



RESEARCH BRIEF

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN THE PHYSICAL HEALTH OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

About this Study

Children of color—especially Black and Indigenous children—are disproportionately overrepresented in foster care and experience barriers in accessing services and receiving physical and behavioral healthcare compared to their White counterparts. Although racial disparities in mental health outcomes of children in foster care have been examined systematically, less is known about racial disparities in their physical health outcomes. This systematic review aimed to examine disparities in physical health outcomes (i.e., general health, developmental delays and disability, chronic illness, health-compromising behaviors, all-cause mortality) of children in foster care by their race and ethnicity. Systematic literature searches were conducted in PubMed, EMBASE, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Cochrane Library, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. Of the 6,102 unique studies identified, 24 met inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal article; published 1991 to 2021; English; involved children in the U.S. foster care system; children were primarily in family based placements; included health outcomes; included children's race and ethnicity; quantitative analyses; and observational study design. There was limited evidence to suggest racial disparities among physical health domains examined, in part, due to the small number of studies, variability across study measures and designs, how race and ethnicity were categorized, and how related results were reported. Research that disaggregates results by more nuanced race and ethnicity categories, goes beyond including race and ethnicity as control variables, and uses more robust study designs to understand where racial disparities lie is necessary to inform practice and policy efforts to attain race and health equity in child welfare.

Conclusion

Current evidence suggests there are many unknowns regarding racial and ethnic disparities with regards to the physical health outcomes of children in foster care. Future research could also examine sociodemographic and contextual risk and protective factors and pathways associated with potential racial disparities in children's physical health outcomes in foster care. Efforts should be targeted at the national, state, and local levels to address such disparities and thus promote race and health equity in child welfare.

KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, there was limited evidence to suggest racial disparities among the five physical health domains examined.
- Variations in data sources, study design, and covariates included in analytic models could explain significant findings in some studies and the lack of significance in others.
- Examining racial and ethnic disparities in children's physical health outcomes was not the primary focus of most studies providing limited quantitative race and ethnicity information.
- The very small evidence base of physical health outcomes of children in foster care by race and ethnicity suggests the need for additional research in this area with an eye for racial justice and health equity in child welfare.
- Despite the mixed evidence base, racial and ethnic disparities in certain physical health domains (i.e., chronic illness, disability, mortality) call for the critical need to devise timely plans to bring policymakers' and practitioners' attention to this important topic.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The current systematic review was part of a larger systematic review and meta-analysis project that, in addition to physical health outcomes, explored mental health and behavioral health outcomes of foster children.

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