

Foster Care Well-Being Outcomes by Race and Ethnicity

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TAKEAWAYS

Youth with foster care experience may have more in common with each other across racial lines, compared to the general population, given the typically shared experiences of socioeconomic and other disadvantages among youth placed into foster care.

Black youth with experience in foster care have 20% lower odds of achieving similar employment or substantial earnings, compared to White foster care youth.

Hispanic youth with foster care histories have 10% lower odds of achieving stable housing compared to non-Hispanic foster care youth.

Black and Indigenous youth remain historically over-represented in the foster care population.



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Foster care is an extreme intervention in the life of a family.

While sometimes necessary for the safety and protection of children, research on the long-term effects of foster care show mixed results.¹ Heterogeneous outcomes related to time spent in foster care—positive, negative, or null—can be difficult to predict and are not mutually exclusive. Children with foster care histories can have positive, negative, or neutral experiences within and across out-of-home care contexts. By taking a “bird’s eye” view of foster care-related research through a meta-analytic approach, researchers, advocates, and policymakers can gain a better sense of how research results may vary. Patterns of variation can depend on which outcomes are measured and which research methodologies are used, the geographic location and age of the child when entering and exiting foster care, and other important factors.² Disparities in foster care experiences and outcomes across racialized groups in the United States—for Black and Indigenous children in particular—have resulted in a push for more, and better, research on these topics.³

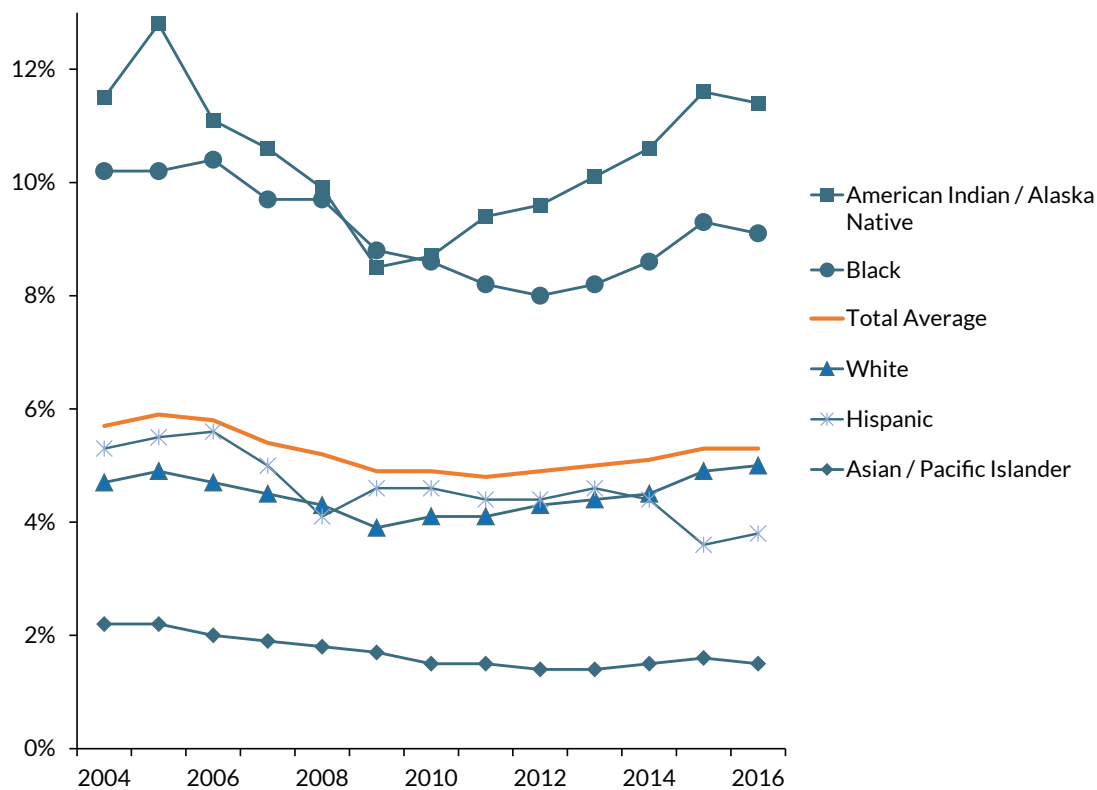
As with other majority Anglo countries, Black and Indigenous children in the United States experience foster care placement at higher rates than their White counterparts (see Figure 1).⁴ When removed from a family home, however, children of color are less likely than White youth to be placed in a living context aligned with the racial, ethnic, or cultural traditions of their family of origin; in the absence of proactive socialization, identity and self-esteem may suffer.⁵ Despite broad differences by race among populations of children and adolescents experiencing foster care, scant research explores differences in health and well-being outcomes.

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Study Parameters

We used a meta-analytic framework to synthesize and analyze research focused on well-being outcomes by race and ethnicity among individuals currently or formerly placed in out-of-home care. This population of young people, which we refer to as foster care-impacted persons (FCIPs), is inclusive of individuals with experience in non-relative family foster care, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities. We reviewed studies based on populations located in the United States, written in English, and published between January 2000 and June 2021 as a peer-reviewed journal article or doctoral dissertation. In order to

Figure 1. Percent Chance of Ever Being Placed in Foster Care by Age 18, by Race/Ethnicity and Year



Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Data, United States, 2004–2016.

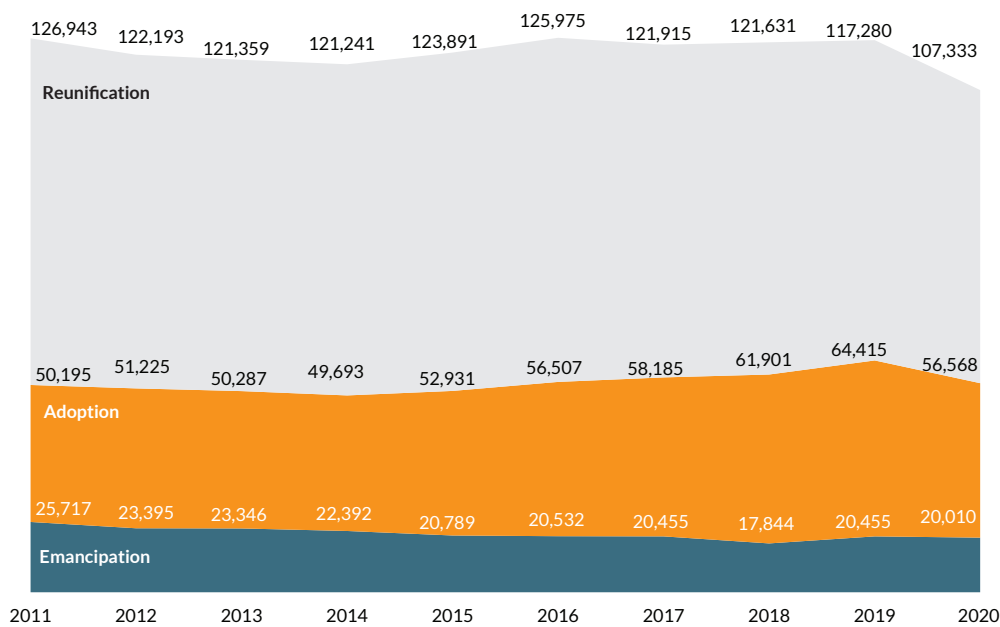
assess aspects of racial disparities in various outcomes, these collected works needed to include data reported separately (i.e., disaggregated) on two or more racialized or ethnic populations. Our goal was to assess “typical” foster care scenario outcomes, rather than specialized care scenarios. As such, studies were excluded if they centered exclusively on intervention programs or treatment-based foster care, juvenile justice programs, care for individuals with developmental disabilities, psychiatric care, or homeless populations.

Research Findings and Limitations

Positive effects commonly measured in the studies we assessed include topics such as educational achievement, employment, and earnings whereas negative effects include homelessness, risky or externalizing behaviors, mental health concerns, and justice system involvement. Our analysis uncovers substantial limitations in the academic research to thoroughly assess racial disparities in foster care outcomes. Before offering a few findings of interest, we foreground some of these limitations.

First, the number of studies centered on experiences of individuals emancipated from, or “aging out” of, foster care is misaligned with the relatively small proportion of children and youth (about 10%) who actually age out (see Figure 2).⁶ Important work (i.e., the Midwest Study) led to a large and sustained interest in topics and pathways to well-being for youth aging out of the system. Yet this body of work provides limited insight—or data—on children and youth who experience more probable outcomes such as reunifying with

Figure 2. Number of Children Exiting Foster Care by Reason, in the United States (+ Washington, DC and Puerto Rico), 2011–2020



Source: Kids Count Data Center, 2022, Children exiting foster care by reason in the United States. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

biological parents or other kin, being adopted, or establishing legal guardianship relations.⁷ Studies evaluating post-discharge racial disparities are rarer still.

Second, due to uneven geographic distributions of racialized and ethnic groups within the United States, certain characteristics related to system involvement are very influential on well-being outcomes during and after foster care; these include location, timing of entry and exit, and familial contexts. Child welfare services are typically county based and, as such, the experiences of youth in the foster care system will vary depending on location and at what age they may come into contact with the system. Despite these important factors, many studies in our analysis did not report pertinent variables such as age at entry, placement stability, placement type, or length of time spent in care. Future research will benefit from closer attention to these details as well as the magnitude and direction of racial disparities in well-being during and after care.

Third, few studies report outcomes for Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander persons with foster care histories despite Indigenous children and youth being subject to distinctly higher rates of foster care entry.⁸ Likewise, policies and practices under the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) may result in different types and durations of foster care experiences for Native children and youth, thus influencing different well-being outcomes.

Several findings of interest emerged from this analysis. Importantly, we found no significant differences among outcomes by race for justice system involvement, high-risk behaviors, or educational attainment, suggesting that possible effects of foster care on these outcomes are similar across racial groups.

Black former foster youth, however, were less likely to achieve full- or part-time employment and financial stability relative to White and non-Black youth with foster care histories. This gap may be a function of systemic employment discrimination as it largely

mirrors observed racial disparities in the general population. Hispanic former foster youth, in contrast, had lower rates of homelessness relative to other groups. While more research is needed, we suspect such results reflect a concentration of experiences including foster care involvement, justice system interaction, and homelessness, which are faced primarily by populations also experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. Put another way, the shared social contexts of Black, White, and Hispanic persons with foster care experience appear more alike than otherwise-similar persons in the general population.

Among the studies examined in this meta-analysis, those collecting baseline data after 2002 reported lower odds of mental health concerns for Black former foster care youth relative to other groups. This suggestion of potential racial differences in manifestations of psychological distress needs further research and could imply the under-detection and therefore under-treatment of mental health concerns for Black persons with foster care histories.

Disparities in foster care experiences and outcomes across racialized groups in the United States have resulted in a push for more, and better, research on these topics.

Summary

While foster care affects only a small percentage of persons involved with child welfare systems, it is among the most intensive and controversial types of family interventions.⁹ Characterizing the nature and extent of racial and ethnic disparities across well-being domains for youth with foster care histories is important, especially considering concerns about persistent overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous youth in the U.S. American foster care system.¹⁰ While heterogeneity in outcomes is expected, more research on emergent patterns across and between racialized groups can help create more efficient, equitable, and effective systems for the provision of foster care in its various forms. ■

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⁹Kennedy, R. S., Potter, M. H. & Font, S. A. (2022). A meta-regression of racial disparities in wellbeing outcomes during and after foster care. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 0(0), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221111481>

¹⁰Font, S. A. & Gershoff, E. T. (2020). *Foster care and “best interests of the child”*: Integrating research, policy, and practice. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41146-6>

¹¹Font, S. A. & Kennedy, R. S. (2022). The centrality of child maltreatment to criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 5(1), 371–396. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-030920-120220>

¹²C’ enat, J. M., McIntee, S.-E., Mukunzi, J. N., & Noorishad, P.-G. (2021). Overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system: A systematic review to understand and better act. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 120, Article 105714. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105714>

¹³Smith, S., McRoy, R., Freundlich, M., & Kroll, J. (2008, May). *Finding families for African American children: The role of race & law in adoption from foster care*. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. <https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/MEPApaper20080527.pdf>

⁶U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2019 estimates as of June 23, 2020. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf>

⁷Font, S. A., & Kennedy, R. (2022). The centrality of child maltreatment to criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 5(1), 371–396. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-030920-120220>

⁸Yi, Y., Edwards, F. R., & Wildeman, C. (2020). Cumulative prevalence of confirmed maltreatment and foster care placement for US children by race/ethnicity, 2011–2016. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(5), 704–709. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305554>

⁹Putnam-Hornstein, E., Ahn, E., Prindle, J., Magruder, J., Webster, D., & Wildeman, C. (2021). Cumulative rates of child protection involvement and terminations of parental rights in a California birth cohort, 1999–2017. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(6), 1157–1163. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306214>

¹⁰Dettlaff, A. J., Weber, K., Pendleton, M., Boyd, R., Bettencourt, B., & Burton, L. (2020). It is not a broken system, it is a system that needs to be broken: The upEND movement to abolish the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(5), 500–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1814542>

Type of analysis: Quantitative meta-analysis.

Data Source: Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and reports (N = 70, with 39 unique datasets).

Type of data: Studies reporting well-being outcomes by race and ethnicity.

Sample definition: Studies focused on individuals currently or previously residing in foster care, including non-relative family foster care, kinship care, group homes, and residential facilities.

Time frame: Studies published between January 2000 and July 2021.

Limitations: Many studies did not report important aspects of the foster care experience such as: age at entry, placement stability, type of placement, or length of time spent in foster care. Research on well-being outcomes following reunification, adoption, and guardianship is quite small compared to the disproportionately larger body of work focused on youth “aging out” of foster care. Despite having the highest rates of foster care placement of any racialized group, American Indian / Alaska Native former foster youth were largely under-represented in cumulative results and largely excluded from this analysis.

Research to Watch

Sarah A. Font

Left Behind? Educational Disadvantage, Child Protection, and Foster Care

Current educational policies for children involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) focus largely on the minority of children currently in or aging out of foster care, and target school stability and college access. This ongoing work investigates the nature of high school education performance and attainment, and post-secondary (college) enrollment among youth with prior or current CPS contact and their low-income, but not CPS-contacted, peers. Following a cohort of over 75,000 high school students in Wisconsin, we find that CPS-contacted youth have lower educational performance and greater educational barriers than their low-income peers.

Youth aging out of care face unique disadvantages regarding on-time high school completion but, conditional on high school performance and completion, enroll in college at similar or higher rates. Youth adopted from foster care appear to attain higher levels of education than other youth with foster care histories, despite similar test scores and high rates of special education placement. Overall, we find little evidence of under-enrollment in college. Across all groups, over 60% of those who graduate on time with “basic” proficiency or above in English and math go on to enroll in college. Although under-prepared youth involved with CPS are less likely to enroll in college, it is not evident that this is disadvantageous, given poor post-secondary outcomes for youth requiring remedial education.