproportionality. So it raised the question of whether or not there was anything related to racial bias.

[00:12:04] And in our second review we actually came to the conclusion that possibly racial bias also played a role in the disparities that we were seeing and we have actually develop our whole work plan and strategy around these issues. So is that where the undoing racism courses come in. Yes. And I notice Joyce James that you have a three pronged approach to addressing disproportionality the underlying racism leadership development and community engagement. Can you kind of talk about each of these and why they're important to addressing adequately addressing the problem of disproportionality. Well it became clear to me early on in this work that inside of the organization we first of all need to know the system. So the data really looking at the data about race and ethnicity to help inform us about our system and then bringing leaders to the table just look at the data to question why it is the way it is to understand what the data is telling us. And then to develop those strategies that we need to develop to create equity within our system. And so the first piece of our work in which case two family programs was also a partner was the leadership development the bringing together the top levels of management from each region of the state. And then our state office staff to examine the data and to develop our vision and values around what we wanted our system to look like.

[00:13:43] And that is what laid the foundation for us to be ready for training like Undoing Racism training which is very powerful in terms of understanding the history of race and institutionalized racism and how it came to be in our country and using that to help us to really figure out how to undo the inequities that we are seeing in the system and having leaders really look internally and examine our own racial biases in terms of how we make decisions and really began into as we refer to it as a result of their leadership development and the development of the vision and values and going through the training beginning to see families through New Orleans understand the culture and history of the communities that we work with and the people that come from those communities having a better understanding of why people are poor instead of our broad stereotypes about how we had previously categorized certain communities and certain people that come from certain communities and really go into those communities and experience in their training with people from the community with some of the parents that were involved in our system with young people with other systems and have in the types of courageous conversations that has ultimately led to a cultural and philosophical shift in our thinking and now operating from a place of what decisions we want made for our own children youth and families. And we've seen that result in some decline in disproportionality and some improved outcomes for all of our children youth and family because this work so it's focused on African-American children and families and Native American children and families. Our ultimate goal is to improve the system for all children and families. We're seeing some of that. Carolyn Rodriguez your bailiwick so to speak is the community engagement piece. Tell us what that was like and how that was developed.

[00:15:56] Well I think as a partnership we did exactly as Joyce was addressing around leadership

development and the foundation piece of our training and then also looking at a model that I mentioned earlier which is a community strategy that includes a one stop center in a small community in East Texas which Joyce had created in terms of its vision and its future development. We took some of the elements from that which really bring to bear on community partnerships as sort of the cornerstone of addressing disproportionality and making sure that community members and partners and system leaders understand what disproportionality is. And we felt that we needed a model that was very dependent on data as an approach data being the driving force for any strategies that are done. And we sort of began to see what became a four stage model for us which was very interdependent in terms of its stages but discrete in the sense that they can be fairly uniquely described. The first had to do was community awareness and engagement where you really begin to make the problem visible and make sure that data is shared with the community and other agencies and begin to tell the story of disproportionality as it relates to families and youth in the system and really trying to get people on board to help lead work at the community level around this. And our second stage really is the community leadership piece where the leadership really goes beyond ones own organization and is really inclusive of community strategies as well. And it's a sense that communities begin to claim responsibility for what happens to the people that live in them. And it's done from a strength based perspective where communities are viewed as Joy says through a different lens. They're viewed through the strength that they have that they know what their history is and they can tell us what works for them and what really doesn't.

[00:18:18] Our model really became one of creating community advisory committees who would be in each of the different regions in Texas 11 regions. Then looking at how that community group helps guide what's done to address the problem from the community organizing stage which is the third stage of our model you're really actually being guided actively by the community and bringing community members to the table as key informants of what the work should look like and ensuring that community members including parents are given an opportunity for meaningful contribution to the kind of strategies that are applied and really being guided through the anti-racist principles of the undoing racism training as a way to be sort of a touchstone of whether you're living the values that you said you were wedded to. And then finally the stage of community accountability which has to do with results and outcomes that are measurable can we really see a difference. At the end of a particular project or work effort or strategy has it really helped us reduce disproportionality for not. And is the work that we've done in a community sustainable.

[00:19:41] Often you'll find that there are projects that happen but they end and then communities really don't have a way to keep things going that are working for families and we say that sustainability is really the ultimate goal that you want to make sure in this work that you leave communities and families in a better place and the belief that communities can and do have capacity to be the owners of their own solutions and that they will keep things moving as long as you invest in them as an area of string and then making sure that communities are also accountable back to the systems that are supporting them. So a sense of mutual accountability for the work that we do what we did in our work. We really tried to build on what we learned about the history. We've had an actual state level evaluation that's been underway that looks at factors that create this proportionality or might contribute to it. And we've we've used our community engagement model as a real active way to make sure there is a consistent approach even though it's tailored differently based on the region that you're in. There's consistent elements to the way families are engaged. The white community is respected the way the systems are brought to the table and so forth. And so we now have that model actively in force in all the parts of the regions that are up and running. And this is journalist James and I just want to say that the importance of that community engagement model is really that mutual accountability and it really lead to spend a lot of time in communities getting to know communities from a different point of view from a strength base perspective really giving community the opportunity to share and what they need from our system versus us sitting in our offices and making decisions about what we think people in certain communities need. It's been

a real eye opener to hear from community and to have them have an equal voice at the table with us in for example designing the first program that we did at the regional level Project Hope which stands for helping our people excel.

[00:22:12] Going to that community and recognizing that we were removing children from that community yet we had not put any resources in place in that community nor had anyone else and so it was a really blighted community without access to services. And so that first community engagement model of the onestop service center we shifted how we do business as well. Not only were we asking families in communities that we work with change but we also were willing to change in that we developed a model where we took our services to the community and we partner with other child and family service systems to bring their services to one central location within that community and to invite community in to tell us was this something that was going to be effective for now. What other kinds of services that they need. And it's been an ongoing partnership and it is the again the foundation for the expansion of the community engagement model where each community comes in and can talk about what their unique needs are and at the same time community and can share with you know what their contributions will be to address this issue tellen Rodriguez you mentioned earlier when you're speaking about meaningful contributions by the community can you give an example of a meaningful contribution that was made by one of the communities that actually resulted in some sort of change with the way that you were doing. Well one that really resonates for me and it goes back to the earliest stages of our statewide expansion is when we began the work in the Houston Texas region. We had a fair number of parents who were serving on the advisory group. One in particular stands out. And she was at that time receiving services from Child Protective Services.

[00:24:14] Her children actually were with her in her home at the time but she had had services directly from them and she took on herself took it upon herself to do a small survey in her housing project area among residents who frankly some of them were not involved with CPS but some were and she asked questions she came up with roughly seven or eight questions as I remember that she asked the group. It was roughly a group of about 15 parents. What kinds of needs they had and why did they feel that they were worried about their children and what was making their community areas seem so at risk and vulnerable. And questions like that. And she came back with having had her discussion with information that was fairly basic to those families the ability to simply get through the day. We need transportation. We need a grocery store close to our house. We need after school activities for our children we need community police approaches in our neighborhood and things that were indirectly the kinds of services that Child Protective Services might ever provide. These were things that they needed from the broader system and community. And so we documented her survey and its results and we use that document as a way to begin to define what community area the work would begin in in the Houston region. We looked at maps that were provided by the city zoning office and looked at them deeply around where the employment gaps were where the highest dropout rates were from school where the unemployment rates were the greatest where the resources were the least available.

[00:26:21] And through that data along with the data that we've been talking about earlier around looking at disproportionality statistics and data we were able to make a stronger case for why the work should begin in a certain series of zip codes in the Houston region. So really taking the information that a parent can easily get from just conversations with their community members and taking that and turning that into something useful that was used as a key piece of information to help define where the work would start in. What is the largest region of the state. My feeling is that you have to be willing to see families in a way that really elevates their strength and who better than this particular parent to get information from her constituents to help inform the process. And this is Joyce James advice. Just the fact that we have actually seen examples of this across the state we have seen parents who initially came in to voice their input about what kind of services they needed

to maintain their children or make their family healthy and whole. Actually because they felt so empowered and a part of our work efforts become leaders side by side with us in a game in engaging by that parent. We for example in the area where we've heard stories that work now have one of the parents who was initially a recipient of services. Now be a case manager who's delivering services to other parents and engaging them in the process around address and disproportionality prevention efforts to you know ensure that maybe they never even come to the attention of the Child Protective Services system. We have apparently it parenting classes parent led and woman women Ssempala make classes.

[00:28:21] That's being facilitated by people who initially came to us for help themselves. It sounds like there's gone really positive way and that sustainability piece is actually happening. So that's a great response from the community. James Joyce how has policymakers and practitioners responded to your efforts. Well you know I'm really excited to say that although the work efforts around disproportionality it actually back in 1996 was when the work first started at the regional level and then at the state level in 2004. Again because we were really committed to looking at data about race and ethnicity and bringing all of that work from the regional level to the state level. We got our legislators attention when we shared the data. And so Texas was one of the first state to have a state law that says we will address disproportionality. And so policy makers have responded positively after we provided the initial assessment which is on our Web site. We were given allocated resources to do this work. We were given positions to have a state level disproportionality manager as well as a policy specialist at the state level and we have disproportionality specialists who work internally with our staff as well as with the communities in every region of the state. And so I would say it's been very positive in terms of giving us resources but also in terms of holding us accountable for the remediation plan that we've put forward. We have developed many relationships with universities.

[00:30:07] And so I would say that practitioners have been at the table with us since we started the work at the state level and that they came to the table with us and have been a part of this work not only at the state level by serving on the state task force but as well as being involved with us that the community level Holston focus group doing research efforts to help us find out what the community's needs are and document in those efforts for us. The other thing is to really go through the underlying racism training with review and the data with us and come into a common vision with us that this work has to take place in all of these various systems including in universities with new social workers who are just coming into the real having a clear understanding of why it's important to understand the history and culture of institutionalized racism and why it's important to really understand the question that we always have. Even to in interviews now we ask people who want to work for. You know while people poor and old coming together around this issue has really led to what I consider to be some really philosophical shift in culture and thinking in universities and I'd like to give you just one example. We invited in some of our partners from one of our universities to go through the ongoing racism workshop with us. And in the course of the discussions that take place in that workshop we were talking about how African-American and Hispanic youth were not doing well in the local school district and that they were not graduating from high school at the same rate as their Anglo peers and therefore not going on to higher ed.

[00:32:02] Well it created a conversation around what needs to happen in the education department at that in that university in terms of how they train teachers to work in poor communities to work with families that come from poor communities as a way to maybe change some of the statistics that we were seeing related to poor outcomes for youth of color. And so it's having that type of impact on systems. We've also as you may know by looking at some of our documents have seen some of our university partners began to look at implementing disproportionality as part of the curriculum for new caseworkers feeling that the research the assessment that we've done the work that we've done to engage communities are looking at the data to understand and the history and

culture is important for someone who is going to graduate and become part of the staff at Child Protective Services that if you come in with a foundational knowledge or around institutionalized racism and the history of that that we're in a better position to actually work with many of the families and youth that we engage with in our system. It's fantastic. Carolyn Rodriguez what can social workers who are not in your area in Texas. What can they do to start to address disproportionality. Well I think that not unlike the way this began in Texas it really takes some curiosity and questioning about what they're seeing on their caseload if their social workers on their unit level if they're a manager and and even broader if you're in a public system and you manage several units and several managers to really question what you're seeing in terms of who you're serving what the data is telling you and raising questions about it and asking curious questions about why certain children seem to be presenting for service more than others.

[00:34:13] Why are the outcomes not as good perhaps for this particular group or as it's compared to others and are families getting equitable service across the types of services that are offered by a particular organization. Just really asking the questions because I think if you don't even begin there even if you're a social worker and you don't have so much power and influence in a particular position you're in. You still can raise the questions about those families that you are responsible for on a day to day basis. This is George James and this is not easy work. As a matter of fact it involves a certain level of risk taken because it's hard to introduce the idea that institutionalized racism exists and to get people to accept that we may be treating certain groups differently based on how we make decisions. And I want to say that those decisions are not always conscious decisions and so we have to be really careful about how we introduce this work to people. But one of the most critical elements of this work is having leadership who communicates that it's important that we do this work. Leadership who understands the importance of addressing this issue and who can communicate and give authority to their direct practice staff and their their managers the OK to question and to do this work. The one of the most powerful tools is the data because it is what it is. And so a willingness to examine the data is really key because that's where a system will be able to determine whether or not there for whatever reason there is any difference in terms of outcomes for the children youth and families that they serve. Joyce James you mentioned this.

[00:36:08] It is really difficult work and it's important to have leadership. What has the role of having that partnership with Casey played in sort of supporting this work. Well I I just like to say that it's been fantastic in terms of the level of support. And Casey has made a direct impact on our ability to actually elevate this work expand it across the state get it down to the community level because of the technical assistance and support. And because of their commitment the anti-racist practice as well. And that when you have a partner with someone who has a common belief in who shares a common vision for addressing this issue then it really serves to strengthen our ability to move forward in doing this work. And so Casey has helped us to not only document our work and provide support for our leadership development pieces of our work they've also supported bringing the under and racism training and there has been direct support for helping us to develop our state level and community advisory committees. They have been in the room when we were in the room. They've been willing to be in the room with community partners even when we can't be there. They've helped us to develop our strategic plans have really helped us to do peer learning with other systems in other states that are doing this work. And it's I would say that we would not be where we are in this process without that support. And Carlo Rodriguez how has the partnership been for Casey working with the Texas Department of Family Protective Services.

[00:37:57] Well I often tell Joyce that it's really been an honor to work on this work because it's to me it's the most authentic work you can do and especially from the perspective of the engagement that it allows with with families and communities. I think that the commitment to this issue has been perceived by our national organization as really unprecedented. I mean we have been excited to provide resources for this and be engaged in the process since it really started at the state level.

And actually my initial involvement in it was to come to a meeting that Joyce had held in her region about this back in the 90s. So I had some idea of what was happening then but the idea that we would spread this work statewide was really well received and has continued to be a major part of our state strategy plan each year since then. So certainly since 2004 we've made this a very strong priority in our budget. I think the opportunities to help co-lead the task force at the state level has been a really good experience for my own involvement. I actually helped facilitate the beginning work with the advisory committees in some of our regions back when the work first started in 2005 after we positioned it into our plan in 04. And so it's been a real opportunity and I think the testimony there too is that many states and many jurisdictions across the country have asked for technical assistance from Casey along with the department more specifically myself and enjoy to actually talk to them about the history of our work together how it all took shape what led to the strategies that we've selected and all of the things that you've been asking about in interviews.

[00:40:01] So I think just the fact that people have known about this work and it's become very visible has been an important piece for Casey as well. And if I might just add another small piece on that this is Joyce James having a partner like Casey who operates at the national level has really been important to me as an individual in terms of the impact that I think this work can have and it has allowed for the work in Texas in partnership with Casey to be elevated in many other systems across the state. As Carolyn mentioned where we've been asked to provide technical assistance and I say that because my commitment around this work was started regional. When I had the opportunity to expand it statewide. I was just really excited. And I believe that this work is so important and so critical to equity all children youth and families in the child welfare system that any opportunity to spread and share the strategies and the practice models that we have used in Texas with others across the country it just really helped me to realize my vision for what I would like to see happen with this work. And so it's personal as well as having Casey as a partner has really helped to spread that work so that it touches the lives of Children Youth and Families beyond Texas. Well that's all the questions I have for both of you.

[00:41:34] Is there anything that you wanted to cover that we haven't covered yet or any final statement either if you wanted to make one thing I would like to say This is Carolyn that if people that are hearing this particular broadcast want information specifically that they can find online or if they'd like information sent to them. We're happy to provide that. And so there are places on the Casey Web site Kacie dot org and also on the Department of Family Protective Service Web site where reports can be located. We have a chronicle that was written two or three years ago I guess and it really tells the story of the work in Texas that people can access through the Casey Web site. So just to say that we certainly want to be a follow up resource as well as people want further information. And this is Joyce James. One last thing I'd like to add is that we are really continuing to work hard to embed the philosophy and the understanding of disproportionality and how we contribute to a system of institutionalized racism so that we can really work on those strategies to undo the inequities. To the point where we've actually integrated Casey knowing who you are training into our new work or curriculum and so at the point that a new case worker comes into our system they are introduced to this cultural competency training and also to the understanding of the history of child welfare in this country so that they are clear about the fact that African-American children did not enter the child welfare system until the late 50s early 60s. And by the 80s were disproportionately represented in the system so that they had that a judicial understanding of the issue as they move into direct practice within our system. And that's an area that Casey has provided support to us on as well.

[00:43:44] Well Joyce James and Carolyn Rodriguez I want to thank you for taking the time to do this podcast and for the important work that you're doing on disproportionality and addressing it in Texas in and around the nation and it's inspiring to see this system change worked and how it is actually changing systems and lives. Thank you. Thank you so much for the opportunity. It's our



pleasure. You've been listening to Carolyne Rodriguez and Joyce James discussing their work addressing disproportionality in the Texas child welfare system and living proof. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.