



Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System

Frequently Asked Questions about Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System

African American children make up less than 20% of the nation's children but 40% of the foster care population.

Disparities are not unique to Child Welfare

They exist in:

Criminal justice

Health Care

Mental Health

Special Education

National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect states no significant racial differences in the incidence of maltreatment.

What is disproportionality in child welfare?

Disproportionality is when a particular racial/ethnic group is involved with the child welfare system at a higher or lower percentage than their representation in the general population. There are two dimensions to the issue: overrepresentation of minority children as compared to their representation in the general population and disparate treatment or services compared to similarly situated Caucasian children.

Why is this issue important?

Children of color in foster care are even more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be affected by the outcomes associated with spending long lengths of time in care. Examples of these outcomes from a ten year alumni study are:

- Mental Health Problems: Former foster children suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹
- Poor Educational Outcomes: Only 1.8 percent of former foster children have either a college bachelor's degree or higher credential, compared with 24 percent of their peers at the same age.²
- Struggles with Establishing a Solid Future: One-third of youth formerly in foster care had incomes at or below the poverty level, one-third had no health insurance, and nearly a quarter had experienced homelessness after leaving foster care.³

What does disproportionality look like in San Diego County?

Children of color, especially African American and Native American, are disproportionately represented at every decision point in the system, the degree of disproportionality increases as cases progress through the system. According to the Child Welfare Research Center at University of California, Berkeley as of 2004:

- African American children make up 6% of the child population in San Diego but represent:
 - 13.57% of referrals and 20.5% of substantiated referrals
 - 20% of open dependency cases
 - 23.6% of out of home placements
- Native American children represent about 0.48% of the general child population but make up nearly 2% of population of children in care for over two years.

Is there more child abuse in families of color ?

No.

- Research shows there is no difference between races in the likelihood that a parent will abuse or neglect a child.⁴ However, there is a great difference between races in the likelihood that a child will be removed from home and placed in foster care.⁵

¹Casey Family Programs. (2005). Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study

²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴Department of Health and Human Services. (1980,1986,1993). National Incidence Study

⁵Caliber-Associates. (2003). *Children of Color in the Child Welfare System: Perspectives from the Child Welfare Community*. Washington D.C., U.S. Dept. of Health It Human Services, Children's Bureau: 83.

Disparities at Critical Decision Points⁶

Reporting issues.

Children of color are more likely to be removed from their mothers as infants than are white children, because hospital staff report their mothers more than they report white mothers for substance abuse during pregnancy.

Foster care entrance.

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.

Length of stay.

Children of color 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).

Limited services.

Families of color, when compared with white families, receive fewer services and have less contact with child welfare staff members.

Family reunification.

Children of color experience reunification at lower rates than white children.

Adoption processes.

Children of color who are legally available for adoption wait longer for an adoptive placement when compared with white children, and they are less likely to be placed at all.

What are the common myths?

1. Myth: Black families have higher rates of child abuse and neglect.

Fact: As noted earlier, the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect found no significant racial differences in the incidence of maltreatment.

2. Myth: It results from higher rates of poverty among blacks – not because of race.

Fact: Research shows that regardless of race, being on welfare doubles the likelihood of having a CPS allegation substantiated.

3. Myth: It is due to racially different treatment at various stages of the decision-making processes of the child welfare system.

Fact: The National Incidence Study supports this explanation. And in fact, disparities are not unique to Child Welfare. They exist in Criminal Justice, Health Care, Mental Health and Special Education.

What is San Diego County doing to eliminate disproportionality ?

Honorable Susan Huguenor, Presiding Judge of Juvenile Court and Mary Harris, Director of Child Welfare Services are providing leadership in San Diego to develop and implement strategies to address the issue. Child Welfare Services has identified Fairness and Equity as a systemic issue to address in the County of San Diego System Improvement Plan.

What is the Fairness & Equity Committee?

A group of community members and stakeholders committed to understanding the issue and taking action to eliminate the racial disproportionality in San Diego County's child welfare system to make it fair and equitable for children and families of color. The group has developed the following work plan:

1. Raise awareness and openly discuss the nature and extent of the problem;
2. Identify structural factors contributing to disproportionality
3. Use data to identify the issues and assess success at addressing disproportionality
4. Identify and monitor implementation of strategies to improve racial equity in treatment and outcomes.

For more information contact: San Diego County Commission on Children, Youth, and Families at 858-514-4660.