

# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## Racial Identity Is Associated with Foster Care Placement

### What is this research about?

Research shows that in 2005 there were a disproportionate number of African-American children in the child welfare system in the United States. In fact, African American youth made up 14.8 % of the child population (under the age of 18). However, they represented 32% of children in the foster care program. At the same time, Caucasian children made up 68.5% of the U.S. child population, but represented only 41% of children in the foster care system. It's not just that African-American children are overrepresented in the system – the rates at which they are placed in foster homes continue to rise as well. The rates for white children, in the meantime, continue to drop. In short, African-American children are much more likely than non African-American children to be placed in foster care. They tend to get less attention from case managers, and they also get less in the way of developmental or psychological assessment.

But there isn't a lot of reliable data on the overrepresentation of African-American children in foster care. With the exception of a few studies, most research uses sample sizes that are too small. There is a need to know more about how a child's race predicts his or her future involvement in foster care?

### What you need to know:

African-American children are 44% more likely to wind up in foster care than non African-American children.

### What did the researchers do?

Dr. Knott at York University, and research assistant Kirsten Donovan at the University of Toronto, looked at whether or not there are a disproportionate number of African-American children in the child welfare system. The Child Abuse Protection Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires that the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) keeps data on child maltreatment. As a result, they used 2005 data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

Their study covered almost 3.5 million investigations done in 2005. When they came across duplicate report IDs or child IDs, the researchers would randomly select one. Investigations with missing or unknown information were also left out. Overall, there was an unweighted study sample of 71, 802 investigations.

## What did the researchers find?

African-American children are 44% more likely to wind up in foster care when compared with non African-American children. In other words, a child's race is a statistically significant predictor of whether or not he or she will be placed in out-of-home care. A number of other factors, besides race, also push children into foster care:

- emotional problems;
- young age (4-7 and 8-11 years);
- substantiated sexual abuse.

Children with caregivers who use drugs are also at risk. So, too, are children whose families have financial problems. Being on public assistance, however, wasn't a significant predictor of a child ending up in foster care.

## How can you use this research?

Policymakers need to understand that systemic barriers create an inequality in services and outcomes for children of different races. More research is needed on those factors that drive children into foster care. Future research should look at how the surveillance of African-American families affects their ability to provide for their children. Child welfare workers should explore alternative ways of responding to situations that involve African-American children who may need foster care. Culturally sensitive interventions need to be tested. This will ensure better results for vulnerable populations.

## About the Researchers

Theresa Knott is Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at York University.

[tknott@yorku.ca](mailto:tknott@yorku.ca)

Kirsten Donovan participated as Research Assistant in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto.

## Citation

Knott, T., & Donovan, K. (2010). Disproportionate representation of African-American children in foster care: Secondary analysis of the national child abuse and neglect data system, 2005. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(5), 679-684. Available online at [bit.ly/1e5paCi](http://bit.ly/1e5paCi)

## Keywords

African-American children, Foster care, Child welfare services, Abuse, Maltreatment, Disproportionate representation

## Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

[kmbunit@yorku.ca](mailto:kmbunit@yorku.ca)

[www.researchimpact.ca](http://www.researchimpact.ca)

