The Center for
State Child Welfare Data

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Tennessee Accountability Center

African American/White Disparities in the Tennessee Foster Care System

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INTRODUCTION

In this report, prepared for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services' Accountability Center, we examine whether African American children are 1) more likely to enter Tennessee's foster care system and 2) less likely to leave placement. Research carried out over the last several decades shows that across the United States, African American children are both more likely to enter foster care and leave care more slowly than white children (Fluke, Jones, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2011). As a result of these entry and exit disparities, African American children are over-represented in state child welfare systems generally and in foster care specifically, a situation that raises important questions about why the rate of involvement for African American children and families is higher than it is for whites. For these reasons and others, when the negotiations that brought the Brian A. Settlement Agreement to a close were underway, the Plaintiffs, with the concurrence of the Department, asked the Accountability Center to address African American/white disparities in Tennessee, with the goal of first establishing the extent to which disparities are present and then providing guidance for the Department's efforts to address disparity.

To meet these objectives, Accountability Center reports—one issued in December of 2017, a second in June of 2018, and a third in December of 2018—have emphasized racial and ethnic differences with reference to such key indicators as placement rate per 1,000 children, median duration, reason for leaving care, and placement in family settings. With this report—a companion to the third and final Accountability Center report—we move beyond prior reports by looking more closely at where and when disparity emerges. We are specifically interested in two issues that we believe have greater operational utility than the summary data typically used to describe disparity. For example, at the state level, admission disparity, which measures the rate of African American child placement relative to the rate of white child placement, offers a useful summary statistic but masks potentially important variation at sub-state levels such as regions or counties. We contend that these sub-state differences reveal important, operationally relevant differences as to why the disparities arise in the first place and, more importantly, what might to be done to alleviate disparity. Understanding the within state variation stimulates a problem-solving process that recognizes the need for multi-dimensional solutions that fit local circumstances. In short, it is unlikely that disparities arise for one reason only and problem-solving ought to recognize that possibility.

In this report, our aim is to provide stakeholders with two types of evidence. First, we want to examine whether entry rate disparity varies from one part of the state to another so that the Department can target resources differentially if the evidence supports that type of strategic thinking. Second, we want to examine exit rate disparities, but with a specific focus on when over the time spent in out-of-home care disparity tends to emerge. Reports of exit rate disparities tend to focus on the average length of time children stay in care. As we show below, the evidence supports a more nuanced narrative that goes beyond the simple observation that African American children stay longer on average than white children. Again, the idea is to reinforce strategic targeting of resources within an overall accountability framework.

Following the introduction, the main body of the report is divided into three sections: data and methods, findings, and implications. Each of the three sections is divided into two subsections: the first subsection addresses entry rate disparities, and the second subsection addresses exit rate disparities. In the data and methods section, we provide a detailed definition of key terms; the next following section describes the assembled evidence with reference to both entry and exit disparities.

DATA AND METHODS

Entry rate disparity or the African American/white placement gap

The African American and white placement gap is measured by comparing African American child placement rates with white child placement rates. Measured in this way, the African American/white placement gap may

also be referred to as the entry rate disparity ratio. We use the terms African American/white placement gap, entry rate disparity, and the disparity ratio interchangeably.

The entry rates and the corresponding disparity ratio are calculated as follows:

- African American child placement rate (AP) = the number of African American children placed / the number of African American children living in Tennessee, by county.

- White child placement rate (WP) = the number of white children placed / the number of white children living in Tennessee, by county.

- African American/white placement gap (i.e., the disparity ratio) = AP / WP for each county in Tennessee.

We used two types of data to measure the placement gap: child placement data and child population data. For the first, we used the Tennessee foster care spell file from TFACTS to identify the number of children placed. These data are analyzed on both a statewide and county-specific basis. Among placed children of all adjudications (neglected, abused, unruly, and delinquent), only children who were placed for the first time (first entry cohorts) from 2011 through 2017 were included.[1] Youth admitted to detention centers were also excluded.[2]

Second, we used the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) data to obtain the number of African American and white children living in each county.[3] Even though there are Hispanic and Latino children and children of other races and ethnicities living in Tennessee, their overall numbers are relatively small, so our analysis includes only African American and white children under the age of 18 at the time of their first admission. With these data, we calculated the proportion of African American children as a percentage of the total African American/white children in the general population. After ordering the counties by the African American/white composition, we divided the counties into the following three groups: (1) the 24 counties with the smallest proportion of African American children (Small African American Population), (2) the 24 counties with the largest proportion (Large African American Population), and (3) the 47 counties in between (Moderate African American Population).

Exit rate disparity

For this analysis, we examined the placement records for all children admitted to foster care between 2011 and 2017. We again used Tennessee's administrative data (i.e., Chapin Hall's spell file) to reconstruct the child's placement history from the day of admission through the day the child left care. We counted the days between those dates and the reason why the child left care. We included children who returned to care, noting for each admission how often the child had been in care previously. The only children excluded from the analysis are children placed in detention centers.

The outcome of interest is permanency. Permanency is measured as the likelihood of leaving placement through either reunification, adoption, or guardianship, whether subsidized or not. Based on the placement records, reunification is the main reason children leave foster care, followed by exits to relatives, and adoption, respectively. If African American children leave care more slowly than white children, the difference is

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[1] The focus on children entering care for the first time excludes children returning to care, an important subset of children admitted to out-of-home care. They are omitted from this analysis because the focus is on the original entry to care rather than reentry. Reentry to care may reveal important disparities but those data ought to be analyzed separately as the reasons for disparate reentry rates may be different than the reasons for disparate entry rates. Combining the two may hide more than is revealed.

[2] The Department may also want to explore disparities with regard to the use of detention centers.

[3] The American Community Survey, sponsored by the US Bureau of the Census, is an ongoing survey of American households and is used to provide estimates of various population characteristics for the years between the decennial census.

expressed as a ratio of the two exit rates. Ratios greater than 1 indicate that African American children leave more quickly; ratios lower than 1 indicate a slower rate of exit for African American children relative to white children.

In addition to dates of admission and exit, we included information about the child and his/her placement history. Specifically, we pulled age at admission, gender, and the child's race/ethnicity from the administrative records. We also recorded the placement type where the child spent the majority of time in care (foster family, congregate care, kinship home, and other) and the year of placement.

Three other pieces of data were added to the file we developed for this component of the study: the proportion of children in the county who are African American and the proportion who are white (calculated as described above). We included this in the analysis to determine whether county-level population differences account for exit rate disparities. In addition, to accommodate the fact that permanency rates vary with how long a child is in care—i.e., permanency rates generally decline as time in care increases—we constructed what is commonly referred to as a person-period file from each child's placement record. Briefly, the analysis allows us to assess whether the exit rate disparity depends on how long children have been in care. For example, among children in care for more than 18 months, the exit rate disparity may be larger (or smaller) than it is among children in care for 24 months or more. Constructed in this way, the analysis provides a way to assess whether disparities in how quickly children leave care depend on how they leave care (i.e., exit reason) and how long they have been in care. The importance of these distinctions will become clearer in the sections below. Finally, we consider whether exit rate disparities are correlated with entry rate disparities.

FINDINGS

Table 1 below provides a basic orientation to the population of children living in foster care, away from their parents. When African American and white children are included, there were approximately 1.46 million children living in Tennessee during the period from 2011 to 2017 (children of other races/ethnicities are not included). Of those children, 22 percent were African American and 78 percent were white. The comparable figures for the foster care population are 28 percent and 72 percent, respectively. Nationwide, African American children make up 23 percent of the foster care population and 13 percent of the general child population. (US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2017).

Table 1 also provides an admission profile by race. Between 2011 and 2017, there were 41,592 total admissions, which includes children entering care and returning to care. Of those, 32,344 were children placed for the first time. Among first admissions to care, 27 percent involved African American children, which is comparable to the overall proportion of African American children in the foster care population.

Table 1: Number of Children, Number of Foster Children by Race: 2011-2017

	Number			Percent		
Placement History	Total	African American Children	White Children	Total	African American Children	White Children
Child population[1]	1,455,454	324,106	1,131,348	100%	22%	78%
Foster care population[2]	6,088	1,701	4,387	100%	28%	72%
All admissions to foster	41,592	11,765	29,827	100%	28%	72%
First admissions	32,344	8,599	23,745	100%	27%	73%

[1] Source: Kids Count Data Book retrieved from: https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6469-population-under-age-18-by-race?loc=44&loct=5#detailed/2/any/false/871,870,573,869,36,868,867/107,642,722,2765/13408. The numbers displayed are the average population size for the period between 2011 and 2017.
[2] Source: TFACTS, Tennessee Department of Children's Services. Includes children with one race; excludes races not shown separately. Figures displayed are totals for the period from 2011 through 2017, inclusive.

Table 2 shows the number of children admitted to care by the reason for leaving care. African American children were more likely to be reunified, somewhat less likely to leave care to live with a relative, and much less likely to be adopted. Twenty-one and 18 percent of African American and white children, respectively, experienced non-permanent exits or were still in care as of December 31, 2017. The relatively large number of children still in care is attributable to the fact that the number of admissions includes children admitted in 2017, many of whom were still in care when the data used for the analysis were pulled from TFACTS. The figures in Table 2 serve as the basis for the analysis of exit rate disparities.

Table 2: Number of Children Placed in Foster Care for the First Time and Reason for Leaving Care by Race

| | Number | | | Percent | | |
Permanency	Total	African American Children	White Children	Total	African American Children	White Children
Adoption	4,616	519	4,097	14%	6%	17%
Reunification	15,486	4,780	10,706	48%	56%	45%
Exit to relative	6,080	1,491	4,589	19%	17%	19%
Still in care/other	6,162	1,809	4,353	19%	21%	18%
Total	32,344	8,599	23,745	100%	100%	100%

Entry rate disparity

Although useful for descriptive purposes, the racial composition of the caseload and the number of children entering care provide few if any operational insights (see Table 1). One key question is whether African American children are more likely to enter care than white children, a question that depends to some extent on the number of children. In this section, we examine the rate of entry into out-of-home care, given the number of children living in the state of Tennessee as a whole. Then we examine entry rates for counties grouped together based on the size of the African American child population relative to the white child population. We do this to highlight two important strategic considerations. First, there is considerable variation in the level of disparity. Second, higher rates of disparity are not, per se, associated with higher placement rates. Efforts to reduce disparity requires an understanding that balances the overall placement rate, the size of the county in terms of population size, and the disparity rate.

We start with the number of children and the number of children placed statewide by race. Table 3 shows the number of children living in Tennessee by race, along with the number of children placed into foster care.[4] For the state as a whole, the African American child placement rate was 3.78 whereas the white child placement rate was 2.99. The entry rate disparity ratio is 1.27, which is indicative of a generally higher rate of placement for African American children relative to white children.

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[4] For Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5, we added up the total number of children (by race) and the total number of children placed for the first time (also by race) for each year between 2011 and 2017 and divided the result by seven (the number of years) to produce an average population-at-risk and an average number of first placements. Because the number of children living in a county and the number of children placed into foster care tends to change from year to year, using the average of the seven years provides a more stable estimate of the placement rate and the disparity ratio.

Table 3: Number of Children, Number of Children Placed, Placement Rates by Race, and Disparity Ratio: Tennessee – 2011-2017

	Total Children	Children Placed	Placement Rate
African American children	324,106	1,226	3.78 placements / 1000 children
White children	1,313,348	3,377	2.99 placements / 1000 children
Disparity ratio			1.27

With that said, it is important to consider county-level placement rates and the corresponding disparity ratios, in part because of where in Tennessee children live. About 70 percent of all African American children live in Shelby, Davidson, Hamilton, and Knox counties whereas only 30 percent of white children live in those same places. If the placement rates in those counties (and others) are different than the statewide rate, then the statewide entry rate conceals important strategic information pertaining to where the Department ought to concentrate efforts to reduce disparity. That information may be helpful to inform strategies.

To illustrate this point, we divided Tennessee's 95 counties into three groups based on the size of the African American child population. The first group consists of 24 counties with the smallest African American child population. In those counties, the number of African American children, as a proportion of the total African American/white population, ranged between 0.3 and 2.6 percent of the population. The second group of counties—47 in total—had African American child populations that ranged between 2.7 percent and 10.4 percent of the total population; the third group—the group with the highest percentage of African American children—had African American child populations that ranged between 10.4 percent and 62 percent. Once grouped, the total population and the number of placements for each group of counties were used to calculate placement rates and the associated disparity ratio. The results are found in Table 4.

With regard to placement rates, white placement rates are highest in the areas with the smallest African American child populations. Moreover, because African American child placement rates are the lowest in the areas with the fewest African American children, the disparity ratio is actually under 1, which means that in the counties with very small African American child populations, the risk of being placed is actually higher for white children than it is for African American children. By way of contrast, African American child placement rates are the highest in the counties which fall in the middle range—neither the smallest nor the largest. Moreover, because the white child placement rate is lower in those same places, the disparity rate rises to 1.15, which is above the ratio in counties with (relatively) small African American child populations, but still somewhat below the statewide figures reported in Table 3.

In counties with the largest African American child populations, the African American child placement rate (3.75) is between the rates reported for the other two county groups. For whites, the placement rate is lowest in the counties with more African American children. Together, the slightly lower rate of admissions for African American children and the much lower rate for white children produce a disparity ratio above two in the counties with the largest African American child populations, which is considerably larger than the statewide disparity rate.

Table 4: Placement Rates and Disparity Ratios by Size of County Population

Population Size	Placement Rate per 1,000		
	African American Children	White Children	Disparity Ratio
Small African American Child Population	2.89	5.41	0.53
Moderate African American Child Population	4.10	3.64	1.13
Large African American Child Population	3.75	1.78	2.10
Shelby	3.72	0.68	5.46
Davidson	3.49	1.00	3.50
Hamilton	4.64	1.61	2.89
Knox	6.31	3.48	1.81

Table 4 also displays the placement rates for African American and white children and the corresponding disparity rates for the four Tennessee counties with the largest number of African American children. Again, these results show why, from a strategic perspective, it is important to move to the county level to understand where disparity is greater than or less than other parts of the state. For example, in Shelby county, the rate of African American child placement is low (3.72) relative to the placement rate for the other 23 other counties included in the large African American child population group (3.75). However, the disparity rate is large (5.46), mainly because the placement rate for white children is among the lowest in the state. By way of contrast, the placement rate for African American children in Knox county is among the highest in the state, but the disparity rate is below the disparity rate for the other counties with large African American child populations because the white child placement rate is likewise above the level reported for the counties in the group.

Exit rate disparity

In this section, we investigate whether African American children have different placement experiences than white children do. More specifically, the focus is on permanency: when they leave care, are children reunified with their family, adopted, or placed with relatives who assume guardianship? We are interested in whether African American children are more or less likely to achieve permanency. We refer to the difference in permanency rates as the African American/white permanency gap or the permanency disparity ratio.

When assessing whether African American children have a different placement experience than white children, it is possible to ask simply: are permanency rates different for African American children? There are, however, some additional factors to consider. First, rates of permanency differ for children of different ages. If, for some reason, African American children are younger or older on average than white children are, then the composition of the population has to be considered when assessing permanency rates. The same is true for placement type. If African American children are more likely to be placed with relatives and permanency rates are correlated with kinship placements, then placement type has to be thought of as a factor that contributes to permanency rates. Other factors to consider include how long children have been in care, the number of times they move between placements, and where in Tennessee the children were living when they entered placement. Regarding length of stay, African American/white disparities may be larger (or smaller) among children who have been in care past a certain period of time. The same is true for county of residence. As observed in the prior section, disparity varies depending on where in the state, children live. Our analysis is designed to consider these issues.

The statistical model presented in Table 5 assesses differences in permanency rates for African American children relative to white children, after controlling for time in care. The interpretation of the findings is straightforward. For time in care (i.e., the person-periods), the column labeled *(Rate) or Odds Ratio* is the most important. Numbers in parentheses refer to rates, which may be interpreted as follows. In the first person-period, the likelihood a child will leave care is about 28 percent (.279). For children who are still in care at the

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start of the second person-period (i.e., they didn't leave during the first), the likelihood of leaving care is somewhat higher (about 32 percent or .323). The likelihood of leaving care among children still in care at the start of the third person-period (PP-3) is slightly lower (.29), and so on.

Table 5 also shows the Odds Ratio (without the parentheses) for African American children relative to white children. Bearing in mind statistical significance (column headed with Pr. > |t|), an odds ratio greater than 1 is associated with an increased likelihood of permanency and an odds ratios smaller than 1 is associated with a lower likelihood of permanency, provided the significance level is .05 or smaller. Odds ratios are expressed in terms of a reference group. In Table 5, the reference group is white children and the odds ratio indicates whether African American children are more or less likely to achieve permanency. The results from this model indicate that across the state as a whole, over all person periods, the permanency rate for African American children (1.017) is *not* statistically different than the rate for white children (Pr. > |t| = .3235).

Table 5: Likelihood of Leaving Care to Permanency by Person-Period

Effect	Estimate	Error	Pr > |t|	(Rate) or Odds Ratio
Time in care				
1-180 days (PP-1)	-0.947	0.0128	0.0001	(0.279)
181-360 days (PP-2)	-0.7417	0.0154	0.0001	(0.323)
361-540 days (PP-3)	-0.8956	0.0205	0.0001	(0.290)
541-720 days (PP-4)	-0.8611	0.0262	0.0001	(0.297)
721-900 days (PP-5)	-0.7743	0.0338	0.0001	(0.316)
901-1,080 days (PP-6)	-0.9025	0.0456	0.0001	(0.289)
Race/ethnicity				
White children	Reference			
African American children	0.0169	0.0171	0.3235	1.017

The next model, found in Table 6, considers the full range of variables included in the analysis: race, age, gender, year of admission, placement type, placement history, and county characteristics. The interpretation of the findings follows Table 5. Permanency rates—the likelihood that a child will achieve permanency by person-period—are displayed within parentheses. Odds ratio are in the same, rightmost column but without parentheses. The odds ratios explain how the variables in the model influence permanency as compared to the reference group.

As shown in Table 6, the permanency rate for each person-period is in close alignment with the results found in Table 5 for each person-period. There is between a 27 and 32 percent chance of reaching permanency during the person-periods for the children who were still in care at the start of the person-period. Of the other variables in the model, the results are in line with expectations: infants achieve permanency more slowly than older children; the results also suggest that placement history matters with children who returned to care moving more slowly to permanency than children in their first placement spell, as do children with some prior history of foster family care.

The model presented in Table 6 also considers whether the county characteristics, measured as the size of the African American population as a percentage of the total population (as described above). When compared with counties in the middle of the distribution (moderate African American child population), neither counties with large or small African American populations have permanency rates that are significantly different, an indication that although the permanency rates differ by county, the size of the African American population is not a factor, when that influence is judged alongside the other factors in the model

The results presented in Table 6 suggest that African American children are somewhat less likely to achieve permanency (.94) than white children. That said, the results in Table 6 report the average effect of a given variable over all person-periods. To understand whether the magnitude of the disparity depends on the time children spend in care, the model has to be adjusted to show race *and* period-specific permanency rates. The results of this adjustment, which is accomplished using interaction terms, are found in Figure 1.

Table 6: Parameter Estimates for Permanency

Effect	Estimate	Error	Pr > |t|	Odds Ratio or (Rate)
Time in care				
1-180 days (PP-1)	-0.975	0.051	.0001	(0.27)
181-360 days (PP-2)	-0.771	0.051	.0001	(0.32)
361-540 days (PP-3)	-0.923	0.053	.0001	(0.28)
541-720 days (PP-4)	-0.867	0.055	.0001	(0.30)
721-900 days (PP-5)	-0.766	0.059	.0001	(0.32)
901-1,080 days (PP-6)	-0.885	0.067	.0001	(0.29)
Race/ethnicity				
White children	Reference			
African American children	-0.067	0.025	0.007	0.94
Age at admission				
Infants	Reference			
Age 1 to 5	0.073	0.026	0.006	1.08
Age 6 to 12	0.015	0.027	0.576	1.02
Age 13 & above	0.164	0.028	.0001	1.18
Gender				
Female	Reference			
Male	0.053	0.016	0.001	1.05
Year of admission				
Year admitted - 2011	Reference			
Year admitted - 2012	-0.067	0.026	0.010	0.94
Year admitted - 2013	-0.038	0.026	0.143	0.96
Year admitted - 2014	-0.070	0.028	0.011	0.93
Year admitted - 2015	-0.115	0.027	.0001	0.89
Year admitted - 2016	-0.319	0.029	.0001	0.73
Year admitted - 2017	-0.806	0.039	.0001	0.45
Placement type				
Foster care	Reference			
Kinship care	0.477	0.021	.0001	1.61
Congregate care	0.296	0.025	.0001	1.34
Other care types	0.234	0.064	0.000	1.26
Placement History				
First admissions	Reference			
Spell 2	-0.468	0.038	.0001	0.63
Spell 3	-0.675	0.073	.0001	0.51
History of foster care	Reference			
History kinship	0.209	0.077	0.007	1.23
History congregate	0.202	0.054	0.000	1.22
History other	0.199	0.117	0.088	1.22
County characteristics				
Moderate African American population	Reference			
Large African American population	0.034	0.071	0.635	1.03
Small African American population	-0.009	0.079	0.913	0.99

Figure 1 displays the adjusted rate of permanency by person-period for African American and white children separately (see Appendix E, Table 1). The adjusted rates refer to the fact that all of the variables in Table 6 have been incorporated in the assessment of permanency rates.

Figure 1: Period-Specific Rates of Exit and Disparity Ratios by Race*
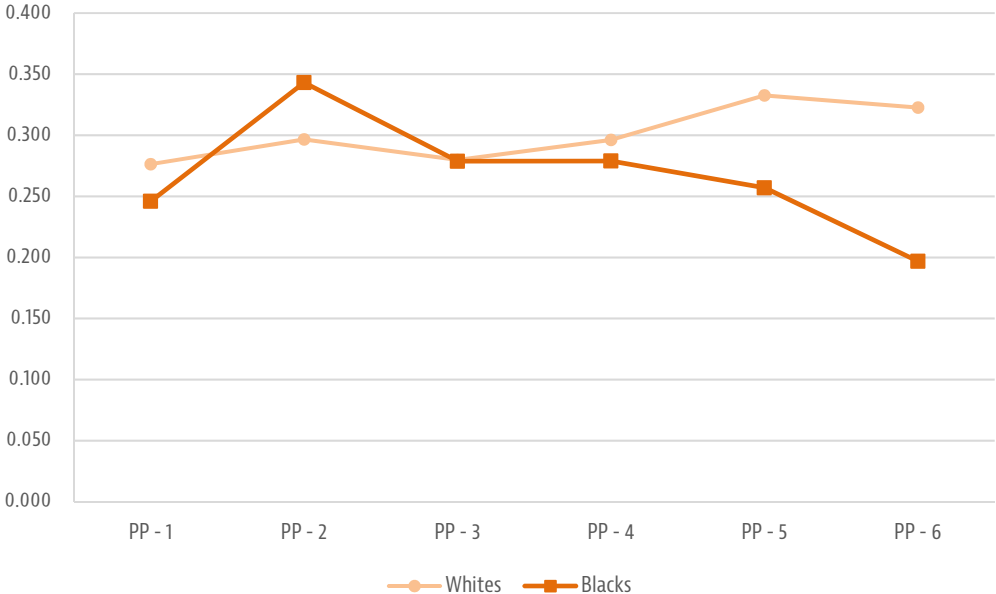

Overall, the analysis reveals that judgments about the African American/white permanency gap do indeed depend on when one looks. Although the statewide assessment suggests that African American children move somewhat more slowly to permanency than white children do, the reason why has to do with what happens among children who have been in care 720 days or more (24 months or longer). Prior to that time, the gap is small and, in the case of children leaving care between the seventh and twelfth month (the second person-period), the rate of permanency is higher for African American children than it is for white children. After 720 days (the fourth person-period), the disparity grows larger, indicated by the gap between the line for whites and the line for African Americans.

Because the disparity in permanency rates is dependent on how long children have been in care, the results displayed in Figure 1 raise the question as to whether disparity is dependent on the type of permanency achieved. More specifically, because adoptions are more likely to involve children who have been in care for some time, during which time reunification and guardianship have been ruled out as possibilities, we may find that disparities in permanency rates generally are the result of exit-specific differences in exit rates that further differentiate the experience of African American children as compared to white children.

To test this possibility, we repeated the analysis shown in Figure 1 (and Appendix E, Table 1) for each of three exit reasons: reunification, guardianship and adoption. The results are displayed in Figure 2 through Figure 4 for reunification, guardianship and adoption, respectively.

Figure 2: Period-Specific Rates of Exit to Reunification and Disparity Ratios by Race*
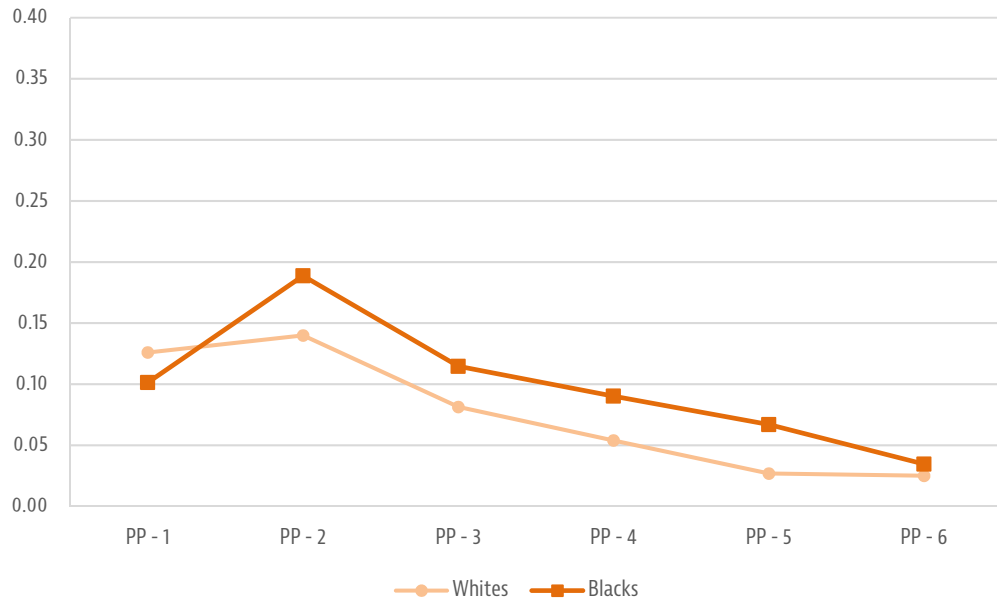
The findings do indeed point to exit-specific disparities. In the case of reunification, African American children are actually more likely to be reunified than white children, except within six months of placement (see Figure 2). For guardianship, the story is a bit more complicated. Exit rates are higher for white children during the first two person-periods, but thereafter are higher for African American children (Figure 3). Finally, for adoption, white children, regardless of how long they have been in care, are more likely to be adopted, except in the initial six months, when adoption is rare overall (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Period-Specific Rates of Exit to Guardianship and Disparity Ratios by Race

Figure 3: Period-Specific Rates of Exit to Guardianship and Disparity Ratios by Race

Figure 4: Period-Specific Rates of Exit to Adoption and Disparity Ratios by Race
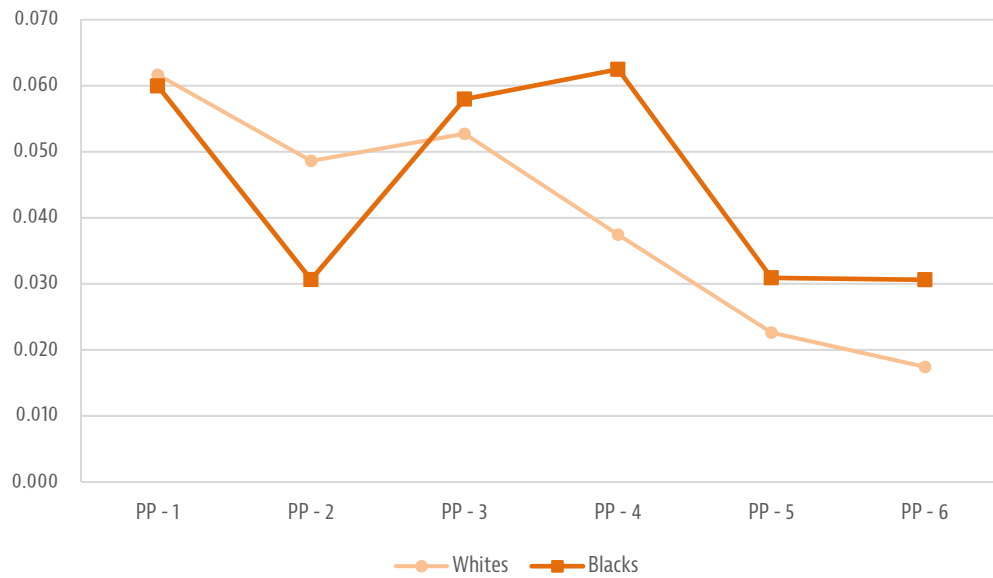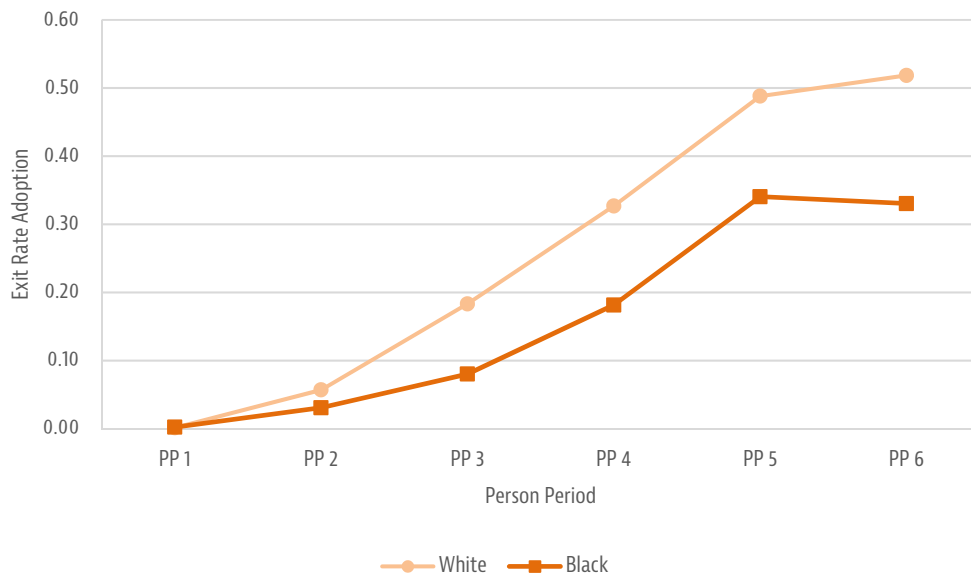

Figure 4: Period-Specific Rates of Exit to Adoption and Disparity Ratios by Race

SUMMARY

In this report, we examined whether African American children are more likely to enter foster care and less likely to leave. Pooled together, the findings suggest that there is no simple narrative that differentiates the placement experience of African American children from the experience of white children. For the state as whole, admission disparities are modest. The ratio of African American admissions to white admissions is 1.27 over the period from 2011 to 2017, which is in line with the disparity ratio reported earlier (1.2) for 2005 (Wulczyn, Lery, & Haight, 2006) and well below levels elsewhere around the country (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007; Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013).

With that said, the results do reveal important two important differences to bear in mind. First, the level of disparity varies at the county level. We showed this in two ways. When grouped by the size of the African

American population relative to the white population, disparity rates were highest in the counties with the largest African American child population. That finding suggests that efforts to reduce disparities ought to focus on certain counties, not exclusively, but as a matter of priority. We also showed that among the group of counties with the largest African American child populations, disparity varied considerably at the county level. Moreover, we showed that for specific counties, the underlying placement rate was not necessarily associated with greater disparity: counties with high African American child placement rates may have low disparity ratios because the placement rate for whites tends to be high in those same counties. Knox county is a clear example of this situation. Placement rates for both white and African American children are higher there than other parts of the state, which produces a lower than average disparity ratio.

We also found that African American children do leave care at slightly different rates than white children overall, but the most meaningful differences are tied to the reason for leaving care. African American children are more likely to be reunified at each point of time (the person-periods), except for the first six months after entering care. For guardianship, the narrative is a bit more complicated. Among white children, in the 12 months after placement, guardianship is more likely than it is for African American children. Thereafter, the guardianship rate is higher for African American children. Adoption is the one reason for leaving care for which the experience of white children is persistently different than it is for African American children. For each person-period, among the children who start the person-period still in care, the likelihood of being adopted is about twice as high for white children as it is for African American children.

Because it is the first time evidence of this nature has been presented to DCS leadership, particularly for the exit disparities, it is prudent to be circumspect about next steps. As the evidence suggests, addressing disparity is not just a matter of reducing admissions or accelerating permanency. For example, simply because African American children leave care to live with their parents at rates that are higher than they are for white children should not be taken to mean that some level of parity has been achieved. We did not, for example, compare whether reentry rates are higher for African American children, which may be cause for further study. If that were the case, the meaningful differences in reunification rates would take on a slightly different meaning. In fairness, then, it is important to avoid the tendency to reach a summary conclusion when important details have yet to be incorporated into the picture this evidence paints.

Notwithstanding the substantial investments DCS already puts toward community engagement, perhaps the most important next step is to convene a group of stakeholders to explore how the evidence presented here informs the broader dialogue about the quality of care children receive, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or where in Tennessee they happen to live. Because adoption disparities are the most striking, the stakeholder group might start with adoption processes by embedding a review within the Department's ongoing continuous improvement efforts. A carefully selected sample of records from counties with elevated adoption disparities, comparing similarly situated children may isolate the factors that contribute to the observed disparity. When the decision to adopt is made and by whom, under what circumstances is it made, and what effort is required to secure adoptive homes are worthwhile focal questions, especially if foster homes are more likely to adopt white foster children than African American foster children.

In sum, if the results pointed to a single narrative, the list of recommendations would be somewhat easier to imagine. That, however, is simply not the case. Whether the topic is admission disparity or exit disparity, the only persistent theme is how much variation there is. Because one part of Tennessee does not resemble other parts, a single solution applied across the state is unlikely to have uniform, intended benefits and could make matters worse in some parts of the state. Going forward, the best problem-solving model would involve systematic application of the Department's CQI model. That process starts with an assertion/observation about disparity (in any one of its many forms including admission/exit disparity) and the collection of evidence that supports or contradicts the assertion. When an observation has been made and substantiated with valid/reliable evidence, the next step involves formulating a statement about why the disparity is present. Again, the reasons why will have to be defended with relevant evidence. An explanation, supported by valid

evidence, is important to the process because it is tied ultimately to the action steps and an assessment of whether the steps taken have their intended benefits.