

National studies consistently show that neglect and abuse—the main preconditions to a child being placed in foster care—occur at the same rate among children of color as they do among white children.

Children of color account for 42 percent of the U.S. child population yet make up 57 percent of all children in foster care. This overrepresentation and disparate treatment of children of color in the foster care system is referred to as disproportionality.

It is an indicator that the child welfare system is not functioning fairly or equitably.

Disproportionality exists among African American children, American Indian and Alaska Native children, and, in several states, Latino children.

The keystone of Casey Family Programs' strategy to improve child welfare is to safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020. If children of color were not overrepresented in the foster care system, but instead reflected the average rate for all children in foster care, the overall number of children in foster care would decrease by about 22 percent—or almost half of Casey Family Programs' 2020 Strategy safe reduction goal.

## Children of Color Treated Differently at Every Stage

Research shows conclusively that children of color are treated differently than white children at every stage of the child welfare system, from the way reports of maltreatment are investigated to whether they are substantiated to the decision on whether to place a child in foster care.

Once in care, children of color experience a greater number of placements and moves. They receive fewer support services, have less contact with case workers and stay in the system longer. Ultimately, they are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their birth families.

Children do best growing up in stable homes as members of families whose connections will last them a lifetime. Disproportionality leads to children of color having less of a chance to experience the loving embrace of a permanent family.

As long as children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system, they will face an inordinate number of obstacles along the path toward successful adulthood.

This doesn't just hold back individuals. It holds back entire communities.

The first step to correcting this inequity is for states to understand the extent to which disproportionality exists in their systems.

To do this, they must first analyze the data and diagnose the problems. Then, they must set out to address the issues within child welfare systems—as well as government policies—that perpetuate disproportionality.

## Disproportionality Facts

- Percentage of children in foster care who are children of color: **57%**
- Percentage of children of color in U.S. child population: **42%**
- Percentage of children in foster care who are African American: **33.9%**
- Percentage of African American children in U.S. child population: **15.1%**
- Percentage of children in foster care who are American Indian and Alaska Native: **2.1%**
- Percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native children in U.S. child population: **0.9%**
- **Note: 19% of children in foster care are Latino, which is about the same percentage of Latinos in the U.S. child population. A 2005 report, however, shows that Latinos are overrepresented in foster care in 16 states.**

## Promising Practices and Recommendations

Promising practices are reducing racial disparities in child welfare. Texas, for example, has reduced disproportionality through staff training, case review and community engagement. Michigan has completed a comprehensive analysis of disproportionality within its system, a strong first step to correcting the disparities. Casey Family Programs assisted both states in their efforts.

System-wide approaches such as investments in prevention, early intervention and increased permanency options—which benefit all children in care—have the additional effect of reducing racial disparities.

### **Casey Family Programs and its partners will issue the following policy recommendations on disproportionality:**

- 1. Congress should mandate the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to publish an annual report that provides a national summary and state-by-state breakdowns regarding the racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities that exist in child welfare.**
- 2. The Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process should be modified to specifically assess racial disparities in outcomes for children and youth. Ongoing assessment of racial equity in state child welfare systems should become part of the CSFR process.**
- 3. Congress should mandate that State Program Improvement Plans, developed as a result of the CSFR process, include evidence-based strategies to reduce racial disparities in treatment and outcomes.**

Racial disparities are a symptom of much larger problems within the child welfare system. As such, we must ensure that this work is done as part of larger efforts to help all vulnerable children at risk of entering, or already in, the child welfare system.