

RESPONSE TO DANIEL HEIMPEL COLUMN IN THE HUFFINGTON POST, February 11, 2011

Sorry, Dan, but you're mistaken on this one.

The conference was a stacked-deck event organized by Bartholet, who has been the nation's foremost crusader against efforts to keep families together. With the exception of Sanders, who appears to have been added at the last minute and my organization's board member, Prof. Dorothy Roberts of Northwestern University, virtually everyone who believes racism is a part of the reason for the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care was systematically excluded.

More important, the claim that the case that bias is a key part of the problem was built entirely or even mostly on the National Incidence Studies is a straw man. On the contrary, there is overwhelming evidence that even when one controls for poverty, there is profound racial bias in child welfare.

To cite just one example: When caseworkers were given otherwise-identical hypothetical cases, they were more likely to rate the child "at risk" if the family was described as Black. Many more examples are in NCCPR's Issue Paper, Child Welfare and Race, on our website here: <http://bit.ly/ckKv7M>

The other failure of the race-has-nothing-to-do-with-it argument is the failure to consider that child welfare decisions are affected by both class and racial biases, and they reinforce each other. Indeed, the biggest failing in American child welfare is the confusion of poverty itself with "neglect."

Three-quarters of all "substantiated" cases of child maltreatment involve neglect. Typical state statutes define neglect as lack of adequate food, clothing, shelter or supervision – a perfect definition of poverty. So it is inevitable that large numbers of impoverished families who have never actually maltreated their children are "defined in" by neglect laws.

Yes, poverty contributes to more actual maltreatment, if only due to the additional stress that comes with being poor, but also, more important, to the *appearance* of more maltreatment when the poverty itself is confused with neglect.

There's an unspoken corollary to the claim that "it would require a scale of public social investment something akin to the Great Society or the New Deal" to end the alleged causes of Black people "beating" their children. The corollary is that "we're never going to do that, so we'll just have to confiscate their children and hand them over to nice middle-class white people instead." In fact, it requires only ending the confusion of poverty with "neglect" and ameliorating poverty's worst effects, something we could afford to do even now if we stopped putting so many children needlessly into foster care – which costs more than better alternatives.

The notion that there is no racial bias in child welfare also defies common sense. Whenever I'm at a gathering where people are in denial about racism in child welfare I try to

pose one question: Suppose this gathering were taking place late at night. When it ended, who in the room would have the most difficulty hailing a taxi? No one seems to have any problem figuring that out. Why, then, does anyone believe that the bias that still is part of every facet of American life somehow disappears at the child welfare agency door?

Still, in one sense, this debate actually represents progress. I'm old enough to remember when the entire field was "in denial" about poverty having anything to do with who got caught in the CPS net – and professionals would insist that they never, ever take away children just because of poverty. The fact that so many now are willing to, in effect, cop to class bias rather than be accused of racial bias is at least a small step in the right direction.

Richard Wexler
Executive Director
National Coalition for Child Protection Reform
<http://www.nccpr.org>