



NIS interpretations: Race and the National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 May 2010

Received in revised form 30 July 2010

Accepted 2 August 2010

Available online 6 August 2010

Keywords:

Child maltreatment

Disproportionality

Policy

ABSTRACT

The National Incidence Studies (NIS) of Child Abuse and Neglect are the primary estimates of actual child maltreatment rates in the United States. Findings from the NIS-2 of 1986, and the NIS-3, of 1993, have been presented as demonstrating that Blacks and Whites are maltreated at equal rates. The NIS-4, using 2006 data, was presented as showing markedly different findings from the prior NIS studies with regard to race. A supplementary NIS-4 report on race argued that differences between the NIS-3 and NIS-4 were due to better precision and an expanding income gap between Blacks and Whites between 1993 and 2006. This paper will demonstrate that the NIS-2 and NIS-3 did not, as is commonly believed, show equivalence between Black and White maltreatment rates and that the NIS-2, NIS-3 and NIS-4 do not differ markedly in their racial findings. Further, the large historical increase in the Black/White income gap cited in the NIS-4 race supplement derives from a simple failure to account for inflation. If left unaddressed, misinterpretations of NIS data will continue to misinform policy, cloud the issue of racial bias in the child welfare system and obscure the ongoing role of concentrated poverty in driving racial disproportionality.

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1. Introduction

Do Black children experience more child maltreatment than White children in the United States? The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) has been interpreted as showing such an effect for the first time, in contrast to the Second and Third National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-2 and NIS-3), which were interpreted as showing no such effect (Sedlak, 1987; Sedlak, 1991; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Sedlak, Hantman, & Schultz, 1997; Sedlak, Mettenburg, et al., 2010; Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). The “NIS is a congressionally mandated, periodic research effort to assess the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States” (DHHS, 2010). It is analogous in within-area impact to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health or the National Crime Victimization Survey. As such, the NIS series has been a prime driver of policy.

This paper will show that contrary to the claims of the study authors, the NIS-2, NIS-3 and NIS-4 have very similar findings with regard to race. Confidence intervals in the NIS-2 and NIS-3 were so large that very different point estimates of maltreatment by race failed to achieve statistical significance. Unfortunately, all published sources of which we are aware portray this as affirmative evidence that Black and White maltreatment rates are equivalent. Finally, a key substantive explanation offered by the NIS-4 research team for the “new” race findings, a

claimed large increase in the Black/White income gap, is incorrect, being due to a failure to account for inflation between 1993 and 2006.

2. Current interpretations of the NIS studies

This section reviews how the NIS-2, NIS-3 and NIS-4 race findings have historically been interpreted in comparison with each other and with official report data. The impact of the NIS on the policy debate is presented.

2.1. Review of the NIS studies

This brief background of the NIS is by no means an exhaustive review, and readers are encouraged to consult the detailed reports available (Sedlak, 1987; Sedlak, 1991; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Sedlak, Hantman, & Schultz, 1997; Sedlak, Mettenburg, et al., 2010; Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). The following information is drawn largely from these sources. The NIS are periodic surveys that were instituted to help understand the national incidence of child abuse and neglect. A probability sample of counties was selected. The NIS-2 used 29 counties, the NIS-3 used 42 counties and the NIS-4 used 122 counties. Both child protective services staff and community sentinels (law enforcement, medical staff, teachers, etc...) provided data on maltreated children of whom they were aware. Cases were eligible if they resulted in demonstrable harm (actual injury) called the “harm standard”—a higher standard than would be required for a CPS agency to substantiate a case; or were at risk of harm, called the “endangerment standard”. The latter category was added after the

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NIS-1 to insure that cases reflected those that would be substantiated (Sedlak, 1991, p. 2–7). Identifying information was used to unduplicate reports. The similarity of the endangerment standard to substantiated cases has advantages and drawbacks. One advantage is the ability to compare findings to the detailed victim data in NCANDS (DHHS, 2008). One drawback is that recent empirical work indicates that many unsubstantiated cases include serious risk and harm (Hussey et al., 2005; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009).

2.2. Interpretations of the NIS-2 and NIS-3 relative to race

The NIS-2 original report stated there were no significant differences by race, though a revised report mentions “three marginal noteworthy but insignificant trends related to race/ethnicity” specific to physical abuse, physical neglect and fatalities (Sedlak, 1987; Sedlak, 1991). The NIS-3 final report states that “The NIS-3 found *no* race differences in maltreatment incidence” (italics in original text) and that “The NIS findings suggest that the different races receive differential attention somewhere during the process of referral, investigation, and service allocation, and that the differential representation of minorities in the child welfare population does not derive from inherent differences in the rates at which they are abused or neglected” (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996, p.8–7). It is also stated that “Thus, the NIS-2 and the NIS-3 have both failed to uncover any evidence of disproportionate victimization in relation to children’s race” (p. 4–30). At many other places in the report, it is noted that there is no “statistically significant” difference by race (e.g. p. 4–28, p. 8–7).

2.3. Interpretations of the NIS-4 relative to race

“Unlike previous NIS cycles, the NIS-4 found strong and pervasive race differences in the incidence of maltreatment.” (Sedlak, Mettenburg, et al., 2010, p.9). Due to the critical nature of this finding, a supplementary report was released in March, 2010. Sedlak and colleagues argue therein that the differences between the NIS-4 and NIS-3 are due to (1) increased precision and (2) the widening of the income gap between Black and White families between 1993 and 2006 (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010).

2.4. Official victimization rates: NCANDS

NIS findings are frequently compared and contrasted to findings from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). NCANDS provides annual national counts of child abuse and neglect reporting, victimization rates, and services provided by child welfare in the United States (DHHS, 2008). In 2006, 48 states and the District of Columbia reported a victimization rate for Black children of 19.8 per 1000 children and a victimization rate of 10.7 per 1000 for White children (Department of Health and Human Services and Services, 2008). Black children were therefore 1.85 times as likely as White children to be officially reported to child welfare agencies and classified as victims of maltreatment.

2.5. Shaping the policy debate

The NIS-2 and NIS-3 have been universally interpreted as showing equivalence between Black and White children’s rates of *actual* maltreatment. This apparent conflict with NCANDS has been taken to suggest that the current reporting and child welfare investigation system is biased towards over-reporting and/or differentially screening in and validating Black children as victims. For example, the Children’s Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services has indicated that “The Third National Incidence Study (NIS-3) ... did not find racial differences overall. These findings suggest that the overrepresentation of African-American children in the child welfare

system is not attributable to higher rates of maltreatment in this population, but to factors related to the child welfare system itself” (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, & Gourdine, 2010). The state of Washington summarizes the findings of the NIS-3 similarly, stating “...multiple waves of the National Incidence Studies show that despite their higher representation in the ranks of the poor, there is no higher rate of abuse in Black or American Indian families” (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2008, p. 10–11). The governor of Oregon, in a recent executive order, asserted that “national studies have shown that children of color are not abused at higher rates than white children” and that “disparate treatment can happen at many steps along the decision-making process within the child welfare system including reporting, investigation, substantiation and foster care” (Kulongoski, 2009). Calls for legislative change in academic journals have also been based upon these interpretations (Dixon, 2008). At least eleven states are currently addressing disproportionality and disparity in legislation or policy, both at the level of reporting and also at the level of services following reports (Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare, 2009).

3. Correcting misinterpretations of the NIS

This analysis uses NIS endangerment standard rather than harm standard estimates. Discussion is restricted to the “all maltreatment” category, citing rates per 1000 children, with confidence intervals in parentheses when available. Justification for these choices can be found in the discussion section. Rates are always per 1000 children. The data presented in Table 1 are derived from the NIS-3 final report appendices and the NIS-4 supplementary report (Sedlak, Hantman, & Schultz, 1997).

3.1. Race and maltreatment in NIS: The data

The NIS-2 found a maltreatment rate of 19.41 for Whites and 36.22 for Blacks, this difference being statistically non-significant (Sedlak, Hantman, & Schultz, 1997). The NIS-3 found a rate of 36.50 (21.93–51.06) for Whites against a rate of 54.96 (33.61–76.30) for Blacks, also statistically non-significant (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). The NIS-4 found statistically significant different rates of 28.58 (24.43–32.73) for Whites and a 49.55 (39.25–59.85) for Blacks (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). These data are presented in Table 1 and graphically in Fig. 1.

Although not significantly different, the NIS-2 and NIS-3 race point estimates were consistent with each other and with the NIS-4, both in general magnitude and valence. Black children were 87% more likely than White children to be victims of maltreatment in the NIS-2, 51% more likely in the NIS-3, and 73% more likely in the NIS-4. The statistically significant NIS-4 racial difference is 22 percentage points higher than the statistically non-significant NIS-3 difference, but is 14 points *lower* than the statistically non-significant NIS-2 difference. NIS-4 “splits the difference” between the two prior studies.

A common logical fallacy occurs when one argues that the lack of ability to prove an assertion stands as disproof of the assertion

Table 1

Endangerment standard (all maltreatment) rate estimates from the NIS-2, NIS-3 and NIS-4 with confidence intervals.

NIS Version	Whites	Blacks	Percentage difference
NIS-2 (1986)	19.41 (13.87–24.95)	36.22 (19.96–52.48)	Blacks 87% higher (NS)
NIS-3 (1993)	36.50 (21.93–51.06)	54.96 (33.61–76.30)	Blacks 51% higher (NS)
NIS-4 (2006)	28.58 (24.43–32.73)	49.55 (39.25–59.85)	Blacks 73% higher (p<.05)

Note: NIS-2 estimate from Sedlak et al., 1997, p. D-27. NIS-2 Confidence Intervals from Sedlak, 2010. Other Estimates from Sedlak, McPherson & Das, 2010, p. A-2.

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