Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Outcomes of Former Foster Youth


In 2006, children of color comprised 58 percent of the U.S. foster care population compared with 42 percent of all children in the U.S., though not all children of color are equally overrepresented. Past research by Pecora et al. (2005) using data from the Casey National Alumni Study shows that being White rather than African American was associated with a significant increase in the estimated odds of several positive outcomes (having income at or above the poverty level, having income at or above three times the poverty level, and owning a home or apartment). Using data from the same study, Harris, Jackson, O’Brien, and Pecora (2010) examined racial differences in mental health outcomes. They found no statistically significant difference between alumni who are African American and alumni who are White after controlling for demographic and background characteristics, risk factors, and foster care experiences.

This paper utilizes data from two large scale studies of former foster youth, the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) and the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Northwest Study), to examine two questions: are there racial or ethnic differences in foster youth outcomes? If so, can those differences be explained by factors other than race or ethnicity, such as differences in family background or placement history?

The researchers limited their analysis to foster care alumni who completed all interviews (Midwest Study 513 foster care alumni, Northwest Study 479 foster care alumni). Self-report data was used to measure outcomes and is comparable across the two studies.

**Northwest Study:** There were statistically significant differences between African American alumni and those in other racial and ethnic groups.

- African American alumni were more likely to have a high school diploma or GED. This was due to the high percentage of African American alumni who had a GED. African American alumni were less likely than non-Hispanic White alumni to have a high school diploma.
- African American alumni were more likely to have completed at least some postsecondary education or training, though this association was only seen after all of the controls had been added to the model. This could happen if one control is associated with an increase in the estimated odds of completing any postsecondary education or training, another control is associated with a decrease in the estimated odds of completing any postsecondary education or training, and both controls are associated with being African American. In essence, these “effects” cancel each other out, resulting in no relationship in the absence of the controls.
- African American alumni were more likely to have avoided early parenthood than Hispanic/Latino alumni, but less likely to avoid homelessness than non-Hispanic White alumni.

**Midwest Study:** Most of the statistically significant differences (after controlling for demographics- family background, and placement history) were between alumni who are African American and those who are non-Hispanic White.

- The odds of experiencing a positive (or of avoiding a negative) outcome were lower for African American alumni than for their non-Hispanic White counterparts.
- Being African American was associated with a reduction in the estimated odds of a range of positive economic outcomes (never having received TANF or food stamps, currently being employed, and having worked or having earned at least $5,000 during the past year).
- Being African American was associated with a reduction in the estimated odds of having been married and having avoided teenage parenthood.
This paper sought to address two questions about the outcomes of foster care alumni during the transition to adulthood.

**Question one:** Are there racial or ethnic differences in foster youth outcomes?

Just under one quarter of the possible differences between alumni who are non-White or Hispanic/Latino and alumni who are non-Hispanic White were statistically significant. The differences were not consistent. In some cases, being non-White or Hispanic/Latino was associated with favorable outcomes and in other cases the reverse was true. Nor were they consistent across the two studies.

**Question two:** Can those differences be explained by factors other than race or ethnicity, such as differences in family background or placement history?

The results underscore the importance of controlling for factors that may be correlated with both the outcomes of foster care alumni and their race/ethnicity. Controlling for demographics, family background, and placement history explained 39 percent of the statistically significant differences between the outcomes of Midwest Study alumni who are non-White or Hispanic/Latino and those who are non-Hispanic White. This was most evident in the domain of educational attainment. Before any controls were added, being African American was associated with an increase in the estimated odds of having completed any postsecondary education or training, having ever attended college and having completed at least one year of college. All of those differences in educational attainment disappeared once controls were added.

Comparison of the two samples produced many inconsistent results. It is difficult to make clear recommendations for child welfare policy or practice based on the findings. The one exception may be in the area of family formation, where the odds of avoiding teenage parenthood were lower for African American alumni than for non-Hispanic White alumni regardless of the sample. Although child welfare agencies should have strategies aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy among foster youth of all races and ethnicities, the results suggest that particular attention should be paid to ensure that those strategies are culturally relevant to African American foster youth.

Given that the results mirror racial and ethnic differences that exist among young people in the general population, interventions that extend beyond the child welfare system and address social and economic inequalities that persist in the larger society are needed.

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1. U.S. Census Bureau (2008a). Table 2: Annual estimates of the population by sex and selected age groups for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007 (NC- EST2007-02).