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Research article

Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system in Canada: A mixed methods study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of the study is to understand the similarities and differences in child welfare involvement for Asian- Canadian (East and Southeast Asian) versus White-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system in Canada, and to consider the implications and recommendations for service. This mixed methods study began by replicating this author's previous study that found significant differences in the case characteristics and services used by Asian compared to non-Asian families in the child welfare system. The present study used a mixed method approach to further build a comprehensive descriptive understanding of Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system at national and local levels. **Methods:** Secondary data analysis of the 2008 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008) was conducted to identify the case characteristics (such as referral source, investigation type, and primary maltreatment type) and short-term service outcome (such as substantiation decision and decision to transfer to ongoing child protection services) of child maltreatment investigations involving Asian-Canadian children and families in the child welfare system. The results were presented to focus group participants in a workshop, and a semi-structured interview guide was used to document child welfare workers' experience with and perception of Asian-Canadian service users.

Results: The results indicated substantial differences between Asian- Canadian and White-Canadian children and families investigated by child welfare agencies in respect to the household composition, maltreatment type, substantiation decision and decision to transfer to ongoing child protection services. Child welfare workers validated the results from secondary data analysis of the CIS-2008 and offer a broader cultural and structural context for understanding child welfare involvement with Asian-Canadians.

Conclusion: Asian-Canadian children and families bring a diversity of cultural values and family norms. This study prompts further consideration for social work practice and policies in working with Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system.

1. Introduction

This study aims to understand the differences in child welfare involvement for Asian-Canadian (East and Southeast Asian) versus White-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system in Canada, and to consider the implications and

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recommendations for service. This study began by replicating this author's original study (Lee, Rha, & Fallon, 2014), using the most recent 2008 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2008). In the original study (Lee et al., 2014) conducted secondary data analysis of the CIS-2003 and found a higher proportion of substantiated child maltreatment investigations with physical abuse as the primary maltreatment type for Asian-Canadian families, compared to non-Asian families. There were significantly more physical abuse investigations involving Asian-Canadian families that used "hit with object" as a form of physical maltreatment and "spanking" as a form of discipline, compared to physical abuse investigations involving non-Asian-Canadian families (Lee et al., 2014, p. 543). Furthermore, the study found there was "an 11.25 times greater likelihood of child welfare placement for substantiated physical abuse investigations involving Asian families than those involving non-Asian families" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 545). Ethnicity was the most significant predictor of out-of-home child welfare placement (Lee et al., 2014). The consistent findings of disparate case characteristics and short-term service outcome between Asian-Canadian and White-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system using the CIS-2008 data, prompted a mixed methods research design. The current study examines child welfare workers and community service providers' interpretations regarding results from the secondary data analysis of the CIS-2008.

Asian children and families are an under-studied population in child welfare research (Behl et al., 2001). More attention to Asian children and families in the child welfare system is necessary. East and Southeast Asians combine to represent the fastest growing ethnic minority in Canada and the United States (Statistics Canada, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). "According to the 2010 Census, the Asian population grew faster than any other race group in the United States between 2000 and 2010" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Similarly in Canada, the proportion of Asian-born persons has steadily increased from 14% in 1981 to 41% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2010). For the first time in history, the Asian-born proportion of the foreign-born population exceeded the European-born proportion in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2010). Statistics Canada (2010) projects that the Chinese and Filipino population (currently the second and fourth largest visible minority group in Canada) will double in population in the next two decades. Furthermore, "the visible minority population would be over-represented in the younger age groups... 36% of the population under 15 years of age in 2031 would belong to a visible minority group, compared to 18% of persons aged 65 and over" (Statistics Canada, 2010, p. 1). The growing Asian visible minority population in Canada and United States prompts us to carefully consider the unique needs of these communities and how to best service the vulnerable children, youth, and families that come to the attention of the child welfare system.

There is no universal definition of child abuse and what constitutes violence against children varies substantially across the Southeast Asia region (Chan et al., 2011; Ju & Lee, 2010; UNICEF, 2005). Many countries in Southeast Asia do not have established child welfare systems or legislation for the protection of children from maltreatment (UNICEF, 2005). Empirical studies suggest, however, that various forms of maltreatment occur in the population, and children could benefit from formal child welfare intervention in Southeast Asia (Chan et al., 2011; Ju & Lee, 2011; Tang, 2006; Zhu & Tang, 2012). Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong who experience physical abuse have high rates of health-compromising behaviors including sexual experimentation, non-fatal self-harm, and suicidal behaviors with low levels of social support (Tang, 2011). In many Southeast Asian cultures, personal or family shame, perceived disobedience, and fear of retribution prevent many cases of child abuse from being reported (Chan et al., 2011; Rhind et al., 1999; UNICEF, 2005; Zhu & Tang, 2012).

In Canada and the United States, where child welfare is an established system of protection, Asian populations are found to be under-represented in child welfare services, compared to all other ethno-racial groups (Dakil et al., 2011; Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010; Hill, 2007). When involved in the child welfare system, Asian/Pacific Islanders have the highest proportions of reported physical abuse compared to all other ethno-racial groups in the United States (Dakil et al., 2011). Furthermore, Asian/Pacific Islanders were less likely to receive child protective service interventions such as family preservation, mental health, and substance abuse than other ethno-racial groups involved in the child welfare system for physical abuse in the United States (Dakil et al., 2011).

The Asian population has a diversity of needs. Huang, Calzada, Cheng, and Brotman (2012) found that immigrant Asian-American children in a community sample had higher levels of internalizing problems, lower levels of interpersonal relationship skills, and were less likely to be in good physical health compared to White children. Among the Asian sub-groups, Southeast Asian parents had the lowest average level of education and were more likely to live in poverty. Children of Southeast Asian immigrants were found to have the worst physical and mental health outcomes among the Asian sub-groups. Despite some evidence of need for services, Asian communities are under-represented in mental health (Leong & Lau, 2001), physical health, and social services (Kim & Keefe, 2010).

Behl et al. (2001) conducted a content analysis on the inclusion of ethnicity in child welfare research over 20 years and found that only 2% of the empirical literature in which ethnic breakdowns were reported, included Asian children and families. This lack of attention ignores the real and relevant issues in the Asian communities. The lack of child welfare research on Asian populations may contribute to the Asian "model minority" stereotype that claims that little or no government or social services are needed for this population (Kim & Keefe, 2010; Leong & Lau, 2001). The "model minority" stereotype reinforces the myth that an individual can overcome disadvantage and discrimination by simply working harder. This myth can negate the broader structural and systemic barriers that hinder access and equality. The harmful consequence is that Asian populations will continue to be made invisible in social service provision, practice standards, and research literature. This study aims to contribute to the knowledge-based regarding Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system, and offer recommendations for working with this population.

2. Literature review

There is a multitude of research regarding racial disproportionality and disparity (Ards et al., 1998; Fluke et al., 2010; Hill, 2006;

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