



# What the Data on Infants and Toddlers Tell Us: Disproportionality in Child Welfare

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**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

From the prenatal period to age 3, the brain undergoes its most dramatic development as children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, reason, and relate to others. The healthy development of this brain architecture equips a child to succeed in all areas of life and to contribute to society.<sup>1</sup> Every baby has enormous potential, and every family wants to help their child reach this potential.

Yet, families with young children continue to face challenges, often stemming from economic insecurity, material hardship, and stressful experiences that can undermine healthy development. For some families, life conditions such as community violence, trauma, physical or mental health issues, substance use disorders, or racism can magnify the normal stresses of raising children. Due to the lived experiences and intergenerational effects of institutional and interpersonal racism, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) families disproportionately face these challenges, leading to inequities in opportunities for their young children.<sup>2</sup>

For many families of color in the United States, the compounding impact of policy decisions and systemic racism are drivers of disproportionate involvement with child protective services and overrepresentation of children of color, particularly African American children, in foster care. Numerous studies have shown that racial bias and racial inequities occur at various decision points in the child welfare continuum.<sup>3</sup>

Once families become involved in the child welfare system, where infants and toddlers represent the largest age group entering foster care, they often encounter a system that is not responsive to the developmental needs of infants and toddlers. Research indicates that maintaining relationships with a trusted caregiver is critical for children's health and well-being and that removing children from struggling parents, even when necessary, can inflict and/or increase existing trauma for children, parents, and families.<sup>4</sup> Given these factors, most children who come to the attention of the child welfare system can and should continue to remain at home whenever possible—if there are no critical safety concerns—where they can receive services and supports needed to protect and support the whole family.

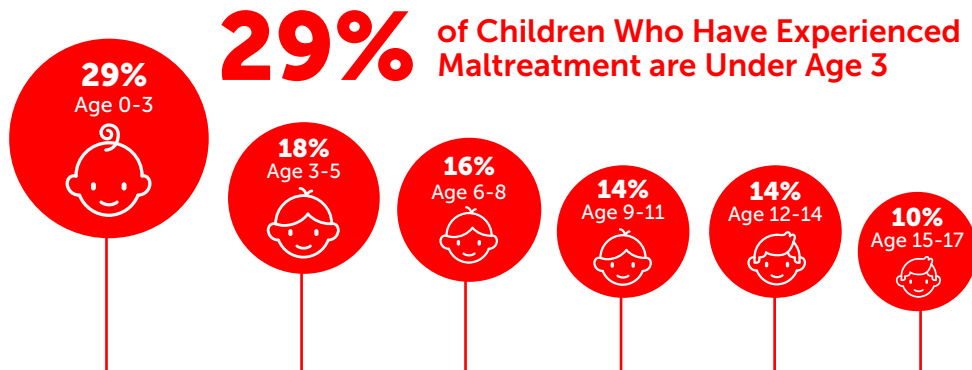
We all have a shared responsibility to nurture and protect each child and to support communities and families in creating the safe, stable, nurturing environment children need. Thoughtful policy development at the local, state, and federal levels can play a positive role in ensuring children thrive and reach their full potential. States can leverage a broad range of prevention supports to help keep families together, support family protective factors, and work with communities to strengthen the conditions where families live. In developing a continuum of care for families, states should work closely with parent leaders, including those with lived experience, to ensure the services provided are relevant and accessible to families in those communities.

To better understand what is driving these disparities, states should disaggregate their data for young children under age 3 and look at key trends and decision points—particularly unsubstantiated reports of maltreatment, child welfare contact or involvement by race and ethnicity and geography. These data can help illuminate disparities in access to resources and disparities in outcomes that raise significant concerns about the near-term development and long-term well-being of young children, and support the development of strategies to address inequities and the specialized needs of families with very young children in a way that is responsive to community needs and culturally relevant. The following infographics provide a breakdown of the data from The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) on children under age 3 by race and ethnicity for both substantiated maltreatment cases and foster care entry.

## Children With Cases of Substantiated Maltreatment

In the United States, children under age 3 make up 16% of the child population under age 18.<sup>5</sup> Of the 597,190 children under age 18 who had a substantiated maltreatment report in FY2020, 29% were under age 3. Infants and toddlers make up the largest age group, with 92,766 of these children under the age of 1.<sup>6</sup>

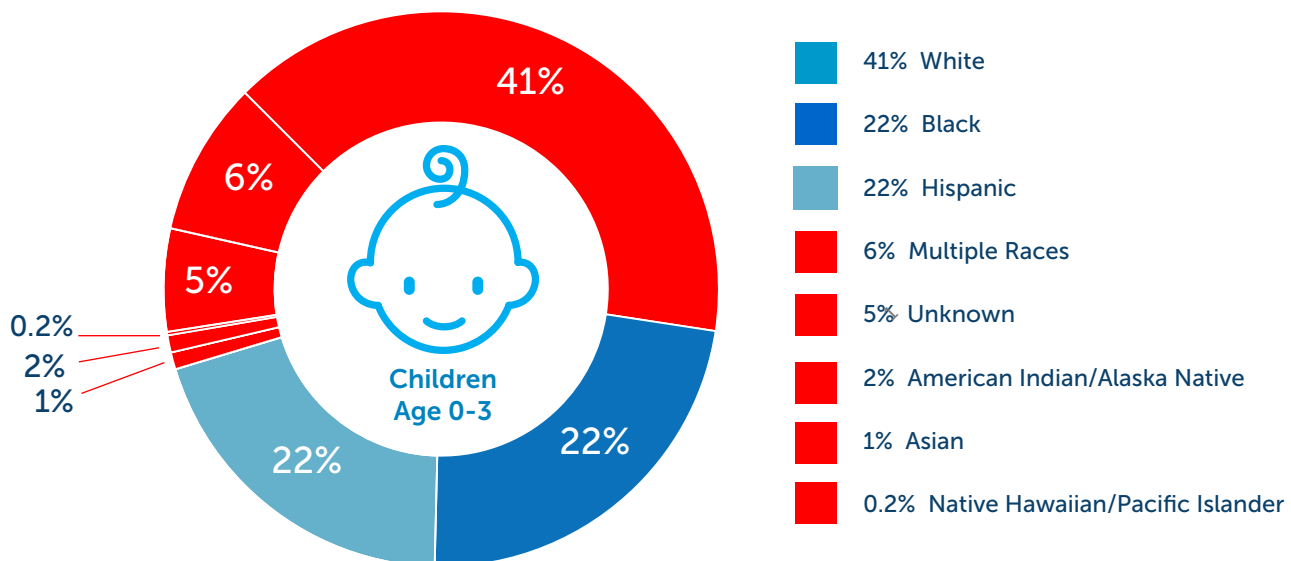
### Percentage of Children Who Have Experienced Maltreatment by Age<sup>7</sup>



### Race/Ethnicity of Children Age 0-3 Who Have Experienced Maltreatment<sup>8</sup>

Although race and ethnicity do not strongly correlate with rates at which maltreatment is substantiated, systemic racism and over-surveillance of communities of color has led to reports of maltreatment of African American children being investigated at significantly higher rates than those of White children, contributing to their over-representation in the child welfare system.<sup>9</sup>

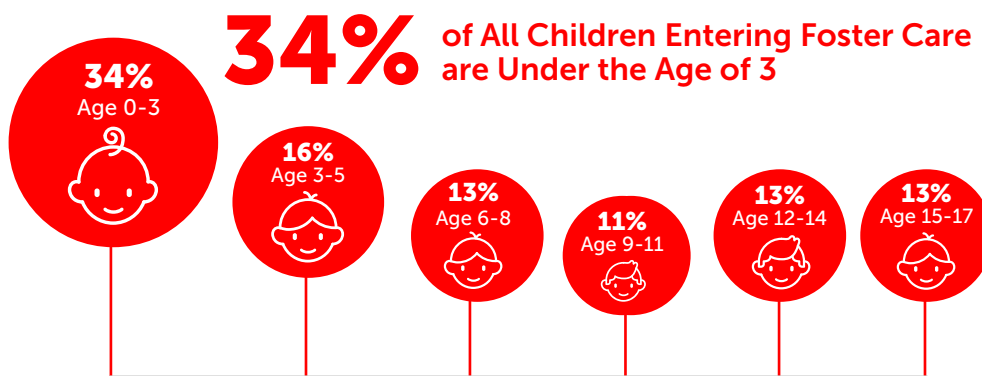
The following presents the breakdown by race and ethnicity of the total 172,414 children under age 3 with substantiated cases of maltreatment.



## Children Entering Foster Care

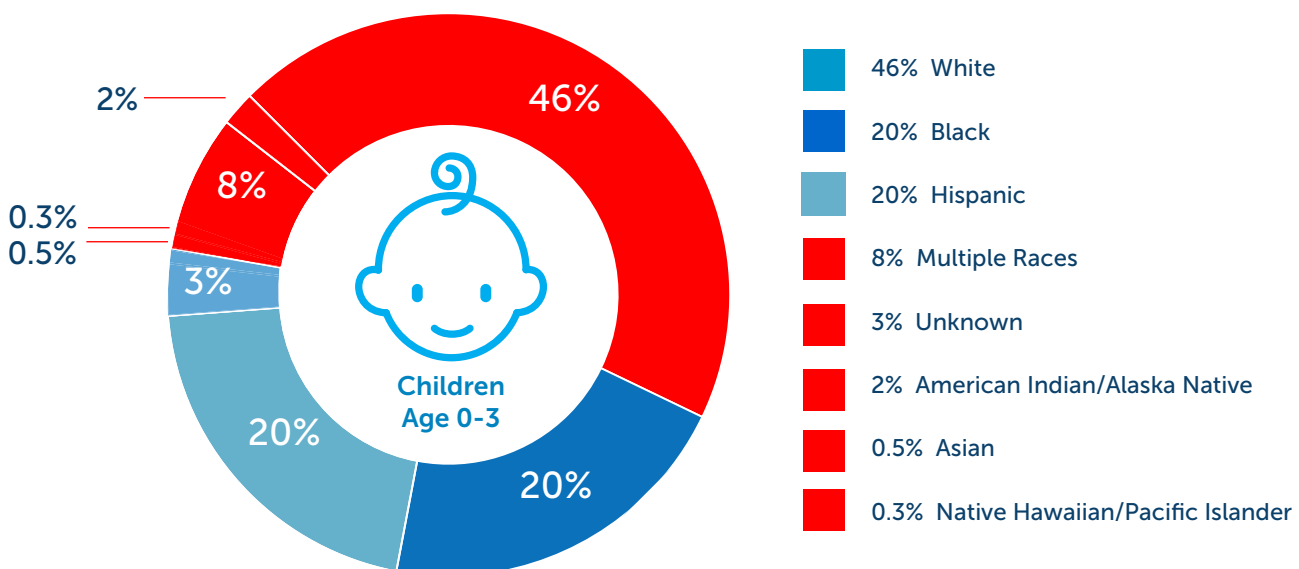
Poverty, which is disproportionately common in communities of color, is often mistaken for neglect, which results in increased reports of child maltreatment and out-of-home placements. Low-income families are more likely to be investigated for child maltreatment and to have substantiated findings of child abuse and neglect than families with higher incomes—despite a lack of evidence that maltreatment itself is more prevalent. These factors often lead to unnecessary removals from families without addressing the underlying unmet needs that negatively affect child and family health.<sup>10</sup> Of the 213,964 children under age 18 entering foster care in FY2020, 34% were under age 3. Infants and toddlers make up the largest age group, with 43,694 of these children under the age of 1.<sup>11</sup>

### Percentage of Children Entering Foster Care by Age<sup>12</sup>



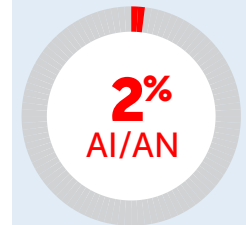
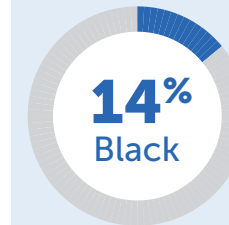
### Race/Ethnicity of Children Age 0-3 Entering Foster Care<sup>13</sup>

The following presents the breakdown by race and ethnicity of the 73,450 children under age 3 entering foster care.

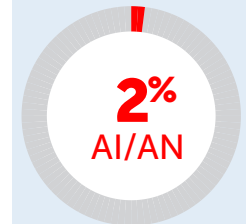
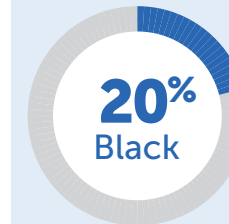
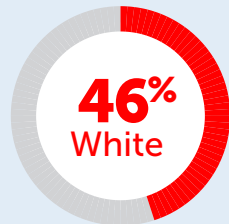


The following data illustrates the disparities present by race/ethnicity for substantiated maltreatment and children entering foster care.

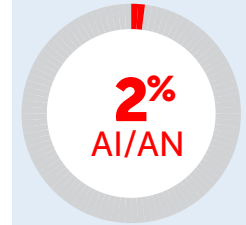
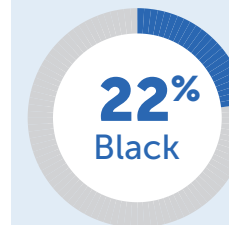
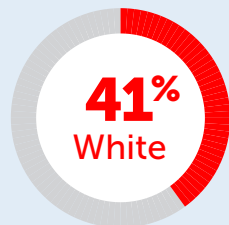
Children Under Age 3  
in Overall Population<sup>14</sup>



Children Under Age 3  
Entering Foster Care<sup>15</sup>



Children Under Age 3  
with Substantiated  
Maltreatment<sup>16</sup>



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## CONCLUSION

Historical and current federal and state legislation and public policies have contributed to systematic disadvantages and inequities for families of color. This institutionalized racism shaped and continues to perpetuate social and environmental conditions that undermine access to safe and stable housing, good-paying and stable jobs, nutritious food, health care, and other services and supports that promote well-being—conditions that are disproportionately experienced by children and families of color as starkly illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The conversation about how to best support families with very young children must be reoriented toward strengthening families and the communities where they live. All states and communities should strive for a commitment to building systems that welcome and affirm all people and parents in honoring their lived experiences.

Additionally, by reviewing data and making improvements to policies and practices related to child maltreatment reporting and investigation, state agencies can make progress in addressing systemic racism and improve the well-being of children and families. For example, states can review their current child welfare investigation and child removal policies in an effort to change punitive practices that contribute to over-surveillance of families of color. States can also develop differential response systems to establish multiple pathways for responding to child maltreatment reports, including those involving families that are considered low risk.

The National Infant-Toddler Court Program's *Strengthening Families with Infants and Toddlers: A Policy Framework* lays out a menu of options for state and local policymakers to develop policies that meet the basic components of what it takes for young children and families to thrive. By providing supports from the start, communities can enable families to nurture their children and promote positive outcomes for the entire family.

**For more information, please see the full ITCP Policy Framework [here](#).**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ENDNOTES/CITATIONS

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