

## Why Are Children of Color Overrepresented in Reports to Child Protective Services?

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Alarming stories of black children tied to bedposts and left to starve (O'Donnell, 2003; Shogren, 2003) while under supervision of Child Protective Services (CPS) or of black children in foster care who are simply unaccounted for month after month (Canedy, 2002) remind us of a stark reality: African American and other minority children are disproportionately found in the official child welfare population. Effectiveness in preventing maltreatment among *all children* requires understanding why and how *some children* appear disproportionately at different stages in the official report and substantiation process.

The Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, is in the middle of a 5-year, NIH-funded project attempting to understand racial disparities in child maltreatment reports and substantiations. In our studies, we investigate some statistical inconsistencies that experts in the field have been unable to resolve.

First and foremost is the inconsistency between the main findings of the National Incidence Studies (NIS)<sup>1</sup> and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Set (NCANDS).<sup>2</sup> For example, the NIS does not find meaningful statistical differ-

ences by race in child maltreatment, but the NCANDS and related studies find wide racial gaps. These two studies used different measures of child maltreatment. The NIS data measure known but unreported as well as reported child maltreatment, and the NCANDS data capture only reported and substantiated maltreatment. The logical places, then, to look for racial bias would be at the reporting and substantiation stages. To explain the findings of racial gaps in the NCANDS data but none in the NIS data, children of color would need to have higher report rates or higher substantiation rates than whites, or both.

Of course, bias is a strong word. Even if we could demonstrate that children of color have higher report rates or higher substantiation rates than whites, we would also need to show that these rates could not also be explained by legitimate factors, such as the type of maltreatment, the source of the report, the age or gender of the child, or the economic circumstances of the family. If, for example, neglect is found to be more prevalent among the poor, and blacks are more likely to be poor than whites, then higher reporting and substantiation rates among blacks would not establish racial bias. To establish racial bias, one must show that *identically situated* blacks and whites are treated differently (Myers, 1993).

### References from "Race, Poverty, and Child Maltreatment", page 9

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## CHILDREN OF COLOR OVERREPRESENTED IN REPORTS

We have conducted several studies using the NIS data and found that *reporting* bias does not seem to be at the root of the finding of official overrepresentation of African American children in the CPS (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998; Ards, Myers, Chung, Malkis, & Hagerty, in press). Although it may be intuitively appealing to blame police, teachers, or other mandated reporters for overreporting children of color, our findings simply do not lend support to this hypothesis.

We have also looked for racial bias in substantiation rates in Minnesota. We *do* find statistically significant differences, once we controlled for relevant factors (Ards, Myers, & Malkis with Sugrue & Zhou, 2002; in press). This finding, however, is not replicated in national data, so it is not clear that substantiation bias is the sole answer to the question (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998, 1999, 2001; Morton, 1999).

We are also collecting qualitative data to measure possible racial bias among case workers. This is a delicate task, because some child protective service workers are reluctant to be interviewed. On the one hand, we need to know the attitudes and perceptions of the front-line workers, and on the other, we must respect their privacy. We do not want personnel to feel that studies such as ours are witch hunts. Nonetheless, we are confident that our qualitative data will provide valuable insights in helping us unravel the complexities of racial disparities.

Development of policies on prevention strategies requires that we unravel the race and child maltreatment mystery. Are children of color disproportionately found in the child protective services because of failures to intervene and prevent neglect and abuse?

Or, alternatively, are there equal rates of abuse and neglect among identically situated families across races and ethnicities but unequal rates of reporting, assessment, out-of-home placement, or service delivery, or a combination of these? Is the racial disproportionality a signal of racial discrimination within the child protective services, a discrimination that harms families of color and produces inefficiencies in the delivery of services?

Or, quite benignly, is the racial disproportionality an illusion, an artifact of differential exposure to poverty, welfare services, or high-risk neighborhoods? Perhaps racial disproportionality is not about race at all.

Depending on the answers to these questions, preventive measures would take different forms. Our initial findings and our intuition suggest that parts of the answers to all three possibilities may explain why children of color are disproportionately found among those reported as abused or neglected. Thus, preventive approaches may need to account for all of these paths to racial disproportionality.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The National Incidence Study (NIS) is a congressionally mandated, periodic effort of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN). The first NIS (NIS-1), mandated under P.L. 93-247 (1974), was conducted in 1979 and 1980 and published in 1981. The second NIS (NIS-2), mandated under P.L. 98-457 (1984), was conducted in 1986 and 1987 and published in 1988. The third NIS (NIS-3) was mandated under P.L. 100-294 (as amended). The NIS-3 data were collected in 1993 and 1994, analyses conducted in 1995 and 1996, and these results published in 1996. A key objective of the NIS-3 was to provide updated estimates of the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States and measure changes in incidence from the earlier studies. <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/pubs/statinfo/nis3.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) was developed by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Human Services in partnership with the states to collect annual statistics on child maltreatment from state CPS agencies. <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/prevmnth/scope/ncands.cfm>