



THE Porch Light Project

Forever Family For Every Child



Children of Color and Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System

A Pennsylvania Partnerships
for Children Initiative

All children deserve the safety and security of being raised in loving and permanent families, free from abuse and neglect.

Yet a great disparity exists in Pennsylvania's foster care system: African American children are six times more likely to be in foster care than white children and Latino children are three times more likely to be in foster care.ⁱ

There are more than 18,000 Pennsylvania children living in foster care today. Forty-seven percent of these children are African American yet African American children comprise only 13 percent of the state's child population. White children make up 80 percent of the state's child population and comprise approximately 47 percent of Pennsylvania's foster care population.ⁱⁱ This disproportionate rate of children of color in foster care is not only an issue in Pennsylvania but is a nationwide problem. More than half of the 500,000 children in foster care in the United States come from minority families even though children from minority communities comprise less than half of the children in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only do children of color enter the foster care system in our state at higher rates than white children, they experience longer lengths of stay in placement and wait greater periods of time to achieve permanency through adoption and legal guardianship. Furthermore, African American children are less likely to be reunified with their birth families than other children.

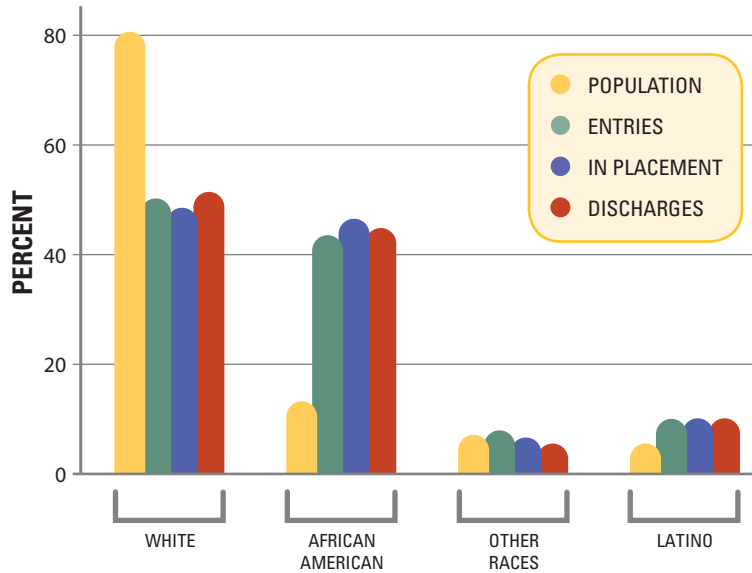
While the rate of disparity that exists between children of color and white children in Pennsylvania's child welfare system is cause for alarm, it is important to remember that any child — regardless of race or ethnicity — who is raised without the stability of a safe and supportive family has an increased likelihood of mental health disorders, substance abuse, dropping out of school, and involvement in crime.

Some would argue that the overrepresentation of children of color in our foster care system may be explained by the fact that children of color have a greater chance of living in families that are poor, unemployed, suffering from mental illness and/or headed by teen parents.^{iv} But, these factors alone are not enough to explain the problem. Three

national studies have found that there is no statistical difference in the maltreatment rates between African American and white children.^v The missing link is likely to be found in the careful examination of practice and systems issues. This is the very exercise in which Pennsylvania must engage. This is the step that is happening in other cities, counties and states around the nation.

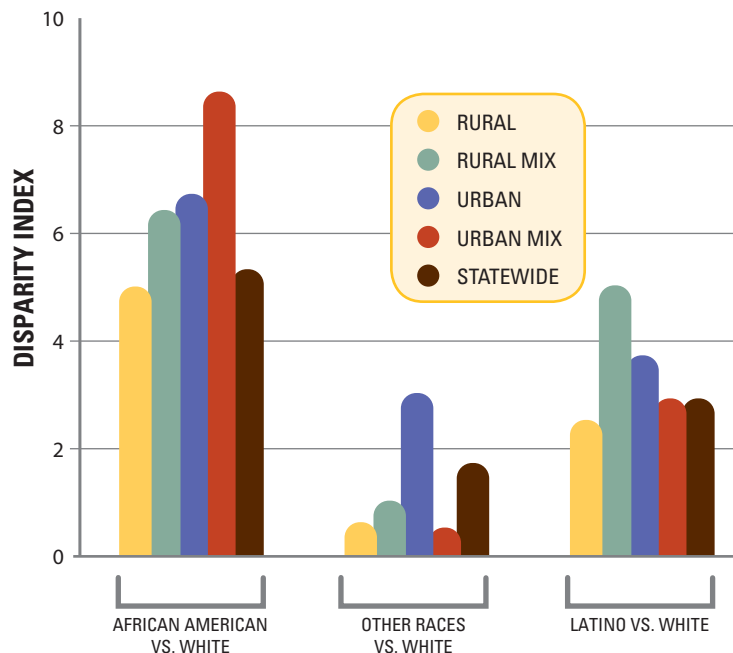
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RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN IN THE POPULATION AND IN FOSTER CARE BETWEEN 10/1/08 AND 3/31/09



Children of color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system.

RACIAL/ETHNIC DISPARITY INDICES FOR PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT BY COUNTY TYPE BETWEEN 10/1/08 AND 3/31/09



African American children are five times more likely to enter foster care than white children and Latino children are three times more likely. This disparity exists for African American and Latino in all types of Pennsylvania counties.

Guiding Questions for Administrators

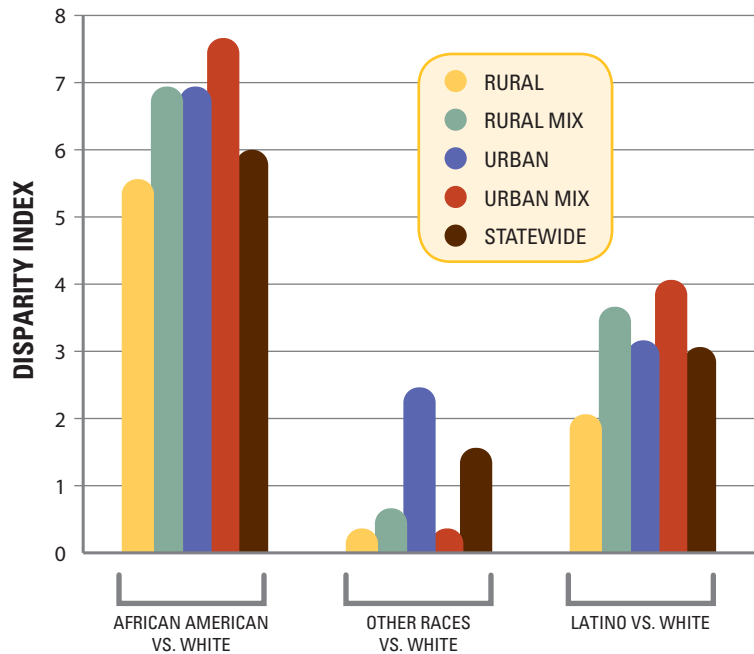
1. Why are African American and Latino children overrepresented in foster care in our county?
2. Why do the rates of children entering and exiting foster care in our county differ based on race and ethnicity?
3. What is our local practice to assure equal treatment of all children —regardless of race and ethnicity —at all key decision making points such as investigation, acceptance for service, placement, reunification, etc.?
4. Do our criteria for placing a child in foster care differ based on the race and ethnicity of the child?
5. Does our workforce reflect the diversity of the communities we serve, and have workers been adequately trained to be culturally competent?
6. What factors among county government, courts and private providers might contribute to the racial disparity children of color experience?



RACIAL/ETHNIC DISPARITY INDICES FOR PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT BY COUNTY TYPE BETWEEN 10/1/08 AND 3/31/09

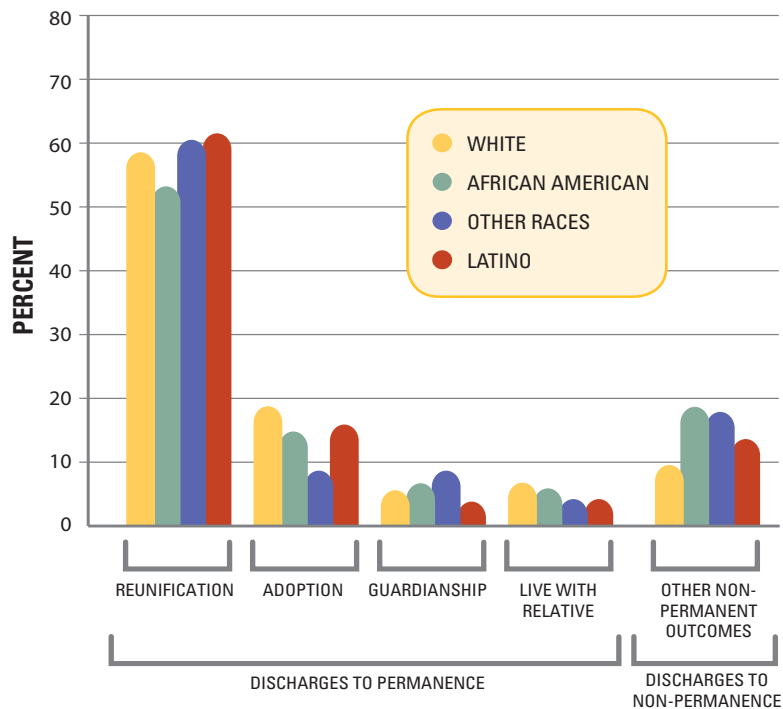
Questions for and Practitioners

7. Are there other family and community factors that drive disparate treatment?
8. What is our agency's philosophy and experience in working with the community to address issues that might impact disproportionality and disparity?
9. How would we describe our relationships with community agencies?
10. Do African American and other families of color have adequate resources to keep their children safely at home or with extended family?
11. What other factors impact timeliness and permanency outcomes for children of color?
12. What is our local strategy to collect comprehensive data by race and ethnicity at all key service delivery points, and to utilize the data to improve practice?



African American children are six times more likely to be in foster care than white children, and Latino children are over three times more likely. African American and Latino children are overrepresented in foster care placement in all Pennsylvania county types.

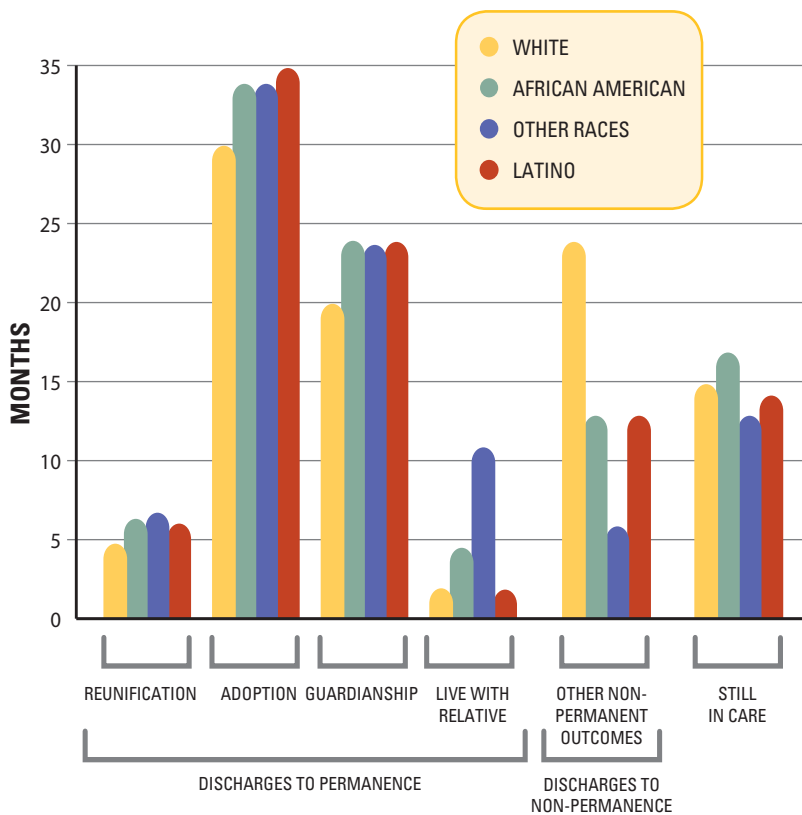
DISCHARGE REASONS FOR PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN EXITING CARE BETWEEN 10/1/08 AND 3/31/09



African American children are less likely to reunify with their birth families or be adopted than other children.



MEDIAN LENGTH OF STAY FOR PENNSYLVANIA CHILDREN DISCHARGED BETWEEN 10/1/08 AND 3/31/09 AND THOSE IN CARE 3/31/09



Children of color spend longer periods of time in foster care than white children.

Addressing the Issue

The issues of racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity in Pennsylvania's child welfare system need to be addressed by all stakeholders. It is time for state and county officials to examine existing data — and collect more complete data. Current Pennsylvania law prohibits data collection by race and ethnicity in the ChildLine and Abuse Registry. Changing the law isn't required to collect better data. Data on race and ethnicity should be collected at all service delivery points including intake and referral when allegations are made, investigation when substantiations are determined, and acceptance and delivery of in-home services.

But better data collection should not deter us from taking aggressive steps to act on what we already know. Improvements in child welfare practice can help to address disproportionality and disparity.

Policymakers and practitioners alike should insist upon:

- Consistent and regular review of comprehensive data by race and ethnicity at the state and county levels.
- Recruitment and training of a workforce that is culturally competent and reflects the diversity of the community it serves.
- Improvement of practice at key decision points for all families by:
 - Advancing family strengthening activities that are home and community-based and culturally sensitive.
 - Improving family engagement through family finding, Family Group Decision Making and fatherhood initiatives.
 - Removing barriers to adoption and guardianship.

Addressing the issues of disproportionality and disparity in Pennsylvania's child welfare system is a critical step to assure our commitment of a safe and permanent family for every child. We should not delay.

Data tables are available online at www.porchlightproject.org.

This report was made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide and improve – and ultimately prevent the need for – foster care. To learn more, visit www.casey.org. The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and do not necessarily reflect the views of Casey Family Programs.

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ⁱ Statewide Data Package. AFCARS Longitudinal File maintained by Hornby-Zeller Associates for the PA Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Hill, Robert B., Ph.D. Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update. Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, October 2006. Pg. 3.

^{iv} Barth, R. (2005). Child welfare and race: Models of disproportionality. In D. Derezotes, et al. (Eds.) Race matters in child welfare. The overrepresentation of African American children in the system (pp. 25-46). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of American; Chaffin, M. Kelleher, K., & Hollenberg, J. (1996). Onset of physical abuse and neglect. Child Abuse and Neglect, 20: 191-203; Walker, C.D., Zangrillo, P. & Smith, J. (1994). Parental drug abuse and African American children in foster care. In R. Barth, J. Berrick & N. Gilbert (Eds.) Child welfare research review: Vol. 1 (pp. 109-122). New York: Columbia University Press; Wells, K. & Tracy (1996). Reorienting intensive family preservation services in relation to public child welfare practices. Child Welfare, 75: 662-692.

^v Hill, Robert B., Ph.D. Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update. Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, October 2006. Pg. 13.



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