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COLORADO EVALUATION
AND ACTION LAB

Colorado Lab Newsletter

April 2021

Featured in this newsletter:

- Prenatal Substance Use and Improving Family Health
- Ensuring the Equitable Treatment of Defendants
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Prenatal Substance Use and Improving Family Health



To better address the growing problem of perinatal substance use in Colorado, the [Prenatal Substance Use and Improving Family Health study](#) examined the intersection of health, public assistance, and child welfare. Findings show several factors increase the risk of infant child welfare removal from mother and family due to perinatal substance misuse, including:

- less than adequate prenatal care,
- low household income,
- low participation in WIC, and
- the medical fragility of substance exposed newborns.

For infants removed from the home, the rate of placement with relatives while in foster care decreased by 15% from 2016 to 2019. More infants being placed in non-relative foster care is concerning as placing children with relatives has been shown to promote healthy child development.

This data linkage project is a first of its kind in Colorado because it considers the health and well-being of mothers and infants as a unit—even during times when they may be physically separated for medical care, safety, or permanency.

Study findings inform entry points for wrapping services around pregnant women misusing substances beginning during the pregnancy. Future phases of research will build on this initial study to increase understanding of the barriers pregnant women misusing substances face in accessing adequate prenatal care, more effective screening and treatment approaches, and systems and policy changes that can strengthen the health and life path of Colorado families.

The statewide perinatal substance use data linkage study was mandated by

SB19-228 and made possible by the [Linked Information Network of Colorado \(LINC\)](#), which securely connects data across multiple systems. The study was designed in partnership with the Center for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention, Illuminate Colorado, the Substance Exposed Newborns Steering Committee, and experts from state agencies and the academic community. Future work is proposed through SB21-136, the Behavioral Health Recovery Act.

For more information, contact [Dr. Elysia Clemens](#).

Ensuring the Equitable Treatment of Defendants



Denver District Attorney Beth McCann (left) announced findings of the Colorado Lab study, [Racial Disparities in Prosecutorial Outcomes](#), at a press event on April 7th. Initiated by the Denver DA's Office, the goal of the study is to increase transparency and ensure the equitable treatment of defendants.

Study findings were shared and discussed with all of Colorado's district attorneys during a day-long forum on April 8th co-hosted by the Denver DA's Office, Colorado District Attorneys' Council, and the Colorado Lab.

Prosecutors' ability to exercise a wide degree of discretion has the potential to contribute to equitable - or inequitable - outcomes for defendants in the criminal justice system. The study analyzed felony cases accepted for prosecution by the Denver DA's Office to understand the presence and extent of racial and ethnic differences. Administrative data and case file review showed differences between Black, Hispanic, and white defendants across three of the four points of prosecutorial discretion examined: dismissals, deferred judgments, and referrals to drug court. On the fourth point, plea offers, there was no evidence of racial and ethnic differences.

Interviews with Denver prosecutors provided additional insight. Overall, interviewees shared a common concern about the overrepresentation of people of color in the criminal justice system and pointed to the system itself as contributing to racial disparities.

This study represents an important first step in understanding racial and ethnic differences in case outcomes. It also recommends additional actions, including the further evaluation of case refusals and dismissals, review of eligibility requirements to support equitable outcomes, increased processes to support cultural awareness and racial justice, and improved ongoing data collection and review.

In the News

[DU study: White people and people of color are sometimes prosecuted differently by city attorneys](#), Denverite

[Study commissioned by Denver DA finds no 'pervasive' issues of race or bias](#), Channel 9

[Study: No evidence of widespread racism found in Denver DA's Office](#), Channels 2 & 31

[Black and Hispanic people face "persistent set of disadvantages" in Denver courts](#), Denver Post

[Report Shows Denver DA's Office Racial Disparities](#), Westword

[Study examines equity in prosecution decisions in Denver DA's office](#), Denver Gazette/Colorado Politics

For more information, contact [Dr. Elysia Clemens](#).

New at the Colorado Lab

Learn about new projects that are underway at the Colorado Lab and stay tuned for more information as these efforts progress.

[Early Childhood Mental Health Counseling](#)

This project supports the Office of Early Childhood in creating a framework for Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Consultation to ensure there are standards and practices in place for consultants to use when working with child care providers and families.

[Colorado School Counselor Corps](#)

On behalf of the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Lab is conducting a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the Colorado School Counselor Corps Grant Program. The program aims to increase access to school counseling in order to increase graduation rates, decrease dropout rates, and increase rates of matriculation into institutions of higher education.

[Respondent Parents' Counsel](#)

The Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel (ORPC) provides legal advocacy services to indigent parents involved in child welfare proceedings. The Colorado Lab is assessing the impact of ORPC's interdisciplinary teams on child welfare and building the internal capacity of ORPC to routinely evaluate the effectiveness of its work and use evaluation findings to inform strategic planning.

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