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ZERO TO THREE
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Building Strong Foundations: Racial Inequity in Policies that Impact Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Infancy and toddlerhood are periods of incredible possibility and opportunity. Children grow and develop more rapidly during the first three years than any other time in their lives. Their everyday experiences—where they sleep and play, what they eat, and who loves and cares for them—shape their development and lay a foundation for future learning. With the right supports, every child in every family can get a strong start.

But the odds are stacked against infants and toddlers of color. Despite comprising a large share of our young child population, they disproportionately lack resources that help children and their families thrive. There are racial disparities across nearly every measure of wellbeing, including health, economic security, and access to early learning experiences.¹ These disparities are rooted in discriminatory policies throughout U.S. history that have blocked opportunity for people of color. Families of color have always been resilient in the face of adversity, but the impacts of historical policy decisions persist today. Despite progress toward equity, current policies continue to fall short.

Infants and toddlers of color are future scientists, entrepreneurs, policymakers, educators, and health care professionals. Their wellbeing is critical to our nation's success. Changing the odds for young

children of color and their families requires policymakers to ensure that policies, programs, and services are designed to meet the needs of increasingly diverse American families. Policymakers should be aware of disparities, understand how policy decisions have contributed to inequity, and recognize policy as a tool to disrupt and dismantle institutional racism and promote equity.

This paper explores racial disparities, including the policies that drive them, among infants and toddlers and their families. It highlights key examples in recent history and their continued consequences for young children of color and their families. The paper concludes with recommendations to ensure new or reformed policies reduce racial disparities.

A large share of our nation's infants and toddlers face systemic barriers to opportunity

Each year, our nation grows more and more diverse. Roughly half of today's 11.8 million infants and toddlers are children of color.² (See Figure 1). By 2050, an estimated 53 percent of the U.S. population will be multiracial or nonwhite.³

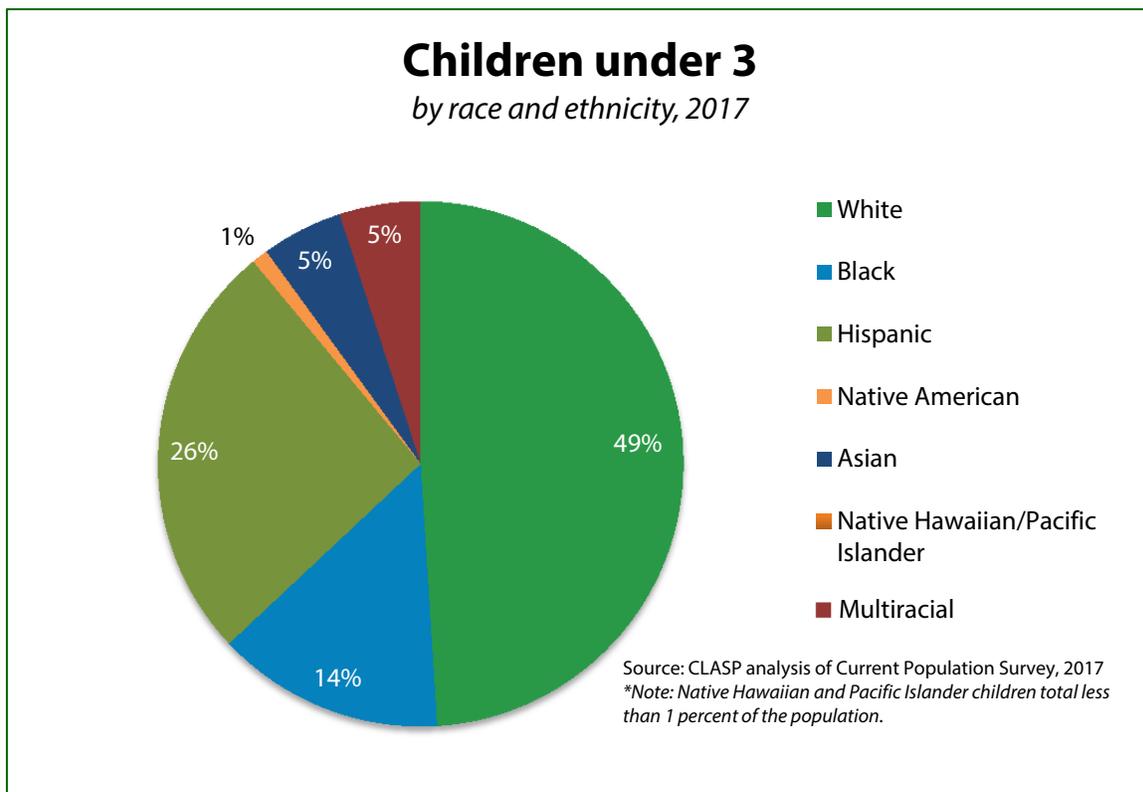


Figure 1

Despite this, infants and toddlers of color face significant disparities compared to their white peers. Overall, children of color are more likely to have low incomes than white children.⁴ (See Figure 2). They're also more likely to be food insecure, live in poor-quality housing, and have families that struggle to cover basic expenses.⁵ Despite high rates of employment, parents of color are more likely to work in low-wage jobs with unstable schedules and few employer-sponsored benefits (such as paid time off, retirement benefits, or health insurance).⁶ Low-wage work undermines parents' ability to

care for their young children during a critical period of development. It also traps families in a pattern of economic instability that echoes throughout their lives. Moreover, the stressors associated with poverty are compounded by challenges accessing affordable health insurance and preventive health care services, quality child care, and interventions for developmental delays and mental health issues.⁷

Experiencing instability and hardship—particularly during the earliest years of life—has long-term consequences for children’s wellbeing. Children living in poverty have a higher risk of poor health and developmental delays in childhood. When they grow up, they are likely to have lower wages and educational attainment than their economically secure peers.⁸ Research demonstrates that the longer children live in poverty, the worse their adult outcomes.⁹

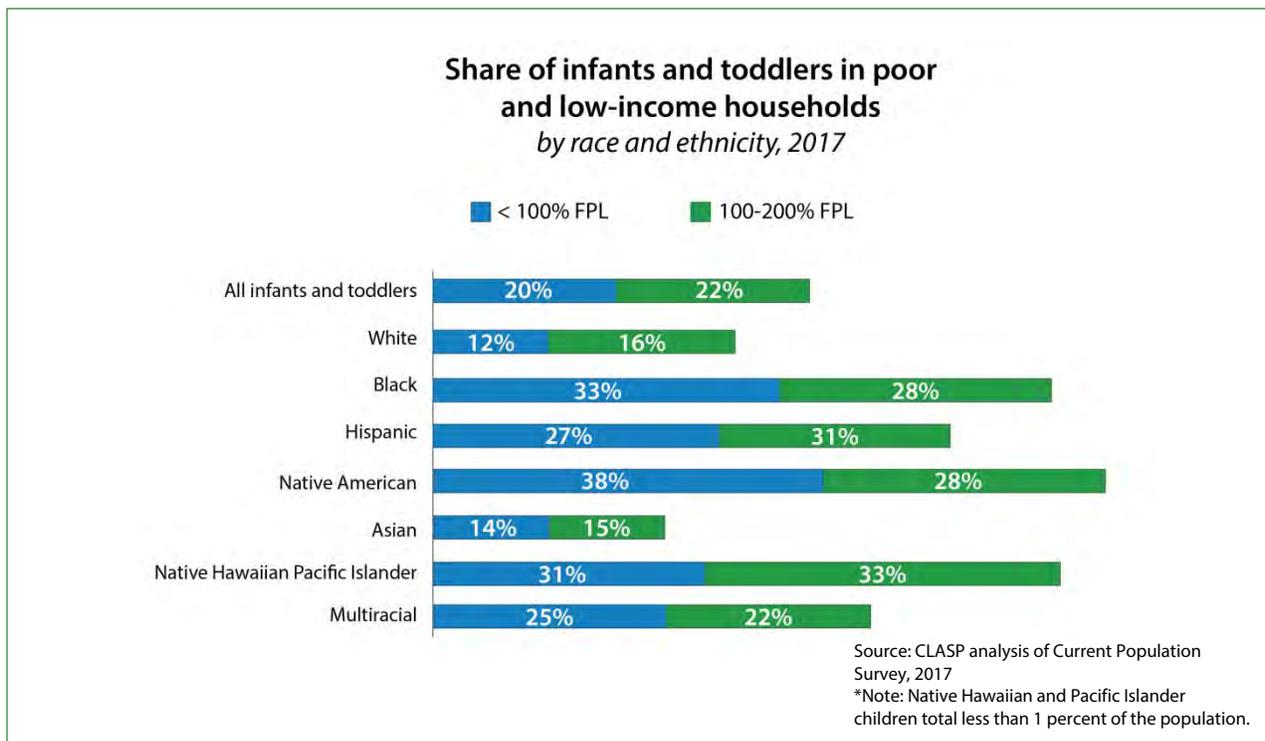


Figure 2

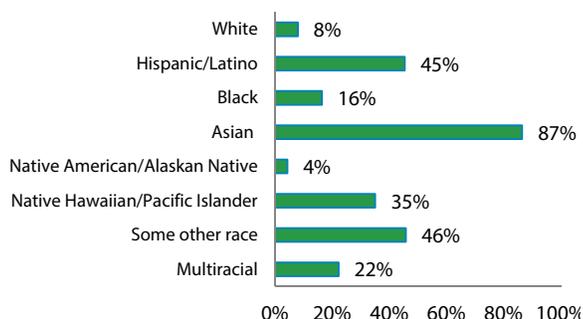


Most infant and toddlers in immigrant families are children of color

Characteristics of infants and toddlers in immigrant families

A large share of children of color have immigrant parents

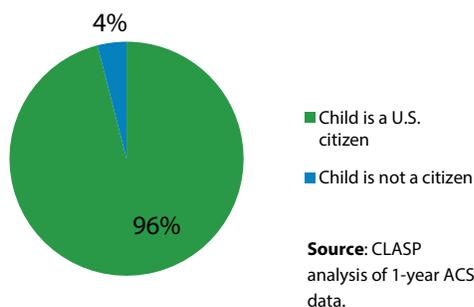
Children < 3 with one or more immigrant parents, by race and ethnicity, 2016



Source: CLASP analysis of 1-year ACS data.

Vast majority are U.S. citizens

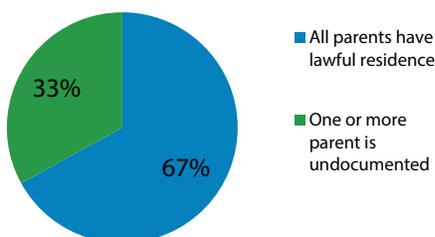
Citizenship status of children <3 with immigrant parent(s), 2016



Source: CLASP analysis of 1-year ACS data.

One-third are members of mixed-status families

Infants and toddlers with one or more undocumented parents, 2009-2013



Source: Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Jie Zong, A Profile of U.S. Children with Unauthorized Immigrant Parents, Migration Policy Institute, 2016. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/profile-us-children-unauthorized-immigrant-parents>.

Nearly 3 million children under age three—23 percent of all infants and toddlers—are members of an immigrant family. A large share (83 percent) of infants and toddlers in immigrant families are children of color.¹⁰ In addition to the structural barriers that confront other children of color, children in immigrant families face unique systemic challenges tied to their parents' immigration status.¹¹

Immigrants often arrive in the United States with limited English proficiency. That makes it challenging to find employment and navigate our complicated educational, housing, medical, and social service systems. Immigrant workers—including those with high levels of education—are overrepresented in low-quality jobs that don't offer paid time off, stable work schedules, or employer-sponsored health insurance.¹² Consequently, more than half of all infants and toddlers in immigrant families live in low-income households, making them vulnerable to the hardships that accompany economic insecurity.¹³

These burdens are more significant for mixed-status families, who face persistent fear of family separation due to enforcement actions against undocumented members.¹⁴ Undocumented immigrant parents have higher levels of poverty and lower levels of education. They are also more likely to work in low-wage jobs, often under exploitative conditions. Research suggests children in immigrant families are less likely to access public programs that can support their development, such as nutrition assistance and early care and education programs, despite infants and toddlers generally being eligible to receive these services as U.S. citizens.¹⁵

Immigration policies that threaten to separate families and reduce access to public health and nutrition programs have disproportionate impacts on immigrant families of color. They also harm infants' and toddlers' wellbeing. Under threat of deportation, immigrant families may become increasingly socially isolated, leaving their homes only when necessary.¹⁶ They are also more likely to refuse public programs and services.¹⁷ This leads to increased financial and material hardship. As a result, infants and toddlers may lose out on health care services or early care and education experiences. Parents may experience greater levels of fear, stress, and anxiety, which is passed on to infants and toddlers and can impact their cognitive and emotional development.¹⁸

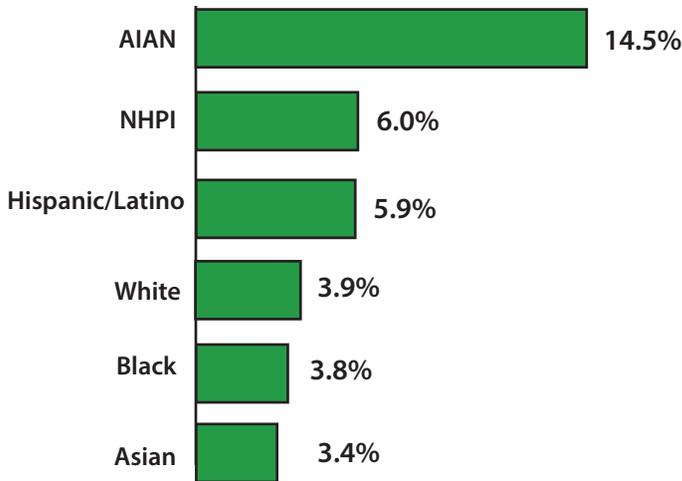
Children who are separated from a parent due to immigration detention or deportation may suffer from psychological trauma, resulting in behavioral changes, frequent crying, and changes in eating or sleeping habits.¹⁹ Parental separation may have particularly adverse effects on infants and toddlers, who are still developing crucial attachment relationships and are most reliant on parents for physical and emotional care and support.²⁰

Infants and toddlers of color and their families face disparities across measures of health, economic security, and access to quality early care and education



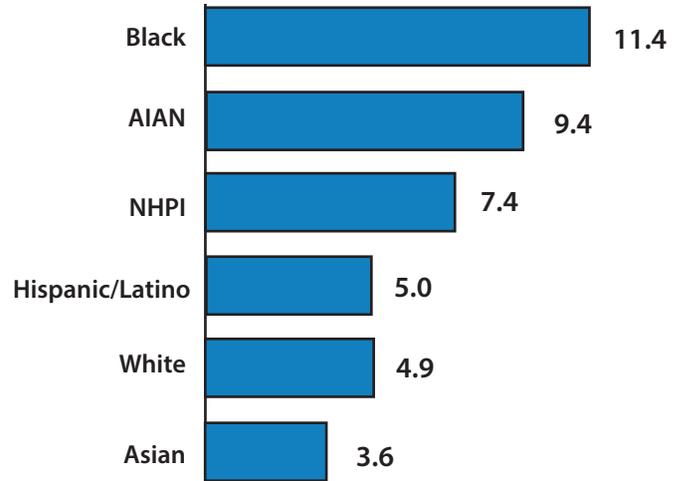
Native American infants and toddlers are most likely to be uninsured.

Share of children under 3 by race and ethnicity who are uninsured²¹



Black infants and toddlers have the highest infant mortality rates.

Infant mortality rates (per 1,000 births) by race and ethnicity, 2016²²



Women of color make up **more than half** of mothers with very young children in low-wage jobs.²³

Of mothers with infants and toddlers in low-wage jobs, **20.8%** are Black and **30.4%** are Latina.

Comparatively, **11.6%** of all workers are Black, **16.5%** are Latinx.



Asian and Hispanic infants and toddlers are less likely to receive child care assistance.²⁴

Share of eligible infants and toddlers served in CCDBG

Share of **state-eligible** infants and toddlers served in CCDBG, <180% FPL

Share of **federally-eligible** infants and toddlers served in CCDBG, <292% FPL

	White	Black	Hispanic	AIAN	Asian	NHPI
Share of state-eligible infants and toddlers served in CCDBG, <180% FPL	13%	25%	10%	12%	7%	42%
Share of federally-eligible infants and toddlers served in CCDBG, <292% FPL	7%	18%	6%	9%	4%	25%

Public policy can create or reduce structural inequality

From our nation's inception, rights and privileges have been granted to some and denied to others based on race and ethnicity. This history of colonization, slavery, segregation, and exclusionary immigration policies has undermined millions of Americans' health and wellbeing and is at the root of racial and ethnic inequality that continues today. Changing the odds for young children requires us to understand how public policies—past and present—cause, perpetuate, or disrupt racial inequities.

Provisions in the New Deal cemented inequitable access to opportunity

As modern systems of support for families took shape, institutionalized racism and discrimination were embedded into provisions of the New Deal. New Deal programs were designed to provide economic relief to struggling Americans following the Great Depression. However, many of the benefits enjoyed by white Americans—such as low-cost housing loans, minimum wage protections, and Social Security—largely excluded people of color.

For example, New Deal housing programs operated under strict regulations in determining which neighborhoods were “safe” to insure mortgages. “Redlined” neighborhoods—where residents were mostly Black, Jewish, or immigrant—were deemed hazardous, and mortgage lenders refused to give loans to families of color who were otherwise credit-worthy. As a result, people who lived in redlined areas couldn't get affordable mortgages in the neighborhoods in which they lived, but they also couldn't move to “desirable” neighborhoods because federal regulations effectively mandated segregation.²⁵

In the 1960s, Congress passed legislation prohibiting such overt discrimination. However, more than a century of discriminatory policies, practices, and attitudes isn't unseated that easily. Redlining and other policies restricted families' access to safe housing, good-paying jobs, quality schools, and affordable health care for decades, preventing parents of color from achieving the “American Dream” and offering economic security for future generations. Today, Black and Hispanic families at every income level have higher rates of debt, lower rates of home ownership, and less wealth compared to white families.²⁶ This affects their abilities to respond to an emergency situation, transition between jobs, save for retirement, and cover unexpected expenses. That makes them less economically secure, even with greater earnings. Compounding this instability, racist policymaking also has persistent consequences for the availability of and families' access to quality child care, culturally competent health care providers, and other community resources that support infants' and toddlers' healthy development.

Discriminatory policies aren't just a thing of the past

Discrimination is less explicit today, but modern law and policy continues to reinforce structures of inequality for people of color. Policy decisions at every level, including how we prioritize spending public resources, how we structure our tax code, and who is eligible to receive public programs and services, do not affect every American equally.

Consider the Child Tax Credit (CTC) as an example. The CTC offsets the costs of raising a child, providing a maximum annual credit of \$2,000 for each child under age 17. Families earning less than \$2,500 per year are ineligible for the credit. The CTC is partially refundable, meaning parents who owe little or no federal income tax can receive a refund of up to 15 percent of their earnings.²⁷ Millions of children are lifted out of poverty or made less poor because of this extra income from the CTC every year. However, the CTC disproportionately benefits higher income families.²⁸

The 2018 *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act* (TCJA) made significant changes to the CTC that further tip the scales toward higher-income households. Despite needing the credit far more, working families with low incomes receive little or no benefit. These are disproportionately families of color. Although TCJA doubled the maximum credit from \$1,000 to \$2,000, it substantially increased the income threshold at which the credit begins to phase out. The phase-out for single filers went from \$75,000 to \$200,000; for married filers, it went from \$110,000 to \$400,000. As a result, a married couple with two children earning \$400,000 will receive a \$4,000 increase from the CTC. Conversely, a single mother with two children working a full-time, minimum wage job receives a \$75 increase.²⁹ More than 10 percent of families with infants and toddlers at the lowest income levels will be ineligible altogether.³⁰

History demonstrates that today's policies will have long-lasting impacts on the wellbeing of infants and toddlers of color, their home environments, and their access to opportunity. We can't ignore the inequitable impacts of policy decisions at every level of government. Policymakers must be intentional about designing and implementing policies with racial equity in mind.

Early Head Start can serve as a model for equitably serving young children and families of color

Public policy can alleviate systemic racism and remove barriers to social programs that improve young children's wellbeing when they are thoughtfully designed, executed as intended, and informed by families' lived experiences. When infants, toddlers, and parents have the supports they need to succeed, families are stronger and more stable. This not only creates safer and more productive communities, but also helps build the nation's economy by strengthening our future workforce.



Rooted in the war on poverty and the civil rights movement, Head Start is a good example of policy created with equity in mind. The program is anchored in the belief that all children, including those with social and economic barriers, deserve the opportunity to succeed. Head Start's federal-to-local grant structure was created to bypass state governments and prevent the inappropriate use of funding by pro-segregation policymakers in the South.³¹ As a result, Head Start has responded to the needs identified by each community, serving black children, Native American children, and other children of color throughout its 50-year history. Early Head Start was established in 1994 to extend the same high-quality, comprehensive services to infants and toddlers and pregnant women.³²

Today, Early Head Start serves linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse communities around the country.³³ The federal-to-local model allows each individual program to meet the unique needs of the families it serves, informed by regular community needs assessments and strong quality standards for all children, including children with special needs and dual language learners. Early Head Start programs offer a variety of comprehensive services, such as medical and dental screenings, nutrition services, and parent-involvement activities. Research demonstrates that Early Head Start boosts infants' and toddlers' cognitive and social-emotional development and supports positive parenting

practices.³⁴ However, Early Head Start is significantly underfunded, limiting its reach. In 2017, just 7 percent of eligible infants and toddlers accessed Early Head Start.³⁵

Equitable policymaking can build strong foundations

Addressing structural barriers that affect millions of young Americans and their families is a national imperative. Policymakers of diverse backgrounds at every level of government must take immediate steps to eradicate discriminatory policies and dismantle structural inequality.

Make space for communities of color to lead and participate in conversations about policy decisions. Individuals and families of color are experts in their own lived experiences. Their knowledge and experiences should directly inform policy decisions. Policymakers should ensure communities of color have a seat at the table and feel comfortable sharing their perspectives during the policymaking process.

Assess and revise current policies. Policymakers from diverse backgrounds should take a closer look at how current policies affect infants and toddlers of color and their families and revise those that have a disproportionate negative impact.

Increase investments in programs that help families meet their basic needs. For many years, programs that help meet the needs of children and families from poor, low-income, or otherwise vulnerable backgrounds have been grossly underfunded, affecting access to services and undermining quality. Programmatic limitations often disproportionately impact children and families of color, who are more likely to be eligible due to lower household incomes. Policymakers should reduce these barriers through additional investments and more equitable eligibility and enrollment policies.

Improve data collection. Policymakers and program administrators should promote better, more comprehensive data that is disaggregated by race and ethnicity. This will help them understand the characteristics of their communities, patterns in the availability of public programs and services, rates of access among potentially eligible children and families, and how community members may be affected by policy decisions.

Identify strategies to reach populations who are underserved. In partnership with communities of color, policymakers should implement culturally relevant approaches to reach populations who are underserved in existing programs. Strategies may include a targeted outreach plan or revising eligibility criteria.

Be thoughtful when creating and implementing new policies. Moving forward, policies need to be created in a way that ensures they do not discriminate against children and families of color. Special attention should be placed on supporting equitable implementation of policies at the state and local levels. Staff from all backgrounds and at all levels of policy implementation should be trained in racial equity and implicit bias. Administrative policies and processes should clearly address discriminatory practices.



Conclusion

Infants and toddlers of color and their families have been systematically denied opportunities and access to resources. Addressing disparities will require an expanded investment in public programs for families with low incomes, along with public policy reforms that reduce structural inequality.

As part of our *Building Strong Foundations* project, CLASP and ZERO TO THREE identified 13 policies that are considered foundational to support wellbeing for infants, toddlers, and families. States need to recognize disparities, take concrete steps to reform policies, and invest in communities where resources are unequal. As a nation, we have to ensure equity is at the forefront of every policy conversation in order to promote positive outcomes for our increasingly diverse population of young children.

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