Case Study for the Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data (CW-SEED)

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Services Administration

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Overview

The Children's Services Administration (CSA) at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) has worked to improve equity in its practice with families of color, given a long history of racial disparities in the child welfare system. This case study focuses on CSA's efforts to collect more and better data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage and to design and use data to lessen disproportionality in the system. It also highlights six counties that implemented these data collection practices, including one county that also uses anonymous removal meetings. The case study covers the following data practices:

- **Collecting data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage.** CSA's Race Data Collection Project (RDCP) aims to collect these data from all families involved with child welfare through. This includes collecting information on youth[1] and families' self-reported identity and then entering it into Michigan's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (MiSACWIS). The RDCP includes nine counties and some members of the statewide Centralized Intake Unit.
- **Holding anonymous removal[2] meetings in Kent County.** This practice entails systematically omitting key identifying information (race, ethnicity, and geography) from decisions about removing youth from their homes. The goal is to eliminate bias from and strengthen decision making during this important meeting. Kent County has also analyzed data related to the meetings to determine whether they lessen racial disproportionality among youth of color in out-of-home care in the county.

Box 1. About this case study

This case study is part of a series of case studies that showcase approaches for advancing equity in child welfare agencies through data-driven approaches. Each case study highlights major components of an agency's approach—including, the data practices used, their equity-based features, and where they fall on the continuum of child welfare services. Agencies in the series represent a diverse range of data practices, geographies, community contexts, focal populations, and service environments. The case studies were conducted as part of the Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data (CW-SEED) project, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in collaboration with the Children's Bureau, both in the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The CW-SEED project is led by Mathematica in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and the University of North Carolina School of Social Work.

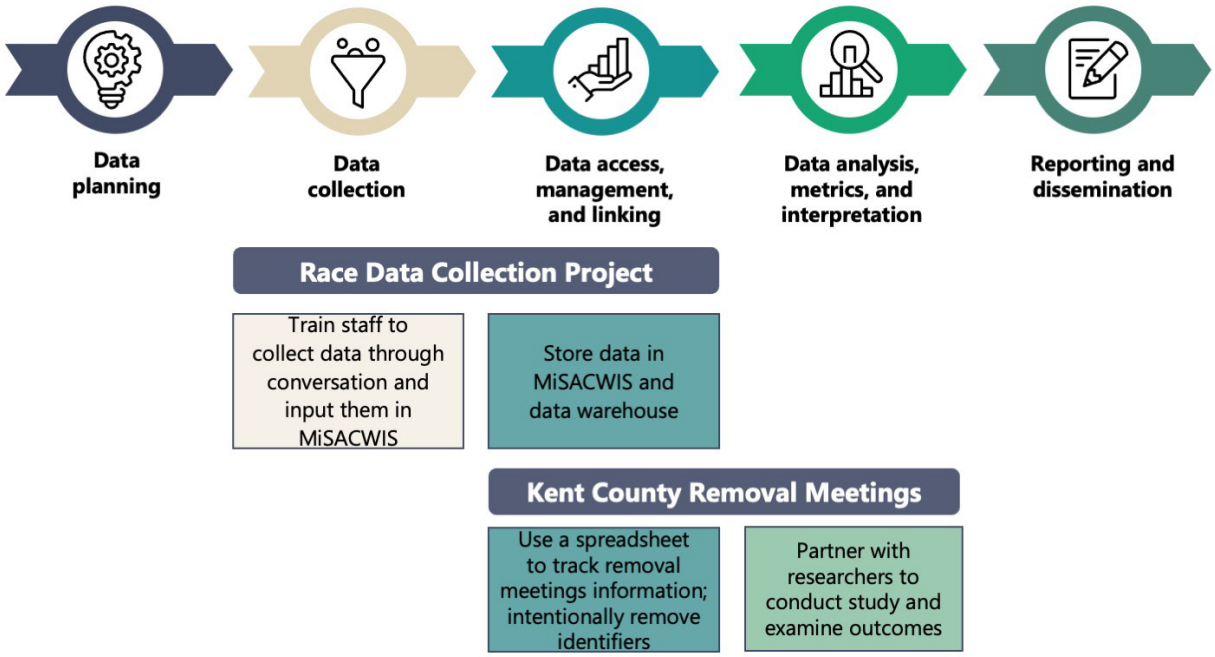
[1] This case study uses the term "youth" to describe the young people these data practices apply to, rather than using the terms "youth" and "child" interchangeably. ("Children" typically includes to ages zero to 17 whereas "youth" can include ages 18 and older.) In cases where we report demographic data, we specify the age group these data refer to.

[2] This practice is sometimes referred to as blind removal. Michigan uses the term anonymous removal to avoid ableist language. Ableist language includes words or phrases that devalue people with disabilities.

In addition to describing the data practices, this summary describes the community context for Michigan and select counties; CSA's motivation for its equity work; data practice development and goals; data practice results including data quality, analysis, findings, and dissemination; facilitators of and barriers to implementing these data practices; and opportunities for furthering data practices that enhance equity. We describe the data practices based on what we learned from in-person interviews and the documents that participants shared. Interviewees included state and local child welfare agency leaders, supervisors, frontline staff, and data systems staff as well as leaders and staff at partner organizations. Although the findings in this summary reflect their perspectives on the featured data practices, we did not evaluate the effectiveness of these data practices.

As shown in Figure 1, Michigan's data practices are used at different points along the stages of the data life cycle: (1) data collection; (2) data access, management, and linking; and (3) data analysis, metrics, and interpretation.

Figure 1. Michigan practices across the data life cycle[3]



Note: Figure 1 shows the areas of the data life cycle that are of interest to this case study. Michigan's data practices may have touched on other areas of the data life cycle, but these are the focus of this case study.

[3] More information about the data life cycle can be found in "Using Data to Enhance Equity in Child Welfare: Findings from an Environmental Scan, OPRE Report #2024-083" (Gemignani et al. 2024).

Box 2. Key terms defined by the CW-SEED project

Data are information collected about individuals and families that come into contact with the child welfare system. Data include information about age, gender identity, disability, race/ethnicity, and descriptive information such as how a household is structured or the events that led to a child's placement in out-of-home care. In the CW-SEED case studies, we are particularly interested in data or information that can help assess and address equity—or inequities—in the child welfare system at the local level.

Data practices include all activities that involve data, which includes data planning, collection, access, and analysis; use of statistical tools and algorithms; and data reporting and dissemination.

Disparity is the unequal outcomes of one group compared with outcomes for another group (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).[4]

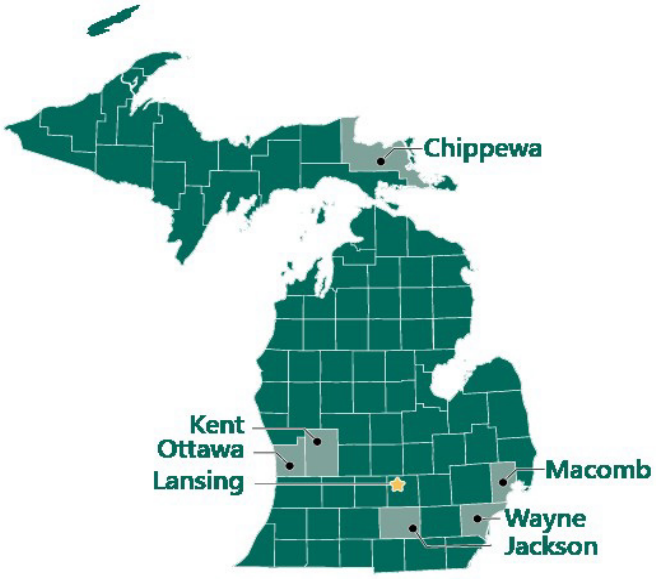
Disproportionality is the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a particular group when compared with its percentage in the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).

Equity is the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; LGBTQI+ persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. This definition is consistent with President Biden's Executive Order 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (White House 2021).

Community context

CSA is headquartered in Lansing, the capital of Michigan (shown in Figure 2). Michigan has a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system with 83 counties. CSA's Centralized Intake Unit is one centralized system for collecting reports of child maltreatment throughout the state. To understand local implementation of data practices, we included county child welfare agencies in the case study, including Chippewa, Jackson, Kent, Macomb, Ottawa, and Wayne counties. All these counties are engaged in the RDCP; Kent County is the only county in Michigan that implements anonymous removal meetings.

Figure 2. County child welfare agencies that participated in the case study



[4] Although the CW-SEED project has adopted these definitions of key terms, there are multiple ways to define and operationalize the terms disparity and disproportionality (McDaniel et al. 2017).

State and county context

In the 2022 federal fiscal year, the families of nearly 140,000 children and youth[5] in Michigan received an investigation or alternative response for child abuse or neglect (Children's Bureau 2024). Also in 2022, 8,940 children and youth[6] lived in out-of-home care—37 percent of these children and youth lived in foster homes; about 45 percent were placed with kinship or relative caregivers; 5 percent lived in group homes or residential centers; and 3 percent had independent living arrangements (Children's Bureau 2023). Youth of color are overrepresented in Michigan's foster care population. In 2021, for example, Black children and youth in Michigan represented 29 percent of the state's foster care population (Children's Bureau n.d.).[7] Also in 2021, 4.7 percent of children and youth in Michigan were multiracial, compared with nearly 14 percent of children and youth in foster care (Children's Bureau n.d.).

Michigan counties that participated in this case study varied in their region, size, urbanicity, data practices, and demographic makeup. Table 1 and Figures 2 and 3 describe their characteristics.

Table 1. Characteristics of Michigan case study counties

Jurisdiction	Population size (to nearest hundredth)	Data practice
Chippewa County	36,300	RDCP
Jackson County	160,100	RDCP
Kent County	659,100	RDCP and anonymous removal meetings
Macomb County	874,200	RDCP
Ottawa County	300,900	RDCP
Wayne County	1,757,000	RDCP

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023b).

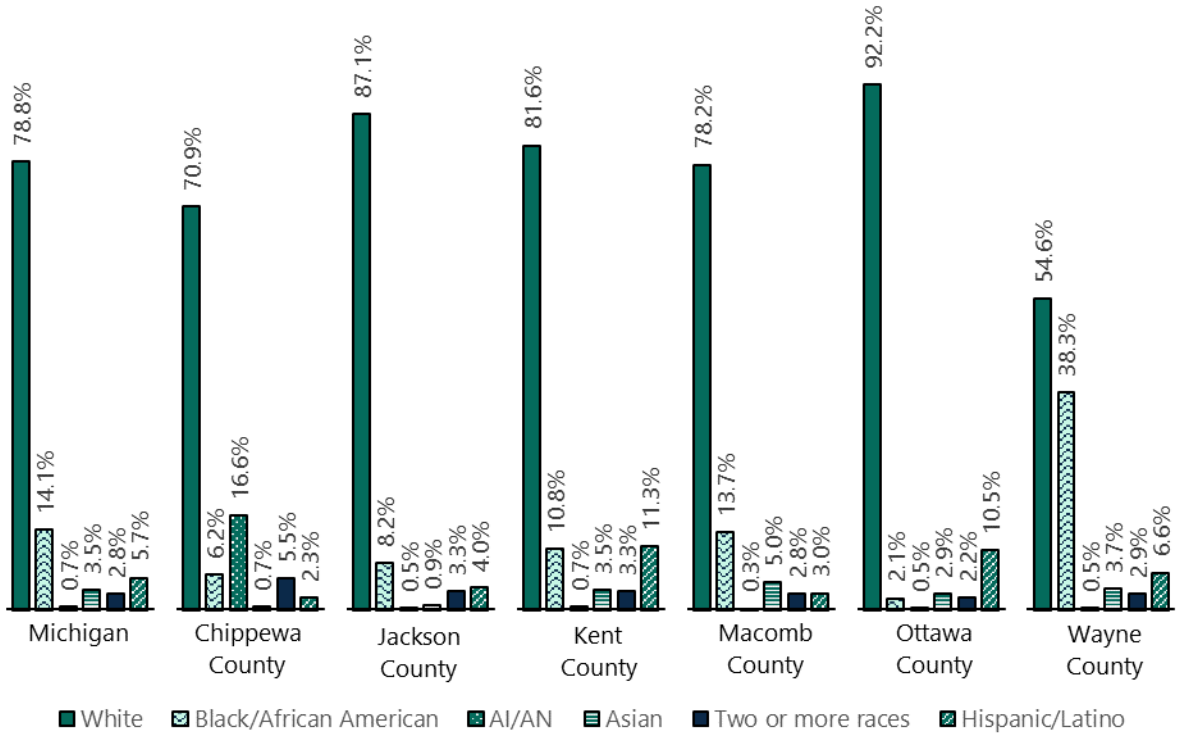
RDCP = Race Data Collection Project.

[5] National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). This number reflects a count of children and youth ages birth to 17 who received at least one child protective services response (investigation and/or alternative response) in the 2022 federal fiscal year, regardless of the number of times they might have been the subject of a response that year (Children's Bureau 2024).

[6] Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). This number is a count of children and youth ages birth to 20 in foster care in Michigan on September 30, 2022 (Children's Bureau 2023).

[7] The Michigan general child population race estimates are based on 2021 data from the Census Bureau. The Michigan foster care population race estimates are based on AFCARS data and reflect the population of youth in Michigan foster care on September 30, 2021. Both sets of estimates come from the Children's Bureau's Child Welfare Outcomes Report showing data by state; Michigan page (Children's Bureau n.d.).

Figure 3. Race and ethnicity in Michigan case study counties



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023a, 2023b).
AI/AN = American Indian/Alaska Native.

Motivation

Several years ago, CSA leaders chose equity—including racial and ethnic equity—as a focus for improving services for youth and families in care. The agency's data practices related to racial and ethnic equity began partly through its ChildStat project, a quality improvement process designed to improve the state's child welfare system (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015). ChildStat strategies include county presentations to CSA leaders on data disaggregated by race on particular points along the child welfare continuum, such as reports of child maltreatment. These presentations created an opportunity for counties to have conversations about how race and other identity data are collected and the quality of these data in MiSACWIS.

> "We want to make sure that we, as a county, are understanding the race and ethnicity of families. Then, we can have specific, targeted … culturally appropriate services."
>
> -County manager

In addition, CSA's Anti-Racist Transformation Team (ARTT) focuses on addressing disproportionality and disparities for youth of color in Michigan's child welfare system. The team reinforces the importance of maintaining accurate data on race and ethnicity. Several counties, including Jackson and Kent counties, are part of the ARTT. ARTT participants noted that to determine disproportionality, it is critical to have accurate race and ethnicity data for the youth and families they serve. ARTT first focused on youth in foster care and has since expanded to a broader child welfare continuum, including families whose youth have not entered foster care.

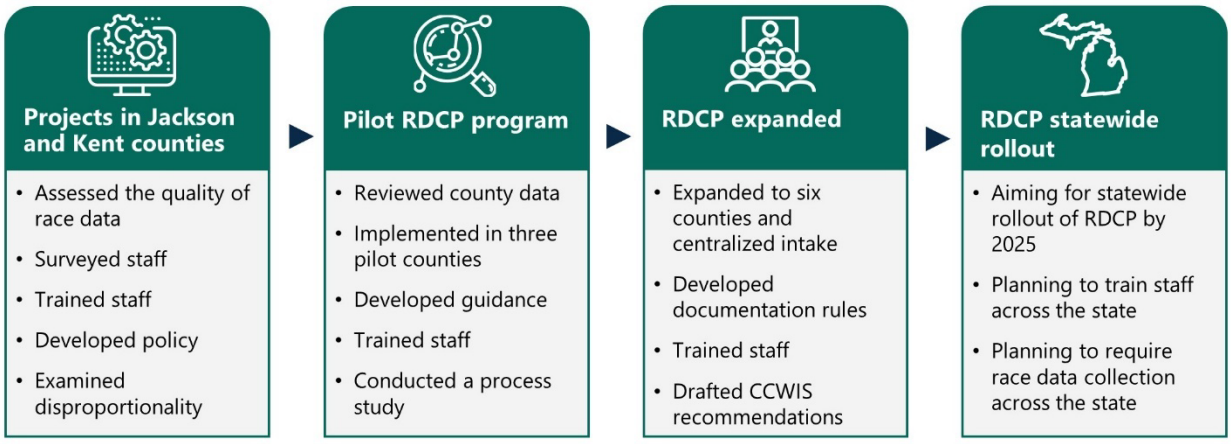
Race Data Collection Project (RDCP)

RDCP: development and equity goals

The RDCP began in 2022 with the goal of increasing the accuracy, reliability, and completeness of data CSA collects on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage (Children's Services Administration n.d.). It built on work that started in Jackson and Kent counties. In 2021, Kent County leaders learned through a case review process that about 13 percent of MiSACWIS cases had inaccurate race data, and that only about half of surveyed staff reported asking youth and families about their identities or updating MiSACWIS when the information was incorrect. As a result, the county trained staff to strengthen their data collection practices. Once all staff were trained, leaders changed the county agency's policy to require staff to collect these data from youth and families. Leaders in neighboring Jackson County replicated Kent County's work using the resources they had developed. Jackson County also implemented a staff survey and training.

CSA saw the importance of expanding these county-level data collection initiatives and developed the RDCP to train more counties. Although the title of the practice (Race Data Collection Project) only names race data, interviewees explained that the practice involves collecting data on ethnicity, culture, and heritage in addition to race. CSA developed a staff training and tested data collection with three pilot counties. Lessons from these three pilot counties helped refine the training, implementation, and practice guidance. CSA expanded the RDCP to six additional counties and some Centralized Intake Unit staff. Figure 4 shows the RDCP's evolution in Michigan. It was important to CSA that counties be able to tailor practices for collecting data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage to their local context. Thus, each county developed its own implementation team.

Figure 4. Evolution of Michigan's Race Data Collection Project



CCWIS = Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System; RDCP = Race Data Collection Project.

RDCP: implementation

RDCP implementation was supported by a grant from Casey Family Programs, and the early stages involved forming a state-level RDCP team (that included Chippewa, Kent, and Ottawa counties) to participate in the project. To decide which counties to include, the team reviewed statewide data, including county and local child welfare staff's demographics, agency culture, and the county's previous diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. CSA conducted a statewide survey of child welfare staff to learn

their views on collecting data about race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage, which they used to inform the RDCP staff training. The RDCP team partnered with Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity (ERACCE) to develop materials for the training and to support implementation of data collection practices, including developing a policy and related guidance about collecting data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage. The pilot counties formed implementation teams, which included county directors, managers, supervisors, and caseworkers. Before expanding, the state-level RDCP team identified opportunities for improvement. For example, they reviewed data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage monthly and interviewed staff and clients to deepen their understanding of implementation successes and challenges.

RDCP: practice details

Conversations with youth and families

As noted, the RDCP focuses on improving the accuracy, reliability, and completeness of data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage for all families involved with CSA. To do this, staff ask youth and families about their language, culture, religion, traditions, and related practices—such as holidays, family rituals, food preferences, family and community structures, or use of kinship support networks. Caseworkers ask about these identities at the time of investigation, and then document the information in MiSACWIS. If the case is transferred to the ongoing unit (which serves families of youth that enter out-of-home care), the CPS caseworker has access to this information, which provides more information about the family from the start. Even if race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage data are already entered into MiSACWIS, the ongoing caseworker confirms the information with the family to ensure accuracy**.**

The RDCP was introduced within a larger agency conversation and training on anti-racist child welfare practices. To improve data collection on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage, county staff received training on how to have conversations with youth and families about their identities. CSA recognized that collecting data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage might look different in different community contexts, and that counties participating in the RDCP would tailor their data collection practices based on their local demographics. Some Centralized Intake staff also collect data on youth, families, and reporters at the time of a maltreatment report.

Case study respondents emphasized that conversations with families are not meant to be only about a participant's race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage, but also to allow caseworkers to better understand families' strengths, support systems, and parenting beliefs and practices, which can facilitate more successful connections to services.

Before county staff began implementing RDCP data collection practices, state agency and partner staff at ERACCE offered an online Anti-Bias Child Welfare (ABCW) training. The ABCW training included content on (1) race as a social construct, (2) how race affects the lives of people of color and historically excluded communities, and (3) how to initiate conversations with families on race, culture, ethnicity, and heritage (Children's Services Administration n.d.). It was a six-hour training delivered over two days and was offered one time.

After the initial ABCW training, the agency held regular staff meetings to discuss the new practice and share learning experiences. Caseworkers also received support during supervision. CSA developed scripts and resources to support data collection. The ABCW training will be integrated into training for new hires.

Box 3 includes CSA guidance for having conversations about identities.

Box 3. CSA guidance for conversations about race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage

Guidelines

- Get to know more than just the client and their identity, also get to know their family and support system
- Collect data about culture and heritage, such as important traditions, food, activities, and family and community structures
- Ask questions in a conversational manner to help put youth and families at ease
- Take part in mutual sharing between staff and clients
- Use information to inform practice and connect clients to culturally appropriate services

Key talking points

- "I would like to get to know you so that I can best support you. How would you describe yourself? What is the most important thing for me to know about your identities to best serve you?"
- "What's important for me to know about your race, ethnicity, the language you speak, and other identities to make sure you get services that are accessible to you?"
- "What are some incorrect assumptions that people have made about you and your family that have created problems for you in the past? If I say something that is not right, please feel free to correct me."
- "Can you tell me about any traditions, celebrations, and practices that are important to you and your family?"

Collecting reporter information at Centralized Intake

Under regular practice, CSA's Centralized Intake Unit does not collect any information on the race of youth, families, or reporters. Initially, this was believed to reduce bias when screening reports of maltreatment. However, for the RDCP, a subset of Centralized Intake staff were trained to collect race data.[8] They asked reporters to self-report their race and, to the best of their knowledge, share the race of all individuals mentioned in a maltreatment report (including caregivers, youth in the home, and the perpetrator). They record the information in MiSACWIS. CSA plans to use these data to better understand whether there is bias among reporters in making child maltreatment reports, among Centralized Intake staff who conduct screening, or among county staff who make investigation decisions, but has not done so yet.

American Indian/Alaska Native identity and Tribal membership in Chippewa County

Chippewa County participated in the RDCP and has a relatively high percentage of AI/AN families (16.6 percent). Because of the Michigan Family Preservation Act (which includes the Indian Child Welfare Act), staff in Chippewa County have always asked individuals about their AI/AN identity and whether they are an enrolled member of a federally recognized Tribe.

Although the RDCP did not provide staff trainings specifically tailored to collecting data related to AI/AN identity and Tribal membership, case study respondents noted that participating in the RDCP may have positively influenced the quality of Chippewa County's data on AI/AN youth and families. Through the

[8] Whereas the RDCP in county agencies included comprehensive data collection on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage, Centralized Intake staff participating in the RDCP asked only about race.

RDCP, staff strengthened general skills related to talking with families about their identities, including with AI/AN families.

Further, RDCP participation reinforced existing trainings and encouraged conversations between supervisors and staff about families' identity and heritage, including AI/AN identity and Tribal membership. As a result, staff said they better understood the distinction between identifying as Native American and being an enrolled member of a Tribe—that is, a person can identify as Native American regardless of their political and legal enrollment in a federally recognized Tribe. Their understanding of the population could support staff conversations with AI/AN families and service providers about providing culturally responsive services for AI/AN families.

> "We also have to understand that there's education we have to provide [to families], just as much as we're trying to learn. And understanding the trauma that they face… You need to do a good job explaining why we're asking. We have to be mindful. We need to educate families in addition to being educated ourselves."
>
> -County manager

Chaldean identity in Macomb County

Michigan has the largest population of Chaldean[9] people outside of Iraq, mostly residing in southeast Michigan (Chaldean Community Foundation 2024). The 2020 U.S. census estimated that nearly 45,000 Chaldeans lived in Macomb County. Although Macomb County (which borders Detroit) has a large Chaldean community, the ethnicity list in MiSACWIS did not initially include an option to identify a family as Chaldean.[10] As part of the RDCP, Macomb County implemented new procedures to improve data collection on Chaldean identity. CSA Data Management Unit (DMU) staff updated fields in MiSACWIS and trained staff in a new process for documenting this information (Box 4). The new indicator for Chaldean identity helps the agency conduct analysis on this population. The Chaldean population pilot practice in Macomb County will serve as a template to replicate with other subpopulations that CSA has not yet identified.

Box 4. Documenting Chaldean identity

To document a person's Chaldean identity, Macomb County staff were instructed to fill out the Demographics tab of MiSACWIS the following way:

- Select White for race
- Select Arabic for ancestry
- Select Chaldean for language
- Select Catholic for religion

To support Chaldean identity data collection, DMU staff held an initial training and ongoing check-ins with Macomb County staff. The regular collaboration between the DMU and county agency gave county

[9] The Chaldean people trace their roots to ancient Babylon in present-day Iraq. The Chaldean diaspora includes North America, Australia, Europe, and several countries in the Middle East. An estimated 500,000 Chaldeans live throughout the United States. Metro Detroit has the world's largest Chaldean population outside of Iraq, with an estimated 187,000 people. Most Chaldeans speak the Chaldean language (also called Syriac, which is a dialect of Aramaic, not Arabic) and are members of the Eastern Rite Chaldean Catholic Church (Chaldean Community Foundation 2024; Michigan State University School of Journalism n.d.).

[10] After data collection for this case study was completed, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) published a set of revisions to Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (SPD 15), which will have implications for CSA's future Chaldean identity data collection. Based on recommendations made by the Federal Interagency Technical Working Group on Race and Ethnicity Standards, SPD 15 is revised to add Middle Eastern or North African as a minimum reporting category, separate and distinct from the White category, among other changes.

agency staff greater insight into DMU's abilities and limitations. This promoted clearer data requests by county agencies to the DMU and better cross-agency collaboration.

RDCP: data quality

Interviewees used several methods to assess and improve the quality of race and ethnicity data. At the county level, agency directors and supervisors conducted "read behinds," which are electronic case reviews to determine whether race and ethnicity fields in MiSACWIS are completed or updated. They also reviewed the narrative portion of the case file to ensure it included relevant information about cultural identity or additional information about race and ethnicity. To monitor data accuracy, county leaders initiated efforts to count the number of cases where the race entered in MiSACWIS matched the family's self-reported race. DMU staff, who also review data in MiSACWIS, have tracked improvement in the number of completed race and ethnicity fields during the RDCP.

> "We found out that some of our families didn't match. They didn't identify with the race that they were coded with in our system. Prior to that, we found with our removal meeting data that sometimes families or children would be coded as White, but really they would be multiracial and we weren't identifying that.... We know if we're relying on data, our conclusions are not going to be correct if our data is not accurate."
>
> -County manager

RDCP: analysis and progress toward goals

While testing the RDCP with the first three counties, CSA completed an evaluation and improved the project. This helped prepare them to expand it to more counties. Data sources for the evaluation included academic and gray literature; ABCW workshop observations and participant surveys; and county staff interviews, surveys, and feedback sessions. County implementation teams collected staff feedback, shadowed staff, and reviewed case notes in MiSACWIS to ensure conversations with families about their identity were taking place. Then, the RDCP team issued recommendations for a statewide rollout, which included increasing caseworkers' knowledge about and buy-in of data collection through county-level, pretraining conversations.

In one county, better data collection on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage revealed that multiracial youth were disproportionately involved in foster care. According to interviewees in one county, its data did not show any racial disproportionality for youth in foster care before the RDCP. However, when staff examined outcomes for multiracial youth in foster care, the data revealed substantial disproportionality. After participating in the RDCP, the county agency was more confident that its data accurately represented the population and that it was better equipped to measure disproportionality for multiracial youth. Based on these analyses, the county agency started a work group to address the needs of multiracial families.

RDCP: dissemination, feedback, and improvement

Learning about families' race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage allowed caseworkers to engage more authentically with families and connect them to more culturally appropriate services. Improved race and ethnicity data also allowed CSA and county agencies to better understand the needs of their communities and identify gaps in services. In response to those needs, these agencies can develop community partnerships, plan for services, and improve their work to recruit foster parents. Respondents in one county described ways they aimed to better support multiracial families, including through hosting a Facebook group, podcasts, and other conversations about the needs of multiracial families, as well as meeting physical needs, such as hair care for multiracial youth. One county leader described how learning more about different communities helped them interpret data—for example, the county learned that some Tribal communities take longer before they consider terminating parental rights, which affects the timeline to permanency and permanency outcomes.

> "Now, I feel very solid about [our county's] race data because of these conversations [with families]. Two years now and we are highly disproportionate for multiracial youth … and feeling more certain in the data makes us more certain [about] the disproportionality."
>
> -County manager

By having better data on race and ethnicity, leaders in all case study counties felt more confident in their data and in submitting ad hoc data requests to the DMU. These requests in turn supported other data reporting and may be improving data reports throughout the state. For example, one county director asked the DMU for a data report on youth in foster care disaggregated by race; the next month, that metric was included in the monthly fact sheets the DMU circulates to all county child welfare directors and program managers. Thus, that metric is now available to all counties to support their ChildStat presentations.

Counties also said participating in the RDCP improved their ChildStat presentations. Some counties present their ChildStat data and other data related to demographics and disproportionality in child welfare to their community partners—including, judges, private agency partners, attorneys, grassroots organizations, and mandatory reporters. Depending on the context of these meetings, the presentations help educate partners and create a space for group discussion. Although these community partners are typically not surprised to see data showing racial disparities in the child welfare system, county agencies said data transparency was important in dealing with community partners.

> "In the ongoing unit, we had a mom that was refusing to engage in [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings regarding substance use. She wasn't refusing, she just did not want to do AA meetings because she identified as a Jehovah's Witness. And we had never asked those questions to figure out what was important to her, what her beliefs were, what her traditions were, what her culture was… And once we were able to figure those things out—what was important to her family—we were able to … give her services she was actually wanting to do."
>
> -County caseworker

Anonymous removal meetings

Anonymous removal meetings: development and equity goals

Removal meetings are where decisions are made about removing youth from their home after a family is investigated for child maltreatment. As part of a broader conversation on racial disparities, Kent County implemented an anonymous removal practice. This practice entails systematically and intentionally eliminating data on race, ethnicity, and geography from the decision-making process on removals. Through its handling of race and other identity data during removal meetings, the practice intends to eliminate bias from and strengthen decision making about removing youth from their homes. First, the county's child welfare agency conducted analyses to understand disproportionality and the total number of youth of color in out-of-home care.

Staff found that a disproportionate number of youth of color were in out-of-home care. They also tracked youth removals by zip code to identify neighborhoods with the most removals. Then, in 2018, they formed a community partner group to address disproportionality in the system. This group learned about the removal practice in Nassau County, New York, where they call the practice "blind removals". This prompted Kent County agency leaders to meet with researchers at Florida State University who had worked with Nassau County. However, before implementing the practice, Kent County leaders did not have a good sense of whether the removal process was a point in child welfare services where disparities increased. Due to this knowledge gap, Kent County leaders aimed to conduct additional analyses after implementing the practice to determine whether the practice reduces racial disproportionality among youth of color in out-of-home care in the county. During early implementation, Kent County also changed the name of the practice from "blind removal meetings" to "Kent County anonymous removal meetings," which were sometimes referred to simply as "removal meetings," to avoid using ableist language.[11]

Anonymous removal meetings: implementation

Kent removal meetings began in August 2019 and are now regular practice in the county. To plan for implementing anonymous removals, Kent County adapted Nassau County's model to fit its local context. This included changing the timing of removal meetings. In Nassau County, youth may be placed outside their home temporarily while removal meetings and decisions are in process. Because Kent County did not want to risk traumatizing families by removing youth unnecessarily, their meetings take place before removal.

Anonymous removal meetings: practice details

Before implementing anonymous removals meetings, standard removal practice in Kent County involved a decision between a Child Protective Services (CPS) worker and their supervisor, with no protocols related to handling race data and other identifying information. In contrast, for the anonymous removals model, if a CPS worker determines a youth is at risk of imminent harm, a panel of about 10 to 12 participants (both internal and external to the county child welfare agency) meets and uses a facilitated process to make removal decisions (Baron et al. 2022). Prior to the removal meeting, the CPS worker provides all relevant information and paperwork to a clerk, who removes all identifying information about a youth and family (Box 5).

[11] Some prefer not to use the term blind because it may inadvertently denigrate people with visual impairments.

Box 5. Kent County removal meeting guidelines for information to include or exclude

- **Exclude:** Any identifying information, such as names; race and ethnicity; geographic identifiers (such as city name and zip code); police departments; school districts; names of professionals involved in the case (such as judges, police officers, or attorneys); and family income and other indicators of socioeconomic status
- **Include:** Youth's age and gender, what action the CPS worker is requesting (such as removal), relevant and substantiated CPS history, court involvement information, whether a family team meeting was completed, the immediate risk to the youth, the family's strengths, barriers the family faces, the family's current services, and what services have worked well for the family in the past
- **Optional:** CPS workers can state their recommendations for the case; the agency stresses that it is okay if these recommendations differ from what the removal meeting team ultimately decides

On average, meetings are scheduled the same day as or within one business day of a CPS worker determining that a meeting is needed, depending on the level of risk the CPS worker believes youth may face. Emergency meetings may be scheduled if the CPS worker deems it necessary (Baron et al. 2022).

Participants in the removal meetings include a facilitator, the CPS worker and their supervisor, the section and district manager and/or the agency director, and select members from the removal meetings panel. Internal panel members include agency leaders, foster care and prevention supervisors, engagement specialists, and family specialists. External panel members include community mental health partners, substance use treatment providers, domestic violence service providers, and prosecuting attorneys. The district secretary takes notes during the meeting. Panel members provide needed perspectives and expertise—for example, a community mental health partner could speak to services that could support the family and help prevent removal. The facilitator ensures all voices are heard during the meeting.

The steps for the meetings are as follows:

1. The facilitator reviews the guidelines for information to include and exclude during the meeting.
2. The CPS worker presents the family and case details to the removal meeting attendees.
3. Attendees ask clarifying questions of the CPS worker, discuss the family's needs and strengths, and come to a consensus on the final removal decision.

Removal meetings typically last 30 minutes. The removal meeting information is tracked in a spreadsheet maintained by a Kent County staff member. The spreadsheet includes fields related to date of meeting; caseworker, supervisor, and meeting participants' names; intake, investigation, and case ID numbers; case status; family strengths and barriers; date of last family team meeting; the caseworker's removal recommendation; imminent or current risk to the youth(s); and the ultimate removal decision. If the members of a removal meeting reach a consensus that a removal is necessary, they decide whether to file an emergent petition or schedule a preliminary hearing, which would determine how quickly a removal would take place after the conclusion of the removal meeting.

An effectiveness study of Kent County's anonymous removal practice found that the time it took to remove a youth after the conclusion of a CPS investigation increased by about nine days (Baron et al. 2022). Case study respondents explained that this increase reflected the effect that removal meetings had on agency culture—that is, staff slowed down and took more time to investigate and discuss the family's situation before making a removal decision, while remaining within the required 30-day window to investigate a report of maltreatment.

Anonymous removal meetings: data quality

This data practice focused on omitting data that could create bias at an important stage of child welfare decision making. Kent County respondents did not note challenges related to omitting race and related identity data in preparation for and during the removal meetings. Further, although Kent County maintained some removal meeting data in a spreadsheet, respondents noted they had not recently reviewed the data and did not comment on the data's quality.

Anonymous removal meetings: analysis and progress toward goals

Kent County respondents said the improved quality in race data achieved through the RDCP allowed them to assess how well the anonymous removal meetings supported their goal of lessening racial disproportionality. Before starting the removal meetings process, Kent County leaders assumed overrepresentation of youth of color in out-of-home care in Kent County was related to bias in removal decisions, but they did not have the data to confirm that assumption. However, as they progressed with implementing removal meetings, they observed a reduction in removals for all youth overall: 514 youth entered care in 2014, compared with 160 youth in 2023, according to respondents.

In response to this decline, Kent County put more resources toward collecting data and conducting research into whether the practice impacted disproportionality and whether other practices were needed to reduce overrepresentation of youth of color in care. Although Kent County maintained some removal meeting data in a spreadsheet, respondents said they did not typically use meeting these data, including for assessing the practice's impact on disproportionality. Instead, they worked with a research team at the University of Michigan to conduct an effectiveness study of the practice (Baron et al. 2022), which used MDHHS administrative data to examine Kent County investigations and removals by race.

The analysis suggested that Kent County's removal meetings may have contributed to an overall reduction in the number of youth entering out-of-home care; investigators in Kent County removed children and youth ages birth to 17 at lower rates following the implementation of anonymous removal meetings, though this difference was not statistically significant. Baron et al. (2022) and interview respondents both hypothesized that this decline could have been in part due to removal meetings increasing scrutiny for every removal decision in Kent County. Further, during the removal meetings, CPS workers often learned about new resources to support families and prevent removals.

Baron et al. (2022) found no evidence that the practice impacted racial disproportionality in removals in Kent County among children and youth ages birth to 17. The number of White children and youth entering care decreased by 48 percent, whereas the number of Black children and youth entering care decreased by 34 percent (Baron et al. 2022). Instead, the study found that disproportionality started during the reporting stage, much sooner than when removal decisions are made. In Kent County, Black children and youth were almost three times as likely to be the subject of a child maltreatment report than White children and youth. Thus, the removal process was not a main contributor to disproportionality in the system. Based on these findings, CSA shifted its attention to equity practices earlier in the life of a child welfare case, including by involving Centralized Intake in the RDCP. However, because Kent County staff believed the anonymous removal meetings led to better quality decisions in general, the county continued the practice.

Anonymous removal meetings: dissemination, feedback, and improvement

From February to March 2023, Kent County's quality assurance team conducted focus groups with county staff to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the removal meeting process. The qualitative data indicated that staff appreciated the cultural shift created by the removal meeting process, that they felt more supported by agency leaders, and that the meetings emphasized families' strengths and connecting them to services. Case study participants also said the opportunity to challenge assumptions or biases and make decisions without identifying information allowed meeting attendees to learn from their own biases and strengthen their decision making on removals.

> "[Kent removal meetings] changed the context … and conversations around placing children in care, because all of us really challenged staff to say, 'What is really going on?'"
>
> -County manager

Implementation facilitators and barriers

Facilitators

Using leadership to promote buy-in

Past and present CSA leaders and county agency leaders played a major role in building momentum, supporting buy-in within and across counties, and developing the infrastructure to make sustained investments in the collection and use of race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage data to advance equity at the state and county level.

Leveraging existing DEI practices

The RDCP built on other CSA DEI practices, including (1) engaging more people impacted by the child welfare system in MDHHS policy and program decisions and (2) supporting a DEI manager in the central office who helped lead the RDCP. The RDCP also drew on previous DEI trainings through ARTT and ERACCE, which supported antibias work and created ongoing conversations about how to improve child welfare services to advance equity. Kent County leaders leveraged their participation in the RDCP and used their improved race data to examine the impact of anonymous removal meetings on racial disproportionality in out-of-home care in the county.

Strengthening staff skills and buy-in through training and support

Components of the RDCP trainings that promoted staff buy-in and learning included making connections to staff's knowledge and expertise in trauma and motivational interviewing; explaining that conversations about identity could strengthen family engagement and improve connections to services; and encouraging staff to learn from their peers by sharing stories and examples of data collection with others in their local offices. In Kent County, caseworkers viewed the anonymous removal meetings as supportive and learning opportunities; through the removal meetings, staff learned about resources for families, made more informed removal decisions, and felt more prepared for court, which increased their buy-in to the practice.

Using diverse staff representation to support data collection

Staff that reflect the identities of the families served by CSA and the counties strengthened efforts to collect better data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage. For example, a DMU staff member who is

Chaldean first noticed the data collection issue for the Chaldean population, which led Macomb County to focus on collecting information on Chaldean identity during the RDCP. Having a county workforce that reflected the local community also promoted family engagement, which strengthened data collection.

Barriers

MiSACWIS race and ethnicity data field limitations

Several interviewees thought the list of ethnicities in MiSACWIS did not fully reflect the populations CSA serves, which created an underreporting issue. However, adding identities beyond those required for federal reporting would have meant more work for DMU staff, who must translate more granular data into the federal reporting categories.

Staff discomfort or unfamiliarity

Staff discomfort posed a challenge to both data practices. For the RDCP, staff discomfort could threaten data collection and quality. This discomfort was typically caused by staff's lack of experience with discussions about race, not feeling competent in explaining to families why they were asking for this information, or experiences with families that did not want to answer these questions. In Kent County, caseworkers were initially hesitant to participate in the anonymous removal meetings because they would have to detail their decision-making process and opinions in a group setting and thought they might be judged or evaluated by agency leaders during the meetings.

Need for ongoing training

The RDCP provided staff with training at the start of the project but did not provide formal, ongoing trainings. Case study respondents noted a need for occasional follow-up trainings, such as training to onboard new staff and help current staff troubleshoot data collection challenges.

Data collection burden on Centralized Intake staff

The Centralized Intake Unit's call center structure incentivized staff to work through calls quickly and made it difficult for staff to step away from their phones to attend RDCP and related DEI trainings. The pressure to work efficiently caused some Centralized Intake staff to view race data collection as "just another thing" they had to do during a busy workday.

Technical challenges to documenting AI/AN identity and Tribal membership in MiSACWIS

Once staff identify Tribal affiliation for individuals in MiSACWIS, they cannot easily change it. Although these demographics do not typically change, staff have erroneously entered data in the past, which created inaccuracies. Sometimes, staff ran into challenges with MiSACWIS when a person self-reported as AI/AN or a Tribal member but not both—the system was designed to presume that both must be true.

Difficulty examining disproportionality

Before Kent County started having anonymous removal meetings, unreliable race data meant Kent County leaders could not determine whether removal decisions significantly contributed to racial disproportionality among youth in out-of-home care. Another county struggled to measure disproportionality for multiracial youth. In MiSACWIS, staff could enter more than one race for an individual. To create a data report with information on multiracial youth, DMU staff typically collapsed race data into a single, dichotomous multiracial field. As a result, the data for multiracial youth could seem

inaccurate or oversimplified because the dichotomous measure could be masking the diversity of multiracial identities.

Opportunities for furthering data practices that enhance equity

Data system transition: From MiSACWIS to CCWIS

CSA is preparing to replace MiSACWIS with the new Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). An initial goal of the RDCP was for CSA to formulate recommendations to guide CCWIS data elements on race and to consider how the data system can strengthen anti-racist data collection practices. As part of the RDCP, CSA developed recommendations such as allowing for separate data points for White and Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA)[12] identities. Interviewees spoke to elements they hoped would be in the future CCWIS system—for example, the ability to filter licensed foster homes by ethnicity, race, and culture to facilitate placement matching and tailor recruitment to the places it is most needed.

Interest in collecting more data about mandated reporters

State and county staff both expressed interest in collecting and using more data on mandated reporters' identities—including, race, gender, profession, organization, and zip code. Staff envisioned using these data to promote equity and prevention. Disaggregating intake data by reporter characteristics could inform training for mandated reporters and Centralized Intake staff. For example, case study participants shared that maltreatment reports made by law enforcement and schools were more likely to be screened in by Centralized Intake staff, according to analyses conducted with a university partner. Respondents thought a better understanding of how mandated reporting influences disparities in reporting could create feedback loops to reporters and facilitate individualized interventions for overreporting.

Expand current data collection practices on identity

Interviewees discussed various ways data collection could expand and support other data equity practices. They described how the RDCP trainings, with their focus on having conversations about identity, provided both the momentum and staff knowledge base for other data collection on identity. One county leader thought the RDCP provided "a natural lead-in" for conversations about other identities—such as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE)—and reminded their staff of how they successfully worked through other uncomfortable conversations.

Box 6 includes information about Michigan's work to collect SOGIE data on youth in care. At the heart of all identity conversations is the question, "What is important about you that I should know?" The RDCP evaluation also recommended that the data collection practices be adopted beyond CPS staff, by other MDHHS agencies, service providers, and private agencies.

[12] CSA uses the term SWANA to describe the region commonly referred to as the Middle East and North Africa. The term SWANA describes this area in geographical terms, without using the Eurocentric term Middle East (San Diego State University 2022). SWANA can be more inclusive of people living in or connected to this region who may not identify as Arab, such as the Chaldean community.

Box 6. SOGIE data collection practices in Michigan

Three counties in Michigan participated in a federal demonstration grant to improve practice with LGBTQI+ youth in care.[13] As part of this, county staff participated in the Asking about SOGIE (AAS) pilot program. AAS was co-developed with a community partner, the Ruth Ellis Center, which trained child welfare workers to ask youth about their SOGIE and document it in MiSACWIS. The goal of the AAS was to provide safe visibility for LGBTQI+ youth so they could receive more support while protecting their privacy. By the end of the pilot program, Michigan's MiSACWIS system had fields for entering SOGIE information.

- **Staff asked all youth ages 12 and older about their SOGIE**, which resulted in a better understanding of the identities of youth in their care. This allowed them to connect youth to services and ensure safe and affirming homes.
- **The implementation team facilitated Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles**, which helped teams make data-informed decisions about improvements to trainings and tools. This process allowed workers to bring up concerns so they could be addressed promptly and led to updates in training and practice guidance about the age at which a young person should be asked about their SOGIE.
- **Additional counties are currently planning to collect SOGIE data**. Additional counties are also interested in training staff to collect SOGIE information in MiSACWIS, and will use the tools developed as part of AAS to inform their work.

For more information about AAS, see the implementation guide, Asking About SOGIE (Matarese et al. 2022).

Conclusion

For this case study, we spotlighted two data practices that Michigan's child welfare agencies use to promote equity in Michigan's child welfare system. The RCDP focuses on improving data collection related to race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage for all families involved with Michigan's child welfare system. The RDCP trained county agency caseworkers to have conversations about race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage with families and ask families to self-report their identities. CSA's process evaluation of the RDCP and the perspectives of case study interviewees revealed that the RDCP has improved practice with families and the completeness and quality of data on race, ethnicity, culture, and heritage. As a result, CSA has expanded the practice to more counties and CSA departments, and it plans to expand the RDCP statewide.

Kent County has done additional work aimed at reducing the number of youth of color entering out-of-home care. Kent County's anonymous removal meetings include deliberately taking racial, ethnic, geographic, and other potentially identifying or biasing information out of the decision-making process. According to interviewees, anonymous removal meetings have improved overall practice and decision making related to removals, but findings from analyses done in partnership with researchers indicate the practice has not reduced racial disproportionality among youth in out-of-home care in the county.

[13] The 2016 National Quality Improvement Center on Tailored Services, Placement Stability, and Permanency for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Two-Spirit Children and Youth in Foster Care (QIC-LGBTQ2S) grant was funded by the Children's Bureau.

Methodology

Site identification. The CW-SEED project team gathered recommendations for potential case study sites from several sources, including an environmental scan of data practices agencies are using to promote equity, project team members, and Administration for Children and Families' regional program managers. The team sought recommendations for states, counties, or localities that were using innovative data practices to promote equity. The project team also sought input from the CW-SEED expert group and presented a list of the top choices and alternate choices for case study site informational calls to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). Choices represented a range of data practices adopted by agencies working across the country with different areas of equity focus, including agencies working to advance equity related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) or among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. Although the project team had developed an initial understanding of the sites' data practices as a result of our recommendation process, the team pursued more in-depth knowledge of the data practices through preliminary information calls with child welfare agency staff in each site.

Data sources and data collection methods. To prepare for the site visits, the project team requested practice and policy documents and any written reports related to the data practice. The team tailored interview protocols to reflect information gleaned from the document review and used semi-structured interview guides to guide interviews focused on data practices with small groups of leaders, program managers, frontline staff, and community partners. The research protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board. The primary data sources for each case study include (1) information from the jurisdiction selection process, (2) jurisdiction-specific documents and the completed review rubrics for each of the documents, (3) notes from interviews and observations, (4) notes from focus group discussions, and (5) any documents from the environmental scan relevant to the jurisdiction.

Data analysis and case study findings. The project team conducted qualitative analysis by coding the data sources using NVivo software. The team used this to identify themes of key findings, which are presented in the case study summary. The case study summary was shared with the site and with the CW-SEED expert group for review.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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