



engage and educate for equity

RACE MATTERS in

ADVANCING CHILD WELFARE

Child Well-Being Depends on Strong Families and Effective Public Systems

- Our nation's vitality depends on the **well-being and developmental success** of each successive generation. Fortunately, we know much about how best to support families in their efforts to raise children to thrive and to help young adults find their place as contributing members of society.
- Even still, more than 400,000 children are in the foster care system at any given time, most placed temporarily as a result of parental neglect or abuse.¹ About 70% of foster care placement results from **neglect**, not abuse.² If families had what they needed when they needed it, public systems such as child welfare would be needed less. States spent approximately \$29 billion in federal, state, and local funds for child welfare purposes in 2010.³
- When child welfare system practices are ineffective, the consequences are far-reaching for young people. The longer one remains within the **foster care system**, the poorer the outcomes tend to be in terms of high school graduation, employment, residential stability, pregnancy outside of marriage, drug abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system.⁴
- Researchers continue to debate the complexity of factors that produce the **disproportionate demographic representation** of children in foster care,⁵ but the persistent fact is that African American, American Indian, and Latino children are disproportionately vulnerable to involvement in the foster care system.⁶ Once in, they fare more poorly than other children in their outcomes.⁷ This document focuses on how to ensure that children's families are strong and that when they must interface with the child welfare system, they are treated appropriately and equitably.
- More than half of the country's child population will be non-White by 2023.⁸ Now more than ever before, our **shared fate** as a nation depends on closing the racial gaps that exist -- including those related to the child welfare system -- so that all children and youth have the chance to succeed.

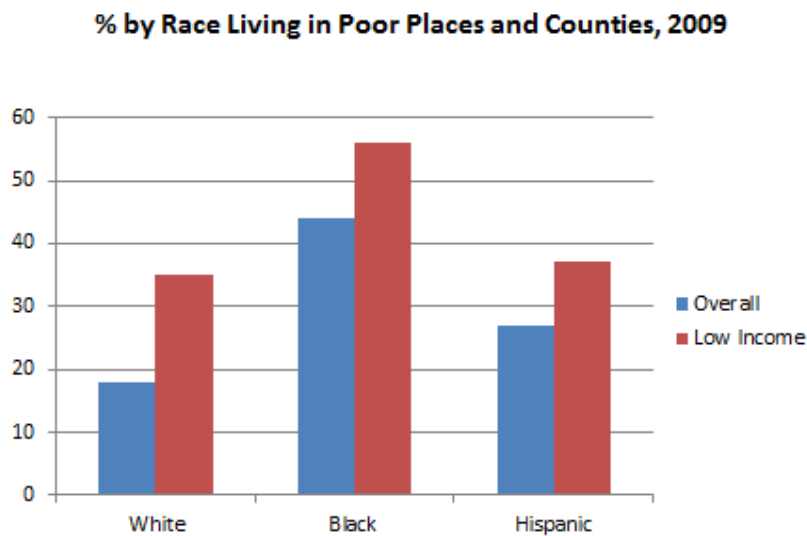


For guidance to frame communications about racial disparities, please refer to RMI's "How to Talk about Race" tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.

“Racialized” Barriers Compromise Children’s Welfare

“Racialized” means that (1) the barriers to good outcomes within child welfare disproportionately affect families and communities of color and (2) these barriers are the results of (often reinforcing) institutional policies, practices, and perceptions that maintain inequity. The items below are illustrative. Readers are encouraged to examine local data for disproportionality and disparities and identify any specific institutional barriers that exist in your locale. NOTE: National data do not speak to the circumstances of specific jurisdictions but can be helpful to raise important questions for which local answers are critical to shape appropriate actions where needed.

- **Equitable treatment within one’s community.** The community you live in shouldn’t predict your likelihood of having access to child protection if needed or differentially being reported to child welfare authorities for circumstances not reported in other neighborhoods. But it seems to. Poverty itself does not produce maltreatment, yet economically distressed areas have higher maltreatment reporting, investigation, and substantiation rates. This fact inclines families of color to be more likely to be brought to the attention of authorities, since, as the chart below shows, they are more likely to live in more distressed communities. Further, nearly 60% of all Native Americans who live outside of metropolitan areas inhabit persistently poor counties.⁹ Conversely, because White children are less likely to live in areas of high poverty, they may be vulnerable to insufficient oversight in terms of child protection.



Source: <http://nps.umich.edu/publications/u/2011-16%20NPC%20Working%20Paper.pdf>

- **Equitable treatment in child welfare system decision-making.** Research indicates that differential treatment by race can and does occur at almost all decision points across child welfare systems.¹⁰ This is a useful caution for all systems to ensure that its policies and practices do not inadvertently produce inequities. Conscious and unconscious racial biases can contribute to this outcome, as qualitative studies of individual child welfare agencies are coming to reveal. Key among the decision points are the following:

- ◇ **The decision to investigate.** African American families are more likely to be investigated for maltreatment reports than are White families. Some research indicates that this is especially true if the alleged perpetrator is a parent.
- ◇ **The decision to provide in-home services.** White families are more likely to receive in-home services, counseling, housing assistance, child care, mental health and substance abuse services, and case management.
- ◇ **The decision for out-of-home placement.** African American and American Indian children are more likely to be removed from their homes (as are Latino children in certain jurisdictions), while White children more so remain in their homes where their families receive in-home services. This is the case even under comparable family circumstances. While African American and American Indian children are the most likely groups to be placed in kinship care, formal kinship caregivers do not receive support comparable to that of non-kin foster care families.

As a consequence of the foregoing, African American children have longer lengths of stay outside their home than others. As already noted, the longer someone is in the system, the more vulnerable they are to poorer outcomes. African American and American Indian children are less likely to be reunited with their families – the preferred permanency outcome for children in out-of-home placements, because it supports family and cultural preservation.

- **Cultural competence & language barriers.** The failure of child welfare personnel to have sufficient cultural understanding of families and racial and ethnic communities, and the inability of child welfare systems to offer interpretation services to afford linguistic access, can lead to inappropriate or unfair treatment for some families, with research documenting particular problems for South Asian and Hispanic families.¹¹
- **Particular vulnerabilities of children from immigrant households.** Raids by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) have resulted in undocumented and U.S. citizen children being left behind without a parent or guardian to care for them. Immigrant children and children from immigrant households are less likely to be living in relative foster care and more likely to be living in group homes and institutions, compared to their U.S. born counterparts.¹² Further, the lower receipt of public assistance by immigrant families renders them vulnerable to those circumstances that expose them to child welfare authorities.¹³



For guidance to identify barriers that produce racial inequities, please refer to RMI's "What's Race Got to Do with It?" tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.

Effective Actions Can Close Racial Gaps

The items below are illustrative to demonstrate that intentional efforts can indeed close racial gaps. Readers are encouraged to identify additional strategies that can be utilized in your locale, given what local data reveal as needing attention.

- **Systematically and routinely assess decision points and outcomes by race.** Because national data reveal that African American and Native American children have poorer child welfare system outcomes, and local data indicate the same for Latino children in some communities, it is essential that all key system data be collected and analyzed by race. The particular racial categories utilized in data collection should be nuanced to the demographics of the locale (e.g., identifying specific American Indian tribes instead of using the general category of Native American; specifying country of origin for Hispanic or Asian American groups; distinguishing between African Americans and African nationals instead of using the category Black; distinguishing generations within immigrant groups). Where results show disparate outcomes, at any given decision point and overall, it is important to identify those factors that produce such inequities and take strategic action to reduce racial gaps. Without disaggregated data, it is impossible to determine if agency policies and practices need reconsideration.
- **Become intentional and systematic in advancing race-informed strategies and decisions.** In its Remediation Plan to reduce inappropriate racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare, the State of Washington Statewide Racial Disproportionality Advisory Group recommended, among other measures, that the Department of Social and Human Services, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and relevant legislative and judicial committees and staff utilize a Racial Equity Impact Analysis tool to review all policies and practices.¹⁴
- **Reduce the potential for bias and oversight in decision-making.** Training for mandated reporters and child welfare staff and contractors in cultural competence, the ways in which inequitable treatment is likely to occur, and how to employ respectful and informed approaches across racial groups can alert personnel to conclusions and actions that too often undermine the goal of equitable and effective treatment. A growing body of guidance, tools, and other resources from a range of racial-ethnic communities is available to advance cultural competence. For example, Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)¹⁵ has designed a tool to help teachers and schools distinguish between cultural differences and child maltreatment when determining whether to report suspected maltreatment. In addition to the enhancement of decision-makers' cultural competence, bias and oversight can be reduced through the use of standardized guidelines and assessment tools (that are themselves culturally and racially informed) at critical junctures in decision-making,¹⁶ so that all decision-makers have access to the best knowledge about variations in the strengths and challenges of different racial and ethnic communities.
- **Exhibit cultural respect through community engagement.** A demonstration project in Woodbury County, Iowa, designed to meet the needs of Native American families involved with child welfare included a significant community planning process prior to implementation and a strong component for increasing cultural competence among child welfare workers. Native liaisons were hired to help build trust between the Native American community and child welfare workers. They were also able to help workers "reframe" child welfare challenges in more culturally appropriate ways, such as understanding complicated family trees to identify kin. Culturally competent practices, such as the use of Native healing practices, were incorporated into service offerings. The county saw a 28% decrease in the foster care disproportionality rate for Native children.¹⁷

- **Utilize Team Decision Making (TDM).** TDM refers to the systematic collaboration of child welfare staff, family members, service providers, and neighborhood representatives who together make critical decisions regarding the assessment of family needs and strengths, child removal, change of placement or reunification, the development of specific safety plans for children at risk, and the design of in-home or out-of-home services and supports. This approach seeks to improve the agency's decision-making process by utilizing family- and community-based knowledge to develop specific, individualized, and appropriate interventions for children and families.¹⁸
- **Provide linguistic accessibility.** The Child Welfare League of America offers a list of resources for working with limited English proficient clients, as well as tips for working with interpreters and translators for child welfare agencies. They recommend having a qualified interpreter and translator since these professionals follow a specific code of conduct and are trained in the skills, ethics, and subject matter. However, they acknowledge that professional interpreters are limited for certain small indigenous groups.¹⁹
- **Develop competencies for work with immigrant youth and families.** An increasing number of jurisdictions are establishing specialized units within their child welfare system to address the needs of immigrant youth and families. Some of the key practice considerations to improve services to this population include (a) specialized training to include sensitivity to the needs of immigrant families and understanding the impact of migration and acculturation on family experience; (b) development of knowledge and protocols to assess potential relief options such as Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), Special immigrant Juvenile Status, and U-Visas; and (c) the development of special handbooks, memoranda, and protocols with foreign consulates.²⁰



For guidance to improve chances that policies and practices will reduce racial disparities, please refer to RMI's "Racial Equity Impact Analysis" tool at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/PublicationFiles/MORE%20Newsletter%20Toolkit%20Starter%20Version5228PK%20for%20adobe.pdf>.

¹ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>, accessed 1.30.13.

² http://www.clasp.org/issues/in_focus?type=child_welfare, accessed 1.17.13.

³ http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2012_06_20_FR_CaseyCWFinancing.pdf, accessed 1.30.13.

⁴ N. Zill, *Adopting Children from Foster Care: Aiding Children While Saving Public Money*, Brookings, May 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/5/adoption%20foster%20care%20zill/05_adoption_foster_ca_re_zill.pdf, accessed 1.17.13.

⁵ Center for the Study of Social Policy et.al., *Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Analysis of the Research*, December 2011, <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Reducing%20Disparities/DisparitiesandDisproportionalityinChildWelfare/Disparities%20and%20Disproportionality%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20December%202011.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.

⁶ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>, accessed 1.30.13.

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- ⁷ F. Farrow et.al., "Racial Equity in Child Welfare: Key Themes, Findings and Perspectives," in Center for the Study of Social Policy et.al., *Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Analysis of the Research*, December 2011, <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Reducing%20Disparities/DisparitiesandDisproportionalityinChildWelfare/Disparities%20and%20Disproportionality%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20December%202011.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ⁸ http://articles.cnn.com/2008-08-13/us/census.minorities_1_hispanic-population-census-bureau-white-population?_s=PM:US, accessed 1.10.13.
- ⁹ Tom Rodgers, *Native American Poverty*, <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/ExclusiveCommentary.aspx?id=0fe5c04e-fdbf-4718-980c-0373ba823da7>, accessed 11.30.12.
- ¹⁰ This section about all of the decision points is derived from F. Farrow et.al., "Racial Equity in Child Welfare: Key Themes, Findings and Perspectives," in Center for the Study of Social Policy et.al., *Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Analysis of the Research*, December 2011, <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Reducing%20Disparities/DisparitiesandDisproportionalityinChildWelfare/Disparities%20and%20Disproportionality%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20December%202011.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹¹ J. Fluke et.al., "Research Synthesis on Child Welfare Disproportionality and Disparities," in Center for the Study of Social Policy et.al., *Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Analysis of the Research*, December 2011, <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Reducing%20Disparities/DisparitiesandDisproportionalityinChildWelfare/Disparities%20and%20Disproportionality%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20December%202011.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹² Casey Family Programs, *Immigration and Child Welfare* Fact Sheet, n.d., <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Special%20Interest%20Areas/Immigrants%20and%20Refugees/FactSheetImmigrationandChildWelfare/Immigration.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹³ J. Fluke et.al., "Research Synthesis on Child Welfare Disproportionality and Disparities," in Center for the Study of Social Policy et.al., *Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Analysis of the Research*, December 2011, <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Child%20Welfare%20Permanence/Reducing%20Disparities/DisparitiesandDisproportionalityinChildWelfare/Disparities%20and%20Disproportionality%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20December%202011.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹⁴ Statewide Racial Disproportionality Advisory Group, *Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Washington State Child Welfare – Remediation Plan*, December 2, 2008, <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/disproportionremediationplan.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.brycs.org/>, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, M.A. Johnson et.al., *Family Assessment in Child Welfare Services: Instrument Comparisons*, September 2006, http://www.todaydocs.com/index.php?m=url&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcsrc.berkeley.edu%2Fbassc%2Fpublic%2FBASSC_FamilyAssessment_FULL_REPORT091406.pdf&title=Family%20Assessment%20in%20Child%20Welfare%20-%20Center%20for%20Social%20Services%20..&type=pdf, accessed 1.30.13.
- ¹⁷ Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau/ACYF, *Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare*, January 2011, https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/racial_disproportionality/racial_disproportionality.pdf, accessed 1.17.13.
- ¹⁸ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Team Decisionmaking: Involving the Family and Community in Child Welfare Decisions, Part Two*, September 2002, http://www.aecf.org/upload/pdf/familytofamily/f2f_tdm_sept_02.pdf, accessed 1.30.13.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.cwla.org/voice/0907translation.htm>, accessed 1.13.17.

²⁰ Casey Family Programs, *Immigration and Child Welfare* Fact Sheet, n.d., <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Special%20Interest%20Areas/Immigrants%20and%20Refugees/FactSheetImmigrationandChildWelfare/Immigration.pdf>, accessed 1.17.13.

The Race Matters Institute (RMI) assists partners and clients to have the framework, knowledge, and tools they need to advance racial equity within their spheres of influence. Learn more about us at <http://racemattersinstitute.org> or contact us at <http://www.racemattersinstitute.org/contact/>. This product was prepared for RMI by JustPartners, Inc. Thanks to Rob Geen and Tracey Fields of the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their critical feedback. The research was funded by the Annie E Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented here are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.