



Highlights of [GAO-07-816](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

A significantly greater proportion of African American children are in foster care than children of other races and ethnicities, according to HHS and other research. Given this situation, GAO was asked to analyze the (1) major factors influencing the proportion of African American children in foster care, (2) extent that states and localities have implemented promising strategies, and (3) ways in which federal policies may have influenced African American representation in foster care. GAO's methodologies included a nationwide survey; a review of research and federal policies; state site visits; analyses of child welfare data; and interviews with researchers, HHS officials, and other experts.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress consider amending current law to allow subsidies for legal guardianships. HHS believes its proposal for restructuring child welfare funding would give states the option to do this, but the viability of this proposal is uncertain. GAO also recommends that HHS further assist states in addressing disproportionality. In its comments, HHS noted that GAO's recommendation was consistent with its efforts to provide technical assistance to states, but did not address the specific actions GAO recommended. GAO continues to believe that further assistance is important for helping states address disproportionality.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-816](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-816).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Denise M. Fantone at (202) 512-7215 or [fantoned@gao.gov](mailto:fantoned@gao.gov).

## AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

### Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care

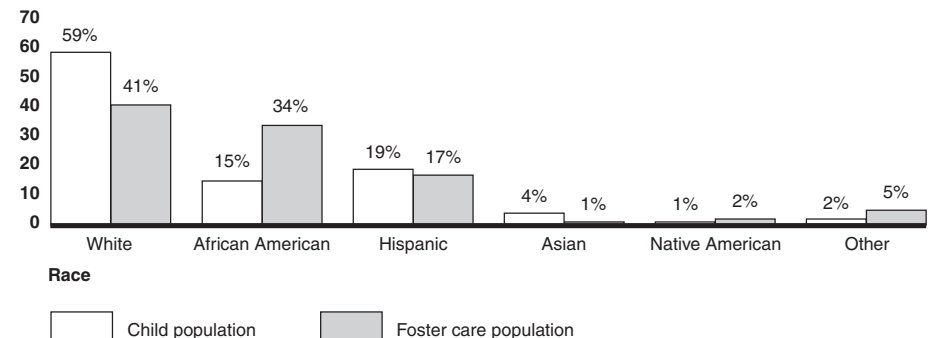
#### What GAO Found

A higher rate of poverty is among several factors contributing to the higher proportion of African American children entering and remaining in foster care. Families living in poverty have greater difficulty accessing housing, mental health, and other services needed to keep families stable and children safely at home. Bias or cultural misunderstandings and distrust between child welfare decision makers and the families they serve are also viewed as contributing to children's removal from their homes into foster care. African American children also stay in foster care longer because of difficulties in recruiting adoptive parents and a greater reliance on relatives to provide foster care who may be unwilling to terminate the parental rights of the child's parent—as required in adoption—or who need the financial subsidy they receive while the child is in foster care.

Most states we surveyed reported using strategies intended to address these issues, such as involving families in decisions, building community supports, and broadening the search for relatives to care for children. HHS provides information and technical assistance, but states reported that they had limited capacity to analyze data and formulate strategies, and states we visited told us they relied on assistance from universities or others.

States reported that the ability to use federal funding for family support services was helpful in keeping African American children safely at home and that federal subsidies for adoptive parents helped move children out of foster care. However, they also expressed concerns about the inability to use federal child welfare funds to provide subsidies to legal guardians. As an alternative to adoption, subsidized guardianship is considered particularly promising for helping African American children exit from foster care. States were also concerned about the lack of flexibility to use federal foster care funds to provide services for families, although states can use other federal funds for this purpose if they consider it a priority.

**Proportion of Children in Foster Care Settings, End of Fiscal Year 2004**  
Percent of population



Source: GAO analysis of AFCARS and Census data.