

Knowledge is Power: An Analysis of the Causes and Effects of the Overrepresentation of African Americans and Other Racial Minorities in the US Foster Care System

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Abstract

This paper employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative statistical analysis with a literature review, to examine the overrepresentation of African American and other racial minority children in the US foster care system and analyze the effects of systemic racial discrimination. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and quantitative data, the study identifies gaps in the foster care process and proposes actionable, data-driven reforms. The analysis utilizes publicly available datasets, including national child welfare statistics and administrative records. It employs descriptive and comparative statistical methods to evaluate rates of system involvement by race and ethnicity at key decision points (reporting, investigation, substantiation, and placement). Additionally, the research incorporates a literature review of peer-reviewed studies and policy reports to interpret observed disparities. The central thesis asserts that institutional biases and historic inequities drive racial disproportionality at multiple stages of decision-making. Solutions are recommended that prioritize family empowerment, cultural competence, and transitional assistance to address these inequities and promote the well-being of children and families.

Keywords: reunification, critical race theory, foster care, family preservation, African American, systemic racial bias, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

1. Introduction

In the United States, racial disparities in child welfare remain a persistent problem. By the time they are eighteen, one in three children will be the subject of a child protective services investigation (Palmer et al., 2023). Black children are 1.6 times more likely than White children to be placed in foster care, and in certain areas, almost 53% of Black children are investigated compared to 28% of White children (Baron et al., 2023). At 2.66 times their population proportion, American Indian and Alaska Native children are likewise overrepresented. (Lawler et al., 2012, pp. 95-110) Sometimes the negative effects of system involvement outweigh the advantages of removal, including diminished cognitive function, emotional instability, and strained parent-child interactions (Baron et al., 2023; Landers et al., 2019).

The question of whether institutional racism or poverty is the main cause of these differences has been discussed in the past. The poverty explanation's proponents contend that low-income families are more likely to be involved with child welfare due to factors like limited access to resources, unemployment, and unstable housing, which results in disproportionate representation for racial minorities who are more likely to face financial hardship. Studies demonstrating a robust relationship between family poverty and rates of child welfare interventions, irrespective of race, support this point of view. Critics point out that even when comparing families with comparable financial situations, there are still notable racial inequalities, which the poverty-only perspective cannot adequately explain. The institutional racism perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the long-term consequences of past discrimination, unconscious bias, and unequal treatment by system actors at critical junctures. Research showing greater rates of investigation and removal for children of color, even after adjusting for poverty and abuse risk, lends credence to this claim. Both theories offer valuable insights, but an increasing amount of research indicates that racism and poverty work together to produce and maintain disproportionality in the foster care system (Baron et al., 2024).

This analysis uses Critical Race Theory to look at how past trauma and institutional racism still impact marginalized populations. This study highlights systemic deficiencies and suggests remedies that put family preservation ahead of out-of-home placement as part of its larger goal. Keywords used in this study are defined as follows for clarity: a “decision point” is a specific point at which staff members in the child welfare system make decisions about a child's progress through the system. The first reporting of suspected maltreatment, the choice to conduct an investigation, the verification of the alleged mistreatment, and the eventual placement of a child in foster care are the main decision points in this analysis. (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2000, pp. 227-235). 'Disproportionality' is measured by comparing the proportion of children from a specific racial or ethnic group represented at each decision point to their share of the general child population within the relevant jurisdiction, as indicated by quantitative data sources (Jr. & Sabol, n.d.). It is hypothesized that disproportionality increases at each decision point, connecting theoretical perspectives to practice to examine how race influences outcomes through a systems thinking approach (Baron et al., 2023).

The systems-based analysis traces how discrimination is sustained or amplified across multiple system actors (Baron et al., 2024, pp. 1611-1664). The two key and defining points are

theoretical and empirical. The theoretical component deals with factors such as the integration of Critical Race Theory with systems-based thinking, and the empirical component deals with factors that include the identification of the impacts of differential bias at distinct and critical decision points.

The findings recommend reforms in family empowerment, culturally competent education, and anti-racist practices. In addition, addressing systemic discrimination is essential to ensuring the protection and development of children.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Importance of the problem

The question of whether racial differences in child welfare represent institutional prejudice or actual maltreatment risks continues to be debated despite decades of research. According to recent research, racism is still a factor even when socioeconomic status is taken into account, which could put vulnerable children at risk (Baron et al., 2023).

On the other hand, a different viewpoint contends that the child welfare system upholds institutional racism and systemic oppression, with subjective choices resulting in excessive monitoring and needless removal of children of color. American Indian and Alaska Native groups are especially impacted by this, as their experiences are frequently hidden in more general research (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2022). We provide statistical and graphical depictions of demographic information about children in the US foster care system in the section that follows. Table 1 compares each racial/ethnic group's share of the overall U.S. children in foster care in relation to the total U.S. population. Figure 1 compares the racial composition of the overall U.S. population with the racial composition of the foster care system, highlighting these disproportionalities.

Table 1. Racial Representation & Disproportionalities in the U.S. Foster Care System

Racial/Ethnic Group	Total U.S. Population	U.S. Population Share (%)	Foster Care System Share (%)
African Americans	48,200,000	14%	23%-25%
American Indian/Alaska Native	7,7000,000	1%	2%-3%
Hispanic/Latino	68,000,000	20%	21%
Asian	25,000,000	7%	1% or less
White	195,000,000	57.5%	42%

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures & U.S. Census Bureau.

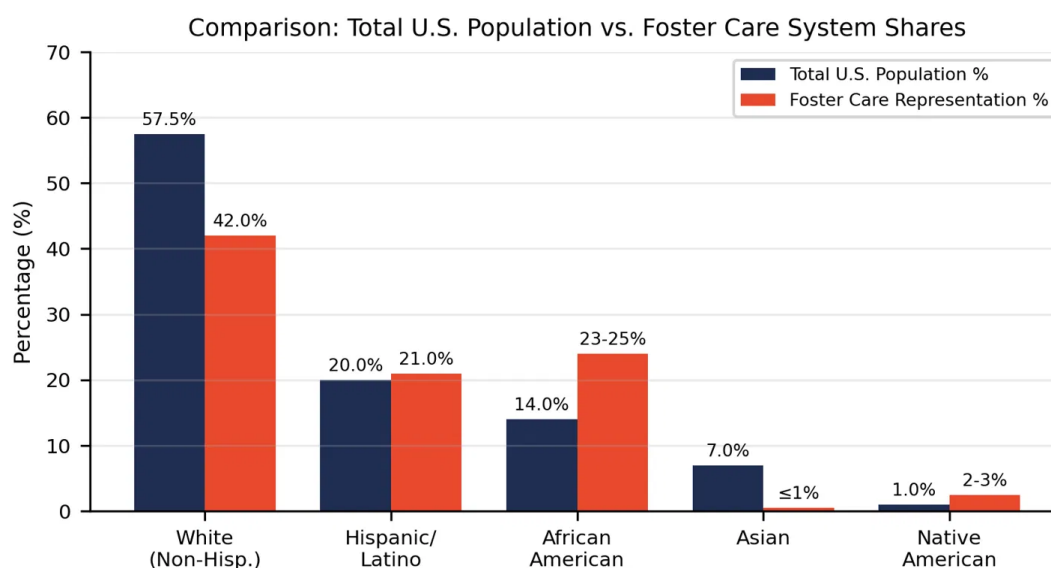


Figure 1. Total U.S. Population in Comparison to the Foster Care System

Further research must address secondary harms associated with foster care, such as reduced cognitive ability and lasting trauma experienced by children and parents. (Maguire et al., 2024). By using a systems thinking framework, this study will pinpoint specific decision points where bias and discrimination compound throughout the process (Baron et al., 2023). Critical Race Theory and systems analysis are strategically used to identify failures and propose data-driven solutions to promote culturally competent practices and family empowerment among at-risk groups.

1.2 Hypotheses and Relevance

Finding institutional gaps and suggesting data-driven solutions that emphasize family empowerment and culturally competent practices are necessary to address racial overrepresentation in foster care. This study employs a systems-based analysis with Critical Race Theory (CRT) to track children's movement through the welfare process. Based on these frameworks and prior data, the central and secondary hypotheses propose increases in disproportionality at each subsequent decision point, including reporting, inquiry, substantiation, and care placement (Hill, 2007; National Indian Child Welfare Association [NICWA], 2021).

Hypothesis 1 (Primary): Racial disproportionality increases at each successive decision point in the child welfare process (reporting, investigation, substantiation, and placement), resulting in greater overrepresentation of Black and AI/AN children in foster care relative to their proportion in the general child population.

- This approach is grounded in the systems thinking framework, which posits that discrimination is a multi-stage process in which bias can be sustained, amplified, or mitigated by various actors throughout the system (Baron et al., 2023; Cooper,

2013).

- Rationale: CRT theorists argue that historic racism contributes significantly to contemporary manifestations of racial group disadvantage (Cooper, 2013).
- Hypothesis 2 (Secondary): We hypothesize that the “racial concordance effect” significantly influences foster care placement decisions. Specifically, because White investigators constitute the majority of the workforce, they are less likely to place White children into foster care than children of other races, even when facing similar levels of risk. This dynamic leads to the under-placement of White children in high-risk situations. Recent quasi-experimental data support this hypothesis, demonstrating that investigators are more likely to afford the “benefit of the doubt” to families of their own race, contributing to disparities in placement outcomes (Baron et al., 2023).
- Hypothesis 3 (Exploratory): We hypothesize that for American Indian and Alaska Native children, current overrepresentation is uniquely rooted within unresolved historical trauma and a legacy of federal assimilationist policies focused on systematic child removal (Landers et al., 2019; NICWA, 2021).

2. Conceptual Frameworks

2.1 Systems-Based Thinking

2.1.1 Hotline Screeners

According to a systems-based analysis, hotline screeners are a significant “front-end” point where racial prejudice frequently starts and then intensifies throughout the course of the multi-phase child welfare procedure (Baron et al., 2023). This analytical framework, which draws from the social sciences (including institutions and power imbalance) and the sciences (including systems theory and feedback loops), goes beyond analyzing specific incidents to look at how discrimination is maintained, intensified, or lessened over time by various decision-makers (Baron et al., 2023; Cooper, 2013).

Analysis shows that hotline calls involving Black children are screened for investigation at a rate 4.9 percentage points (approximately 8%) higher than calls involving White children with identical maltreatment potential. Screeners exhibit this unjustified difference across both high-risk and low-risk cases, in contrast to investigators, whose bias is primarily focused on high-risk instances (Baron et al., 2023). Investigators can frequently reduce initial screener bias in low-risk instances by removing children or refusing to verify claims. However, investigators often exacerbate initial discrepancies in high-risk instances where there is a possibility of maltreatment, which results in the underplacement of White children who are at risk (Baron et al., 2023).

While screeners do not make final placement recommendations, their initial “gatekeeping” role is important. Parsing the data shows that screener decisions account for 8% to 14% of the total unwarranted disparity observed in eventual foster care placements for children with a subsequent maltreatment potential (Baron et al., 2023). Screeners exercise substantial discretion, but do not systematically learn the eventual outcomes of the investigations they

launch (Baron et al., 2023). From a system perspective, this lack of feedback prevents organizational learning and allows partial decision-making patterns to persist at the point of entry (Baron et al., 2023; Cooper, 2013).

These findings demonstrate that because discrimination compounds across multiple decision-makers, comprehensive reform must address unwarranted disparities generated at the initial screening phase, rather than focusing solely on investigators (Baron et al., 2023).

2.1.2 Systems-Based Thinking: The Racial Concordance Effect for Investigators

Because investigators are statistically less likely to place children of their own race into the system than children of a different race, the racial concordance effect has a significant impact on foster care placement decisions (Baron et al., 2023). This impact is notably noticeable in high-risk instances where there is a possibility of future abuse, indicating that investigators frequently give families of the same race the “benefit of the doubt” (Baron et al., 2023).

In particular, studies show that white investigators are more likely to place white children in high-risk households than Black children with identical maltreatment potential. Because approximately 86% of the child welfare workforce is white in certain jurisdictions, this agreement results in higher conditional placement rates for Black children system-wide. While investigators of other racial groups also demonstrate a tendency to be more lenient with families of their own race, their smaller representation in the workforce means that their individual biases do not offset the aggregate racial disparity (Baron et al., 2023).

A critical and counterintuitive outcome of this effect is the potential “under-placement” of white children in high-risk environments (Baron et al., 2023). By giving white parents greater leniency, white investigators may accidentally harm white children by leaving them in dangerous situations where they are more likely to experience subsequent maltreatment (Baron et al., 2023). While Black children are placed in foster care at higher rates, this higher placement may offer them greater protection compared to white children who are left in homes with future maltreatment potential due to investigator bias (Baron et al., 2023).

2.1.3 Systems-Based Thinking: Neglect vs Poverty

Because socioeconomic status is one of the best indicators of abuse complaints, poverty and neglect are often confounded in the foster care system, creating a systemic confusion between material deprivation and parental unfitness (Kim & Drake, 2018). The reason for this complication is that the term “neglect” typically refers to the absence of necessities like food, clothing, or housing. However, child welfare procedures frequently overlook the distinction between deliberate neglect and an inadvertent lack of resources brought on by systemic disenfranchisement (Merritt, 2021). Due to their frequent interactions with social service organizations, public health clinics, and other mandated reporters, families in poverty are also more visible and subject to surveillance, making them more likely to be reported than more affluent families (Merritt, 2021; Pryce & Yelick, 2021).

Additionally, courts and experts frequently mistake the lack of a normal nuclear family structure for maltreatment, using arbitrary criteria that don't take into consideration the family's

unique financial situation or the various cultural approaches to childrearing (Cooper, 2013). The child welfare system has a long-standing assumption that poor parenting is linked to poverty, which frequently causes system actors to see a family's way of life and financial difficulties as detrimental to the “best interests of the child” (Cooper, 2013; Merritt, 2021). In the end, many children are taken from their families due to ongoing financial difficulties that make it difficult for their parents to supply the essentials demanded by reactive social norms, rather than because of deliberate damage (Merritt, 2021).

2.2 Critical Race Theory

2.2.1 Unconscious Racism

Unconscious racism, also known as implicit bias, is seen as a fundamental and ingrained aspect of civic institutions, including the American foster care system, according to Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ravitch, 2021; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Corbin, 2024). According to this viewpoint, people eventually absorb attitudes and ideas that attach negative value to non-white races because Americans share a “common historical and cultural heritage” in which racism played a major role (Cooper, 2013). Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is deeply ingrained in the legal, cultural, social, and educational systems and policies that uphold racial inequity, going well beyond personal prejudice and bias (Ravitch, 2021).

According to CRT, racism is a “central ideological and political pillar” that upholds current social conditions rather than only a person's conscious mental state (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Solórzano & Huber, 2020; Coates, 2024). According to Cooper (2013), the foster care system is examined as a hegemonic institution where individuals in positions of authority may unintentionally discriminate against families of color due to “unconscious racial motivation.” According to critical race theorists (Ledesma, Ojeda, Coon, & Parker, 2024; Corbin, 2024), legal norms that are ambiguous or nebulous, like the “best interests of the child” standard, foster unconscious bias. This ambiguity encourages system actors, such as judges, attorneys, and caseworkers, to employ “cognitive shortcuts,” such as models and stereotypes based on cultural myths and historical analogies (Cooper, 2013).

CRT (Corbin, 2024) focuses on how race is constructed through these institutional structures (Ravitch, 2021), making racism appear “ordinary and natural” rather than aberrant. Because the law tends to support the “insider's” or perpetrator's viewpoint, this leads to “pretextual racism,” discrimination that does not look as such on its face and frequently goes unchecked (Cooper, 2013). Rejecting ahistoricism in favor of a contextual and historical examination of the law is a fundamental component of CRT. According to the argument, all current forms of racial group disadvantage are a result of historical racism. As a result, current discrepancies in foster care are viewed as remnants of past oppression, such as slavery and the systematic removal of American Indian children during the Boarding School era (Cooper, 2013; Landers et al., 2019).

CRT scholars argue that unconscious racism contributes to a master narrative (Cooper, 2013). This account dovetails with longstanding racial stereotypes, leading professionals to reach

“racially disparate conclusions” with respect to safety and risk, frequently resulting in unjustified family separations (Cooper, 2013; Merritt, 2021).

Ultimately, CRT scholars contend that child welfare institutions may reproduce forms of systemic inequality (Cooper, 2013; National Indian Child Welfare Association [NICWA], 2021).

2.2.2 Cultural trauma in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Communities

By rejecting “ahistoricism” and arguing that current group disadvantages, like the disproportionate number of Native children in foster care, are directly related to a legacy of systematic oppression, Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines historical trauma in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities (Cooper, 2013). According to this framework, the trauma that AI/AN communities endure is seen as a major part of a larger story about federal assimilationist policies intended to destroy tribal identity rather than as a collection of individual episodes (National Indian Child Welfare Association [NICWA], 2021).

CRT identifies (Coates, 2024) the Boarding School era, which lasted for over 100 years, as a primary source of trauma where the federal government involuntarily removed AI/AN children from their families and sent them to military-style institutions. These schools operated under the motto “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” explicitly aiming to “Christianize and civilize” children by forbidding their native languages and religions (Cooper, 2013).

The rejection of ahistoricism in favor of a contextual and historical examination of the law is a fundamental component of CRT (Cooper, 2013). Without acknowledging these long-standing patterns of forced relocation and removal, scholars argue that it is impossible to understand the current racial disproportionality in the child welfare framework, where AI/AN children are represented in foster care at nearly twice their rate in the general child population (Landers et al., 2019; NICWA, 2021). According to CRT, present child welfare procedures frequently perpetuate the trauma cycle since unconscious racism is ingrained in civic institutions (Cooper, 2013). For example, modern investigators may rely on stereotypes of Native families as “alcoholics” or “gamblers” to justify removals, which CRT views as an extension of the “hegemonic role of racism” that historically sought to undermine tribal sovereignty (Cooper, 2013; NICWA, 2021).

The “best interests of the child” norm is particularly susceptible to unintentional bias, according to CRT theorists, because its ambiguity encourages the use of “cognitive shortcuts,” such as antiquated metaphors and cultural beliefs. This sometimes leads to professionals confusing the consequences of poverty or a tribe's collective child-rearing customs with parental neglect (Cooper, 2013). CRT examines legislation such as ICWA (1978), which acknowledged tribal sovereignty to alleviate the “shocking” historical removal rates of Native children (NICWA, 2021). However, CRT scholars point out that full compliance with ICWA remains elusive in many jurisdictions, which they attribute to a continuing “master narrative” that views families of color as deviant and prioritizes institutional self-perpetuation over tribal self-determination (Cooper, 2013; NICWA, 2021).

Ultimately, CRT asserts that historical harm is the root cause of current inequity, including

higher rates of poverty and substance use in AI/AN communities (NICWA, 2021). By reframing these issues as manifestations of systemic disenfranchisement rather than individual failure, CRT advocates solutions focused on family empowerment and tribal sovereignty to secure the well-being of Native children (Merritt, 2021; NICWA, 2021).

3. Recommendations

Research and evidence-based analyzes suggest a multifaceted strategy that focuses on particular leverage points in the system's decision-making lifecycle to address systemic racial disparities and unjustifiable inequalities within the child welfare system (Cooper, 2013; Pryce & Yelick, 2021).

Employing evidence-based approaches, like Structured Decision Making (SDM), gives screeners consistent screening and clear, culturally appropriate recommendations (Children's Bureau, 2019; Cooper, 2013). By defining standards for what qualifies as a valid justification for a CPS investigation, these tools aim to reduce subjectivity (Pryce & Yelick, 2021). Decisions can be made based more on objective risk indicators than on preconceived notions about families by implementing “blind” screening procedures that eliminate racial and demographic identities from reports (Pryce & Yelick, 2021).

Currently, screeners do not systematically learn the eventual outcomes of the investigations they launch, thus preventing organizational learning (Baron et al., 2023; Cooper, 2013). By putting feedback loops in place, employees can evaluate the correctness of their risk assessments and progressively change their partial decision-making behaviors. Families at low or moderate risk can be redirected from the normal investigative track to voluntary, community-based support services by states using differentiated response (DR) routes (Children's Bureau, 2019; Cooper, 2013). By rejecting a “one-size-fits-all” methodology and emphasizing family empowerment over reactive surveillance, this strategy lessens disproportionality.

To find particular instances of bias and inaccuracy, progress necessitates a methodical audit of revictimization cases (Palmer et al., 2023). Additionally, to address the past policies that have historically disenfranchised communities of color, whether on purpose or accidentally, a multi-layered anti-racist approach at the legislative level is required (Pryce & Yelick, 2021). In order to facilitate transparent monitoring and focused interventions, specific, implementable policy reforms include requiring the gathering and dissemination of disaggregated data on child welfare decision points by race and ethnicity. To ensure that reports based only on poverty-related challenges are directed to preventive economic support services rather than initiating thorough investigations, legislatures should amend mandatory reporting laws. The implementation of independent oversight bodies with investigative and enforcement powers can hold agencies accountable for disproportionate placements and civil rights violations throughout the foster care process. Additionally, instituting periodic cultural competence and anti-bias training for all caseworkers and supervisors can help mitigate unconscious bias at each decision point. To further address historical trauma, states should expand and fully fund tribal family services in collaboration with Native communities, supporting culturally rooted alternatives to removal whenever possible.

In order to help mandated reporters and intake personnel differentiate between true parental neglect and poverty-related hardship, agencies should give them specialized training. This involves teaching about the effects of systemic disenfranchisement, cultural childrearing customs, and historical trauma (Cooper, 2013; Merritt, 2021). In order to guarantee that the system's goals align with families' cultural beliefs and needs, meaningful reform necessitates involving communities of color in the development of new screening policies (Merritt, 2021; Pryce & Yelick, 2021). This includes revising mandated reporting laws to prevent families from entering the system due to a "misperception" of maltreatment driven by visibility bias (Pryce & Yelick, 2021).

3.1 Evaluating Reform Effectiveness

Alongside implementation, agencies should monitor a predetermined set of quantifiable outcome indicators to determine whether these reforms have the desired effect. The racial disparity ratio in screened-in and substantiated reports, tracked quarterly, along with 12-month re-report and re-substantiation rates to ensure that decreased disparities are not offset by overlooked safety concerns, can be used to gauge the efficacy of screening and investigation reforms (SDM and blind screening). The percentage of low- and moderate-risk cases diverted from formal inquiry and the family-preservation rate among diverted cases at six and twelve months after referral can be used to assess differential response routes. The disparity index, which is defined as each racial/ethnic group's share of placements relative to their share of the overall child population (Tilbury & Thoburn 2009) and is calculated separately at reporting, investigation, substantiation, and placement with a target of measurable year-over-year reduction, can be used to evaluate data transparency and oversight reforms. Workforce training programs can be assessed by tracking the racial concordance gap in placement decisions over time and by using pre/post caseworker ratings of implicit bias. The percentage of AI/AN cases with documented active efforts and placement-preference compliance, as well as the rate of short-stay (one week or less) removals among Black and AI/AN children, which should decrease as reforms take hold, can be used to monitor ICWA compliance and tribal family investment.

4. Conclusion

The comprehensive synthesis of this study reveals that racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is an amplified, multi-stage process, rather than a collection of isolated incidents. Some systems-based scholars argue that the system's observed behavior suggests a shift from child protection toward bureaucratic self-perpetuation and heightened surveillance of marginalized families. However, some scholars interpret the observed disproportionality differently, attributing it primarily to higher rates of poverty and related stressors among affected communities or to differential rates of substantiated maltreatment. Others suggest that mandated reporting practices, community safety concerns, or differing rates of family stress might also contribute to these patterns. By considering these alternative explanations, this study underscores the complexity of the issue and supports the need for ongoing critical reflection when evaluating the causes of disproportionality in child welfare.

Discrimination begins at the "front end" with hotline screeners, who make rapid, subjective

decisions highly susceptible to unconscious bias. These initial unwarranted disparities are often amplified by investigators in high-risk cases, where Black children are eventually 50% more likely to be placed in foster care than white children with identical maltreatment potential. Systemic bias leads to a paradoxical outcome known as the “racial concordance effect”. Because the majority of the workforce is white, white investigators frequently afford white parents the “benefit of the doubt,” leading to the harmful under-placement and under-protection of at-risk white children. Meanwhile, the same system over-reports and over-removes children of color by conflating material deprivation from poverty with intentional neglect.

For American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, overrepresentation is inextricably linked to a history of systematic oppression, such as the Boarding School era [Landers et al., 2019]. CRT argues that modern disproportionality is a prolongation of these assimilationist policies, necessitated by the destruction of tribal families and identities. Recent data show that Black and AI/AN children are disproportionately likely to have very short stays (one week or less) in foster care. These brief removal episodes raise key questions about the necessity of removal and highlight the trauma inflicted on families for risks that could be ameliorated without separation.

Meaningful reform requires targeting leverage points in the system. Evidence-based solutions include implementing objective decision-making tools such as structured decision-making (SDM), adopting blind screening processes to remove demographic identifiers, expanding differential response pathways, and ensuring full compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Redressing these inequities necessitates a collective rethinking of the system’s purpose, shifting from a “command-and-control” bureaucracy to one that emphasizes public participation and family empowerment.

There are two main innovations in this work. Theoretically, it merges Critical Race Theory with a systems-based thinking framework, reconceiving prejudice not as an isolated act by any single actor but as a process that multiplies across successive decision points, from hotline screening to placement. Empirically, it pinpoints the areas in this multi-phase process where differential bias effects are concentrated, demonstrating that unjustified racial disparities start at initial screening and are further amplified rather than lessened by investigators in high-risk cases. When taken as a whole, these contributions link observable, decision-point-specific bias patterns to theoretical explanations of institutional racism.

5. Limitations

This study mainly used secondary quantitative analyses and published literature. Since the analysis does not use original administrative data, any conclusions about discrimination should be viewed carefully. In summary, the quantitative conclusions are based on secondary datasets and previously published administrative statistics rather than original data gathering; therefore, generalizability across jurisdictions with different policies and demographics cannot be assumed. Furthermore, the reported relationships between race and system involvement should be interpreted as correlational because the study combines descriptive and comparative statistics with a literature review rather than a controlled research design; they show patterns consistent with institutional bias but do not, by themselves, establish causal mechanisms.

Furthermore, disparities may stem from various factors such as poverty, different levels of exposure to mandated reporters, geographic differences, and institutional bias. Future research should use longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to more effectively identify the factors that contribute to the disproportionalities.

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The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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