

Acknowledgments

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And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

Ramona W. Denby

After years of working in child welfare and advocating on behalf of children and families, I developed a keen awareness of the inequities experienced by African American children in the child welfare system, the mental health system, and the juvenile justice system. Inequities have resulted in disparate experiences among African American and other children of color served by these systems nationwide. My early contributions to social research literature were typically focused on public policy–related research and advocacy-directed practice. While sharing my experiences as social worker and social work educator, several friends and my former dean, Tony Tripodi, encouraged me to share my thoughts about what might improve our national system of child welfare, from my viewpoint. Dean Tripodi offered great advice, which I did not always

follow, but it was important for me to have his counsel along the journey associated with the completion of this book. To Dr. Tripodi, Reverend Nawanna Miller, Curtis Jewel, Dr. Kevin Dixon, and others, I appreciate your spoken faith in me, which allowed me to act on faith and personal dedication and determination to bring to paper, along with my co-author, the concerns, ideals, and suggestions for improving a system of care that affects the lives of many children and their family members daily. To the late John Michel of Columbia University Press, who first received and supported the concept of this book, and to Jennifer Perillo and Stephen Wesley, also of Columbia University Press, who have also supported the idea and provided invaluable input and support along the way, I am very grateful. The technical support and assistance from Irene Pavitt and Pat Perrier was timely and consistent—thank you. I am also grateful to Maya Porter for reading through early versions of the manuscript and providing critical feedback. For family and friends who have been patient with me and loved me through it all—you are appreciated.

I dedicate this book to my family:

Two phenomenal women—my mom, Caroletta Marie, a consummate professional, my mentor and first teacher; and Candace Michelle, my “baby girl” now grown, whose loving support is an unwavering source of inspiration.

And in loving memory of my dad, Jack Leroy Curtis (1925–1998), who believed that I can do anything he put his mind to, and to my little brother, Jack Jr.

Carla M. Curtis

African American Children and Families in Child Welfare

Introduction

To those who ask, “Why do we need a book devoted specifically to African American families?” we reply that after over sixty years of nationalizing child welfare and instituting reforms aimed at improving conditions for all children in care, African American children hold a unique and uncontested disproportional position in the out-of-home care system. National reports from the federal government document a significant number of active cases among African Americans resulting from referrals to child protective service (CPS) agencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Studies have also documented the fact that African American children are not the target for family preservation services, even though they continue to represent a “special needs” population due in large part to their disproportionate numbers in out-of-home care (Denby & Curtis, 2003).

These facts result in complex questions that are difficult to answer, such as why disproportionality continues after years of policy and program reform and intervention. Ultimately, finding answers requires a change in the historical approach to examining the social conditions in which children are raised and the cultural context in which they are served and should result in a different response. Political pundits and child welfare experts alike will differ about the most appropriate response to the “why” queries, but our knowledge of history confirms one certainty—the experience of African Americans in this country is political, and the experience of children and families in the child welfare system is also political.

From the introduction of African Americans to this country through the slave trade system, to subjugation both socially and politically during slavery and its aftermath, the experience of African Americans in systems