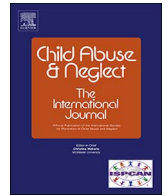


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Factors associated with racial differences in child welfare investigative decision-making in Ontario, Canada



Bryn King^{a,*}, Barbara Fallon^a, Reiko Boyd^b, Tara Black^a, Kofi Antwi-Boasiako^a, Carolyn O'Connor^a

^a Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada

^b Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston, 3511 Cullen Blvd Room 110HA, Houston, TX 77204-4013 USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the substantial body of literature on racial disparities in child welfare involvement in the United States, there is relatively little research on such differences for Canadian children and families. This study begins to address this gap by examining decision-making among workers investigating Black and White families investigated for child protection concerns in Ontario, Canada. Using provincially representative data, the study assessed whether Black children were more likely than White children to be investigated by child welfare, if there was disparate decision-making by race throughout the investigation, and how the characteristics of Black and White children contribute to the decision to transfer to ongoing services. The results indicate that Black children were more likely to be investigated than White children, but there was little evidence to suggest that workers in Ontario child welfare agencies made the decision to substantiate, transfer to ongoing services, or place the child in out-of-home care based on race alone. Black and White children differed significantly with respect to child characteristics, characteristics of the investigation, caregiver risk factors, and socioeconomic circumstances. When adjusting for these characteristics, Black families had 33% greater odds (OR = 1.33; 95% CI: 1.26, 1.40; $p = < 0.001$) of being transferred to ongoing services compared to White families. Among Black families, the assessed quality of the parent-child relationship and severe economic hardship were the most significant and substantial contributors to the decision to provide child welfare services. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

1. Introduction

The mission of the child welfare system is to promote the safety, permanency, well-being, and family and community support for children while responding to and preventing the problem of child maltreatment (Trocmé et al., 2009). A widely shared and implicit goal of professionals involved in the system is to carry out the mission with integrity, in a manner that treats all children and families with equity and fairness, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nation of origin. Yet, in many contexts, racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities persist as a feature of modern child welfare agencies, with children of certain racial minority backgrounds more likely to be referred for suspected maltreatment, to be substantiated as victims, to be placed into out-of-home care, and to remain in care for longer periods of time than White children (Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010; Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013; Sinha, Trocmé, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2013; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; Wolczyn,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bryn.king@utoronto.ca (B. King), barbara.fallon@utoronto.ca (B. Fallon), rkboyd@central.uh.edu (R. Boyd), tara.black@utoronto.ca (T. Black), kofi.antwi.boasiako@mail.utoronto.ca (K. Antwi-Boasiako), carolyn.oconnor@mail.utoronto.ca (C. O'Connor).

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Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013).

There are competing explanations regarding the causes of, and prescriptions for, addressing racial disparities in child welfare involvement (Bartholet, 2009; Cross, 2008; Drake et al., 2011). Some scholars argue that the overrepresentation of Black children is due to organizational and worker-level factors characterized by racial bias and systematic discrimination (Derezotes, Testa, & Poertner, 2005; Pon, Gosine, & Phillips, 2011; Roberts, 2002). Other scholars contend that overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system is a function of their disproportionate experience of poverty and other risk factors associated with maltreatment (Barth, 2005; Drake et al., 2011; Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2009). Certainly, the complexity of this problem cannot be understated. The root causes involve social, economic, political, historical, and structural factors, that often trigger competing priorities for child welfare agencies (Boyd, 2014). The charged and pervasive nature of this issue presents a unique challenge for overwhelmed and overburdened child welfare agencies, their workers, and communities they serve. More importantly, for many Black families in contact with child welfare agencies, racial disproportionality and disparity are a reflection of historic and ongoing legacies of social and institutional discrimination that place the intersectional burden of risk and poverty disproportionately on Black families and communities.

Ontario's child welfare system is beginning to grapple with the issue of Black-White disparities in reporting, service involvement, and placement in out-of-home care (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016a). One Toronto-based agency has documented higher rates of child welfare involvement among Black families compared to White families (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2015) and efforts are under way to collect and analyze race-based data more systematically (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016b; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016), but there is little research assessing this phenomenon across the province. The following sections will review the literature regarding definitions of disproportionality and disparity, as well as racial disparities in child welfare involvement in the United States and Canada. Given the relatively limited research on Black children and families in the Canadian child welfare system, racial disparities in other service domains will also be briefly discussed.

1.2. Definitions of disparity and disproportionality

Historically, there has been a failure to distinguish between disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare literature, with the terms often treated as synonymous and driven by the same processes. However, these terms carry distinct implications. Disproportionality in child welfare is typically used to refer to the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of different racial groups (Boyd, 2014; Fluke et al., 2010). In this definition, representation is measured by comparing the proportion of Black children in the general population to the proportion of Black children experiencing a specific child welfare decision point (e.g., referrals, entries into out-of-home care) or outcome (e.g., reunification, adoption). Disparity in child welfare has primarily been defined in two distinct ways. On one hand, disparity is defined as "the comparison of the ratio of one race or ethnic group in an event to the representation of another race or ethnic group who experienced the same event" (Fluke et al., 2010, p. 8). As such, a disparity exists when the ratios being compared are not equal (Myers, 2010). Alternatively, disparity is also defined as "unequal treatment" with respect to involvement, decision-making, delivery of services, or outcomes for similarly situated children from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (Hill, 2007, p. 53). In this sense, some portion of the magnitude of observed disparity ratios are attributed to unjustified differential treatment between groups. In the current study, disparity is defined as the ratio of the rate of a key front-end outcome (investigations, substantiated maltreatment, transfer to ongoing services, and placement in care) for Black children to the rate of the respective outcome for White children.

1.3. Black children and racial disparity in child welfare in the United States

Research indicates that Black children in the U.S. are overrepresented in child welfare reports, investigations, and foster care entries, and experience disparities compared to White children in reunification rates, placement duration, and exit from out-of-home care (Derezotes et al., 2005; Foster, Hillemeier, & Bai, 2011; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; United States General Accounting Office, 2007). Levels of disproportionality for Black children tend to increase at each subsequent stage after a maltreatment report is substantiated (Harris & Hackett, 2008; Hill, 2007). Compared to children of other racial/ethnic backgrounds, Black children are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care (Goerge & Lee, 2005; Hill, 2005; Needell et al., 2003; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007) and experience more frequent changes in non-kin placement (Foster et al., 2011; Zinn, DeCoursey, Goerge, & Courtney, 2006). They are also less likely to reunify with birth parents and tend to have longer stays in foster care (Close, 1983; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Harris & Courtney, 2003; Wulczyn, 2003). In addition, previous studies indicate that Black children and families receive fewer and lower quality services, fewer foster parent support services, fewer contacts by caseworkers, less access to mental health services and less access to drug treatment services when compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Courtney et al., 1996; Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 2004; Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003; McRoy, 2004; Tracy, Green, & Bremseth, 1993; Urquiza, Wu, & Borrego, 1999).

Some scholars have argued that the overrepresentation of Black children is due to systematic discrimination and punishment of Black parents for being poor (Derezotes et al., 2005; Roberts, 2002). Research has demonstrated that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in explaining racial disparities in maltreatment reporting, substantiation, and entry into care, since multivariable models accounting for poverty and other social and health risks reduce or reverse these statistical differences when measured at both the individual (Ards, Myers, Chung, Malkis, & Hagerty, 2003; Dworsky, Courtney, & Zinn, 2007; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; Slack et al., 2007) and at the neighbourhood or community level (Drake et al., 2009; Wulczyn et al., 2013). In sum, the research indicates that the phenomenon of racial disparity in child welfare involvement in the United States is likely due to the complex interplay of

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