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New Report Finds Dramatic Racial Disparities for California Kids



(Getty Images)

Many children of color in the state face different health and education opportunities from the earliest years.

That's according to a [new study](#) from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The report looked at factors like birthweight, access to preschool and, later, reading and math proficiency. The researchers then created an index that weighted these and other social markers to measure a child's opportunity to thrive later on.

The findings were stark. On a scale of 0 to 1000 (with 1000 being the highest), Asian and Pacific Islander children in California scored 768, Whites 748, American Indians 529, Latinos 405, and African American children 395.

“A multicultural state needs multicultural solutions,”
Nadereh Pourat, UCLA
Center for Health Policy
Research

The report gives this analogy for thinking about the results. Think about a power grid that brings power to an area. A “prosperity grid” offers critical links to help kids succeed – in this case whether someone in their household has a high school diploma, their parents income, and achievement levels at their school.

“The inability of children of color to connect to this network through their neighborhoods clearly has significant consequences for their healthy development and well-being,” the authors wrote. Sarah de Guia, director of government affairs at the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN), said she is grateful that the Casey foundation is collecting and analyzing the data by

race and ethnicity. De Guia said she would like to see more of this analysis.

“We push for breaking the data out [by ethnic and racial groups] at CPEHN. It is critical for a deeper understanding of the numbers. But sometimes there is pushback to collecting the data,” says de Guia.

De Guia said different communities have different needs and whether a proposed policy works may hinge on language or cultural understandings.

“We need to understand exactly what is going on to make better policies,” said de Guia.

While health markers, beyond birthweight, were not explicit in the child well-being index, de Guia says health is reflected in social markers – it’s hard to do well in school if you don’t feel well – and, she says conversely, social issues can’t be improved without taking health into account.

“It is very important that we look at all policies through a health lens,” said de Guia. She says everything from the environment where children live, to the available transportation to whether there are school-based health centers are factors that affect the whole child.

To Ted Lempert, the president of Children Now, an Oakland-based child advocacy organization, the study is a vital piece of information about the future of the state.

“Three quarters of kids starting kindergarten today in California are children of color,” said Lempert.

“What this study points out is we need to get serious about every single kid having access to quality early learning, quality K-12 and quality health. If we focus that way, our future is going to be a lot better off and we’re also going to close these racial disparities,” said Lempert.

While the study was released on an auspicious day – as Affordable Care Act new enrollments were tallied – Nadereh Pourat, professor of health services at the UCLA School of Public Health, says that the study is a good reminder of the work that needs to be done.

“A multicultural state needs multicultural solutions,” said Pourat. While expanding access to health care providers is a first step to reducing health disparities, it is not a total solution.

Now, she said, it is time to focus on improving the actual care the people of different races and ethnicities experience.

“If you need a translator you generally know that the care might not be as good as if you can speak the language,” said Pourat.

Pourat says California can improve its marks on equity by focusing on this clinical piece of the puzzle going forward.

Amid all of this news, though, the study did offer a few relative bright spots for California.

The national study’s authors pointed to California as a positive example for the state’s steps last year on education reform. The Local Control Funding Formula is meant to reallocate money to schools with the largest numbers of at risk students. It also gives the schools more say over how to target their resources.

And while many experts agree that access to health care is only the beginning of addressing healthcare inequities, Covered California got an early start and outperformed many states’ efforts to enroll the uninsured.

About the author

Rachel Dornhelm got her start in radio at WHYY. After anthropology graduate school, Rachel lived in Uzbekistan working with youth near the drying Aral Sea. Rachel returned to radio full-time in 2001. Her work has appeared on WNYC, WBUR, Marketplace, NPR news magazines and KQED. [View all posts by Rachel Dornhelm](#) →

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