



Disproportionality in the Child Welfare Systemⁱ The Disproportionate Representation of Children of Color in Foster Care

The Color of Foster Care

On September 30, 2003 over fifty percent (59% or 304,910) of the 523,085 children living in foster care placements were children of color, although they represented only 41% of the child population in the United States.ⁱⁱ

The following groups are *overrepresented* in foster care:

- **Non-Hispanic African American:** 35 percent (184,480) of the children in foster care are African American, but they make up only 15 percent of the child population, a representation rate of 2.33:1 (.35/.15).ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Non-Hispanic Native American:** 2 percent (10,260) of the children in foster care are Native American (American Indian and Alaskan Native), but they make up only 1 percent of the child population, a representation rate of 2:1 (.02/.01).^{iv}
- **Hispanic/Latino:** 17 percent (91,040) of the children in foster care are Hispanic/Latino, but they make up 19 percent of the child population, a representation rate of 1.06:1 (.17/.16).^v

The following groups are *underrepresented* in foster care:

- **Non-Hispanic White:** 39 percent (203,920) of the children in foster care are Caucasian, while they represent 59 percent of the child population, a representation rate of .64:1 (.39/.59).^{vi}
- **Non-Hispanic Asian:** 1 percent (3,280) of the children in foster care are Asian while they represent 4% of the child population, a representation rate of .25:1 (.01/.04).^{vii}

The Relative Disparity Rate—Comparing Children of One Race or Ethnicity to Those of Another^{viii}

The relative disparity rate for each group compared to Non-Hispanic White children is:

- **Non-Hispanic African American:** 3.6:1.
- **Non-Hispanic Native American:** 3.1:1.
- **Hispanic/Latino:** 1.7:1.
- **Non-Hispanic Asian:** .52:1.

Maltreatment Rates: Reporting, Screening and Investigation

There are no statistically significant differences in overall maltreatment rates between African American and Caucasian families according to three national incidence studies.^{ix} After controlling for such factors as income level, unemployment and location (urban or rural), African American communities actually have lower rates of child maltreatment than Caucasian communities.^x

While the overall maltreatment rates for African-American families are no greater than those for Caucasians, most research studies have found race to be an important factor in making reports to child protective services hotlines. Additionally, both public and private hospitals have been found to over report abuse and neglect among African Americans while they underreport maltreatment among Caucasians.^{xi}

Most research studies suggest that race alone or interacting with other factors is strongly related to the decision to investigate a call made to the child protective services hotline.^{xii}

Child Maltreatment Investigation Determination Rates

Child maltreatment is more likely to be substantiated (or indicated) when families are African American or Hispanic than when they are Caucasian.^{xiii}

Instead of being referred to foster care, 40% of Hispanic/Latino children receive services in their own homes; 44% of African American children receive in-home services and 72% of Caucasian children are served in their homes.^{xiv}

Children Entering Care

Race is an important factor that affects the decision to place a child in foster care.^{xv} In 2003, 51% (150,990) of the 296,160 children who entered foster care placements in the United States were children of color. 46% (137,340) of the children were Caucasian.^{xvi}

Length of Stay

Median length of stay for African American children is 18 months; for Caucasian children 10 months.^{xvii}

Number of Placements or Moves

African American children are twice as likely to have experienced three or more moves as compared to Caucasian children in care for an equivalent length of time. (Note that this is based on data from 1998.)^{xviii}

Limited Services while in Foster Care

Some research shows that families of color, when compared with Caucasian families, have less contact with child welfare workers, receive fewer services and are substantially less likely to receive services in their homes.^{xix}

- African American foster parents reported fewer hours of contact between social workers and their children than was reported by other racial and ethnic groups.^{xx}
- Caucasian foster care parents received more services than any other racial and ethnic groups

Children Exiting Care

Many studies have revealed that one major contributor to disproportionality of children of color is their slower rates of exit from care.^{xxi} In 2003, 52% (145,700) of the 280,640 children who exited foster care placements in the United States were children of color: 46% (127,680) of children exiting were Caucasian, 29% (82,420) were African American, 16% (45,890) were Hispanic, 3% (8,080) were two or more races, 2% (5,720) were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% (2,620) were Asian, and less than 1% (970) were Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.^{xxii}

Permanent Placements - Reunification

In certain cases, African American children are less likely than children of other races to be reunited with their families.^{xxiii} Five major studies in four states between 1990 and 1999 revealed that Caucasian children are four times more likely than African American children to be reunited with their families, and they are reunited more quickly. Additionally, a reanalysis of national data in 2005 reconfirmed this finding. This analysis found race continued to be a strong predictor of reunification, even after controlling for other factors: age of entry, parental job skills, parental substance abuse problem, and services provided to caretaker.^{xxiv}

In contrast, about equal proportions of children from different ethnic groups who are reunited with their families later return to foster care.^{xxv}

Permanent Placements - Adoption

One research study has shown that children of color, particularly African American children who are legally available for adoption wait longer to be adopted. This study documented that African American children are adopted eventually in the same numbers but the process takes much longer.^{xxvi}

What Causes Disproportional Representation of Different Racial and Ethnic Groups?

What are the reasons for this disproportional representation of children of color in the child welfare system? What is the “most appropriate” representation of any group of children in the child welfare system? Theories about causation can be classified into three types: parent and family risk factors, community risk factors, and organizational and systemic factors.^{xxvii}

According to theories about **parent and family risk factors**, children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system because they have disproportionate needs. They are more likely to have risk factors, such as unemployment, teen parenthood, poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, mental illness, etc, that result in high levels of child maltreatment.^{xxviii}

Proponents of **community factors** assert that overrepresentation has less to do with race or class and more with residing in neighborhoods and communities that have many risk factors, such as, high levels of poverty, welfare assistance, unemployment, homelessness, single-parent families, crime and street violence that make residents more visible to surveillance from public authorities.^{xxix}

In contrast, theories about **organizational and systemic factors** contend that racial overrepresentation results from: the decision-making processes of CPS agencies, cultural insensitivity and biases of workers, governmental policies, and institutional or structural racism.^{xxx}

(Revised June 16, 2006)

Reference Notes

ⁱ Disproportionality for the purposes of this fact sheet refers to the extent to which children are over- or under- represented in the child welfare system relative to their proportions in the census population. This definition was obtained from a paper by Hill, R.B. (2006). *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update*. Washington, D.C.: The Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity. See http://www.cssp.org/major_initiatives/racialEquity Special thanks to Dennette Derezotes of *Race Matters* and Robert Hill of *Westat* for consultation regarding these statistics.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (August 2005). *The AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System) Report*. Retrieved May 6, 2006 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report10.htm; The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2003). KIDS COUNT State level Data On-line. Retrieved June 1, 2006 from http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/compare_results.jsp?i=710&dt=2&yr=4&va=a&s=a&dtype=&x=159&y=10.

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID

^{iv} IBID

^v IBID

^{vi} IBID

^{vii} IBID For example, to calculate the Disparity Index for Black children compared to White children the Disproportionality Index for Black children is divided by the Disproportionality Index for White children. See http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/dynamics/disprop/Disproportionality_Disparity_Methods.htm

^{viii} The Relative Disparity Rate or Relative Rate Index compares the likelihood of one group experiencing an event to the likelihood of another group experiencing the same event. Source: Barbara Needell, “*Race/Ethnic Disproportionality: New Views, New Measures*” power point presentation available at www.cssr.Berkeley.edu/cwscmsreports.

^{ix} Hill, R.B. (draft 2006). *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update*, draft prepared in May, 2006 for the Casey/Center for the Study of Social Policy Alliance for Racial Equity.

^x Ards, S. (1992). Understanding patterns of child maltreatment. *Contemporary Policy Issues*. 10(4): 39-50. Korbin, J., Coulton, C.I., Chard, S., Platt-Houston, C. & Su, M. (1998). Impoverishment and children maltreatment in African American and European American neighborhoods. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10: 215-233.

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^{xii} IBID

^{xiii} IBID

^{xiv} *National Study of Protective Preventive and Reunification Services Delivered to Youth and Their Families* (1993). The Children's Bureau, DHHS.

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- xv IBID
- xvi U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (August 2005). *The AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System) Report*. Retrieved May 6, 2006 from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report10.htm;
- xvii Source: *Children of Color at a Glance: CWLA (Child Welfare League of America) Fact Sheet and Relevant Research*. Retrieved online at <http://ndas.cwla.org>. Data Source: Median Length of Stay for Children Exiting Care, 2000. Special tabulation of 2000 AFCARS prepared by CWLA, National Data Analysis System.
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