

Child Welfare: Gateway to Juvenile Court for African-American Youth

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Youth of color are overrepresented in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Addressing racial and ethnic disparities (often referred to as “disproportionate minority contact”) has been at the forefront of conversations about how to improve both systems for years. And yet there has been little research that specifically identifies the child welfare system as a pathway to the juvenile justice system for youth of color. The December 2011 Models for Change Knowledge Brief, [“Is There a Link between Child Welfare and Disproportionate Minority Contact in Juvenile Justice?”](#)¹ does just that. Researchers looking at system data from Illinois concluded that the Illinois child welfare system can act as a gateway to the juvenile justice system for African-American youth—hence contributing to racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system. The Illinois research offers insight into these issues for other states and direction for future research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

African-American Youth are Overrepresented in the Child Welfare System

- On average, African-American children are represented in child welfare placements at a rate more than twice their percentage in the U.S. child population. In Illinois, an eight-and-a-half year study found that African-American youth are represented in the child welfare system at nearly three times their proportion in the general population.²

¹ The main ideas in this document are drawn from that Knowledge Brief, available at <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/317>. The document one of many documents summarizing key research that have stemmed from Models for Change with implications for policy and practice in the juvenile justice field. For more information about Models for Change, visit www.modelsforchange.net.

² Note that this is an even larger disparity than their representation in the juvenile justice system. African-American youth in Peoria, IL make up 25 percent of the county, but 66 percent of all youth in detention, 61 percent of all youth on probation, and 72 percent of all youth in child welfare.

Therefore, if being in the child welfare system makes it more likely that a child will enter the juvenile justice system, then the overrepresentation of African-American youth in the child welfare system would contribute to their overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system.

African-American Youth in the Child Welfare System are More Likely to be Arrested or Detained When Compared to Other Youth Involved in Child Welfare

- While three percent of all youth in DuPage County, Illinois that were arrested had open child welfare cases, 10 percent of arrested African-American youth had open cases—more than tripling their arrest rate when compared to other youth. Additionally, only seven percent of all the youth in detention had open child welfare cases, whereas 16 percent of African-American youth in detention had open child welfare cases. (In both cases, African-American girls in the child welfare system had even higher percentages of juvenile justice involvement.)

Child Welfare Youth Are More Likely to Be Formally Processed in the Juvenile Justice System

- In Illinois, researchers analyzing 10 years of data found that being labeled a “foster youth” more than doubled the likelihood that a formal delinquency petition was filed against a youth, even after they controlled for a range of important factors such as age, gender, race, and type of offense. Youth in child welfare consequently have greater risks of deeper involvement in the justice system when compared to youth who are not in the child welfare system.

Since a larger percentage of African-American youth in the juvenile justice system are also involved in the child welfare system, these youth are more likely to be formally processed—thus contributing to racial and ethnic disparities at deeper levels of the juvenile system.

IMPLICATIONS

- While this study did not establish a causal relationship between child welfare involvement and juvenile justice contact, it did show that the child welfare system is a significant pathway into the juvenile justice system for African-American youth.
- Efforts to prevent racial and ethnic disparities should incorporate a closer look at child welfare systems to better understand what it is about being in the child welfare system that might contribute to greater justice system involvement for African-American youth.
- If we can decrease arrests for all youth in the child welfare system, we will be able to reduce the disparate number of youth of color in the justice system. The impact will be even stronger for African-American females than for their male counterparts.