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A birth cohort study of Asian and Pacific Islander children reported for abuse or neglect by maternal nativity and ethnic origin



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ABSTRACT

Research identifying racial and ethnic disparities in child protective services (CPS) involvement in the U.S. has focused on the overrepresentation of Black children and the growing Latino child population. Little attention has been paid to children of Asian origin, the most underrepresented group of children in the U.S. CPS system. The objective of this analysis was to examine subgroup patterns of CPS involvement in California for Asian and Pacific Islander (API) children prospectively based on maternal nativity and ethnic origin. We extracted data for API children born in California in 2006 and 2007 ($N = 138,858$) from population-based birth records and linked those records to CPS records spanning the first 5 years of life (through 2012). We assessed distributional differences in risk indicators for the full birth cohort of API children and calculated a summary risk variable representing the cumulative number of risks present at birth. Generalized linear models were used to estimate API children's adjusted relative risk of CPS report by subgroup. Overall, 12.2% of children born in California in the 2006–2007 birth cohort were API. The majority of API children had foreign-born mothers (80.9%). Children of U.S.-born Hawaiian, Guamanian, or Samoan mothers had the highest rate, with 20.4% being reported to CPS by their 5th birthday. The lowest rates of child abuse and neglect reporting were observed among children of foreign-born Asian Indian (2.5%), Korean (2.7%), and Chinese (2.8%) mothers, compared to 5.4% of all Asian and Pacific Islander children, and 14.8% of children in general population. Findings underscore the presence of disparities in CPS involvement among API children, which has implications for health and well-being across the life course and for targeted maltreatment prevention strategies.

Research identifying racial and ethnic disparities in child protective services (CPS) involvement in the U.S. has largely focused on the overrepresentation of Black children (Lanier, Maguire-Jack, Walsh, Drake, & Hubel, 2014; Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013; Drake et al., 2011) and the growing Latino child population (Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2015; Cardoso, Dettlaff, Finno-Velasquez, Scott, & Faulkner, 2014; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Growing concern around enhancing sensitivity to ethnicity and culture in the child welfare field has led to increasing efforts to disaggregate data by ethnic groups to identify potentially unique patterns of child maltreatment risk based on factors such as parental birthplace. Despite increased attention given to ethnic and cultural diversity with Latino and Native American groups in child abuse and neglect research and practice, relatively little research has focused on the scope of child abuse in the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) population (Fong & Mokuau, 1994).

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API groups comprise 30% of the total immigrant population in the U.S., with a disproportionate concentration residing in California (Grieco et al., 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In 2010, API groups surpassed Latino immigrants as the fastest-growing minority population, with the number of foreign- and U.S.-born API residents growing 46% from 2000 to 2010 and 10% from 2010 to 2013 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This growth is expected to continue, with the U.S. Census Bureau predicting the API population to increase 79% by 2050 (Ortman & Guarneri, 2009).

National data aggregated by ethnic group have consistently reported API children to be at lower risk of maltreatment than other groups, but the few studies that examined subgroup differences suggest otherwise. In 2014, the rate of substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports of abuse or neglect among API children in the United States was 1.7 per 1000, much lower than other races and ethnicities (8.6 per 1000 for Whites, 8.8 per 1000 for Hispanics, and 15.3 per 1000 for African Americans; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). In California, in the 2006–2007 birth cohort, by the age of 5 just 5.4% of API children were reported to CPS, compared to 13.7% of White children, 31.6% of African American children, 21.2% of Latino children of U.S. born mothers, 11.8% of Latino children of foreign born mothers, and 36.5% of Native American children (Putnam-Hornstein, Mitchell, & Hammond, 2014). These numbers suggest that API children are less likely to become involved with CPS than children of other racial and ethnic groups, yet researchers have not accounted for factors that might contribute to diversity in the general API population, such as ethnic origin and maternal nativity.

No known studies have prospectively followed a group of API children from birth to determine exposure to risk of report to CPS. Although sparse, existing regionally based studies have demonstrated a great deal of variation in patterns of abuse and neglect among Asian subgroups with a history of involvement with CPS. For example, an examination of 1263 API families reported for suspected child abuse to the Washington State Division of Child and Family Services Case and Management Information System between 1995 and 1997 found that Southeast Asian and Samoan families were overrepresented relative to the overall API community, whereas Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino families were underrepresented (Pelczarski & Kemp, 2006). A study in San Diego, California, that examined 158 API families reported for child maltreatment determined that Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, and Koreans were less likely to have a report of child abuse and neglect, whereas Vietnamese and Cambodians were more likely to be referred (Ima & Hohm, 1991). Another study examining child maltreatment among Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cambodian families analyzed 761 case files retrieved from the Asian Pacific Unit of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. In that study, Cambodian refugee families were the most frequently reported ethnic group and were overrepresented in CPS reports compared to their share in the Los Angeles population (Chang, Rhee, & Berthold, 2008; Chang, Rhee, & Weaver, 2006; Rhee, Chang, Berthold, & Mar, 2012; Rhee, Chang, Weaver, & Wong, 2008).

Additionally, a recent theory of cumulative risk that has shown the number of exposures to different household risks to influence the potential for child maltreatment (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010). Despite the fact that APIs fare better across a range of health outcomes compared to other racial groups (e.g., Barnes, Adams, & Powell-Griner, 2008; Ye, Rust, Baltrus, & Daniels, 2009), a closer examination of risk associated with CPS involvement revealed substantial diversity in various health and prenatal risks in different API ethnic groups (e.g., Gomez, Kelsey, Glaser, Lee, & Sidney, 2004; Holland & Palaniappan, 2012; Islam et al., 2010). For instance, although definitions of Pacific Islander are inconsistent across studies, in general, this group tends to present with worse health, mental health, and access to health care than other Asian groups (Aczon-Armstrong, Inouye, & Reyes-Salvail, 2013; Bitton, Zaslavsky, & Ayanian, 2010; Jaurez, Samoa, Chung, & Seto, 2010). Furthermore, some important prenatal and perinatal indicators of risk for child maltreatment, such as maternal age, maternal education, birth weight, and insurance type, have been found to vary by API ethnic origin (Rao, Daniels, El-Sayed, Moshesh, & Caughey, 2006; Schempf, Mendola, Hamilton, Hayes, & Makuc, 2010; Wong et al., 2008). Socioeconomic risks most highly correlated with child protection involvement also vary widely in the API population. Asian Indians and Chinese Americans, for example, have on average much higher levels of college education than Southeast Asian groups (Allard, 2011). And compared to other ethnic groups, a substantial proportion of Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, and Samoans live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Given such variability in health and socioeconomic risks of different API ethnic groups, it is possible that differences in cumulative exposure to such risks may contribute to differential rates of maltreatment reports among API subgroups.

Another factor to consider when examining CPS involvement among API groups is parent (typically maternal) nativity. In the Latino child population, a small but growing body of work highlights the protective effect of parent immigrant status as it relates to CPS involvement, wherein children of Latino immigrants have overall lower rates of reporting, substantiation, and risks associated with maltreatment, than children of U.S. born Latino parents (Cardoso et al., 2014; Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009; Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2015; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). It is equally plausible that differences in nativity in the API population—which may be reflective of characteristics of recent immigrants that differentiate them from those who do not migrate and distinctive cultural norms, processes, behaviors, interactions with systems, and environmental contexts around family and community supports—may also result in varying levels of involvement with CPS. Yet because API children have, for the most part, been studied as a panethnic group, the extent to which immigrant status protects API children from abuse and neglect is unknown.

To our knowledge, no studies have examined the effect of ethnic affiliation in conjunction with nativity on risk of CPS involvement among children born to API mothers. We take advantage of the state of California having the largest and most diverse API population in the U.S. (Ponce et al., 2009) by prospectively following API children born in California to their 5th birthday to determine whether the cumulative likelihood that a child is reported for maltreatment differs by API maternal nativity and ethnic origin.

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