



FACTSHEETS | DECEMBER 2021

# Embedding Equity Into Disaster Preparedness Efforts in Child Welfare

Disasters disproportionately impact and widen disparities for marginalized groups, including people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Disasters are also resource intensive, and they can overwhelm child welfare systems that are designed for routine operations, making it difficult for agencies to implement equitable practices when disasters hit.

As the frequency and severity of disasters increase (U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2016), it is critical for child welfare agencies to build equitable approaches into their disaster preparedness and response (DPR) initiatives. This factsheet presents strategies for reducing disparities in child welfare DPR efforts for children, youth, and families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## WHAT'S INSIDE

Background

Equitable approaches to disaster preparedness and response

Additional resources

Conclusion

References



## BACKGROUND

Disasters tend to hit our most vulnerable families the hardest—both in the short term and during the long-term recovery phase. Children, youth, and families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are at heightened risk for experiencing the negative effects of disasters, whether natural, medical, or caused by humans. These families are more likely to live in high-risk areas that are exposed to repeated disasters (e.g., at low elevations in flood-prone areas, in neighborhoods with industrial plants) (Center for Progressive Reform, 2018), and they are less likely to have access to the resources and supports needed to recover from the physical, emotional, and financial ramifications of these adverse experiences (Winston, 2021).

While families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have been experiencing severe setbacks from disasters for generations, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on their disparate outcomes. For example, compared with White people, African-American, Hispanic and Latinx,<sup>1</sup> Asian, and American Indian and Alaska Native people have all encountered higher rates of pandemic-related infections and deaths in their communities (Hatcher et al., 2020; Rubin-Miller et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2021). They have also suffered greater economic setbacks. African-American and Hispanic people have experienced higher rates of poverty and food insecurity compared with their White counterparts, and they have had greater difficulties meeting housing expenses and paying rent during the pandemic (Winston, 2021). Compounding the problem are the relative difficulties that these families have in accessing government aid provided through various relief efforts.

<sup>1</sup> When describing the work of other researchers and organizations, this bulletin uses the terms for racial and ethnic populations used in the original sources.

Data have shown that children, youth, and families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are also overrepresented in the child welfare system (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Agencies are beginning to explore and implement equitable and antiracist strategies to reduce disparate outcomes for these populations—including those that occur in the wake of disasters. (For information on equitable practice strategies that can be used across the child welfare service continuum, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity](#)).

## EQUITABLE APPROACHES TO DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

To address the disparate outcomes families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds face following disasters, child welfare agencies can embed the following equitable practices into their DPR initiatives.

**Racial equity impact assessments.** A racial equity impact assessment (REIA) is an evaluation of how various racial and ethnic groups might be affected by proposed actions or decisions (Keleher, 2014). REIAs can help child welfare agencies identify strategies for addressing potential inequities and may be useful for various aspects of disaster preparedness, such as efforts around drafting new disaster plans or updating existing ones. To access a sample REIA tool, see the [Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit](#) by Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation.

**Dedicated equity staff.** A recent scan of jurisdictions working to integrate equitable practices into local emergency operations found that areas with dedicated equity staff were best

positioned to respond to the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative & Public Health Alliance of Southern California, 2020). Child welfare agencies can embed equity personnel and/or equity teams into their disaster response structures so that they are part of the decision-making process for all aspects of DPR efforts. It is also important for equity staff to be represented at the agency's leadership level so that critical equity issues can receive a timely response.

**Lived experience.** One way both child welfare leadership and frontline professionals can identify equity gaps in DPR is by directly engaging members of impacted groups and tapping into their lived experience (Office of Governor Kate Brown, 2020; Office of Minority Health, 2011). For example, caseworkers can have ongoing conversations with the youth and families on their caseloads about existing equity concerns. At the agency level, engagement might involve more formal efforts, such as regularly tapping into the knowledge of trusted community leaders who can elevate critical equity concerns or forming and consulting with equity teams that include youth and families from underserved communities who have experienced disasters firsthand. Agency staff can work to identify trends that surface during these collaborations and then include individuals with lived experience in relevant data-informed decision-making and continuous quality improvement efforts.

**Culturally responsive disaster preparedness training.** Many agencies require staff to participate in foundational cultural responsiveness training—an important first step in racial equity education. However, there are also opportunities to integrate racial

equity content into DPR training. For example, DPR training can present explanations of how emergency scenarios disproportionately impact people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including specific examples from the community served by the agency (e.g., environmental hazards, housing and food security, mobility). Training can then provide information and invite discussions on how DPR efforts can account for these increased vulnerabilities. (For a comprehensive list of potential disaster-related vulnerabilities for people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, see [In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum](#) by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]).

**Culturally specific and/or responsive services.** Following a disaster, culturally specific and/or responsive disaster response services should be available to the families served by the agency. *Culturally specific* services are developed for members of particular racial and ethnic groups, while *culturally responsive* services are designed to respond respectfully and effectively to people of various cultures. Agencies should maintain lists of culturally specific and/or responsive providers in their areas that offer postdisaster services to families. These might include the following (Capacity Building Center for States, 2021):

- Immediate trauma services
- Assistance for medically fragile children and their caregivers
- Benefit programs to respond to new needs (e.g., housing repairs or reconstruction)
- Child care for families

**Language considerations.** DPR messaging and services should reflect and accommodate a community's language needs (Office of Minority Health, 2011). It is especially critical to consider these needs when it comes to any agency-issued disaster correspondence and alerts. Emergency communications should be translated in a timely and clear manner that is consistent with communications distributed to other groups in the community. Agencies can also consider which communication channels will ensure their outreach efforts have maximum impact (e.g., culturally specific media outlets). During the disaster recovery phase, child welfare professionals should be prepared to assist multilingual families with applications for government aid, as these programs can be complex and inaccessible, particularly for people whose primary language is not English.

**Equitable distribution of resources.** When distributing resources and aid following a disaster, child welfare agencies should account for and address the disproportionate risks and disparate outcomes experienced by children, youth, and families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. There are monitoring tools that can assist agency personnel in observing and documenting the differential needs of specific communities as well as potential gaps in service provision. This is typically done through a combination of first-hand observations and interviews with impacted community members. To access a sample tool, see the Response Monitoring Tool in NAACP's [\*In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum\*](#).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Below is a short list of websites, publications, and other tools to help your agency implement equitable approaches to DPR:

- [\*In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum\*](#) (NAACP)
- [\*Guidance for Integrating Culturally Diverse Communities Into Planning for and Responding to Emergencies: A Toolkit\*](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health)
- [\*Embedding Equity Into Emergency Operations: Strategies for Local Health Departments During COVID-19 & Beyond\*](#) (Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative & Public Health Alliance of Southern California)
- [\*Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity\*](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [\*Working With Children, Youth, and Families on Disaster Preparedness\*](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [\*What Is Child Welfare? A Guide for Disaster Preparedness and Response Professionals\*](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [\*Coping With Disasters and Strengthening Systems: Leading Your Agency Through a Disaster\*](#) (Capacity Building Center for States)

## CONCLUSION

Natural, medical, and human-caused disasters can deepen existing inequities for children, youth, and families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their effects can contribute to intergenerational poverty and may have lasting impacts on the prosperity of their communities. However, when done in an equitable manner, recovery efforts undertaken by child welfare agencies and community partners can also provide opportunities to improve disparate conditions and increase the resiliency of these families and communities. It is critical to embed equitable practices into a child welfare agency's disaster preparedness continuum—from the planning to the recovery and response phases.

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#### SUGGESTED CITATION:

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
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