

DISCRIMINATION, DISPROPORTIONALITY, AND DISPARITY: BLACK FAMILIES' EXPERIENCES OF STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BIAS IN CHILD WELFARE

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STUDY

INTRODUCTION



PROJECT SETTING

- Statewide initiative to improve federal outcomes
- Key partners include
 - Child Welfare organizations: Kansas Department for Children and Families, Kansas Family Advisory Network, Kansas Youth Advisory Council, Children's Alliance of Kansas, Foster Adopt Connect, statewide network of private providers: Cornerstones of Care, DCCCA, KVC Kansas, Saint Francis Ministries, and TFI Family Services
 - Court/Legal System: Office of Judicial Administration, the Court Improvement Program, and the Kansas Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning
- Technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy



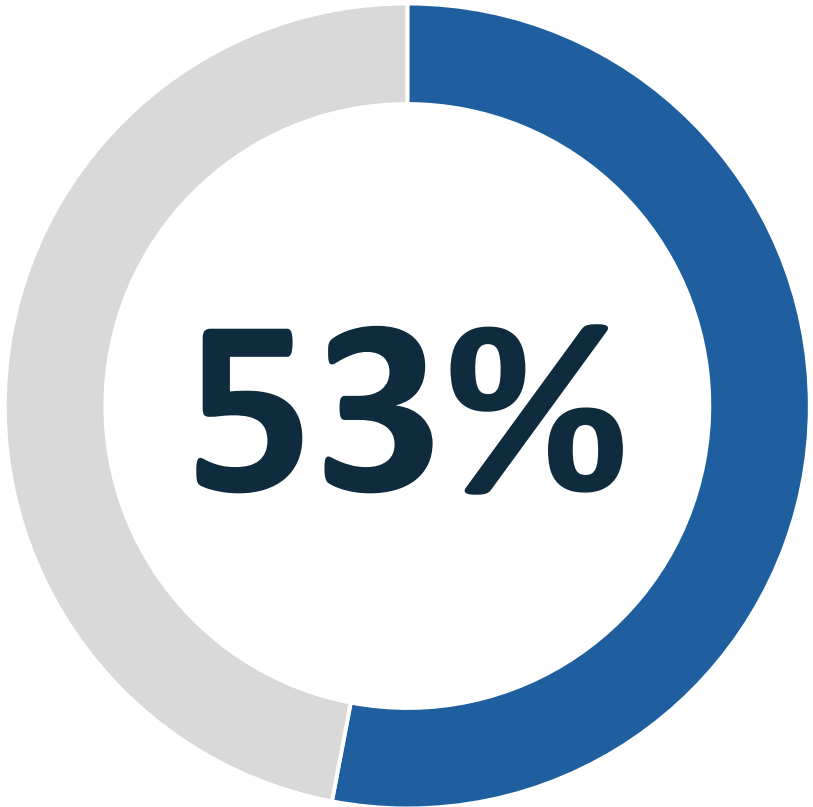


BACKGROUND

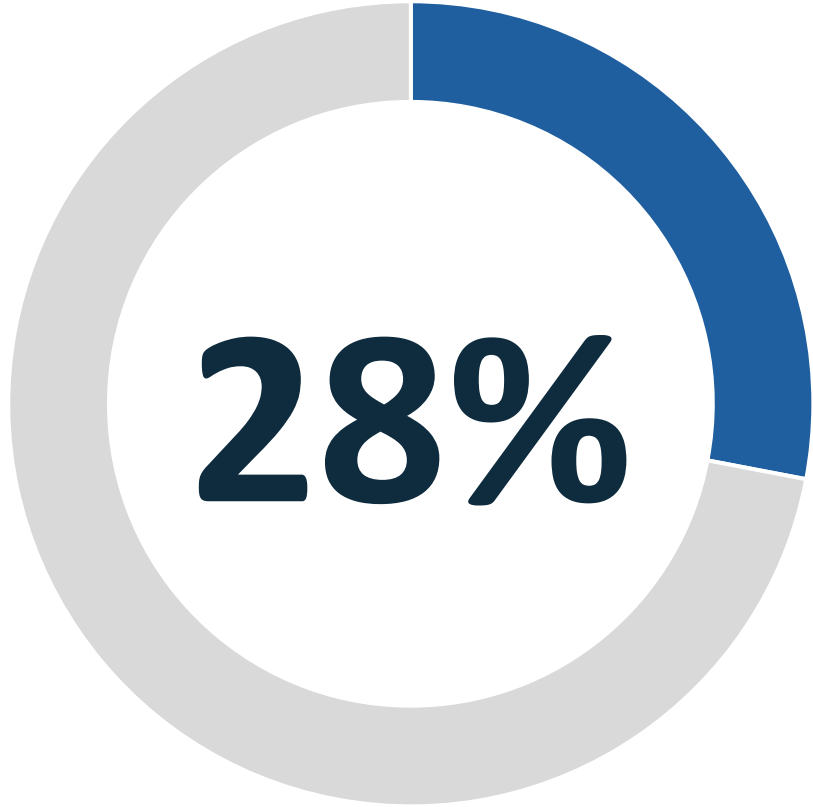
Racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare have been a consistent problem for decades (Dettlaff, 2021).



Black families experience child welfare investigations at a much higher rate than White families



Black Children

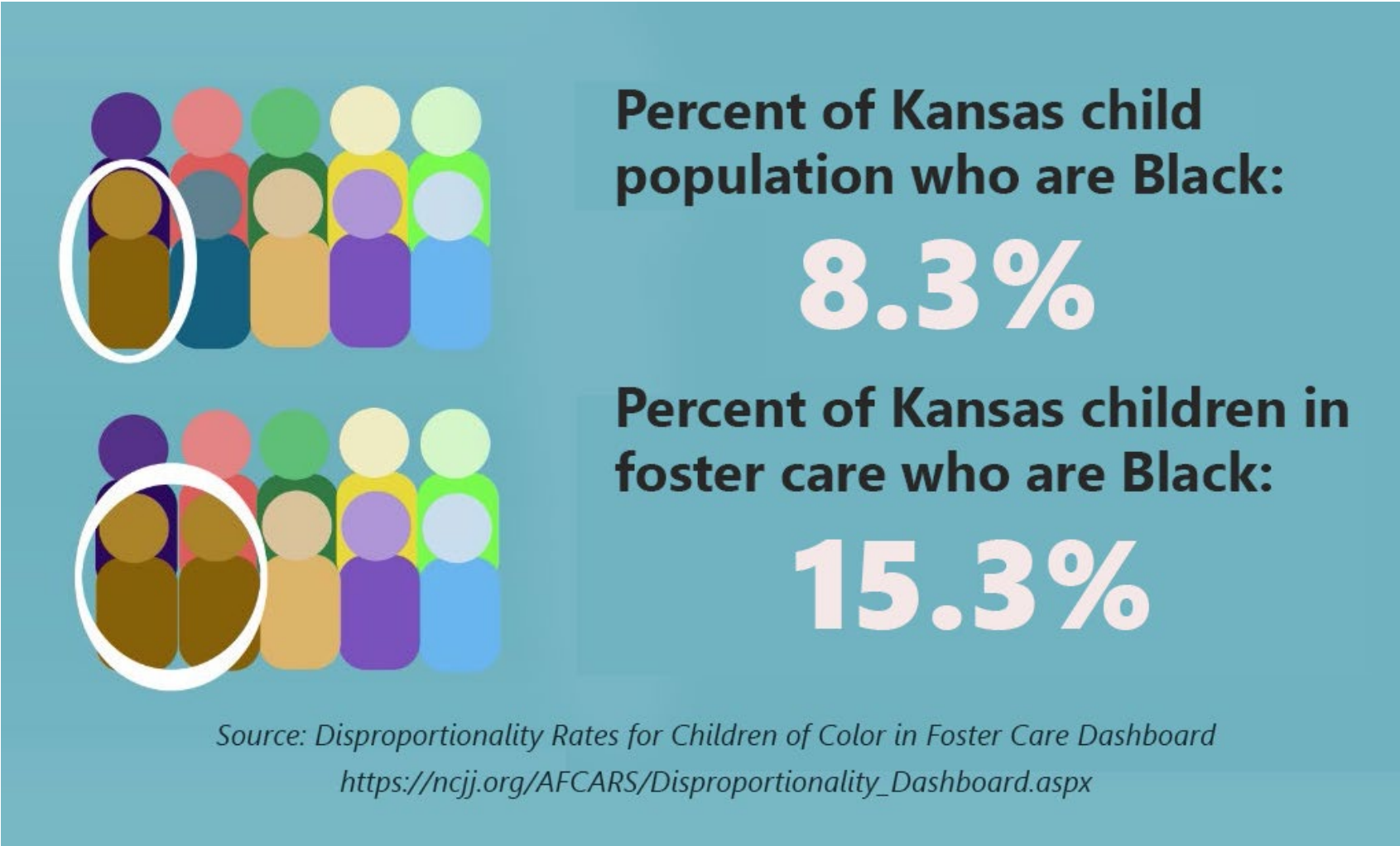


White Children

Source: Kim et al, 2017



Black children are placed in foster care at nearly twice the rate of White children



Source: [NCJJ's Disproportionality Dashboard](https://ncjj.org/AFCARS/Disproportionality_Dashboard.aspx)



Black children experience poorer outcomes even after accounting for children's age, type of maltreatment, adverse childhood experiences, and trauma symptoms

Clark et al, 2020; Liming et al, 2021a, 2021b



STUDY RATIONALE

While many studies have demonstrated these disparities, few have centered Black families with lived experience and focused on the structural and institutional contributors

TWO GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does it come about that Black families with young children experience low and slow reunification rates?
2. How does the child welfare system, prevention services, and other partners support bonding and well-being of Black families with young children?

METHOD





METHOD

Feature	Description
Design	Exploratory, and pragmatic qualitative design Guided by Institutional Analysis framework from the Center for Study of Social Policy Advised by small council of community leaders from study's county
Participants N = 58	Black parents with lived experience (n = 4) Kinship and nonkin caregivers (n = 5) Frontline caseworkers and supervisors (n = 28) Administrators in child welfare and community agencies (n = 14) Early childhood, hospitals, courts (n = 7)
Procedures	Individual interviews and focus groups by phone or zoom Verbatim transcription Compensation of \$50 for parents
Analyses	Thematic analysis by research team in Dedoose Trustworthiness via co-coding, multiple reads, team consensus to finalize themes, detailed audit trail, and peer debriefing

RESULTS





7 MAIN THEMES

- Parent Trauma and Loss
- Race, Power, and Privilege in Foster Care Placements
- Systemwide Focus on Child Not the Family Unit
- Removals First, Not Families First
- Compliance Prioritized Over Engagement and Individualized, Strengths-Oriented and Culturally Relevant Responses
- Race and Culture Blindness
- Parents' Legal Representation and Court Experiences

PARENT TRAUMA AND LOSS

The system's response to Black parents' trauma and loss was frequently indifferent, lacking in compassion and empathy, and hyper-judgmental.

"...It was hard, I mean it's crazy because you hear a baby crying and you just automatically think that it's your baby out there crying somewhere." ~ Birth parent

RACE, POWER, AND PRIVILEGE IN FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

Within placements, anti-Blackness, power, and privilege were used in favor of White foster parents and to the detriment of Black birth parents.

“.....I think it starts to be driven by the foster parents...There is this power of coercion. Then they get...the worker on board...A lot of the foster parents get private attorneys before parental rights are even terminated...They start...reaching out to people so that when that time comes, they can just keep the baby or they can try to push around the case a little bit.” ~ Frontline worker

SYSTEMWIDE FOCUS ON CHILD NOT THE FAMILY UNIT

The system was widely and deeply structured to prioritize and promote child-saving over supporting and preserving Black families.

“...because I mean I don’t want to make the wrong move...I chose my words really carefully. And before I said them, and I tried to check my tone, my voice when I spoke as well, because I didn’t want them to take it the wrong way, and then I’d be screwed out of a visit.” ~Birth parent

*“...I said, ‘Ma’am...Now that this is all over with,...what are you going to do to help put my family back together?...You didn’t have any problem tearing it apart. What are you guys going to do to help put my family back together?’”
~Birth parent*

REMOVALS FIRST, NOT FAMILIES FIRST

The most pervasive and problematic response to Black families' needs, including non-safety needs based in material and financial hardship, was removal of children rather than provision of resources and supports.

“There are a lot of families who want help, but they are never gonna reach out to [the agency] and [the agency] is never gonna know that that family needs help because the definition in the community is well-established that they are not people to be trusted..” ~Administrator

“I don't know how many single moms, who were Black moms, that they get hotlines because they didn't go pick up their kids from school or they didn't answer the phone soon enough.” ~Frontline worker

**COMPLIANCE
PRIORITIZED OVER
ENGAGEMENT AND
INDIVIDUALIZED,
STRENGTHS-
ORIENTED AND
CULTURALLY
RELEVANT
RESPONSES**

Services are centered in compliance and monitoring, not organized to be engaging, supportive, etc.

“Jump – jump all those hoops and go higher if you want to. If you go higher, they can’t ask for you to do anymore....Go above and beyond, yes, do that and do it quickly, as quick as you can...Jump them hoops. Go to court, do what you need to do to get your children back.” ~Birth parent

“There's a lot that's done to them, not with them or for them...There's a lot of red tape, too.” ~Frontline worker

RACE AND CULTURE BLINDNESS

Services were designed to be “color blind,” not accounting for Black families’ culture, community history and context, historical racism, ongoing oppression, and cumulative disadvantage.

“I get very worried that oftentimes, workers, unintentionally, will say, “No, I’m not looking at race in this case. This isn’t about race. I’m making these decisions from a social work perspective.” ...You have to see it through race...because that’s the only way to make sure that we’re doing the work right. We cannot be color blind in social work...I don’t want people to be afraid of saying that they work social work through a lens of race because otherwise, you’re just working it through the White Lens.” ~Supervisor

PARENTS' LEGAL REPRESENTATION AND COURT EXPERIENCES

The court and legal system also harmed Black families by not assuring quality legal representation and authentic parental engagement in court processes.

“And then when we go back to court and something always happened to my Attorney...And it will be a different guy in there and he'll be like, ‘...Is there anything you want to tell me? I'm like, “I don't know what to tell you, because I don't really know what the hell is going on.” You supposed to tell me something, right? ...I'm like, well, did you read the papers and see what's all being going...He's like, yeah it doesn't look good...What do you mean? What's so bad?...What's going on?...[It's] someone who just got your case. They're saying all this, and you're like you don't even know my situation.” ~Birth parent

DISCUSSION



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Structure institutions' work in ways that can center families; honor Black families' culturally-specific needs; and be responsive, compassionate, humanistic, and caring
- Reduce caseloads for caseworkers and attorneys (e.g., robust funding and organizational mechanisms)
- Establish accountability mechanism to ensure practice centers Black families
- Pair above mentioned improvements with training to address conscious and unconscious biases

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Address limitations in mandated reporter laws and processes
- Due to the interplay of poverty and maltreatment, incorporate poverty reduction strategies and robust safety net programs
- Hold child welfare leaders accountable for racial equity

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

- Expand Institutional Analysis to many jurisdictions to uncover structural and institutional factors
- Conduct meta-analyses to identify common themes and federal level changes
- Examine disparities over time to identify whether jurisdictions enact changes and whether structural changes result in improvements that can be replicated

THANK YOU

This paper has been accepted for publication in
Child Welfare.

Please contact Dr. Becci Akin for copies or
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