

RACE matters

Unequal Opportunity within the CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Why Equal Opportunity is Important

- We know much of what is needed to produce effective child welfare practice. It includes: increased focus on outcomes related to safety, permanency and well-being; shared accountability for achieving positive outcomes across federal and state government, families, communities and other agencies; strengthened workforce capacity in both numbers of workers and increased skills; family involvement in the crucial decisions being made about their children; effective partnerships with communities and neighborhoods; and reformed federal financing that increases support for prevention, family support and effective treatment services.
- The consequences of poor child welfare practice are far-reaching. There are individual and social costs when children enter the foster care system unfairly, experience multiple placements, and grow to adulthood without adequate social connections or supports. One analysis that includes immediate costs such as hospitalization, chronic health problems, and mental health care and long-term costs such as special education, juvenile delinquency and lost productivity, has estimated that the nation loses \$258 million a day and \$94 billion annually by inappropriately placing children in foster care.
- Embedded inequities produce disparities in how families and children fare in child welfare systems. Systematic policies, practices, and stereotypes work against families and children of color to undermine their strengths, deplete their resilience, and compromise their outcomes. Child welfare leaders and service providers require a deeper understanding of the consequences of embedded inequities, how they are produced, and how they can be challenged in order to design a framework that ensures that children are appropriately protected and that all children do well.

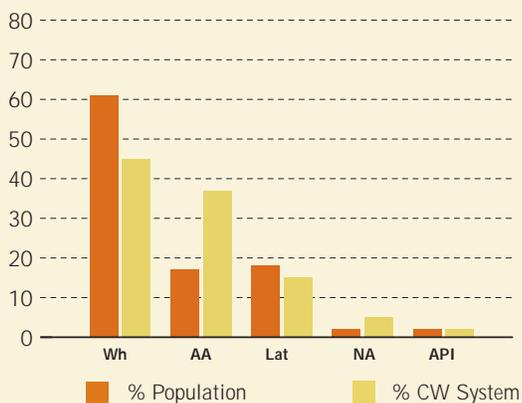
Barriers to Equal Opportunity

- Poverty. Most cases of child maltreatment involve parental neglect, which is usually difficult to disentangle from the conditions of poverty. Welfare receipt increases the likelihood of substantiation and out-of-home placements for African-American children, whose families are less likely to receive in-home services than similarly situated White families. When Latino and African-American families have similar incomes, Latino children are placed in foster care in proportion to their representation in the population, but African-American children are placed at a rate six times their representation in the population.
- Spatial location and discrimination. Concentrated poverty in racially segregated neighborhoods combined with negative cultural stereotypes and presumptions can fuel inappropriate and intrusive access and scrutiny by child protection workers in ways that contribute to racial and ethnic disproportionality. Additionally, the “visibility hypothesis” suggests that children are more visible in terms of their race or ethnicity when they constitute a very small percentage of a local population. In these settings they become more vulnerable to family removal.
- Child welfare system practices. Even when families and children of color have the very same characteristics as non-Hispanic Whites, research reveals differential treatment, if not racial bias, at virtually all points of the child welfare decision making process beginning with substantiations of abuse and neglect and continuing through exit strategies.
- Lack of culturally competent services. Children of color are disadvantaged by the lack of language-proficient service providers for non-English fluent families and practices that ignore or misinterpret families’ culturally-specific strengths. Cultural incompetence becomes a more significant factor contributing to disproportionality when combined with the vague definition of neglect and the broad discretion allowed child protective service workers in the interpretation of neglect.

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The Consequences of Unequal Opportunity

- **Differential vulnerability.** In 46 states, African-American children are one and a half to more than three and a half times more likely to be in the child welfare system than their representation in the general population. Nationally, African-Americans and Native Americans are about three times more likely to be in the child welfare system than non-Hispanic Whites. Latino children are over-represented in foster care in selected states and cities. In states with large Native American populations, Native children are disproportionately represented, comprising 15–65% of the foster care population.



- **Racial disparities are evident at every critical decision point.** Children of color enter foster care at higher rates, even when they and their families have the same characteristics as comparable White children and families. They remain in foster care for longer periods of time than White children (a median stay of 17 months for African-American children versus 9 months for White children). Longer stays in foster care by children of color contribute to racial disproportionality because these increase their numbers in the system in any given year. Families of color receive fewer services and have less contact with child welfare staff members than White families do. Children of color experience lower reunification rates than White children.
- **Vulnerability in large and small numbers.** Racial disproportionality is most apparent in large cities where there are both sizeable African-American and foster care populations. In some major metropolitan areas, over 90% of all children in foster care are African-American. An alarming 1 in every 10 children in Central Harlem is placed in foster care. In Chicago, most child protection cases are clustered in only two zip codes. The over-representation of African-American children in foster care is even greater in areas where they constitute a smaller percentage of the population.

Strategies to Promote Equal Opportunity

- **Policy change.** Child welfare leaders can become accountable for achieving racial equity by using it as an explicit outcome measure and applying a racial equity impact analysis to safety, permanency, and well-being. They can institutionalize the expectation of equity in their state plans and compile and track racial disparity data at all key decision points in order to set benchmarks, develop practice strategies, monitor progress and ensure racially equitable treatment and outcomes. Just as federal policy mandates the reduction of disproportionate minority confinement in the juvenile justice system, the child welfare system could make this an explicit aspiration to be tracked in its work as well.
- **Practice change.** The pursuit of equity is enhanced through the adoption of specific practices such as community partnerships, family group decision-making, and structured decision-making that can minimize bias where discretion exists. Other promising practice strategies include cultural competence training for service providers and child protective service workers, subsidized guardianships for relative care and greater access, incentives and resources for home-based services.
- **Emerging collaborative partnerships for moving forward.** Support is growing at the national level to increase awareness; strengthen research, data collection and analyses; enhance public will and coordinate practice improvements in sites. In addition to work by the Black Administrators in Child Welfare and the Race Matters Consortium, a new Consortium on Racial Equity in Child Welfare has been formed. It is comprised of representatives from Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, including Casey Family Services, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy with the explicit purpose of launching a national campaign to promote racial equity in child welfare systems nationally.

