

Episode 90 - Dr. Priscilla Gibson: Disproportional Suspension Among African American Youth: The Experience of Kinship Caregivers

[00:00:08] Welcome to living through a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at 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. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed our podcasts as evidenced by the more than 200000 downloads to date thanks to you all. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening. And we look forward to hearing from you. This podcast airs at a time when President Barack Obama has proposed raising the mandatory school age to 18 in hopes of reducing the dropout rate and its associated negative consequences. Yet under zero tolerance policies thousands of elementary middle and high school students have become virtual dropouts due to multiple and extended suspensions. What is more such suspensions have high emotional and relational costs for grandparents providing kinship care in addition to the educational costs experienced by the child. Priscilla Gibson is an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota.

[00:02:14] Dr. Gibson is a licensed independent clinical social worker with over 25 years of direct social work practice experience. Dr. Gibson's research interests include African-American grandmothers and other older caregivers in kinship care arrangements. In a telephone interview Dr. Gibson spoke with me about her current qualitative research exploring the experiences of kinship caregivers parenting African-American children who are disproportionately suspended under school zero tolerance policies my guest today is Dr Priscilla Gibson. Thank you for joining us Dr. Gibson. Thank you for having me. So Dr. Gibson one of your interest is in African-American grandmothers as kinship care providers. What do we know about African-American grandmothers as kinship providers. What literature is really rich. We know they're disproportionately African-American grandmothers except this role as kinship care provided despite our low income and limited resources. We also know that they're invested in their grandchildren and do not want the grandchildren to be placed in foster care with strangers. We know that they also want their grandchildren to afford it. The social problem that is being experienced by their parents and unfortunately overwhelmingly that's drug abuse. And while some parents that things happen to parents for no fault of their own there are the majority of the situations is because of neglect from drug abuse. And that grandparents experience intense emotional feelings about their adult children having social problems and continue to support them as much as they can. And we know that the caregivers grandparents were self supporting were not using governmental assistance at all prior to assuming the role as caregivers.

[00:04:34] However after assuming the role they found that they needed governmental help financial support and the kind of social support legal concerns are huge for this population and they really struggled with whether to get legal custody of the children or to wait until the adult parents get their act together and return to effective parenting. Actually that is their hope. It doesn't always happen. We know anything about sort of the percentages of an American grandparent. So that is a what percentage is the numbers. There are two pieces to that. Number one there are two kinds of kinship care. There is the formal kinship care where people in the child welfare system. And so data on that population is easily obtainable. Then there are informal situations where grandparents assumed the role and need to decide whether they will indeed report that to people like census

takers. And that is a concern for researchers because we don't essentially know how many people are in informal kinship care we assume there there are more in informal informal but those situations are very hard to get numbers for. The situations occur and then children return to their homes so they're really dynamic they're not stable. Why my kinship provider not records that they're doing this for a reason. Why not take it a formal. There are a variety of reasons from the community that if people in the child protection system find out about the informal caregiving situation then they will come and take the child to care to not wanting to be public about the problems of their adult children to wanting to protect their grandchildren from any stigma or harsh scrutiny. By the public by the community.

[00:07:03] You mentioned one of the sort of impacts of kinship care and that was the need for additional financial assistance either other impacts on the grants or as a result of kinship care giving. Yes. One of the huge impacts is a change in lifestyle. And so grandparents who become primary caregivers and that's a situation that I explore. So I look at situations where the grandparent is totally in charge of this grandchild and the biological parents are not in the household. That's the change in them lifestyles. They then need to do more activities around being a parent being a caregiver and at their stage in life they have less peers who are doing better and need to find people who are caregiving. They need support and they find out that indeed they don't have as much information or knowledge about their grandchild as they thought they had. And buzz around the country there are these support groups grandparents as parents that are sometimes funded by different organizations to not only provide information to grandparents about resources. Provide them with support to maintain the caregiving relationship but also for them to talk about and meet with the grandparents who are in similar situations. Now you're conducting some research and examining caregiver experiences of school suspensions. How do you assess this topic come about. I was working on an evaluation tragic with another entity at the University of Minnesota. It's called CAREI which stands for the Center for Applied Research for educational improvement. And CAREI had been hired by a school district to evaluate the views of students parents and administrators on new programs that were just instituted.

[00:09:27] And during that time I participated in many meetings in which the suspension rates were discussed and parent involvement was also discussed and I became really interested in parents and caregivers views about suspensions and particularly how they could mitigate the suspensions of their children. And so I wrote a proposal on the prefunded suspension is a big problem in the African-American community in Minnesota. It is such a problem that no one entity I think it's called the Department of Crime and testis calls a suspension of African-American males an epidemic proportions and it is seen as a pipeline from school to jail. It is seen as not educating a whole generation of African-American males. It causes distance between the child and the school and so that child sometimes not return are goes back with an attitude that then ends up with their child results in their child or dropping out of school. So it is a huge problem that sounds similar to what's going on in Buffalo. Recently there have been several meetings with the school board relating to suspensions in Buffalo. The latest iteration came about because the student was suspended and while they were at the bus stop meaningful they were shot and killed. And the story around this story is that the public was informed that there's a disproportional amount of suspensions for children as young as 5 for things as real as talking to a teacher or loitering in the hallway. Yes it's like so many school districts nationwide are using zero tolerance and zero tolerance basically emerge from concerns about weapons. And then it just morphed into everything. So it's like any time there's a fight there's a conflict with the teacher the teacher said this child is unruly and disrupting my class. Other kinds of behaviors that don't have to do with safety. They're child is suspended. And parents are very concerned about.

[00:12:02] So tell me about your project. Oh sure. So I'm using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of caregivers and of defining caregivers as biological parents and relatives who are

caring for their child and their experiences with suspensions. We've been recruiting African-American grandparents and parents by posting announcements mailing and you mailing recruitment letters. The eligibility criteria to be included in this survey are heading at least one trial who has been suspended this year or next year and living in the metro area. Now for caregivers they need to be primary caregivers. So again a situation where the biological parent is not in the household they contact us. We screen them for eligibility. Tell them about the research procedures and schedule an interview. We usually do interviews in their homes and interviews a tape recorded and transcribed and they are given a 24 hour certificate. We know that that does not take care of it. But it's a small token of our appreciation for telling us this story. So what's the response been like your response. It has varied. At times I get lots of calls especially after the suspension has occurred. And by the time we there the research staff zoo research assistants and myself can we get back and usually it's within a week or sometimes actually several hours later. By the next day parents have calmed down and they may or may not decide to be interviewed. We've interviewed 23 African-American parents.

[00:14:00] We have talked to a group of parents about their interest in having us to come out and do a focus group meetings as a group have evolved around the suspensions that they are having a problem with people participating and so we don't have a day to go in and do focus groups. I found that when I've worked with an agency and have been on site that X more as a way of let me say it this way people who are grandparents and parents who have their own premises when we're there makes it more possible for us to collect data will we can find a path in place. Just recently the Minnesota kinship caregivers association did a mailing and we got even more caregivers giving sounds great. Just just sort of a side question So when you're there and they're there what do you think about that. Miller said it very well. In the same place the same time make the suspense of the Today show that just was more willing to since as has been think a couple of things. First we really need to be clear as researchers that we do now want to push people to pressure people walk or coerce people into our state. The other things that we're learning that like especially I think people in the African-American community are suspicious of researchers and the research process. Part of it is an education. The other thing that we do that we agreed to do with our or B is to read. So everybody hears the same thing. We had an announcement that we read someone else reads as far as and then we and we are in a totally different room different part of the building. And if people decide to come to us then they can come to us.

[00:16:10] But we do not approach people individually and usually read to a group send announcement letters out and post letter. And when I say send announcement letters. No we don't approach people we don't approach them face to face and say we're doing this study. And let me tell you about it and if you're you interested we don't do that so I think the more that caregivers learn about us the more the people are less suspicious about us. The more that although kinship caregiver Gilling has been a staple in the African-American community and actually other communities there's still a level of stigma. And when that level of stigma is talked about is less prominent. I think that we will get more people participating in our studies. And one of the things that we have been slowly doing is going to churches and just talking about kinship care and actually in next month we are doing a panel discussion in the community that will be recorded that a group of us are talking about issues with kinship care in the African-American communities they know about. There's a panel of about five of us an attorney a school nurse who also does facilitate a support group for kinship caregivers in the African-American community a kinship care giver who was instrumental in starting a group another kinship caregiver who is known for her work in policy and for her work with the kinship navigator program that provided grants and service provider who is with Minnesota kinship caregivers association. And I will also be a part of that. Talking about the research though we're really pleased about it and also like in the fall in September doing there was timber is grandparent.

[00:18:21] And in September I was invited along with two other caregivers to talk to a group of

African-American women. I think they're called the band on a Saturday afternoon around issues with caregiving. And it worked really well we had between 60 and 70 people there. So in your 23 interviews what are some of the things that are beginning to emerge. You know there are four basic themes at this point. And let me just kind of talk about them. So one is the emotional cost caregivers and we interviewed only women at this point had intense initial reactions to the suspensions. First they were shocked that the suspensions occur. They were afraid that the suspension would damage learning and the learning environment and their children wanting to learn. They were angry that the suspension occurred and it influenced their work and their incomes. Some women told us that they were upset that they were being called at work what they thought of as petty things but they were also worried about their child and they were concerned that their child was being disrespectful to adults when there was a situation or a disagreement or conflict between the child and the teacher or the child and another authority figure at school. And then there were Cognitive Reactions. And so they would think I had to do something to avoid future suspensions and they demanded facts and called school and wanted to know what happened with this. Why was my child suspended. They talked to their children and questioned the rationale for their child's behavior. Why are you acting this way. What caused you to do this.

[00:20:10] And they wanted to contact the parents of other children and the school system will not give them a contact information about the other child other parents so that they could do that and then they will reflect that so they did lots of thinking about this and wondered about the values that they were teaching their children in their homes. Wondered about this whole thing about teaching especially boys to defend themselves when adult parents or adults were not present and they realize that they liked information about suspension and policies on suspensions and they didn't understand the whole thing about zero tolerance in the school system. The second thing was an added element in the relationship with all of the children in their household. So with the child who was suspended they questioned the truthfulness of the child's story and we did talk to their child back. OK. Are you saying you didn't do anything. You must have done something. What did you do. They pushed talking to the child about developing a plan to avoid future suspensions. They were concerned that their child was modeling undesirable behavior to other siblings to other children or household. So like this child was suspended but I don't want you to follow what he's doing. They were concerned that suspensions were system of other problems. And how would they find out those other problems. They were wondering about the robbery and the teacher's ability to deal with especially African-American bullies and they realized that they had rules in their house that in advertently resulted in suspension. Parents talked about a child who was in detention and detention was after school but their parent rule in the household was you get on the school bus because I don't have transportation to go and get you from school.

[00:22:19] So when the school bus comes you need to be on it. Well that the teacher or someone in the office told their child he needed to stay out of school because he had gotten a detention and said Well my mom said I gotta get on the bus. And according to this story nobody would call them and explain the situation so their child was suspended. And then with the child who was not suspended their parent related to the child about OK your brother was suspended. Don't you do this this and this and then talk to the child about the family everybody providing support to the suspended child. OK. This happened. Let's work together so that this does not happen again and that you go back to school and you realize that school is important. The third thing was mother's reaction and interaction and advice to the school. So they felt like the schools should distinguish between major and minor infraction that they shouldn't use the practice of zero tolerance that unless it was a safety issue that children should be suspended and that they need to really we think the whole idea of suspension and allow punishment in the home are youth in school suspensions which some schools do for some infractions and they really schools really need to explore why so many African-American boys were suspended and then they talked to the teachers and principals they explained sometimes in some instances the unfairness of the suspension for their job and then they discuss

how the household rules might conflict with the schools in terms of suspensions.

[00:24:13] And they wanted the school to know that and then the last one was the mother's strong opinions about recommendations to the school into other parents and to the school they said do not reward students have been tested. And so sometimes after suspension that child's class was going to have a field trip and their child was allowed to go on the field trip. And they felt that that was a reward in their child. That should not happen. They felt that the school should help them form up form a support group for parents of children who were suspended so that they could talk about and develop strategies to avoid suspensions. They found that churches had a role and should have activities. And talk about suspensions since it is so prominent in the African-American community that the schools should hire African-American males to mentor boys and that there needed to be an African-American male presence in the school and then again suspension as a symptom of problems with the child with the parent but the school and with the teachers and I really thought that they were looking at everything including themselves and their parenting. And then they had recommendations to the parents and they said be proactive with the school get the facts become involved be involved with the school regularly including visiting classes communicate with the teachers regularly. Don't wait until your child gets into trouble and know that your child is not always truthful or respond and responsible and that provide children with opportunities to continue to learn outside the school system when the suspension occur because learning is so important. And discuss your concerns about the school and the teachers outside of the child's presence.

[00:26:07] So don't let the child know all of your concerns about the teacher and the school and certainly don't talk negatively about the teacher or the school in front of you you. Sounds like a lot of important information that is out of the recisions you've had with kids over so far. How many more. She is planning to speak with. And what do you hope will happen next. Now that news is starting to see some of these things. What do you intend to do with the infant. We are continuing to recruit and hope to get between 10 and 20 more informants. That is ongoing and we continue to do member checks and ask caregivers about these things that have then emerged from the data. Another faculty member with me were collaborating to develop an intervention for the parent and the child and maybe including the teachers but we're not clear about that and what we are thinking about doing is working with one school and being involved in either a preconference police conference with the child and the parent and talking about what each of them can do to avoid future suspensions and then going back at one month two months and three months to see if indeed any of those interventions are what they thought of was intervention worked why they were there why did it work. I'm also going to present this information to parents to the school system to caregivers. I'm writing it up for publication and I'm preceding it to at professional conferences. And so for practitioners who may be listening. What do you think is the takeaway message for them. They're working with kinship caregivers are potential consent caregivers.

[00:28:16] What do you want their take away message to be I want them to know that the rules around suspensions are not set in stone. They are policies and policies can be changed. In addition increasingly grandmothers are assuming the role of school age children. These grandmothers have more of a difference in experience with school systems their biological parents. And so they're dealing with school issues. We're also losing a whole generation of African-American children who are not being educated who are not having a positive experience with the school system due to this. And so we really especially social workers the school social workers need to work with parents around their experience who the suspicions and also providing the information in an easy way that they can digest and take in rules and policies about the school suspensions for example a one sheet summary of policies and behaviors that result in suspensions and need to be given to ever pass the Gesine their parents talk to their children before the school starts and continuously around what they're doing with their peers to avoid conflicts and to handle conflict. And what they're doing with their teachers and being respectful to teachers. It's almost the same thing that some experts talk

about driving while black no matter whether you think you're right do with the police person said. And so in schools no matter whether you think you're right or not do what the teacher says do with the principal send that message and then what is it with the school system to let them know the devastating effect of suspensions you know in the literature it is said that one of the reasons suspensions occur is to alert parent of the misbehavior of the child. Well yes it does.

[00:30:35] But it also negatively impacts their child's education. So it's first really important that the school staff and social workers work together to find alternative methods to misbehaviors with teachers and among peers. Those are some really important euphemisms for social workers working in schools or was in the service. And I hope the rest of your work goes well either home of Boston is anything that you want to talk about that we haven't had one. No not at this point. As I say that and I think of one thing the importance of education for all kids but it and especially African-American children. The other thing is the importance of parents feeling that they are welcome in school and are a part of the school system and their children's education. And I know that that is work because every parent isn't thinking like that. But that welcoming environment and reaching out to them it's really important. I don't think that we can no longer separate the school and family and trying to merge and form a positive collaborative relationship. And I'm not saying that this is easy but I am saying there is work to be done. Do you have any suggestions of how to make the schools more welcoming to them. I think that they need to go beyond the parent and that they have to. Letting parents know how the school operates for example. You go into schools now. And in and I've had this experience in Minnesota and you were asked to show an I.D. and you are given a card saying a little taxing it is ok for you to be in that building.

[00:32:38] And while that I think is around safety and I'm not saying that schools need to do something different. I think parents need to know that that's going to help. I think that parents need to know that they need to visit their kids schools and their teachers are open to talk to parents. At times other than just doing the day when parents are typically working I don't know at this point how the school system will facilitate that because in the day teachers are teaching but if there were a way that teachers could be given 30 minutes an hour where they can just have phone conversations and parents can call the to discuss what's going on the school that would be a way to say I understand that you're working eight to 430. I'm also working for 30 I'm supposed to be in the classroom but the school has decided to give me this time off and then someone else taking care of the kids and I can just talk to a parent. So putting structures in place to support the communication between you and the teacher. And I think that the school system needs to be more involved or people in the school system or even administrators need to be more involved in community they need to speak to churches. And I know that this is different and I know there's a funding issues and I know that they are there they have a job to do and they need to be there eight hours but somehow things ought to be. There needs to be mechanisms and structures so that they can let parents and the community know I am approachable. I am available. Yes this is happening in school.

[00:34:25] I can't discuss personal situations but this is the policy that we're family. So for more information parents have more power good they are and the more they can help their children in the school environment. I think it's also important for the teachers and administrators to know that these parents do care. There is the negative stereotype about the American tears and you know value of education which is totally false that is meditation on both sides. Yeah and you know one of the things I really liked about the finding from the study and the voices that are captured from parents and they're saying yes I'm looking at my parenting I'm looking at my child who may not have been truthful. It is the lives they are looking at the whole situation and they're not just blaming the school system. And so that shows a level of honesty and a level of willingness to work the school system and it makes it seem like the conditions are optimal for both sides that come together over a common concern. Both are wanting things to work wanting children to be successful in school. So it seems like it's the right conditions for folks to not come together in opposition but come together

and work together to try to solve this problem. Yeah it is a major problem again and I think that teachers and parents really need to work together just in a broader effort to educate students. I think you bring a hopeful message. And I know that I want to be clear I don't have all the answers and I don't work in a school system.

[00:36:25] I don't have a specific strategy to implement these ideas but I would like for parents and school systems to start thinking about and talking about them. And I think that the school system need to take the league. Well thank you Dr. Gibson for speaking with us about the work that you're doing with kinship care providers who are African-American grandmothers. You are welcome. It's is just been a pleasure to share what I'm doing in terms of my research and to discuss all of these issues for you. Well you're welcome. We're glad to have you. Thank you. Atua Oh you're welcome. You've been listening to Dr. Priscilla Gibson discuss the emotional and relational costs of suspensions on African-American kinship caregivers. Thanks for listening and join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at 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. We are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.