

CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE
OF AMERICA

STATEMENT

Children of Color in the Child Welfare System



Overview, Vision, and Proposed Action Steps



The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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Children of color, belonging to various cultural, ethnic, and racial communities (primarily African American/black, Latino/Hispanic, and Native/Indigenous American)¹, are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and frequently experience disparate and inequitable service provision. The overrepresentation of children of color in child welfare and other social service systems (e.g., juvenile justice) is linked to social, class, and economic factors that must be addressed to ensure that the needs of all children are fairly and appropriately served. Federal, state, and local governments; the child welfare system; and the communities they serve must ensure that all children, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or racial identity, receive services that address the full spectrum of their needs in a manner that reflects the cultural strengths of their families.

An analysis of federal child abuse and neglect, foster care, and U.S. Census data for 2000, and a preliminary review of the literature, documents disproportionality but does not reveal outcome improvement:

- No significant or marginal race differences in the incidence of maltreatment were found either within the National Incidence Study (NIS)-3 data (1996) or in the comparison of change since the NIS-2 (1986).
- Research indicates that the average African American child is not at any greater risk for abuse and neglect than the average Caucasian child (Sedlak & Schultz, 2001; Ards, et al., 1999).
- African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander children have a disproportionately higher rate of maltreatment investigations when compared to whites (Fluke et al., 2002).
- Nationally, when substantiation rates for abuse or neglect of white children are compared with rates for other racial groups, African American/black and American Indian/Alaska Native children are twice as likely to be substantiated as abused or neglected, while Asian/Pacific Islander children are substantiated at half the rate of white children (CWLA 2003a).
- For every 1,000 white children in the U.S. population, 5 were in foster care on September 30, 2000. Although white children represented 61% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 38% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).
- For every 1,000 African American/black children in the U.S. population, 21 were in foster care on September 30, 2000. While African American/black children represented 15% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 40% of the foster care population. In addition, African American/black children experience longer stays in care (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).
- For every 1,000 Hispanic/Latino children in the U.S. population, 7 were in foster care on September 30, 2000. While Hispanic/Latino children represented 17% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 15% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).

¹ Because the literature review in this statement is based upon U.S. Census and other federal data, it uses U.S. government classifications for race and ethnicity. CWLA uses the terms African American/black; Latino/Hispanic; Native American/Indigenous American; and Asian, Southeast Asian, or Pacific Islander to refer to these groups.

- For every 1,000 American Indian/Alaska Native children in the U.S. population, 16 were in foster care on September 30, 2000. While American Indian/Alaska Native children represented 1% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 2% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).
- For every 1,000 Asian/Pacific Islander children in the U.S. population, 2 were in foster care. While Asian/Pacific Islander children represented 3% of the total population under the age of 18, they were 1% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).
- For every 1,000 children of two or more races in the U.S. population, 4 were in foster care. While they represented 1% of the total population under the age of 18, children of mixed race were 3% of the foster care population (CWLA, 2003b; 2003c).

Clearly, the breadth and depth of this problem point to the need for additional collaborative efforts and further study of the factors that contribute to disproportionality and disparate policies and practices in the child welfare system.

² All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Vision Statement

Through its vision, philosophy, national framework, strategic plan, and other supporting literature, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) clearly articulates a firm commitment to the development and implementation of public policy and best practice initiatives that result in healthy children, families, and communities. Children, youth, and families are best served by policies and practices that meet the needs of children, provide comprehensive cross-systems services and programs, empower families, and are delivered with an understanding of and respect for their culture, values, and strengths.

Central to the vision set forth by CWLA is the recognition that all children and youth have five universal needs. For children and youth to be safe, healthy, and thriving, these universal needs, which are closely interrelated, must be met. They are:

- **The Basics:** Equality, economic security and stability, nutrition, appropriate housing, health care, and education.
- **Relationships:** Nurturing relationships with parents, kin, other adults, siblings, and peers.
- **Opportunities:** Opportunities for affirmative connections to culture, traditions, and spiritual resources, development of talents and skills, and a positive transition to adulthood.
- **Safety:** Protection from discrimination, accidental injury or death, environmental toxins, and abuse, neglect, and violence at home, in school, on the streets, and through the media.
- **Healing:** Appropriate response to trauma by family, friends, and professionals; effective long-term support; and services that are comprehensive, needs-based interventions.

Also inherent in the vision are a belief in strong communities and the need for more effective advocacy to ensure that appropriate resources are allocated to support family stability.

Goals

CWLA and its members will strive to develop, promote, and implement policies, programs, and practices that result in significant and sustained reductions in the number of children of color who are inappropriately referred to and subsequently served by the child welfare system. All stakeholders in the child welfare system must work to eliminate disparate and unequal policies, programs, and practices that result in the disproportionate representation of children of color in care. For children whose safety and well-being require the intervention of the formal child welfare system, services and programs must emphasize prevention, early intervention, and cross-systems approaches to service delivery. CWLA envisions that the solutions developed as a result of its efforts will assist families (biological, kinship, foster, adoptive, and other family compositions) in receiving community-based, competent, and appropriate services and supports. When federal regulations require alternative placements be made, such placement decisions should reflect a strong commitment to enabling children to preserve their culture by living with their extended families and remaining in their communities whenever possible.

Priority Areas for Action

The following major areas require further review, analysis, and action by public and private child welfare and social service administrators, staff, researchers, advocates, youth, families, and their communities:

- the rates at which children of various ethnic groups are reported and/or substantiated as abused or neglected, and the types of maltreatment that are reported and/or substantiated for these groups;
- the relationship between poverty, culture, individual racism, and institutional racism (within the system and in society as a whole);
- the lack of resources, protective factors, and community-based supports as contributing factors;
- the decisionmaking process, beginning with case referral and intake, and its effects on children of color and their families;
- the path through the service system children of color “follow”;
- the availability and equitable provision of family preservation and support services;
- the rate of placement of children of all cultural, racial, and ethnic communities in foster and formal kinship arrangements;
- the manner in and rate at which children of color exit the system; and
- the overrepresentation of children and families of color at all stages of the child welfare process.

Action Steps

National data and case studies validate the need for CWLA, its members, governmental agencies, foundations, advocacy groups, and national organizations to assess, examine, and eliminate factors that contribute to the disproportionate representation of children of color in the child welfare system and the disparities in the services they receive. Asking and answering these questions about child welfare decision points, the intake process, and service provision will require research, collaboration, and additional resources. As action steps evolve toward the development of solutions and new approaches to this issue, we must engage not only child welfare workers, but all those responsible for the well-being, education, and safety of children. And the action steps must be proactive in nature. While systems engage in debates about jurisdiction and decisionmaking, the needs of children, youth, families, and communities remain.

The following are some proposed initial action steps that CWLA will take:

- Engage member agencies, allied organizations, and nontraditional partners (e.g., Black Administrators in Child Welfare, National Council of Latino Executives, National Family Heritage Coalition, National Academy of Sciences, National Indian Child Welfare Association) in ongoing dialogue to establish a common vision, shared goals, and an action agenda as it relates to the disproportionality of cultural, ethnic, and racial communities served by the child welfare system.
- Present relevant information, data, and research on its website through the National Data Analysis System (NDAS).
- Consult with diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial communities and families to obtain their perspectives on existing challenges. Collaborate with these families and communities to develop potential solutions to disproportionate identification by, involvement in, and interventions by the formal child welfare system.
- Through advisory committees, councils, and task forces, solicit member agency participation in the development of agency-specific, culturally competent, and responsive policies, services, practices, and supports that establish a foundation for healthy relationships, effective interventions, and positive outcomes for children and their families.
- Improve the child welfare system's responsiveness to workforce recruitment and retention issues that impact children and families involved with the system. Such issues include, but are not limited to:
 - Recruiting and hiring staff from cultural and ethnic groups the agency serves.
 - Specifying the need for cultural competence and responsiveness in all job descriptions and assessing these qualities in all performance evaluations.
 - Establishing career advancement policies that provide opportunities for staff members from diverse groups to assume supervisory and management positions.
- At *Children 2004*, CWLA's 2004 national conference, provide a status report on work efforts, progress, and accomplishments made during 2003 regarding the treatment of children and families of color in the child welfare system.

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