

Opinion / Editorials**Toronto CAS leads on black kids in care: Editorial**

The Children's Aid Society of Toronto deserves praise for revealing race-based statistics on how it does its work. Others should do likewise.



JIM RANKIN / TORONTO STAR

Everton Gordon, head of the Jamaican Canadian Association, has urged Ontario to order all Children's Aid Societies to release racial breakdowns.

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Few experiences are more traumatic for a child than being taken from his or her family and thrust into foster care or a group home. Black children are more likely to face that situation than those with white skin. And, once placed with a foster family or in group facility, black kids stay longer than any other group.

It's a pattern consistent with racial discrimination and cause for serious concern.

To its credit, the [Children's Aid Society of Toronto](#) has assumed a leading role on this issue by releasing race-based statistics covering kids in care. Agency officials have [posted a revealing analysis](#) of this data online, and its very first sentence reads as follows:

“There is an acknowledged disproportionality, disparity and discrimination in services provided to Black families by child welfare agencies across North America.”

It's a painfully correct assessment. Unequal treatment of different racial groups isn't just a problem at Toronto children's aid, or a big city issue. In some communities, treatment of aboriginal kids may be of particular concern.

That's why every CAS in Ontario and, indeed, the country should do as Toronto has done and publish race-based data on how families and children are handled. It's a necessary first step in confronting systemic bias.

Newly released data confirms findings of a [Star investigation](#), published last December, showing that more than 30 per cent of children in Toronto CAS care are black, while another 11 per cent have one black parent. Yet only 8.5 per cent of people in Toronto self-identify as black.

Furthermore, as reported by the Star's Sandro Contenta, Laurie Monsebraaten and Jim Rankin, the new analysis indicates that [black kids spend longer](#) in foster care and in group homes.

Toronto CAS officials reached this finding through a survey of 126 families that had kids in care. A troubling 45 per cent of children, from the study's 33 black-led families, were kept in the system for more than a year. In contrast, just 20 per cent of kids, from among 50 white families surveyed, were held that long. Children from Asian families had a result similar to that of whites.

Poverty is a well-established factor in placing kids in child protection. Chronic destitution is, no doubt, an element underlying some of the distressing numbers released by the Toronto CAS. But it would be wrong to assume that subtle and systemic racism plays no role.

Bigotry can tilt the system against black kids and families a variety of ways, including in how incidents of concern are reported to children's aid officials by police and schools. Advocates in Toronto's black community have expressed understandable worry that officers enter homes with the same prejudice that has black youths being racially profiled when they're out in the community.

And teachers aren't immune from cultural bias, with one Peel CAS worker telling Star reporters of a call when a child arrived at school with a roti. Apparently, an instructor believed this traditional Caribbean flatbread sandwich posed a health risk.

It's necessary to walk a fine line in confronting these issues. Children in potentially hazardous situations need to be protected, regardless of their race, but they mustn't be subject to excessive measures due to the colour of their skin or that of their family.

Toronto children's aid officials are exploring efforts to help keep black youths out of care, including by referring at-risk families to special counseling services for the black community.

There's hope for the future in approaches like this, and in a frank and open release of race-based data. Queen's Park — and every CAS in the province — should pay attention.