

Rethink the Label *Insular Communities* When Referring to Child Abuse

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“The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.” Socrates

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recently issued a “Call for Essays on Child Maltreatment in Insular and Isolated Communities” (2017). The announcement states, in part, the following:

A growing body of research over the past 20 years has illuminated why some groups—such as Native-born Latino, African American, and Native American children and families—are overrepresented in the child welfare system. There are other individuals, groups, and communities, however, that may experience maltreatment, but remain unknown, isolated, and insular to researchers and policy-makers alike.... In a broader sense, there are many communities that are insular not only due to geography, but also to religious, cultural, language and other sources of isolation.

Although the origin of the word *insular* comes from the Latin *insula*, meaning “island,” the actual definition of the word has such pejorative overtones that, when the subject is child abuse, it should not be used in conjunction with the word *community*.

Among other synonyms, the online Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) suggests the following synonyms for the word *insular*: “narrow-minded, parochial, provincial, small-town, petty, myopic, inflexible, dogmatic, rigid, entrenched, intolerant, prejudiced, bigoted, biased, xenophobic, discriminatory.” All the other words listed have similar negative connotations.

The same thesaurus suggests the following synonyms for the word *insular* as applied to the word *community*: “isolated, inaccessible, cut off, closed, separate, segregated, detached, solitary, self-contained, self-sufficient.” On the whole, this list is more neutral.

Search for the phrase *insular community* AND *child abuse* on the Internet and find that 19 out of the first 20 entries describe abuse that took place in a religious community. Thus, it seems that *insular community*, when used in the child abuse context, is a code name for religious community, even though that may not be the explicit intent.

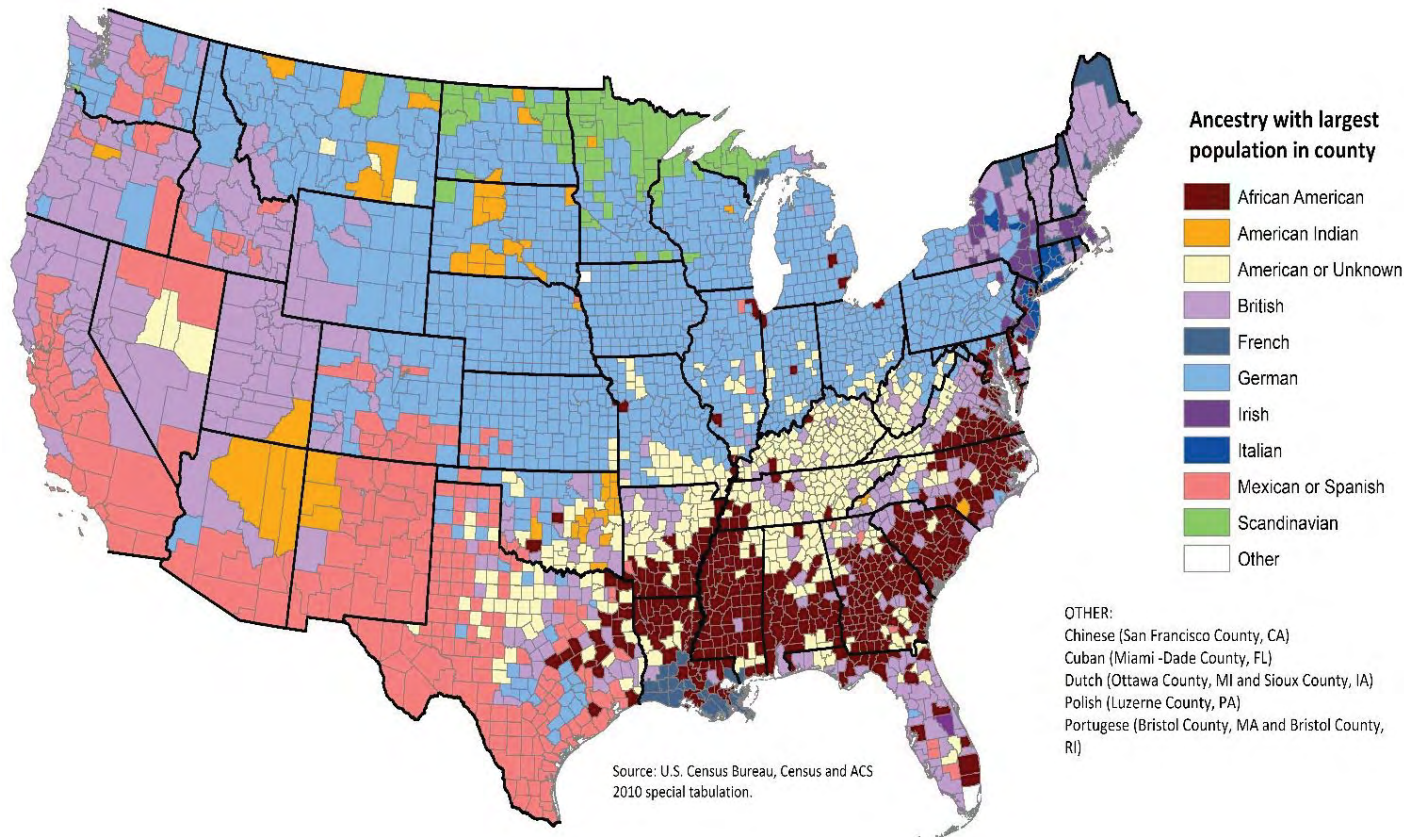
The spate of clergy who have abused their positions and engaged in unspeakable predatory behavior is inexcusable. No amount of monetary compensation or therapy will ever make their victims whole. And, without a doubt, all religious communities have their fair share of child abuse. But to label wholesale those communities as *insular* expresses subtle animosity and condemnation.

Similarly, it is highly stereotypical to refer to all communities of color as *insular*. As of July 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), there were 45.7 million African Americans either alone or in combination with one or more other races. As of July 2016, the Hispanic population was 57.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). As of 2011, there were more than five million Native Americans and Alaska Natives in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). To designate each one as *insular* is a gross mischaracterization.

Consider the latest (2010) U.S. Census Bureau ancestry map in Illustration 1 (next page).

Certainly not all African Americans, American

Illustration I. Ancestry With the Largest Population in County.



Indians, and Latinos, whose concentrated population stretches thousands of miles over multiple states, could be considered insular.

Accurate terminology and definitions are essential in social science research. Words always matter. Perhaps the word *tight-knit*—“a group of people united or bound together by strong relationships and common interests”—might be a better choice for social scientists to use when speaking about these types of communities.

Even if it is done inadvertently, mislabeling can spawn unintended hostility.

About the Author

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