

**Examining Child Maltreatment and the Impact of Race in  
Receipt of Child Welfare Services in the United States**

**Prepared for the Family Violence Prevention Fund  
by**

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**What are the rates of child maltreatment in the United States? Do these rates differ by race, ethnicity and income level? What do we know about how they compare to the representation of children in the child welfare system?**

In 1999, an estimated 2.9 million children were the subjects of a CPS investigation or assessment. Children who were found by a CPS agency to have experienced or to have been at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect are considered "victims" of maltreatment. An estimated 826,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect in 1999. This national estimate is based on data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS, 1999). The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) is the primary source of national information on abused and neglected children known to State child protective services agencies. It is a voluntary reporting system by states.

Within the 50 States, 11.8 children were victims of abuse or neglect for every 1,000 children in the population. A child may have been counted each time he or she was found to be a victim of maltreatment

Children suffer from many different types of child abuse and neglect, while more children suffer neglect than any other form of maltreatment. Substantiated (founded, indicated) child abuse investigations found that about 53 percent of victims in 1998 suffered neglect, 22 percent physical abuse, 12 percent sexual abuse, 6 percent emotional maltreatment, 2 percent medical neglect, and 25 percent other forms of maltreatment. Some children suffer more than one type of maltreatment (DHHS, 2001).

Additional data from the Adoption and Foster Care Data Reporting System (AFCARS) indicates that children of all ages experience abuse and neglect, while the type of abuse more likely to be suffered varies by age. AFCARS was developed in response to a need for national data on children in state foster care and on children who have been adopted through state agencies. Until 1994 there had not been a consistent, national data collection system on the characteristics of children in foster care, foster parents, adopted children and adoptive parents. There are two components: the state component and the federal component. The state component consists of the information system used to collect case management information, and transmit the AFCARS data to the federal system. The federal system consists of the information system that receives the data, process the data and checks it for compliance and quality, and the development of reports.

In 1998, reported AFCARS neglect rates were highest for infants and toddlers, ages 0-3, at 9.7 per thousand in the population, declining to 2.1 children per thousand for teenagers, ages 16-17. Medical neglect ranged from 0.9 per thousand for the youngest, ages 0-3, to 0.1 per thousand for teenagers 16-17. Sexual abuse, however, increased from 0.5 per thousand for children ages 3 or younger to 2.1 per thousand for youngsters 12-15 and declined to 1.2 per thousand for teenagers 16-17.

Both boys and girls experience child maltreatment. In 1998, about 52 percent of reported victims were female and 48 percent were male.

Child maltreatment can result in the death of a child. In 1998, an estimated 1,100 children were counted by CPS agencies to have died as a result of abuse or neglect. Case-level data suggest that 77 percent of these children were 4 years of age or younger. Not all child maltreatment fatalities are reported to CPS agencies.

There are many sources on child abuse and neglect reports (i.e. NCANDS) and child welfare services receipt, i.e., AFCARS. The specific abuse statistics in the above paragraphs comes from the AFCARS system established by the United States Department of Health and Human Services. It is important to note that definitions of child abuse and neglect are determined at the state level. So, while we have the above data on substantiated reports of abuse and neglect, the data gathered in one state may not

mean exactly the same thing in the next state. Additionally, data gathered from the AFCARS in this report is national data and may not reflect the ratios of a given state.

Determining the underlying incidence of child abuse and neglect requires an examination of both reported incidences of child abuse and neglect, and also unreported incidences. The federal government funded three National Incidence Studies (NIS-1, NIS-2, NIS-3) designed to compile information on incidences of both reported and unreported child abuse and neglect. These studies provide the best estimates and are the only studies available with national figures on the proportion of children who are abused and neglected, and among them, the proportion that ever receive child welfare services. The NIS-3 offers an important perspective on the scope of child abuse and neglect. The NIS includes children who were investigated by child protective service (CPS) agencies, but it also obtains data on children seen by community professionals who were not reported to CPS or who were screened out by CPS without investigation. This means that the NIS estimates provide a more comprehensive measure of the scope of child abuse and neglect known to community professionals, including both abused and neglected children who are in the official statistics and those who are not. The NIS follows a nationally representative design, which means that the estimates represent the numbers of abused and neglected children in the United States who come to the attention of community professionals. The fact that there have been three similar national incidence studies that have used comparable methods and definitions means that one can compare NIS-3 estimates with those from the earlier studies in order to identify any changes over time in the incidence and distribution of abused and neglected children.

The NIS-3 was conducted in a nationally representative sample of 42 counties. In every county, the CPS agency was a key participant, providing basic demographic data on all the children who were reported and accepted for investigation during the 3-month study data period, September 5 through December 4, 1993. Further details about the child's maltreatment and the outcome of the CPS investigation were obtained for a representative sample of these cases.

## **RISK OF MALTREATMENT**

According to the NIS-3, 1,553,800 children were abused or neglected in 1993. This number reflects a 67 percent increase since the NIS-2 estimate, which indicated that the total was 931,000 children in 1986. This means that a child's risk of experiencing harm-causing abuse or neglect in 1993 was one and one-half times the child's risk in 1986. Under the Endangerment Standard, the number of abused and neglected children nearly doubled from 1986 to 1993. Physical abuse nearly doubled, sexual abuse more than doubled, and emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect were all more than two and one-half times their NIS-2 levels. The total number of children seriously injured and the total number endangered both quadrupled during this time. (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

What places a child at the risk of maltreatment? When initially examining risk, researchers looked at cause-and-effect models. They found some risk factors more closely linked with specific forms of child abuse and neglect, however, the findings of research conducted in this way could not differentiate the etiologies and outcomes associated with the different forms of maltreatment, especially when various forms of maltreatment occurred simultaneously in an individual.

More recently sophisticated approaches of examining child maltreatment consider multiple pathways and interactive effects. (National Academy of the Sciences, 1993). These models suggest maltreatment results from complex constellations of correlated variables whose influence may increase or decrease during different developmental and historical periods (National Academy of the Sciences, 1993).

Within these models child maltreatment is believed to occur when multiple risk factors outweigh protective, compensatory, and buffering factors (Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989). Additionally, these models emphasize the importance of viewing child maltreatment in the context of the family, community, and society, in addition to individual parental characteristics or stressors (Belsky, 1980, 1992; Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989; Garbarino, 1977; National Academy of the Sciences, 1993; Parke and Collmer, 1975; Wolfe, 1991).

### **Maltreatment Occurrence by Race/Ethnicity**

The NIS studies compared Caucasian, African American, and other children. Hispanic children were a small percent of identified cases grouped with Caucasian children. Biracial children were categorized as “other.” All three studies concluded that there are no differences in the incidence of child abuse and neglect by any racial group.

Overall race differences did emerge, however, for three specific maltreatment categories: Caucasian children were marginally higher risk of physical abuse and at significantly higher risk of sexual abuse and physical neglect.

### **The Impact of Race and Income on Maltreatment Rates**

Race and income interact in determining overall risk of maltreatment in the NIS-3 data. The differences between African American and Caucasian children appear in the lowest income group. About 10 percent of Caucasian children whose families have annual incomes less than \$15,000, compared to 6 percent of African American children with similar family situations have a greater risk of maltreatment. In higher income groups, the difference disappears. Caucasian children in the lowest income group (family income.>\$10,000) were at greater risk of emotional maltreatment and physical neglect. Additionally, Caucasian children whose parents’ were not in the work force were physically abused at much higher rates.

### **THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM - AN EXAMINATION OF DISPROPORTIONAL SERVICE RECEIPT**

Although African American children constituted 15 percent of the population of the United States in 1998, they accounted for 31 percent of founded (substantiated, indicated) reports by child welfare systems, and 45 percent of the children placed in out-of-home care [NCANDS, 1998; and AFCARS, 2001]. In contrast, Caucasian children, while constituting 66 percent of the United States child population, represent only 36 percent of the children in out-of-home-care. The racial/ethnic distribution of other groups is much more representative of their percent of the population as can be observed in Table 1.

**Table 1 Racial and Ethnic Representation in the Child Welfare System**

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Percentage of the United States Population*</b>	<b>Founded Reports**</b>	<b>Placement in Out-of-home Care***</b>
<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>African American</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Asian</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>American Indian</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Unknown</b>			<b>4</b>

\* 2001 Census Bureau

\*\* 1998 NCANDS Data

\*\*\* 2001 AFCARS Data

Comparing the NIS race estimates with substantiation and placement rates cause considerable concern for those who have confidence in the NIS findings. Yegidis and Morton (1999) write, “States are potentially vulnerable in a number of ways. First, all three National Incident Studies (NIS) conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services concluded that there are no significant or marginal differences in the incidence of child maltreatment based on race. Since incidence is measured in rates per thousand, this means that all groups should be represented in the child welfare system consistent with their proportion of the population as a whole. If not, then a basis for the presumption of bias exists.”

Yegidis and Morton also rely on 1995 NCANDS data to support their argument. They report that all but one state had reporting ratios for African American children significantly higher than their percentages of the state’s child welfare population. If the NIS findings are accurate and the NCANDS data correct, it appears that child welfare agencies were largely responsible for the vastly disproportionate rates of child welfare services involvement.

Unfortunately, there are several questions regarding the validity of the NIS data. In an examination of the NIS-1 data, Ards, Chung, and Myers (1998) found there were significant differences in the characteristics of African American and Caucasian victims

by source of report and type of maltreatment. They also found differences within racial groups between sampled agencies and non-sampled agencies, so sample selection biases affected the estimation of reporting rates for both groups. This led them to question the validity of the NIS data to address racial differences in child welfare services.

In order to more closely examine Morton's conclusion (1999) that disproportionality of African American children in care results from high substantiation rates, Ards, Chung, and Myers (1999) completed an analysis of 1993, 1994, and 1995 NCANDS data to determine the type of relationship between the proportion of African Americans in the state and the proportion of cases substantiated. They hypothesized that if African Americans are more likely to be substantiated than Caucasians, their substantiation rates would be higher in states with large proportions of African American children reported. What they found instead was a trend toward an inverse relationship, indicating a higher proportion of African American children reported is associated with lower substantiation rates. They also found no difference in substantiation rates for African American and Caucasians in cases that were rated as "very probable" or judged on information that was determined "insufficient." This exercise was undertaken to examine the hypothesis that more African American cases would have been substantiated even if there was not sufficient data to support it.

Upon completion of these analyses, Ards, Chung, and Myers concluded that the results of their study provided data contrary to Morton's hypothesis that African American child maltreatment cases were disproportionately substantiated. The authors argue that their findings suggest that we should not look to the child welfare system to explain the differences in proportions of children of color, but that we must look to much broader social conditions.

This ongoing debate regarding the proportion of children in the child welfare from different races remains. Why, as indicated in chart one above, do African American children have more substantiated rates of abuse and neglect and placements than children

of other races? Is it because they are at greater risk of maltreatment or are there biases that impact child welfare decision-making?

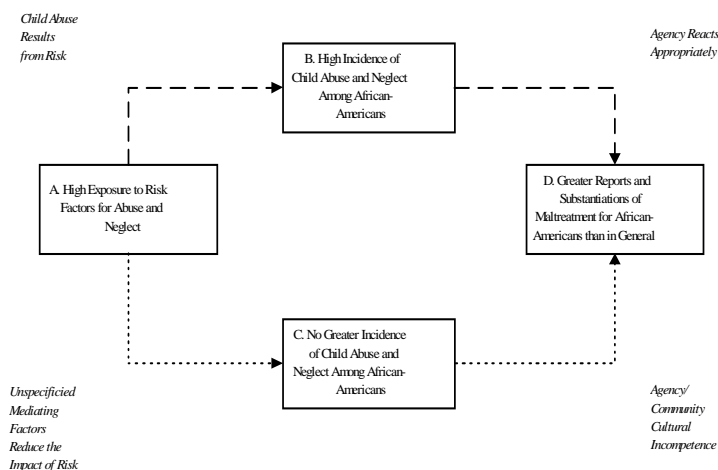
### **Examining the Disproportionality**

Ards, Chung, and Myers (1998) conclude that there are at least three reasons African American children could be over represented in the child welfare system if the NIS findings are true, Morton (1999) adds three additional reasons:

1. African-American children are over reported (that is, reported when they do not need to be or just reported more often when they do need to be)
2. Non-African American children are under reported (that is, they are not reported when they need to be or are just reported less often when they do need to be)
3. The types of maltreatment reported for African-American children are different than those for other children and more likely to be reported to CPS
4. Racial differences in rates of investigation
5. Racial differences in substantiation rates
6. Racial differences in the rates of openings of cases.

At this point in time we do not know the actual occurrence of abuse by race in the general population, but we do know that African American children are over represented in the child welfare system. Barth (2001) proposes a way to help structure the discussion about this over representation (Figure 1). The discussion begins with the assumption that child abuse and neglect is linked to risks that exist within the general population. Children who live in families and communities where there are high levels of risk are more likely to experience abuse or neglect unless there are protective factors that moderate the risk. The model presents two paths that may lead to the disproportionate child abuse and neglect reporting and substantiation patterns we often observe.

**Figure 1. Assumptions of Analysis of Disproportionality of Population**



The first path identifies situations in which high risk factors and the absence of protective factors exist within a community. In this case, more children experience abuse or neglect. This leads to a larger number of children from these communities coming to the attention of the child welfare system. If this system is operating appropriately, more of these children have reports and substantiations of abuse and neglect.

Researchers have observed a continuity of communities in which child abuse and neglect occurs, based upon a century of research examining social problems in Chicago, Illinois, from an ecological perspective (Testa, 2001; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1992). Additionally, Wells (2001) found that when examining substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, there is a relationship between race, ethnicity, and location. When location is introduced into the analysis, the effects of race disappear in the sample. Garbarino and Kostelny (1992) found a strong relationship between per capita reports of child abuse and neglect and socioeconomic and demographic indicators of community context. Testa (2001) observed a continuity in the set of communities in which child abuse and neglect occurred in the last 100 years despite changes in ethnic and racial background. Although ethnic and racial composition of neighborhoods figure in the mix, the relative importance was found to be secondary to economic and family indicators of high-risk neighborhoods.

Additionally, other researchers have observed that high rates of delinquency, infant mortality, low birth weight, tuberculosis (Shaw and McKay, 1942), suicide (Cavan, 1928), and mental illness (Faris and Dunham, 1939) were observed in these same communities.

The second hypothesized path includes children from communities with high risk factors as in the first path, but they also have protective factors that decrease the risk to children. The result is communities with no greater incidence of child abuse or neglect. If these communities and the child welfare agencies within them react appropriately there is no greater representation of these children in the child welfare system than children from communities with low risk factors. If these communities and agencies react in ways that target these families based on the community risk without regard for the characteristics that mitigate that risk, the result can be a high proportion of these children in the child welfare system that is higher than appropriate.

The revised model expands upon Barth's model, arguing that the over representation of African Americans in the child welfare system not be limited to child abuse and neglect reporting and substantiations, but instead encompasses decisions made throughout a child's experiences within the child welfare system. Consequently in the second path of the revised model, elements contributing to disproportionality could include not only reports and substantiations of abuse or neglect at the point of entry into the child welfare system but also at any point at which a decision is made for a child while he or she is in care.

There is a potential that the cause of the disproportionality is some combination of the two paths, and that racial and ethnic treatment questions that exist within the child welfare field can be explained as a part of this model. Unfortunately, there is no overwhelming data to date that would provide a definitive answer. Below is an examination of an approach we are using to look at disproportionality as a function of the child welfare system.

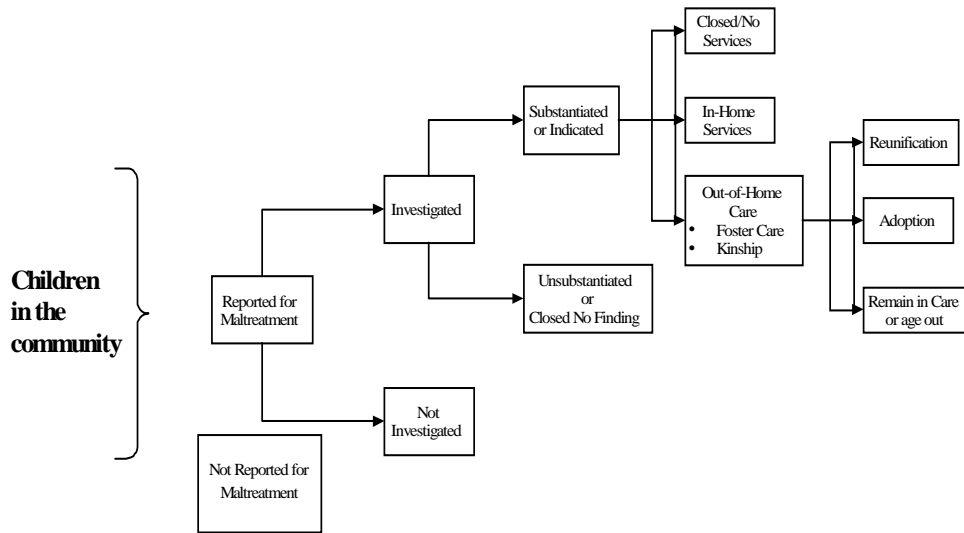
### **Decision Point Research**

The apparent racial disparity in the child welfare system mirrors that found in juvenile justice where allegations of discrimination have been advanced for over four decades. In January of 1989 the National Coalition of Juvenile Justice Advisory Groups produced the report entitled *A Delicate Balance*, which identified both problems facing minority youth within the juvenile justice system as well as their over representation in secure facilities. Upon receipt of these findings, Congress amended the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, mandating that states address the problems creating this over representation. Ten years later this racial disparity within the Juvenile Justice System remains.

One positive outcome of these efforts, however, is a line of research that provides a better understanding of how over representation of a minority group within a service system can occur (Pope & Feyerharm, 1992). By examining the influences at each of a system's decision points from the time a criminal act takes place to the time of sentencing, a clearer understanding of the causes of over representation of minority populations within the juvenile justice system have been obtained.

The racial disparity in the child welfare system is less well understood and will benefit from the development of a similar structure through which to assess the representation of different ethnic and racial groups. This model provides a structure for the examination of variables that impact what is reported for abuse or neglect, factors that explain which children are placed in substitute care, and ultimately when and how each child leaves the child welfare system. Because there are many factors that may impact the level of involvement with the child welfare system at each step in the process, it is important to investigate each of the potential factors and determine the impact of each factor individually and in relationship to the other factors present. Figure 2 is a simplified model of the movement of children through the child welfare system.

**Figure 2. Simplified Model of Caseload Flow of Children**



**How many children are actually in the Child Welfare System? How long do they stay in care? What services do they receive? How do workers make decisions?**

According to AFCARS, there were 581,000 children in out-of-home care on September 30, 1999. The average length of stay for a child in care was 32 months and the median, 20 months. The mean age of children in care was 9.9 years, the median, 10.1 years. Table 2 shows the types of placements children were placed in at this time. Almost half of the children in care lived in non-relative foster care.

**Table 2 1998 Child Placements**

Pre-Adoptive Home	4%	22,484
Foster Family Home (Relative)	26%	151,864
Foster Family Home (Non-Relative)	47%	274,100

Group Home	8%	46,279
Institution	10%	57,590
Supervised	1%	4,979
Independent		
Living		
Runaway	1%	7,886
Trial Home	3%	15,818
Visit		

### **The Impact of Decision Making**

From the first decision point in the child welfare system, a report of abuse or neglect, to the exit of the child from the system, the element of human decision-making becomes a factor with potential impact on the outcome at each decision point. Research suggests that workers use a combination of factors to make placement decisions (DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994). The factors that workers consider in making assessments vary, as do factors in assessments of the severity of risk and the level of intervention indicated (Williams, 1997). Studies using placement decision as the dependent variable, although not conclusive, have found relationships between three types of independent variables: caseworker, client, and resources (DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994). Stein and Rzepnicki (1984) found that decisions are more likely to be made on the basis of deficits in available resources, accepted agency practice, personal values, and biases.

Tatora (1989) reports that caseworkers have usually relied on intuition, experience, and interview engagement skills to ascertain future risk. Additionally, several researchers have suggested that caseworker characteristics and perceptions of their clients influence their final decisions (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Boehm, 1962, 1968; Meyer, 1972, Wolock, 1982). Conversely, others have found no association between caseworker characteristics and placement decision (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978). Additionally, Rossi, Schuerman, and Budde (1999) found through regression analysis that decisions were not consistent based on case characteristics, resulting in two errors: removal of children when it is unnecessary, and failure to remove children from their families when it is called for.

Researchers who have looked specifically at race bias have found that the race of the family being investigated impacts workers' decisions. This research, however, does not predict the way in which race influences decisions. Sometimes assessments of African American families lead to more intrusive interventions, other times they normalize

unacceptable behavior. “Attention needs to be paid to decision-making and the impact of race in regard to the existence of maltreatment, whether children stay at home, what level and kind of effort is necessary to help families, and what level of effort is called for to achieve permanence for children (Williams, 1997).” In 1988, Schorr studied the effect of programs for multiproblem families who faced child placement, school failure, and adolescent pregnancy. Regardless of presenting problems, the programs that worked were holistic, family-centered, flexible, intensive, based in the community, and focused on client strengths and empowerment. In North Carolina, the Kellogg Foundation funded *Families for Kids Initiative (FFK)* showed that the differences in the rates of entrance into foster care and lengths of stay in foster care for African American and Caucasian children declined with the introduction of training and resources (Wildfire, 2000).

### **Decision Points in the Child Welfare System**

What factors, internal to the system, impact a child’s journey through the child welfare system? The information contained in this section follows the path through the child welfare system, providing available research on several decision points. This field of study is fairly new and the data is not comprehensive, but it does begin to give us a picture of different points in the system where bias could potentially come into play.

### ***Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect***

Rolock and Testa (2001) report that African American children are reported to child protective services at three times the rate of Caucasian children in Illinois. Recognizing that there are not three times as many African Americans than Caucasians in the system, it is important to examine more closely the reason for this phenomenon.

### ***Investigations and Substantiations***

Once reported, allegations of abuse and neglect go through a process of investigation to determine the validity of the report. To determine racial differences in CPS investigations of abused and neglected children, Sedlak and Schultz (2001) analyzed the NIS-3 data. They found a greater likelihood of investigations of African American families than Caucasian families when the allegations include emotional maltreatment, physical

neglect, fatal or serious injury, harm, or perpetrator alcohol or drug involvement. They also found that African American families are more likely to be investigated when the reports come from mental health or social service agencies. Caucasian families are at a higher risk of investigation if the parents are not in the work force, or if the perpetrator is not a parent or parent-substitute. Wells (2001) found through bivariate analysis that there is a relationship between race, ethnicity, and site. When site is introduced into the analysis, the effects of race disappear in the sample.

Several studies have concluded that African Americans are over represented in the rate of substantiation of abuse or neglect (Capellari et al., 1993; Hampton, 1987). Other studies, however, contradict these findings. Goerge (2001) found that African Americans are less likely to have an allegation of abuse or neglect substantiated. Baird (2001) found that reports made on African American families are no more likely to be substantiated following a report of abuse or neglect; and Caucasians had a slightly higher overall risk profile. When looking at abuse and neglect scales, African Americans scored higher than Caucasians on neglect scales; and Caucasians scored higher than African Americans on abuse scales.

Testa and Rolock (2001) looked at the impact of the race of the investigator on the substantiation rate of allegations. They found that children in African American families are more likely to be indicated, regardless of the race of the investigator; Caucasian investigators are more likely to indicate report, regardless of family race. Racial differences in the propensity of investigators to substantiate a report appear to be related to the type of allegation and the community in which the investigation was conducted. Additionally, cross-race investigations diminish the disparities associated with the main effects of family and race of the investigator. Both African American and Caucasian investigators indicate opposite race families at a rate slightly less than average.

Some studies show that other factors interact with race in the area of substantiation. The receipt of welfare benefits (Aid to Dependent Families, Temporary Assistance to Needy

Families) doubles the risk of substantiation (Goerge, 2001). Barth (2001) found that a greater percentage of children receiving public assistance has a positive relationship with increased over representation of African Americans for placements.

Single caretaker families had an 87 percent greater risk of substantiation of physical neglect than those of two caretaker families; and 52 percent of African American families versus 18 percent of Caucasian families had a single female caretaker present in the study (Baird, 2001). Several other studies support this finding (Barth, 2001). Additionally, a mother without a high school degree is much more likely to have an allegation against her substantiated (Goerge, 2001).

California data showed that Caucasians are more likely than African Americans to have additional maltreatment allegations substantiated within two years of the first substantiation (Baird, 2001).

### ***The Decision to Place***

Once entering the child welfare system, public policy mandates that “reasonable efforts” are made to prevent placement (Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980). As mentioned previously, African American children are represented in higher percentages in foster care than they are in the states’ general population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999; U.S. DHHS, 1999). In fact, in several studies, race has been identified as a predictive factor of the decision to place a child in foster care. DHHS (1997) reported that nationally, the majority of African American children (56 percent) were placed in foster care while the majority of Caucasian children (72 percent) received in home services. Other reporters indicated that African American children are more likely than Caucasian children to be placed in foster care (Barth, 2001; Goerge, 2001; Hill, 2001). Similarly, Groeneveld and Giovannoni (1977) found that neglected non-Caucasian children were more likely to be removed from their homes than neglected Caucasian children were. Hill (2001) reported that the factors that predict placement into foster care include the child’s race, caretaker substance abuse problems, allegations of abuse or neglect, and child disability. This study shows that race continues to have main effects when

combined with other predictors. Substance abuse problems, allegations of abuse or neglect, and child's disability often mediate the effects of race. A report from Phillips, Haring, and Shyne (1972) indicated that although the race of the mother did not have a significant impact on the placement decision, the race of the father did. Children who were from homes in which an African American father was present were far more likely to be placed in care in contrast to homes in which a Caucasian father was present. Children in the latter homes were more likely to receive services in their own homes.

Other studies have reported that race influenced the placement decision, but the decisions were different dependent upon the reason for placement. In 1994, Lindsey found that the reason for placement varied by race. In dependency cases, African American children were twice as likely to be placed in foster care than were Caucasian children. In addition, when placement was due to environmental factors, African American children were again at a higher risk of placement. The data changed, however, when parental condition was a major reason for placement. Caucasian were 10 percent more likely to be placed than African American children. Where neglect was involved, Caucasian and African American children had equal rates of placement.

In contrast, there are several studies that concluded that race was not a significant factor in the decision to place (Katz, Hampton, Newberger, Bowles, & Snyder, 1986; Runyan, Gould, Trost, & Loda, 1982). Two studies undertaken with a retrospective cross-sectional design show race to be significant at the bivariate, but not the multivariate level (Harris & Poertner, 1999; Harris, Tittle, & Poertner, 2000). Barth (2001) found a higher proportion of African American children in the county is negatively associated with the likelihood of over representation. Additionally he found that a greater percentage of children receiving public assistance has a positive relationship with increased over representation of African Americans for placements.

## What Happens as Children Who Experience Out-of-Home Care Leave the System?

The United States Department of Health and Human Services reported 251,000 children exiting out-of-home care in 1999 through a variety of avenues. The average length of stay for these children was 22 months and the median, 11 months. The length of time in care for these children is considerably shorter than for all children in care (average 32 months, median 20 months). Illinois studies show that the longer a child stays in care the more difficult it is to work toward returning that child home (Testa, 2001).

Additionally, several studies indicate that children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds journey through the child welfare system via different service paths and exit types (Capellari, Eckenrode & Powers, 1993; Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell & Park, 1996; Garland & Besinger, 1997; Hampton, 1987; McCabe, Yeh, Hough, Landsverk, Hurlbut, Culver, & Reynolds, 1999; Wulczyn, Brunner, & Goerge, 1999). Of the 251,000 children exiting, nearly 60 percent are reported to return to the home of their parents and an additional 10 percent to relatives. Table 3 below lists each of modes of exit for children as they leave care.

**Table 3 Exits from Foster Care in 1999**

<b>Exit Type</b>	<b>Number of Exits</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Reunification	147,640	59
Live with Relative	24,953	10
Adoption	38,944	16
Guardianship	7,396	3
Emancipation	18,554	7
Agency Transfer	7,714	3
Runaway	5,232	2
Death	564	0

### **Service Delivery**

Once in care, African American children have longer lengths of stay than other children (Close, 1983). Additionally, they appear to be at a disadvantage in terms of the range, quantity, and quality of services provided; the type of agency to which they are referred; the efficiency with which their cases are handled; and the support their families receive (Courtney et al., 1996; Maluccio & Fein, 1989; Close, 1983).

Through an analysis of data in the Multi-state Data Archive (MSDA), Wulczyn et al. (1999) found African Americans tend to stay longer in care than Caucasian children in all eleven states (AL, CA, IL, IA, MD, MI, MO, NM, NY, OH, and WI); and that they had a 21 percent longer stay in foster care after controlling for other contributors to foster care stay including calendar year of entry, urban or non-urban region, age at entry, gender, state and type of care. For instance, African American children appear to be far more likely than Caucasian children to be placed with kin (Goerge, 2001; Needell, Webster, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Armijo, 2000). Courtney (1995) has shown that reunification for African American children takes longer than for Caucasian children. This disparity becomes even greater when they are in kinship foster care. In a study of kinship foster care in California, children remained in care much longer if they were in IV-E funded kinship care than in regular foster care suggesting an interaction between the policy framework, type of care, and length of stay (Berrick & Needell, 1996). The state is still the guardian. The premise is that children placed with relatives are at an advantage because they know the people with whom they are staying. The relatives do go through a screening process as in other types of foster care, and the initial goal is to return the child(ren) to the natural parents.

Many reasons could explain the longer lengths of stay in care for African American children. They include: the different types of placements that children of different races and cultures go into; the likelihood of reunification; and the likelihood of exiting from care via adoption or guardianship (Barth, 2001). Some have considered the longer lengths of stay acceptable; making the arguments that kinship foster care is a culturally appropriate approach to serving African American children and families (Everett, 1995)

that meets the needs of African American children more than adoption by kin (Thornton, 1991), or by non-African American families (McRoy, Oglesby, & Grape, 1997).

Building on the hypothesis that the historic difference in the rates of permanency among African American and Caucasian children reflect an essential bias against the formalization of kinship bonds or the lack of supplementary permanency options that are in keeping with the cultural traditions and preferences of African American families and communities, eight states, including Illinois, have been approved for IV-E subsidized guardianship waiver demonstration projects. The recent research in Illinois suggests that by restructuring permanency options to build on the strengths of extended families and cultural traditions, one diminishes disparities and turns kinship arrangements into a positive advantage for the timely achievement of permanency as evidenced by the Subsidized Guardianship permanency option in Illinois (Testa, 2000).

Courtney and Wong (1996) determined estimated exits from foster care in California through adoption, reunification, and running away. Their analysis suggested that children in California who were African American had a much lower likelihood to become adopted or reunified, but not a significantly different chance of running away. McMurty and Lie (1992) got similar results in Arizona where the data showed that a Caucasian child in foster care was twice as likely to return home to their families as an African American child was. Hill (2001) reported the strongest predictors of reunification were child's race, the age of the child at entry into care, services received by the caretaker, and absence of caretaker job skills. African American children were less apt to be reunified with their families. There was a main effect when combined with the other family predictors. The study was not able to identify the specific types of services that enhanced reunification.

An analysis of the Multi State Data Archive (MSDA) explores the adoption of children in foster care (Wulczyn et al., 1999). In this data set, African American children are about half as likely (Risk Ratio = .53) to become adopted as Caucasian children. Barth (1997) found similar results in California. Statistics revealed that a Caucasian child is more than

five times as likely to be adopted than an African American child (Barth, 1997; Barth, Webster & Lee, 2000). Risk ratios for reunification for African American children was .63 compared to 1.00 for Caucasian children. Likelihood of African American children exiting care to adoption or to family was shown dependent on location. Adoption of African American children was 40 percent lower and the exit to family was 25 percent lower in urban counties than in non-urban counties.

Another factor that has an impact on length of stay in foster care is adoption finalization. Barth, Courtney, and Barry (1994) found that adoption finalizations for African American children placed in adoptive homes took much longer than other children.

#### **Risk of Re-entry into the Child Welfare System**

Analysis of six states (CA, IL, MI, MO, NY, and TX) in the MSDA showed that longer lengths of stay in foster care for African American children had only a very small net benefit in lower re-entry rates in foster care (Wulczyn et al., 1997) Re-entry rates for both African American and Caucasian children in Oklahoma are similar, 37 percent of whom re-enter the system within three and a half years (Terling, 1999).

Through an analysis of data used by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, the California Department of Social Services used data from 2,198 substantiated cases of child maltreatment in seven California counties, researchers found that Caucasian children have slightly higher item, sub-scale, and overall scores on the Family Risk Assessment than African American children. They also found the items, sub-scales, and overall scores are statistically related to the recurrence of maltreatment regardless of race/ethnicity. Based on this information, Johnson (1999) concludes that the California Family Risk Assessment was not racially biased in its assessment of risk for child maltreatment and gave some indication of the level of services needed to prevent further maltreatment.

## **Future Directions**

1. Measuring maltreatment at the national level is a very complicated process because each state defines maltreatment in different ways, National level data can be confusing for this reason. For instance, Pennsylvania does not take any children into custody for reasons of neglect. If one were to look at their state level abuse and neglect statistics, one could see that their numbers were significantly lower than in other states that do include neglect as an allegation for which children can be taken into custody. In Illinois, substantial risk of harm, only one form of neglect in the Illinois statute, comprises 40 percent of the child welfare cases. In order to examine maltreatment as a national problem systematically, we will have to come to greater agreement on what child maltreatment is.

2. 581 000 children were placed in out-of-home care in 1998. That same year, the average length of stay in care was 32 months. Child placement in out-of-home care is an unfortunate phenomenon. Without maltreatment, the separation of a child from his or her primary caregivers is devastating. By placing a child in care we increase the number of problems in their life. By keeping them in care for several years, we slow their life down. In addition, to examine whether child welfare interventions are actually effective we have to look more closely at what happens to individuals who have been in the child welfare system at some time in their life. For instance, data on homelessness suggests that individuals who received out-of-home services in the child welfare system make up anywhere from 40 percent to 70 percent of the homeless population in this country.
3. African Americans are over represented in the child welfare system.. The causes for this phenomenon are not yet well understood. Efforts to look within the child welfare system, at the strengths and weaknesses of families of different races and ethnicities to understand better their needs, and at the impact of community level characteristics, are necessary to begin to address this problem effectively.
4. Additionally, individuals in other racial and ethnic groups feel as though they are not receiving services that are commensurate with their needs. National level data does not show a disproportionality, but this does not mean that they are receiving services that are culturally competent or effective. Further research in this area is needed to find out more about this phenomenon.

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