Delineating disproportionality and disparity of Asian-Canadian versus White-Canadian families in the child welfare system

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper builds upon the analyses presented in three companion papers using data from the 2003 and 2008 cycles of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003 and CIS-2008) and the Ontario Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (OCANDS) to examine disproportionality and disparity of child welfare involvement for Asian-Canadian children involved in the child welfare system.
Methods: This study used CIS-2008 data adjusted by Census child population data to examine rates per 1000 and three disparity indexes (population-based disparity index [PDI], decision-based disparity index [DDI], and maltreatment-based disparity index [MDI]) to determine the representation of child maltreatment investigations for Asian-Canadian versus White-Canadian children involved in the child welfare system. Logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine the odds of case closure for substantiated child maltreatment investigations, and whether Asian ethnicity remained significant while controlling for child demographics and household composition, case characteristics, and clinical concerns.
Results: This study found that Asian-Canadian children were underrepresented in the child welfare system compared to White-Canadian children (13.9 per 1000 Asian children in the Canadian population vs. 36.1 per 1000 White children in the Canadian population). Child welfare involvement for Asian-Canadian children are almost 2 times more likely to close after an investigation than White-Canadian children. The three disparity indexes (PDI, DDI, MDI) showed substantially different results with respect to the representation of child maltreatment investigations involving Asian-Canadian versus White-Canadian children for physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment, and exposure to domestic violence.
Conclusions: Disproportionality and disparity are complex phenomena. The variation in results derived from different methods of calculating representation suggests the need for greater clarity and consistency in the definitions and methodology in examining racial disparity in child welfare research. Some methodological considerations for future child welfare research with Asian-Canadian populations were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Disproportionality and disparity have received increasing attention over the past two decades in child welfare research in North America (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998; Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010; Hill, 2006; Hines, Lemon, Wyatt, & Merdinger, 2004). Considerable research has focused on the over-representation of Black/African American populations in the child welfare system in the United States (e.g., Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003; Chapin Hall Centre for Children [CHCC], 2008; Clarke, 2011; Hill, 2004) and First Nations/Aboriginal populations in the child welfare system in Canada (e.g., Sinha et al., 2011; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Conversely, very little attention has been given to Asian children and families from

East and Southeast Asia origins involved in the child welfare system in the United States (for exceptions see Chang, Rhee, & Berthold, 2008; Ima & Hohm, 1991; Pelczarski & Kemp, 2006) and Canada (for exceptions see Author, 2014; Lavergne, Dufour, Trocmé, & Larrivee, 2008).

This paper builds upon the analyses presented in three companion papers (Author, 2014; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Black, Fallon, & Trocmé, accepted with revisions; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Fallon, Trocmé, & Black, under review) that used data from the 2003 and 2008 cycles of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003 and CIS-2008) and the Ontario Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (OCANDS) to examine disproportionality and disparity of child maltreatment-related investigations involving Asian-Canadian children and families. Based on CIS-2003 data, this Author (2014) found substantiated child maltreatment investigations involving Asian-Canadian children and families had a higher percentage of the physical abuse subtype "hit with object" compared to other subtypes, which include shake, push, grab or throw; hit with hand; punch, kick or bite; choking,

poisoning, stabbing; and other physical abuse. The authors also found a greater likelihood for child welfare placement during the investigation, despite lower percentage of emotional harm, no significant differences in physical harm, and fewer identified caregiver risk factors, compared to non-Asian-Canadian (excluding Aboriginal) children and families in the CIS-2003. The findings prompted additional exploration by replicating the original study by this Author (2014), using CIS-2008 data combined with focus groups involving child welfare workers and community service providers. The focus groups elicited their interpretations of the results from the CIS-2008 and their perspectives working with Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system (Lee, Fuller Thomson, Black, Fallon, & Trocmé, accepted with revisions). Administrative child welfare data from the Ontario Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (OCANDS) was used to examine the profile of child protection investigations that were closed after investigations instead of transferred to ongoing child protection services, and whether investigations involving Asian-Canadian children and families were closed prematurely compared to White-Canadian children and families (Lee, Fuller Thomson, Fallon, Trocmé, & Black, under review).

The CIS-2003, CIS-2008, and OCANDS results consistently demonstrated significant differences with respect to the maltreatment type, investigation type (e.g., maltreatment-related investigation and risk investigation), and short-term child protection service outcome (e.g., transfer to ongoing child protection services or close after investigation) for Asian-Canadian children and families compared to non-Asian (CIS-2003 analyses) or White-Canadian children and families (CIS-2008 and OCANDS analyses) involved in the child welfare system. The results from the companion papers (Author, 2014; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Black, Fallon, & Trocmé, accepted with revisions; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Fallon, Trocmé, & Black, under review) are based on a child welfare population sampling frame which included children and families involved in the child welfare system. The current research is a subsequent analysis of Author's CIS-2008 study, adjusted by Census child population data. The use of Census child population data expands the sampling frame to include all children in Canada so that an estimated incidence or rate per 1000 children in the Canadian population can be derived. The results are an estimated number of Asian-Canadian children involved in the child welfare system, given their representation in the Canadian child population.

1.1. Research questions

Asians are an under-studied population in child welfare research (Behl, Crouch, May, Valente, & Conyngham, 2001). The existing studies present the proportions of Asian-Canadian children and families involved in the child welfare system (Author, 2014; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Black, Fallon, & Trocmé, accepted with revisions; Lee, Fuller Thomson, Fallon, Trocmé, & Black, under review), but do not expand beyond the child welfare system to examine their representation in the Census population (rate per 1000 of the child population in Canada). To provide a thorough examination of child maltreatment-related investigations involving Asian-Canadian children and families, this study uses CIS-2008 data adjusted by Census child population data to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the representation of Asian-Canadian children versus White-Canadian children in the child welfare system in Canada in 2008?
2. What are the differences in representation in child maltreatment-related investigations and substantiated child maltreatment investigations involving Asian-Canadian children compared to White-Canadian children in the child welfare system in Canada in 2008?
3. What factors are associated with the decision to close after a child maltreatment investigation for Asian-Canadian households in the child welfare system in Canada in 2008?

2. Literature review

The terms racial disproportionality and disparity have often been used interchangeably or in conjunction with each other. The lack of clarity and consensus in the definition and measurement of disproportionality and disparity have been noted as a barrier and concern in child welfare research (Fluke et al., 2010). The literature review in this paper aims to delineate these constructs in order to be able to effectively measure and ascertain its effects.

2.1. Racial disproportionality and disparity definitions

Disproportionality in the simplest terms refers to the state of being unbalanced – either over-represented or under-represented in the child welfare system. Disproportionality can be determined by "the number of children of a particular group experiencing an event divided by the number of children in the broader population of that same group. The result can be multiplied by 100 to produce a percent or by 1,000 to produce a rate per 1,000" (Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008, p. 26). "The reference group can refer to the overall population (unconditional) or the population who experiences a specific decision point (conditional)" (Myers, 2010, as cited in Fluke et al., 2010, p. 8). The method of using an unconditional reference group or population-based sample has been termed incidence rates in Sinha et al.'s (2011) study that focused on First Nations populations. According to Sinha et al. (2011):

> Incidence rates were calculated by dividing the counts of First Nations investigations by 100,385, the weighted First Nations child population (aged 0 to 15) living in the geographic areas served by sites in the CIS-2008 sample. Equivalently, non-Aboriginal incidence rates were calculated by dividing the counts investigations by 2,494,840 the weighted non-Aboriginal child population (aged 0–15) living in the areas served by sites in the CIS-2008 sample (p. 39).

A similar definition and method of calculating representation is the Disproportionality Metric (DM). Shaw et al. (2008) provides the following example:

> To compute the Disproportionality Metric for Black children in foster care, the number of Black children in care (75) would be divided by the total number of children in care (550), and then this proportion would be divided by the total number of Black children in the population (25,000) as a proportion of the total child population (500,000). As shown, a Disproportionality Metric of 2.728 is computed, indicating that Black children are overrepresented in the foster care system in County "A" compared to their representation in the population as a whole (p. 27).

The rates and percentages in the DM offer a standardized measure of representation and provide a "basic starting point for examining disparity" (Shaw et al., 2008, p. 26).

According to Myers (2010), *disparity* is

> 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. Like disproportionality, the reference population in the denominator for both groups can refer to the overall population (unconditional) of the group or the population among the group who experiences a specific decision point (conditional). A disparity exists when the ratios being compared are not equal (as cited in Fluke et al., 2010, pp. 8–9).

The unequal representation of a particular race or ethnic group in the child welfare system raises concerns of possible bias and discrimination. According to Myers (2010), "*discrimination* is the unequal treatment of identically situated groups" (p. 110). A challenge in