



RACIAL EQUITY IN CHILD WELFARE DATA

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Background

During the fall of 2020, exploratory research was completed to highlight what it could mean to add a racial equity lens to child welfare data. Current indexes that showcase the outcomes of children and families involved in the child welfare system all show the same thing - Black, Latino, and Native American children are disproportionately represented in the system and their outcomes are usually poor. Adding a racial equity lens to child welfare data could facilitate not just improved outcomes for children, but also help shift the child welfare field and the organizations that operate within it to become anti-racist. This research brief is geared toward those who interpret and disseminate child welfare administrative data and have the desire to bring more equity into the system. Key recommendations and the accompanying resources needed to accomplish them are provided.

Definitions

Before diving into this brief, it is best to share the definitions of some key terms.

- **Anti-Racist:** used to describe actions that are done with the primary goal of eliminating racism. Those actions can differ depending on the type of racism that a person or entity is trying to end - whether it be on an individual, institutional, or systemic level.
- **Equity:** different levels of support based on an individual's or group's needs in order to achieve fairness in outcomes; belief that omitting a racial analysis from any work allows racist systems, laws, and policies to continue operating within the status quo; often requires a shifting of power across people and communities (from *Center for the Study of Social Policy*)
- **Racial Equity:** the condition where one's racial identity no longer influences how one fares in society; includes the creation of racially just policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages, and the elimination of structures that reinforce differential experiences and outcomes by race (from *Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy*)
- **Race:** categorization of people based primarily on skin tone and physical features; socially constructed concept; research often uses the following categories of race: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and White.
- **Ethnicity:** categorization of people based on their places of origin or cultural background of one's ancestors. Examples include Irish, West Indian, or Polynesian. In most research, one's ethnicity is limited to either "Hispanic or Latino" or "Not Hispanic or Latino". There is an element of social construction for one's ethnicity.

The author acknowledges that these terms might vary across organizations, so the definitions were selected as those most likely to resonate with readers. American Indian or Alaska Native will be

described as “Native American” in this brief. For brevity, this document uses the term “race” to refer to both race and ethnicity.

Methodology

The research aimed to answer the following broad questions:

- a. What best practices should organizations implement when applying a racial equity lens to data?
- b. What data points are necessary when assessing racial equity?
- c. How can the child welfare system achieve racial equity and anti-racism?

In order to answer these questions, three sources of data were used. A subset of publicly available indexes with child welfare outcome data and indexes with equity data points were reviewed to catalogue the type of information that was already being collected and how it was displayed to users. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of 23 professionals with expertise in program administration, data science, policy, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. The professionals came from child welfare jurisdictions, policy think-tanks, academia, and national organizations charged with promoting children and family wellbeing. Findings were supplemented with a literature review of racial equity resources.

Select Findings

When looking at indexes that focus on child welfare or wellbeing and those that are about equity, or specifically racial equity, there are two key distinctions that set them apart. An example of data indicators commonly found in these indexes are listed below.

Child Welfare or Wellbeing	Equity or Racial Equity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Educational attainment of parents● Decision points● Physical health of child● Maltreatment in foster care● Unemployment rate of parents● Mothers who smoked during pregnancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Broadband access● Access to green space● Life expectancy● Denied mortgage applications● Cost of living burden● Employers offering health insurance

Welfare and wellbeing indexes almost solely focus on child or family characteristics and outcomes.

While equity indexes try to draw a picture of the health of the communities that children and families live in. The latter is received as less accusatory of individuals and instead is more critical of systems.

Also, child welfare and wellbeing indexes tend to only showcase quantitative data without an interpretation for the readers to consider, or suggestions for the future. On the other hand, equity indexes often include a narrative of some sort to provide context to the quantitative data and some even explore policies or action steps that the reader should consider looking into.

Equity indexes do have their shortcomings, though, and sometimes use outdated data or fail to include data on populations that are pertinent to conversations around equity, such as people with disabilities or those who identify as LGBTQ+. There is certainly room for an index that pairs child welfare outcome data with information on the systems that facilitated those outcomes.

A final key observation of both indexes is the utilization of White children or families as the comparison point for other races. When discussing child welfare data, researchers usually compare Asian, Black, Latino, and Native American children to White children. For example, “Black children are X times more likely to have this negative experience compared to White children” or “the rate of Latino kids is X times higher than White children”. This approach is problematic for a few reasons. If a child is involved in the child welfare system, then their life is less than ideal. While being a White child will increase the likelihood of a positive outcome, they are still a child involved in the system. To compare one negative situation to another negative situation can defeat the purpose of comparison. Using White as a standard also reinforces racist beliefs that being White, or being like White people, is what one should aspire for. This adoption of White supremacy is a barrier to reaching racial equity. If comparison is desired or necessary to drive home a point, one alternative is to compare the child’s current decision point data to their previous decision point data. Another option is to compare the outcomes of a child involved in the child welfare system with a racial peer who is not system-involved.

Interviewees were asked to describe the client-level and community-level indicators that they would like to see in a child welfare index with a racial equity lens. The responses were too robust to reduce to a few sentences here, so the novel suggestions are each listed in Appendix A and B, respectively. One can see there is a fair amount of overlap between the lists. Even when asked to describe client-level data, there remains a desire to consider the social determinants that impact individuals. This indicates that children and families benefit the most when the child welfare field takes a holistic approach to identifying their needs and strengths.

While wellbeing and racial equity are two separate outcomes to work towards, one should not try to evaluate a measurement of wellbeing without also considering the impact of a racial inequity. For example, in an effort to assess a child’s wellbeing, one might measure the relationship status of the parents – are they together or not? However, one cannot holistically do this without also acknowledging the impact that mass incarceration has on the presence of Black and Latino fathers in the home. Child wellbeing and racial equity are interconnected and therefore, most of the indicators listed in the appendices can be used as measurements of both.

Recommendations

The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data led to four key recommendations for those who want to apply a racial equity lens to child welfare data or transition the system to be more equitable. The lists of resources needed are not exhaustive, but highlight key tools that organizations should acquire to begin the work.

Make An Organizational Commitment

A child welfare organization must educate itself about the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, and the impact of racism on children and families. Such education can come in the form of facilitated dialogues, readings, and workshops. In order to effect sustainable change, education must be supplemented with an organizational commitment to racial equity and anti-racism. Those concepts must be a core component of every aspect of the organization’s work - from the hiring process to service provision to research to publication. Without a systemic approach, something like a one-off training will be received as a work task that does not make any real impact on the actions of the organization and its staff members.

There is also a need to address the lack of racial and gender diversity among the people who typically collect, analyze, interpret, and then publicize data on children, families, and communities. By reporting on a culture that one does not identify with or community norms one cannot relate to, there is a risk of ignoring key contextual factors that influence the outcomes. This can result in framing data in a way that blames families, loses a forward-thinking lens, and highlights findings that are inaccessible to the communities that the data represents. “Accessibility” meaning both the ability to see the data and the ability to understand it in a meaningful way. In addition, biases usually go unchecked when everyone

involved in the work has similar lived experiences. The biases present in obvious and inconspicuous ways throughout the work and cause harm to those who are supposed to be helped.

▪ Resources Needed for Implementation:

- Bold Leadership: Those in decision-making positions must be prepared for resistance they may experience from those who are uncomfortable with tackling racism in the child welfare system.
- External Assistance: Consultants who can provide education, objective guidance, and feedback on the organization's progress towards racial equity and anti-racism.
- Culturally Humble Staff: A workforce that understands that learning about and working with other cultures is a lifelong journey without an end point. The goal is not to be an "expert" but a student.
- Culturally Diverse Staff: Variation of all types of cultures represented in the workforce, as racial diversity alone should not be interpreted as an absence of racism.

"What does it look like to be transformational? It means we're going to unapologetically focus the work on race, racial equity, and the impacted children in a way that's never been done before. Data is tracked and outcomes are actually changed."

-- Interview Participant

Disaggregate Racial Data

In order to understand how subsets of children are experiencing the child welfare system, one must know the unique outcomes of each racial group. Data that is not disaggregated by race or has blanket target goals is sometimes presented under the guise of "serving the needs of *all* children". However, a child's unique needs cannot be met if service providers are unaware of who needs what. There is a limit on how helpful the system can be to children and families if the everyday biases they experience because of their race are not acknowledged.

Disaggregating racial data does come with barriers, though. First, one must understand that the collection of racial data varies across service providers. For example, some caseworkers ask their clients to self-report, while others assign a race to them simply based off of appearance. Inconsistent data collection leads to inconsistent data validity. Unfortunately, though, this is an unavoidable aspect of

working with data that was not collected for research. Open communication with data partners can improve the reliability and validity of data.

A second challenge is that the racial and ethnic categories that are included in client intake forms do not always align with the race or ethnicity that the clients identify with. The racial and ethnic categories that were created by the U.S. Census Bureau are often used as the standard options to select from. However, the U.S. Census Bureau has not shown itself to be a racially equitable organization, so there is room here for those who analyze and report on the data to re-define the standards. Upon receipt of administrative data, researchers could methodically re-categorize the racial and ethnic data into a new set of categories that are more culturally-appropriate for the population being represented. This approach allows communities to have more license over how they are described in data.

Another obstacle to overcome is the presentation of data on Native Americans. This population is typically quite small in size, which leads to concerns about confidentiality. In response to this, Native American children tend to be placed in the face-less category of “Other”. Confidentiality and statistical significance tend to work hand-in-hand, though. If a population size is so small that the identities of the individuals would not be protected, then the data was likely not going to be statistically significant anyway. On the other hand, if the data yields statistically significant results, then there are enough individuals in the sample to protect confidentiality. Automatically placing Native American children and families in the “Other” column promotes the erasure of a culture, and should not be the norm.

▪ **Resources Needed for Implementation:**

- Relationships with Partners: Positive relationships with agencies that provide the administrative data – talk to them about the importance of disaggregating their data and letting clients self-report.
- Competency: Staff members with the quantitative skills necessary to disaggregate aggregated data, or to restructure racial and ethnic categories.
- Culturally Diverse Research Team: A diverse group of people who collect and interpret child welfare data to ensure that biases are recognized and culturally appropriate recommendations are being made.

“An equity index might allow us to see how we’ve done investments and how we haven’t. I was in a recent meeting and everyone from [the organization] who was considered an expert was male, white, and over the age of 40. Perhaps an equity index can help us evaluate that as well. I think that’s connected to how we collect and talk about data.”

-- Interview Participant

Re-Distribute Power

A significant component of equity is power. When thinking about child welfare data, who gets to determine how the stories of children and families are written? In almost every instance, researchers and administrators who are several layers removed from the people represented in the data hold all of this power. More value must be placed on the voices of children, families, and communities whose experiences are not comprehensively described in child welfare indexes, and the voices of service providers who can create one-on-one relationships with their clients and therefore can help frame client data. Through a client-focused approach and community engagement, those who are represented in the data can indicate how they want to be defined and what data needs to do for them. Be intentional about who participates in the interpretation and dissemination of data and cast social politics aside if there is any desire to make meaningful change for children and families.

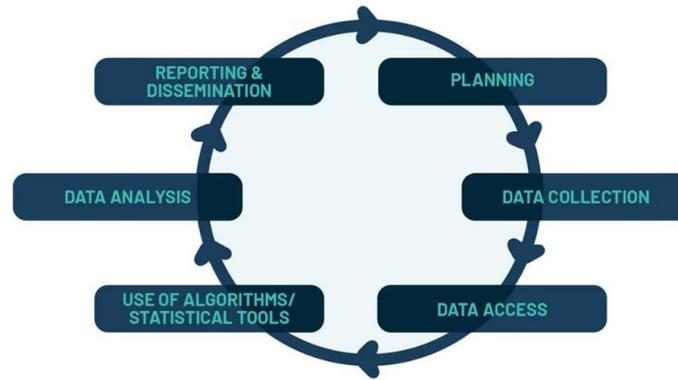
- Resources Needed for Implementation:
 - Positive Relationships with Community Leaders: Bring in people who are knowledgeable, invested, and ready to work for racial equity in the child welfare system. One’s job title, employer name, or social capital should not be the sole determinant for who should shape child welfare data.

“We need to hear from families that we’ve worked with. Data systems and predictive analytics are built to be used and accessed by case workers. What if we brought clients into this process and they could tell us when they are done receiving services and don’t need to further engage with the system.”

-- Interview Participant

Implement Racial Equity at Every Step

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP) has outlined a cyclical process that organizations can follow to ensure that racial equity and community engagement are at the core of data work, depicted below.



<https://bit.ly/CenterRacialEquity>
#CenterRacialEquity



- Planning: Lay the foundation for the rest of the project by doing activities such as identifying how the work benefits the community and understanding the racial history of the locality of interest.
- Data Collection: Acknowledge the fact that administrative data are impacted by the biases of those who collect it, and it is not collected for the purpose of research so there could be issues with incomplete data or data integrity.
- Data Access: Be transparent about who has access to what data and for what purpose. An organization also carries some responsibility in ensuring that the data is not used to further promote stereotypes or biases.
- Use of Algorithms and Statistical Tools: Algorithms are not “race-neutral” and they reflect the biases of whoever created them. To control for that, organizations need to allow for their algorithms to be independently reviewed for inequities and biases.
- Data Analysis: One has to assess intersectional experiences (for example, look at race by gender), avoid using White people as a default comparison group, and know the historical context of race to theorize the “why” behind the numbers.

- Reporting & Dissemination: Accessibility is the core of racial equity at this point. One should have a clear target audience and provide them the tools necessary to understand and act in response to the data. Additionally, data does not always “speak for itself” and often benefits from supplemental narrative content.

Integration of community members should be weaved into every single step of this process in an intentional and consistent way. A few examples include leaning on community advocates to guide the research topics, asking neighborhood groups for their thoughts on what data is relevant to them, or having service providers inform the development of algorithms.

- Resources Needed for Implementation:
 - Patience: The AISP model is an iterative process that cannot be done quickly if done correctly.
 - Positive Relationships with Community Leaders: Bring in people who are knowledgeable, invested, and ready to work for racial equity in the child welfare system. One’s job title, employer name, or social capital should not be the sole determinant for who should shape child welfare data.

“What would it mean to design anti-racist policies? How do you protect these policies? What is anti-racist research? A lot of the current research perpetuates the notion that racism doesn’t exist in the system and doesn’t focus on the context in which families are operating. What would an anti-racist index look like? Again, the community would need to participate in the creation of this.”

-- Interview Participant

Limitations & Considerations

As previously stated, engagement with those who are represented in the data significantly improves the meaningfulness of that data. Roughly half of the interview participants were Casey Family Programs’ staff members, albeit on different teams. And all participants worked in administrative roles. If this research on applying a racial equity lens to child welfare data continues, then the pool of interview and focus group participants should be expanded to include case workers in the system, community advocates, and of course, families with experience in the child welfare system.

Interviews for this study were conducted during a divisive U.S. Presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted racial disparities, and a civil rights movement for racial justice in America that raised social consciousness about the impacts of racism, specifically racism against Black people. The state of the nation could have affected the participation level in at least one of two ways. It is possible that some individuals viewed this time in American history as an opportunity to confront systemic racism and saw this project as one tool that could be used to do that. It is also possible that due to the increased media attention on racism, some individuals were simply burnt out from having yet another conversation about race and chose not to participate.

Conclusion

So what does child welfare data with a racial equity lens look like? At the minimum, it includes disaggregated racial data. Simply noting differences by race is not the end goal, but it does lay a foundation for culturally-appropriate work and allows all involved to understand the disparities and disproportionalities that need to be rectified.

Racial equity is also shown by complementing quantitative data with narratives of lived experiences. This requires researchers, data scientists, and others in administrative roles to build relationships with community members and ask them to participate in the data collection and interpretation processes. Ask them what factors contribute to their outcomes and then include that information in an index. Ask them what strengths and resources can be leveraged to improve outcomes. Instead of using a voyeuristic approach, child welfare indexes can lean on families and communities to provide necessary context around data.

Finally, organizations in the field must make a commitment towards racial equity among children and families, and ultimately push for an anti-racist system. This commitment can begin with internal education and extend to evaluate and revise policies and procedures that disproportionately harm children and families who are poor, Black, Latino, or Native American. While the child welfare system is not solely responsible for racial disparity and disproportionality in outcomes and will need to partner with other systems in order to implement sustainable and systemic change, the child welfare system can certainly lead the charge.

APPENDIX A: Desired Client-Level Indicators

- teen pregnancy rate
- mental health services
- disability status
- family's primary language
- who are our foster families, kinship families, and group home providers
- education placement changes
- quality of contact
- how often were parents denied visits
- generational status
- what services are available to and accessed by families
- ICWA status
- relationship status of the parents (are they together or not?)
- drug use
- homeless rate
- number of kids who enter sex trafficking
- immigration status
- family of origin composition
- maltreatment type
- SOGIE data
- social and emotional development and wellbeing
- sense of agency and justice in their treatment
- sense of safety from violence
- wellness or wellbeing scale
- a happiness scale
- health and equity data
- disproportionality in employment
- housing stability
- public benefits received
- domestic violence
- behavioral development issues
- expulsion rates from pre-schools
- internet access
- parent's experience with the criminal justice system and if that factored into how their case was handled
- interactions with other systems - parents and children
- Were services culturally-appropriate?
- Were services conditional on an investigation being opened?
- access to public transportation
- access to affordable and safe housing
- housing cost burden
- family heritability of resources
- Who gets foster care and in-home services?
- Who gets a kinship placement and who goes to foster care or a group home?
- Are prevention services offered at a proportionate rate?
- decision to offer alternative services to the family
- What are the documented reasons for a child being placed in a not-preferred placement?
- access to healthy food
- access to childcare
- access to high quality schools
- access to green spaces
- number of kids in kinship placements instead of with strangers
- age, race and ethnicity of people who adopt children
- data on informal kinship placements that don't get reported
- wellbeing domain specifically around racial equity
- education of child and parent
- juvenile justice outcome
- multigenerational or crowded housing
- If a child has been removed, what kind of search is conducted to find a Native placement for them?
- feedback from families to about the services that were or were not provided

APPENDIX B: Desired Community-Level Indicators

- real and perceived safety
- brain trauma
- ACES trauma
- economic stability
- parental resilience
- protective factors like social connection
- social and emotional competence
- effects of discrimination
- housing stability
- child poverty
- use of SNAP and Medicaid
- high school graduation rates
- cost of living
- number of and access to green spaces
- public transportation access
- internet access
- access to concrete support services
- access to services within each community
- geographically where kids are being removed from and where they're being placed (geo mapping)
- educational outcomes among communities of color
- road conditions
- job stability
- policing
- availability of non-state philanthropic resources
- median wealth
- historical analysis on housing
- housing covenants
- investment in schools
- Where are insurance companies redlining?
- actuary data on where banks are investing to support the communities
- availability of culturally-appropriate services
- economic equity
- access to living wage jobs
- quality of schools
- concentration of law enforcement (rate of officers and geographic locations of where they police)
- number of liquor stores, public libraries, gas stations, vacant lots, and abandoned homes
- access to healthy food
- Can we document the differences in data outcome across agencies or offices within the same locality?
- engagement of public agencies that provide services to kids with the community
- community engagement and buy-in
- cost of early childcare and how they rate in quality
- healthcare access in the new wave of telehealth
- education access and quality
- built environment
- maternal and child health programs
- prenatal and postnatal care
- medical care
- violence
- segregation
- identification of leaders in the community
- health insurance
- documentation of Native people in the system (i.e. lawyers, social workers, judges)
- allocation of resources - Are there local organizations that could provide services but they're not given enough resources/funding to do so?
- tribal engagement with ICWA kids who are coming into the system
- rate of homelessness
- mental health facilities
- recreational facilities
- lighting at night
- measures that tap into social and built environments to give a picture of social connectedness within a community
- mortgage lending on a local level