

Synopsis: Research Synthesis on Child Welfare Disproportionality and Disparities: Child Welfare Entries

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The project sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy Alliance for Racial Equity called for a compilation and analysis of research related to racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities in child welfare, focusing on research published since the synthesis by Hill (2006). Because there is ongoing research in the area, this analysis included not only research in peer reviewed journals, documents from research and evaluation work available in the child welfare field. Over 200 sources were included and over 400 were considered. The review addressed research on child maltreatment incidence and child welfare decision-making stages (Child Protective Services referrals, investigations, substantiations, placement in foster care, exits from foster care, and so forth). The review's focused on three main explanations of disparities: 1) disproportionate and disparate need of children and families of color; 2) racial bias and discrimination in the child welfare system; and 3) child welfare system processes and resources. A fourth explanation involving geographic context (i.e., region of country, region of state, urbanicity, and/or neighborhood characteristics) was invoked since it explains much of the variability in the child welfare involvement and service receipt of families of color. Support was found for all four areas considered, however, the research base is limited in as much as disparities is often a feature of the research rather than a focus. Consequently, much more rigorous multi-variate and multi-level research is needed in order to better understand the complexities of race in the context of child welfare.