The data are clear: Black and Brown children are disproportionately referred into the child welfare system and disproportionately removed from their homes. Addressing this color line has emerged as a top priority for the child welfare system. Overcoming racial disparities—so deeply embedded in our culture—is among the toughest tasks of our time. Making sustainable shifts in mindsets, policies, and behaviors will take practice (and plenty of it).

The idea of racial disparity and disproportionality in child welfare is not new. For at least 20 years, experts have documented that the percentage of Black children in foster care is consistently higher than the percentage of Black children in the general population. According to the Field Center at the University of Pennsylvania, in 2000, Black children comprised 15 percent of children in the United States but 39 percent of kids in foster care. By contrast, White children represented 61 percent of U.S. children overall but only 38 percent of those in foster care. By 2018, the disproportionality had improved but was still evident, with Black youth constituting 14 percent of all children but 23 percent of those in care.
people, they are di
first step to eradicating racial disparities
Call for Change
In tackling racial disparity and disproportionali
ty, we believe the call for change must focus on three levels. At the concept level, we must acknowledge that Black lives matter. At the policy level, we need rules, such as legislation, that protect people from being treated differently based on race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. Where rules exist, we need to review them to ensure equity. Where they do not exist, we need to create them in a way that supports racial justice. Finally, at the practice level, we need systemwide commitment to practicing new ways of thinking and working that reflect the concept and support the policy.

Inside child welfare organizations, we need to practice those new ways when working with each other. Even more important, we need to practice applying these mindset shifts in working with families and their children. Across the child welfare system, we need to take on both changes concurrently—with strong commitment that starts at the top but pervades every level and every function of the organization.

Practicing Racial Justice
We know that attorneys practice law. Physicians practice medicine. Yogis practice yoga. These disciplines share a recognition that they must remain actively engaged in order to maintain and strengthen the “muscle” of what they do. The notion of “practice” reflects a commitment to evolving and adapting to change.

It is time for child welfare to practice racial justice—making it an integral part of everything these organizations do. How can organizations start? We have identified two important opportunities.

1. Start by Holding Up a Mirror
No one believes that child services caseworkers wake every morning with a goal of seizing a disproportionate number of Black and Brown children from their homes. Child services caseworkers are people who take on this incredibly complex, difficult, and emotional work because they care about children and want to make a difference for individuals and communities. Despite their best intentions, caseworkers of all races are swimming in the same cultural waters as everyone else.

If we are serious about eliminating racial disparities—and ensuring that every family is met with equity—we must get serious about helping caseworkers talk about, identify, and work through their implicit and explicit biases. These shifts can’t be “mandated.” They must be nurtured by leaders who create safe spaces for people to talk openly, to learn from each other, and to do the hard work of revealing and overcoming race-based beliefs and assumptions.

To be clear, many child welfare organizations are making great strides in inclusion and diversity programming and training. These efforts represent important investments of time and energy. Beyond those, we encourage child welfare leaders to step up and formalize opportunities for having open conversations and building bridges across racial and cultural divides.

Our company is demonstrating its commitment to the concept of Black lives matter by taking a stand against racism. In support of that, we host Building Bridges Conversations in which Accenture people have an opportunity to speak—uninter
ducted—about their lived experiences being Black. The company has established some guiding principles for these conversations. First, they are a place where we listen without prejudice and avoid judgment. Second, we strive to be supportive of others in their efforts to broach uncomfortable topics or if they’re working to find language to express themselves. We also aim to be open and respectful of others and acknowledge perspectives that are different from our own. Throughout it all, we endeavor to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. We collectively recognize that there is a high likelihood that everyone might feel uncomfortable at some point. That is not only normal—it’s encouraged.

This model and these guiding principles are worth replicating and adapting within child welfare agencies. Simply having open conversations about what has happened in the past—scars from old experiences, ugly moments that remain top of mind—helps generate greater understanding.

Is it personal? Yes. Will it make you feel vulnerable? Yes. The same is true of everything we do in child welfare. When you are responsible for entering people’s private spaces—their homes—and assessing the way they live and how they are raising their children, it is inherently personal. The families are highly vulnerable. We owe it to every one of these families to approach them with fairness and equity; getting real within the four walls of our own organizations is essential to that goal.

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2. Use Technology to Practice Field Work

Technology is creating previously unimaginable ways to support a racial justice practice. Virtual reality (VR) is a prime example. Consider that VR training has proven valuable in helping vet potential caseworkers and prepare newly hired ones. VR-based experiences also can help in challenging veteran field workers and supervisors to question their own thinking and decision-making processes.

Using this technology, it is possible to simulate a home visit and interaction with a family. The ability to observe and ask questions is highly realistic. With the headset on, each caseworker becomes embedded in a real-world situation and has an opportunity to practice assessment and investigation skills. When the headsets come off, caseworkers come together to talk about what they learned, to compare notes on observations and, ultimately, to talk about what decision to make in terms of how best to support the family.

Now imagine dividing a group of caseworkers into two cohorts. In each cohort, members interact with a family in the same scenario. Once the headsets are off, the two cohorts discuss what they observed and what they would recommend for the case. Here’s where the racial justice practice comes into play: While both VR scenarios shared the same fundamental facts in terms of household composition and details of the report to child services, one cohort interacted virtually with a White family, the other with a Black family.

How might the reactions and recommendations vary? How might assumptions vary with the Black home vs. the White? What might be learned from this experience—which occurs without putting any actual families or children at risk?

This kind of tech-enabled practice works best when an organization has already done the challenging work of creating safe spaces for open discussion. Talking through each cohort’s differences in observations, assumptions, and recommendations could prove to be one of a caseworker’s most eye-opening and change-forging experiences to date.

Conclusion

In her 2020 book, Caste, Isabel Wilkerson compares living in the racial structure of the United States to living in an old house. People move into old houses that they didn’t personally build. They were not the ones who installed wiring that has proven faulty or pipes that fail at the most inconvenient times. But they are the ones who live in that structure today, and they are therefore responsible for fixing it. Wilkerson’s analogy is apt for those of us working in child welfare. We did not create racial disparity and disproportionality in the system, but we have a moral responsibility and obligation to fix them. It won’t happen quickly, and it won’t be easy. It will require strong leadership and a commitment to practice. But it can and must start today.

Reference Note