Children of Color in the Child Welfare System

Children of color are "disproportionately" represented in the child welfare system, meaning that their relative numbers do not reflect those in the general United States population. In many cases they are "over-represented", where the percentage of children of color in the child welfare system is greater than the corresponding percentage in the overall U.S. population.

According to U.S. Census Data for 2003, there are over 73,000,000 children under the age of 18 in the United States. Of these 29% are considered to be children of color: African American/Black, Latino/Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races.

The disproportionate representation of children of color, evident throughout the child welfare services continuum, is clearly seen in the nation’s foster care system. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), there were 515,500 children in foster care (U.S territories not included) on September 30, 2003. Children of color accounted for 58% of these children - or twice that of the general population.

The overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system raises many questions regarding social, economic, and organizational factors that contribute to the current situation. This issue needs to be addressed in order to ensure that all children, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or racial background, receive access to the appropriate services to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being at every stage in the child welfare system.

NDAS has devoted this portion of the website to facilitate access to racial and ethnic data and relevant literature about the subject (See the links under Related Links and Tables and Graphs in NDAS).
**CWLA Fact Sheet and Relevant Research**

### CHILDREN OF COLOR AT A GLANCE, 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th># Children of Color</th>
<th>Total # Children</th>
<th>Percentage of Children of Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children in the United States Population*</td>
<td>21,522,086</td>
<td>73,043,506</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Out-of-Home Care as of September 30, 2003**</td>
<td>310,734</td>
<td>515,500</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Entering Out-of-Home Care**</td>
<td>159,441</td>
<td>294,656</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Exiting Out-of-Home Care**</td>
<td>150,341</td>
<td>278,848</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Waiting to be Adopted**</td>
<td>76,618</td>
<td>123,249</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Adopted from the Public Foster Care System**</td>
<td>31,212</td>
<td>47,696</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*U.S. Census Bureau (2003).
**Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2003. U.S territories not included.
Available online at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars.htm

### RACE/ETHNICITY FOSTER CARE RATES, 2003:

For every 1,000 **African American/Black** children, 16 were in foster care.
For every 1,000 **American Indian/Alaska Native** children, at least 12 were in foster care.
For every 1,000 **Hispanic** children, 6 were in foster care.
For every 1,000 **White** children, 5 were in foster care.
For every 1,000 children of **2 or more races**, at least 7 were in foster care.
For every 1,000 **Asian or Pacific Islander** children, 2 were in foster care.
On average for all races, for every 1,000 children, 7 were in foster care.


### RACE/ETHNICITY ABUSE/NEGLECT RATES, 2003:

For every 1,000 **African American/Black** children, 18 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
For every 1,000 **American Indian/Alaska Native** children, 15 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
For every 1,000 **Hispanic** children, 7 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
For every 1,000 **White** children, 10 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
For every 1,000 children of **2 or more races**, at least 6 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
For every 1,000 **Asian or Pacific Islander** children, 2 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.
On average for all races, for every 1,000 children, 11 were substantiated as victims of abuse or neglect.

Relevant Research

This section is a brief summary of the literature related to children of color in the child welfare system. The overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system has been evident for many years; therefore, when assessing disproportionality it is important to not only describe its existence, but to also identify possible explanations and ways to mitigate its effects. It is unknown to what extent disproportionate representation is linked to data collection practices, contextual factors, background of the children involved, child welfare policies and practices, etc. The lack of uniformity in definitions, measurements, and data collection protocols hinders clear answers and contributes to conflicting findings. However, children of color are not a monolithic group and efforts are needed to ensure that the research conducted in this area reflects the diversity of these children.

Maltreatment Reports & Investigations:

- Three National Studies on Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1981 (NIS-1), 1988 (NIS-2) and 1996 (NIS-3) found that there is little evidence of racial disparities in reporting maltreatment.\(^1\,\!\!^2\)
- In a study conducted in five states, it was found that children of color are more likely than Caucasian children to be investigated when more than one child is reported or the case involves physical abuse, physical neglect, or emotional abuse. However, they are less likely than Caucasian children to be investigated if only one child is reported or if the case involves sexual abuse.\(^3\)
- Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islander children have disproportionately higher investigations of maltreatment than White children.\(^4\)
- Researchers have found that both professionals and nonprofessionals in the child welfare community referred more African American children to CPS agencies than Caucasian children; however, victimization rates do not seem to be linked to race.\(^5\)
- Some research has found that the race/ethnicity of a child is not a predictor of a CPS investigation (but rather gender and age are). Further, the employment status of a parent does impact the effect of race/ethnicity on the likelihood of a CPS investigation. Caucasian children with an unemployed parent had a higher chance of a CPS investigation than African-American children with an unemployed parent.\(^6\)
- Situations that tend to increase the likelihood of more CPS investigations for African-American children include: if the maltreatment is recognized by social services or mental health professionals; if the perpetrator is involved in drugs or alcohol; if the child suffers a fatal or serious injury; or if the child is emotionally maltreated or physically neglected.\(^7\)
- African American children are investigated at a higher rate than Caucasian children, regardless of the race of the investigator; however, there is no evidence that there is racial bias against families of the opposite race of the investigator. Caucasian investigators are more likely than other investigators to indicate a report regardless of the race of the family.\(^8\)

Child Abuse and Neglect Victims:

- [Graph of Child Abuse Victims by Race/Ethnicity, 2000](#)
- [Graph of Child Abuse Victims by Combined Race/Ethnicity, 2002](#)
- Three National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) indicate that the average Black child is no more at risk for abuse and neglect than White children. Researchers who studied the study design of the 1980 National Incidence Study sample selection recommend that due to the study design of the National Incidence Studies, inferences about racial differences in child maltreatment be made with caution.\(^9\,\!\!^10\)
- Data from The Second National Incidence and Prevalence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-2) shows that Black children are less likely than White children to be sexually abused. However, Black children are more likely than White children and children of other races/ethnicities to be physically abused.\(^11\)
- There is a positive correlation between child abuse reports and poverty. Researchers argue that the high visibility of families living in poverty due to frequent contact with public agencies increases their representation in child abuse reporting thus skewing the socioeconomic distribution of child abuse and neglect cases.\(^12\,\!\!^13\,\!\!^14\)
Relevant Research (continued)

- Some common characteristics of areas identified as having high rates of maltreatment are: lack of knowledge about community services and agencies; inability of residents to identify positive attributes of their community; lack of formal and informal network or support systems; poor physical location for community programs; and the dominance of gang activity in the neighborhood.  
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- Black children were slightly more likely than White children to be substantiated for abuse and neglect. Black children were slightly more likely than White children to be placed into foster care.  
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- The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System Detailed Case Data Component (NCANDS DCDC) shows that the pattern of recurrent abuse rates for Black children and White children varies by state. In some states, time to recurrence was shorter for Whites than for Blacks and in other states the reverse was true.  
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- As a single group, Asian children had the lowest victimization rate in 2003; however, when grouped with Pacific Islander children they have the highest victimization rate.  
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Factors in Placement Decision-Making:

- Frequent contact with mandated reporters (e.g. public assistance caseworkers, police officers) is associated with increased likelihood of entry into the child welfare system for children of color.  
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- In a study to identify the correlates of foster care placement, the author found that race, combined with other predictors, has a strong independent effect on the decision to place a child in foster care. The other predictors include child's disability, abuse allegation, receipt of Medicaid, and caretaker substance abuse.  
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- Two placement studies conducted in Illinois by the Children and Family Researcher Center revealed that the factors predicting child placements were not racially biased but rather appropriate and logical for decision-making. Those factors include child characteristics, family characteristics, abuse and neglect history, and the number of caseworker contacts during the investigative process.  
  22

- A study conducted in California to examine the role of race/ethnicity in the decision to place a child in foster care revealed that Black children were more likely to be placed in foster care, even when other factors are taken into account. Hispanics were the least likely to be placed in foster care. Children referred to social services for neglect, who came from high poverty areas, who had up to five siblings, and infants were the most likely to be placed in foster care.  
  23

- The University of California at Berkeley Foster Care Database (UCB-FCD) shows that White foster care parents were provided with more services by their agencies than other racial/ethnic groups.  
  24

Foster Care:

- Graph of Percent of Children in Foster Care by Race, 2000
- Graph of Percent of Children in Foster Care by Race, 2002
- Graph of Percent of Foster Parents of Color, 2002

- In a study to address the factors related to disproportionality in Santa Clara county, it was found that fewer workers, fewer placements, and shorter care durations were strong predictors of reunification.  
  25

- For African-American families, the implementation of interventions that target at-risk areas was found to be very effective in reducing the number of children in foster care. The involvement of key community leaders with initiating these interventions also helped reduce overrepresentation.  
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- In contrast to African-Americans, target intervention is not associated with reduced overrepresentation of Hispanic/Latino children in foster care. Rather, team-decision making interventions were found to be very effective in reducing the number of Hispanic/Latino children in foster care.  
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Relevant Research (continued)

- Management and worker support for a practice was found to be effective in reducing the number of Asian-American/Pacific Islanders in foster care.  

- For single-parent households, reunification of Black children with their families is less likely than for White and Hispanic children and their families.

- In California, Black children are slightly more likely than children of other races/ethnicities to re-enter the foster care system.

- AFCARS data shows that in 2002, 27.9 percent of African-American children were in care less than a month compared to 47.1 percent of White children.

- Graph of Number of Children in Care for Less than 1 Month by Race/Ethnicity, 2002

Adoption:

- Graph of Percent of Children Exiting Care to Adoption, 2000
- Graph of Number of Children Waiting to be Adopted by Race/Ethnicity, 2002
- Graph of Percent of Children Adopted Over Time by Race/Ethnicity, 2002

- In 2002, there was little difference in the time from the termination of parental rights to the finalized adoption for all children in foster care.

- Research shows that Black children are less likely than children in other racial/ethnic groups to be adopted.

- A study conducted in California on the willingness to adopt black foster children revealed some interesting characteristics of prospective adoptive parents. Parents who are willing to adopt black children are more open to adopting a wide range of children traditionally considered as "hard-to-adopt". Parents who express their willingness to adopt a black foster child are more likely to actually do so. The researchers state that it is not a good strategy to use scarce resources to recruit White parents who express an unwillingness to adopt a black foster child in hopes that they change their mind because their findings indicate that such parents do not. They further note that the findings from the study highlight the need for child welfare workers to openly discuss the issues and challenges of race, ethnicity, and culture with prospective adoptive parents so that they may be addressed or dispelled.

Kinship Care:

- Graph of Percent of Children in Kinship Care by Race/Ethnicity, 2002
- Graph of the Number of Children in Kinship Care Over-Time by Race/Ethnicity
- States that have a Kinship Care Policy
- Graph of Percent of States with a Kinship Care Policy

- In 2002, over 124,000 children were in kinship care and of these, 67 percent were children of color.

- Kinship care and informal adoptions are deeply rooted in African American culture dating back to slavery. The practice of assuming childrearing responsibilities by grandparents or aunts and uncles is still prevalent within the African American community today.

- Kinship placement was found to be effective in helping to achieve permanency for black children and in addressing the lack of adoptive and foster parents of color. Legal permanence is less likely at the early stages of kinship care; however, this disadvantage tends to reduce over time.
Relevant Research (continued)

- By restructuring permanency options that build on the strengths of informal adoptions among African Americans, the state of Illinois was able to successfully mitigate the effects of disproportionality of children of color in legal guardianships and adoptions. 39

- The two primary sources of financial assistance to kinship care providers are foster care benefits and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Foster care stipends are much more than TANF payments; however, a kin caregiver must be licensed in order to receive foster care benefits. Unlicensed kin providers can receive the lower TANF payments, but they must first qualify for public assistance. Although kinship care is considered to be one way of achieving permanency for African American/black children, the child welfare system provides higher benefits to non-relative foster parents. 40,41

- Only 37 percent of kinship care providers received Title IV-E foster care payments in 2002. 42

Future Research in Disproportionality

The literature points to several areas where more research is essential to better understand the issues associated with disproportionality. Below is a description of some of the areas that have been identified.

- Only a small number of researchers have addressed the issue of disproportionality in maltreatment reporting and victimization. 43

- In addition to the disproportional placement of children in foster care, it is also important to examine the disproportional access and underutilization of services. Prevention rates and outcomes should also be examined by race and ethnicity.44,45

- Research should use equal units of analysis for comparison purposes. One of the weaknesses in researching disproportionality is the unequal comparison of national surveys with states or counties; direct interviews with administrative records; and cross-sectional studies with longitudinal studies.46,47

- When examining disproportionality in foster care placements, significant effort needs to be made to separate poverty attributes from race and ethnicity. 48

- Factors such as parental substance abuse, child disability, family structure, and child disability should be included when examining the role of race in foster care placement decisions. Additionally, restricting the sample size to children who are new to the child welfare system can help to more clearly identify factors in foster placement decision-making and can be easily replicated in other states by professionals who have access to administrative data. 49

- Those agencies interested in evaluating disproportionality must improve their data collection and tracking methods in order to produce more reliable and valid results. 50

REFERENCES


26. ibid


29. ibid


38. ibid


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47. Ibid.


State and County Initiatives

What are States and Counties Doing?

Is your state or local agency looking into the problem of an overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system? Has your state implemented an initiative to address this problem? If so, share your efforts by emailing ndas@cwla.org.

Minnesota

In response to concerns of the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system, The Minnesota Department of Health and Human Services implemented The Children of Color Initiative. This program seeks to promote positive outcomes for children of color through culturally competent social services. For more information on The Children of Color initiative, please see the Minnesota Department of Health and Human Services website at: Children's Services (MN DHS).

In order to specifically address the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, the department convened the African American Disparities Committee that consisted of leaders, representatives, and members of the African American community. In a report to the 2002 Minnesota Legislature on the Study of Outcomes for African American Children in Minnesota's Child Protection System, the committee provided some insight into some of the reasons for disproportionality as well as some ways to mitigate the effects.

In 2005, the Minnesota Department of Human Services released a report of the findings of a comparative case review study that was conducted in 2003. To learn more about the study and the findings, please read Executive Summary for the African American Comparative Case Review Study Report.

North Carolina

The North Carolina Department of Children’s Services has done extensive research on the overrepresentation of African American children. The agency is working with various counties to search for potential partnerships that they hope will elicit better cooperation from families and achieve better safety for children. They plan to establish an investigatory approach in five counties and then use this experience to contribute to policies and practice. For more information, please see the following articles on overrepresentation: North Carolina: Practice Notes.

Colorado

The Colorado Department of Human Services: Division of Child Welfare sought to examine the root of minority overrepresentation in child welfare in Colorado. The department proposed a research study to compare the delivery of services for children and families of color as opposed to the delivery of services for White children and families. The study also analyzed decisions made at key points in social service cases. The following overview summarizes Colorado's findings: Statewide Overview of Findings in the Executive Summary: September 2002:

"When looking at all child welfare cases, American Indian, African American and Hispanic children are over represented. Asian Pacific and White children make up less of the child welfare caseload than their census percentages. However, while over representation of minority children are evident across all 5 years of data, there is a steady reduction in the degree of disproportional representation across the years with the most decline for African American and American Indian children."


For the full Executive Summary report, please see The Colorado Department of Human Services website: Colorado Executive Summary.
King County, Washington

In an effort to understand and address the disproportionate number of children of color in their child welfare system, King County in collaboration with a superior court judge and the Casey Family Programs established a coalition. The coalition conducted a two-phase qualitative research study to ascertain where disproportionality exists and what factors contribute to it. Phase I analyzed thirteen decision points in the child welfare system and in Phase II, six decision points were selected for a more in-depth analysis. The six decision points that were selected included: 1) reporting; 2) intake and investigation; 3) reunification efforts and services; 4) placement; 5) dependency and termination of parental rights; and 6) pathways for exiting the system. Findings from the King County initiative provide much needed insight into some of the causes of disproportionality as well as some suggestions on how to address them. The research findings and recommendations can be found in the full executive summary: Executive Summary of Research Report - Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System in King County, Washington

To learn more about the King County initiative to address the disproportionality of children of color in the child welfare system, please see The King County Disproportionality Task Force website.

UPDATE! In their continued effort to help mitigate disproportionality, King County’s Design Committee developed three main strategies for intervention. King County shared these intervention strategies in a teleconference presentation titled, King County Racial Disproportionality Initiative: Planning the Intervention-An Update.

Santa Clara County, California

African American, Native Indian, and Hispanic children are overrepresented in the Santa Clara County child welfare system; however, Asian American/Pacific Islander and White children are under represented. To understand the factors that contributed to this disproportionality of children of color, the Santa Clara County’s Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and the Child Welfare Research Team (CWRT) of San Jose State University College of Social Work conducted a three-phase study over three years. Phases I and II examined the reasons for the racial disproportionality and identified the decision points from which they occur.

Findings from Phase I revealed that more research was needed which focused on the actual experiences of children in care and the characteristics of these experiences. Phase II findings revealed that the type of services that were recommended to families of color were limited to a "one-size fits all" approach which did not meet the diverse needs of the different racial/ethnic family groups. The goal of Phase III was to help generate strategies for reducing the disproportionality and to develop more effective services for children and families of color. To read the findings and results of the research conducted in Santa Clara County, please read the Executive Summary.

Texas

Beginning in 2004, The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) took steps to reduce disproportionality in the Texas child welfare system by establishing a collaborative relationship with Casey family Programs to develop an intensive planning and implementation process. Included in the collaboration to reduce disproportionality are community stakeholders such as local government agencies, non-profit agencies, and African-American children and families. Details about the promising work that is being done in Texas were provided in a teleconference presentation held in July 2005 titled, Addressing Disproportionality in Texas: A Committed Community Collaboration.