

Racial Disparities in Foster Care

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Executive Summary

Racial disparities exist in foster care across the United States but rates are especially high here in Newport News and Hampton. Studies have shown that children of color are more likely to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care than white children. They are also less likely to be reunified with their families or adopted. The root causes of these disparities are complex and interconnected, including systemic racism, poverty, and lack of access to resources. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including reforming child welfare policies, increasing support for families, and addressing systemic racism.

Introduction

Foster care is a system in which children who are unable to live with their birth parents due to abuse, neglect, or other reasons are placed in the care of other families or institutions. While foster care is intended to temporarily provide a safe and nurturing environment for children, racial disparities have been observed in the system. There is a generous body of published research observing this issue. This white paper will offer a brief survey of the causes and consequences of racial disparities in foster care and suggest potential solutions to address them.

Background

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), in 2020, there were approximately 424,000 children in foster care in the United States. Of these children, approximately 23% were Black, despite Black children making up only 14% of the U.S. population. Additionally, Indigenous and Hispanic children were overrepresented in the foster care system, with Indigenous children making up 2% of the U.S. population but 3% of children in foster care, and Hispanic children making up 19% of the U.S. population but 22% of children in foster care.



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Causes of Racial Disparities

One potential cause of racial disparities in foster care is systemic racism within child welfare agencies. Research has found that child welfare agencies are more likely to remove children from their homes and place them in foster care when they come from Black, Indigenous, or Hispanic families, even when compared to families with similar circumstances. This suggests that implicit biases within the child welfare system may be contributing to racial disparities in foster care. For example, child welfare workers may be more likely to perceive families of color as neglectful or abusive, even when there is no evidence to support such a claim. Additionally, implicit bias can affect decision-making in cases involving families of color, resulting in more severe interventions, such as a child's separation from the family.

Another potential cause of racial disparities in foster care is the overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic families in low-income communities. These families may face challenges such as inadequate housing, lack of access to healthcare and education, and increased exposure to violence and trauma, which can increase the likelihood of involvement with the child welfare system.

Consequences of Racial Disparities

Racial disparities in foster care can have serious consequences for children and families. Children of color who are placed in foster care may experience culture shock when placed with families who do not share their cultural background, which can lead to feelings of isolation and identity confusion. Additionally, children of color may experience more placement instability, meaning they are moved from one foster home to another more frequently, which can be detrimental to their emotional well-being.

For families of color, involvement with the child welfare system can lead to significant trauma and loss. Parents who have their children removed from their care may experience feelings of shame and guilt and may struggle to regain custody of their children due to systemic barriers such as lack of access to legal representation and resources.



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Potential Solutions

Addressing racial disparities in foster care requires a multi-faceted approach. Child welfare policies need to be reformed to reduce the overrepresentation of children of color in the foster care system. This can include changes to mandatory reporting laws, which can result in unnecessary involvement of families in the child welfare system. Additionally, child welfare agencies must prioritize efforts to keep families together by providing resources and services to families in need, rather than automatically resorting to the removal of children from their homes.

Efforts must also be made to ensure that children of color are placed in foster homes that share their cultural background, and that foster families are adequately prepared to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

Racial disparities in foster care are a complex issue that requires systemic change to address. By acknowledging and addressing implicit biases within the child welfare system, prioritizing efforts to keep families together, and ensuring that children are placed in culturally competent foster homes, progress can be made toward reducing racial disparities and improving outcomes for all children in foster care.



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