

Equality Before the Law: Race and Ethnicity in Nebraska's Child Welfare System



Executive Summary

All children in Nebraska deserve a safe and loving home, and intervention when their home environment becomes unsafe. Child welfare systems should always seek to promote the safety and well-being of the children it serves. Research and data consistently shows that children of color are not treated equitably within child welfare systems. Equality of opportunity for all children and those who are in the care of the state is important to the future of Nebraska, and structural inequity bears a serious financial and social cost.

The data suggest that though system reform efforts have produced some positive trends in our overall population, inequities for children of color, particularly American Indian and Black children, are persistent.

Substantiated maltreatment has declined overall, but multiple and compounding systemic barriers remain. American Indian children are overrepresented among victims by a rate of 2.5, and Black children by a rate of 2.3.

Removal from home has decreased by nearly 36% in the last decade, thanks to recent investments and reforms. These changes have had almost no impact on disproportionality—American Indian children are overrepresented among children removed from their homes by a rate of 9.1, and Black children by a rate of 3.7. In fact, disproportionality for these two groups has increased over the last decade.

Placement type while in care matters, and most children in out-of-home care are in a home with a family. Still, disparity in positive placement types persist, with higher-than-average rates of:

- Placement in group homes and other institutions for American Indian and Black children;
- Supervised independent living for Black and Hispanic youth; and
- Missing from care status (also known as “runaways”) for Black youth.

Placement stability minimizes the disruption that children experience when removed from their family and routine, and most children in care have had only one placement during their current case or foster care “episode.”

Disparities for some children of color remain:

- Black children have *lower-than-average* rates of having fewer (1-3) placements; and
- Black and American Indian children have higher-than-average rates of placement instability (4-6, 7-9, 10+).

Multiple removals during a child’s lifetime represents continued failure of the system to successfully reunify or find permanency. Though rare, instances of multiple removals are much more common among certain children of color:

- American Indian children have *lower-than-average* rates of having fewer (1-2) removals in their lifetime; and
- American Indian children have *much* higher-than-average rates of having multiple (3-4, 5+) removals.

Average lifetime days spent in care has remained relatively consistent over the years, and the overall average for all children in care was 661 days. Longer stays in care likely means a child will experience multiple placements and removals, and increases the likelihood that they will age out without achieving positive permanency.

Recommendations

Progress is not out of reach—data over the course of a decade is a testament to the fact that changes to policymaking, practice, and agency culture can produce positive results for children and families. Without intentional dialogue that includes directly impacted communities and steps to address deeply embedded systemic racism, however, the system will continue to fail some of our most vulnerable children.

1. **Follow the data.** Create depth of understanding of the data within subgroups or at the community level.
2. **Conduct a systems racial impact analysis.** Engage and build trust with families of color in completing a thorough cross-systems assessment of how existing policy and practice drives inequity in the system.
3. **Invest in targeted and family-friendly services.** Partner with communities of color in identifying key child maltreatment prevention needs and invest in culturally responsive services that meet the need.