

Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

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What's race got to do with it?

One long-standing topic of debate in child welfare has been the cause of the racial disparity that exists among children in foster care. Black children, while only making up 15% of the total child population in the U.S., make up one-third of the children in foster care.

Early government mandated studies from 1986 and 1993 showed that there was not [sic] difference in child abuse rates when comparing black and white children. These findings spurred conversations that child welfare workers were exercising a racial bias which was leading to more black children being brought into care and thus the racial disparity in the system. In 1994, Congress responded by passing the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) meant to prohibit states from delaying or denying foster care or adoption placement solely on the basis of race, color or national origin. This law, in part, was meant to allow for and encourage the adoptions of black children out of foster care even when black adoptive families were not available.

Harvard Law School addressed this issue at a conference held last month named, *Race & Child Welfare: Disproportionality, Disparity, Discrimination*. Elizabeth Bartholet, an expert on this topic, argued against earlier claims that a racial bias exists among child welfare workers which results in minority children being removed from homes at a higher rate. Bartholet said that minority children do in fact experience higher rates of maltreatment, and therefore would make up a disproportionate rate of children in foster care. For more information about the conference, see Daniel Heimpel's account on the Huffington Post.



Photo Credit: Harvard Law School

Last week, Reuters Health published an article quoting Brett Drake, who recently released a study with data that affirms Bartholet's statement, saying, "The problem is not that (Child Protective Services) workers are racists, the problem is that huge numbers of black people are living under devastating circumstances. Mitigating poverty, and the effects of poverty, would be the most powerful way to reduce child maltreatment."

Drawing advocates back to the main issue, a fellow speaker at the conference Richard Barth argued, "Should we be so worried that the child welfare system is unfair or racist that we allow minority children to be underserved and unprotected?" According to the Harvard Law School article, "Barth noted that reducing disproportionality should not be the primary goal—it should be to improve the quality of services for all children".

Interestingly, this long-standing debate on race and its impact on waiting children in foster care is one being discussed across the ocean as well. BBC News reported remarks recently from Mr. Martin Narey who just retired after five years as the chief executive at the United Kingdom's leading children's charity, Barnardo's. The BBC article quotes Mr. Narey as stating that in the United Kingdom, "The law is very clear. A child should not stay in care for an undue length of time while waiting for adoptive parents of the same ethnicity. But the reality is that black, Asian and mixed race children wait three times longer than white children." He expressed the opinion that adoption agencies working to place children in the UK's foster care system with adoptive families allow delays in placement because they are reluctant to let white families adopt minority children. In November, UK Children's Minister Tim Loughton sent a letter to local officials expressing that the finding that sometimes "there may be over sensitivity on the grounds of ethnicity when it comes to the matching of children with prospective adopters" "troubled" him.

While debates may continue long into the future, child welfare experts in both the U.S. and U.K. can agree that a great need remains for adoptive families of all ethnic backgrounds to step forward and realize each waiting child's right to a family.

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