



Racial/ethnic disparity in child welfare systems: A longitudinal study utilizing the Disparity Index (DI)[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to examine racial/ethnic disparity among children and families that are involved with the child welfare system. Specifically, the authors explore whether or not disparity levels and long-term changes in disparity in California child welfare systems are significant. In addition, the study investigates how county characteristics such as child poverty rates, unemployment rates, and rurality are associated with levels of disparity and changes in racial/ethnic disparity over time. Using a Latent Growth Curve (LGC) modeling approach, the study estimated the trajectories of county-level Disparity Index (DI) scores (Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008). African American and Hispanic/Latino children were compared to Caucasian children for two phases of the child welfare process: substantiated allegations and entries, between 2005 and 2008. The results demonstrate that racial/ethnic disparity between African American and Caucasian children was significant at both phases of the child welfare process in 2008. However, disparity between Hispanic/Latino and White children was not significant. Levels of disparity between African American and Caucasian children remained constant over time. Regarding the effects of county characteristics, higher child poverty rates, higher unemployment rates and rurality were related to lower levels of disparity. In addition, unemployment rates were associated with increasing rates of change in entries disparity between African American and Caucasian children. And urbanicity was associated with increasing rates of change in substantiated allegations disparity between Hispanic/Latino and Caucasian children. The study's implications for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Study purpose

The current study aims to investigate longitudinal trends in racial/ethnic disparity in child welfare. To date, there have been few attempts to empirically examine whether racial/ethnic disparity has decreased or increased and which factors may explain any reduction/increase of racial/ethnic disparity that may exist over time. The study

attempts to apply a Latent Growth Curve modeling approach to investigate longitudinal trends in racial/ethnic disparity using the Disparity Index (DI) scores in California child welfare systems between 2005 and 2008 (Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008). Longitudinal research on this topic will contribute to the knowledge base concerning racial/ethnic disparity. In particular, the results may be used to inform policy initiatives that target reduction in racial/ethnic disparity and disproportionality in child welfare systems.

2. Background

Nationally, overrepresentation of children from ethnic minorities has been identified as a major concern in the field of child welfare for nearly two decades. Previous studies revealed that children from ethnic minorities are more likely to undergo maltreatment investigations, those investigations are more likely to result in substantiations, and children from these groups are more likely to be removed from their parents and placed in out-of-home care than Caucasian children (Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Hill, 2006; Stoltzfus, 2005; Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Jones-Harden, & Landsverk, 2005). Once these

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children enter the out-of-home care system, they tend to remain in care longer and are less likely to be reunified with their parents/caretakers or adopted than Caucasian children (Barth, 1997; Kapp, McDonald, & Diamond, 2001; McRoy, 2005). As a result, children from ethnic minorities have been found to be disproportionately represented in out-of-home care (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; McRoy, 2005).

In California, in 2007, child maltreatment substantiation rates were similar between Caucasian (20.7%) and African American children (21.5%), but the likelihood of entering out-of-home care was higher among African American children (Center for Social Services Research, 2008). Among substantiated cases, the proportions of children who entered the foster care system were 45.9% of African American children and 33.0% of Caucasian children. Furthermore, 15.1% of Caucasian children in the system exited to adoption by the end of 2007 but only 8.1% of African American children in the system were adopted. Therefore, the percentage of African American children in the foster care system (26.3%) was *disproportionally* higher by a large margin than the percentage of African American children in the child population (6.0%) in California in 2007. In contrast, the percentage of Caucasian children in the foster care system (25.2%) was lower than the percentage of Caucasian children in the child population (31.4%). Overrepresentation of children from ethnic minorities in out-of-home care is a significant problem since children who enter out-of-home care are at high risk of educational delays and emotional distress (McRoy, 2005). Furthermore, once children age out of care, they are at risk of criminal justice involvement, public assistance receipt, substance abuse, and homelessness (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Considering the significance of the adverse outcomes experienced by many children who undergo long term out-of-home placements; explorations of why children from ethnic minorities, especially African American children, are overrepresented in the child welfare system must be explored.

3. Definitions of racial/ethnic disparity

Studies on the overrepresentation of children from ethnic minorities in the child welfare system have often used the terms racial/ethnic “disparity” and/or “disproportionality.” Despite the substantial contribution of existing research, definitions of disparity and disproportionality have, at times, been confusing and the constructs have often been used interchangeably. Table 1 represents previous studies that include the definitions of racial/ethnic “disparity” and “disproportionality.”

The following is a summary of definitions used in the existing literature. The term “disproportionality” refers to the rate of representation of a certain racial/ethnic group in the child welfare systems compared to representation of children of the same racial/ethnic group in the general population (e.g., Hill, 2006; Johnson et al., 2009; Needell et al., 2007; The Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009; Tilbury & Thoburn, 2009; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). On the other hand, the term “disparity” refers to the relative rate of representation of a specific racial/ethnic group in the child welfare population in comparison to the representation of other racial/ethnic groups in the child welfare population (e.g., Hill, 2006; Shaw et al., 2008). Hill (2006) explains that disparity signifies unequal treatment between a racial/ethnic minority and a non-minority in different decision points (e.g., investigation, substantiation, entry into out-of-home care, and exit from out-of-home care). Based on these definitions, the “disproportionality of children in foster care is a function of disparity in the entry and/or exit process” (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007, p 5). Similarly, Courtney and Skyles (2003) explained that disproportionality can result from groups coming into and/or exiting from the system at different rates. For example, the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care may be due to significant disparities concerning entries into foster care and/or disparities in exits from foster care. Therefore, understanding why racial/ethnic disparity exists during various child welfare processes or phases is essential to comprehend overrepresentation of children from ethnic minorities in the system.

Table 1

The definitions of disproportionality and disparity in child welfare system (in alphabetical order by last name or organization's name).

Author(s) (year, page #)	Disproportionality	Disparity
Fluke et al. (2003, p. 364–365)	Disproportionality Representation Index (DRI) were constructed based on Dean (1997)'s study. For example, the Investigation DRI is defined as the ratio derived from dividing the percentage of children in a specific racial group who were the subject of an investigation by the percentage of children of the same racial group in the younger-than-18 years population in the state.	Investigation Disparity Index (DI) is measured as the odds of a child from a non-reference group being investigated who is not a member of a reference group in comparison to the respective proportion of the members of the reference group.
Hill (2006, p 3)	The difference in the percentage of children of a certain racial or ethnic group in the country as compared to the percentage of children of the same group in the child welfare system.	Disparity means unequal treatment when comparing a racial or ethnic minority to a non-minority. This can be observed in many forms including decision points (e.g., reporting, investigation, substantiation, foster care placement, and exit), treatment, services, resources.
Johnson, Antle, and Barbee (2009, p. 688)	The difference in the percentage of a group of children in the child welfare system as compared to that group's percentage in the general population	One group of children experiences inequitable treatment or outcomes as compared to another group of children.
Needell et al. (2007, p. 7)	When a group make up a proportion of those experiencing some event that is higher or lower than that group's proportion of the population.	A comparison of one group (e.g., regarding disproportionality, services, and outcomes) to another group
The Center for the Study of Social Policy (2009, p. 13)	African American and Native American children are involved in child protection/protective systems at a rate that is disproportionate to their presence in the general population.	Children and families of color have less access to services and time spent in temporary out-of-home placement lengthier for children from ethnic minorities than their Caucasian counterparts.
Tilbury and Thoburn (2009, p. 1103)	The extent to which a group's representation in the child welfare system is proportionate to their representation in the overall population	A ratio between rates in a child welfare population for different groups
Wulczyn, Lery, and Haight (2006, p. 6) Wulczyn and Lery (2007, p 5)	The disproportionality refers to one population that is out of proportion with respect to an appropriate reference population. Disproportionality arises whenever the proportion of one group in the comparison population (i.e., foster children) is either proportionality larger (overrepresentation) or smaller (underrepresentation) than in the general population.	Disparity means a lack of equality. (Entry rate) disparity is expressed as the ratio of the entry rate for African American children to the entry rate for white children.

Note. This table does not include all studies presenting the definitions of disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

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