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Child maltreatment in rural southern counties: Another perspective on race, poverty and child welfare



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ABSTRACT

Building on research that has identified community characteristics associated with child maltreatment, this study investigates the adequacy and equity of the child welfare response at the county level. The study focuses on states in the U.S. south with demographic characteristics that make it possible to disentangle county racial composition from county rurality. County-level child maltreatment data were merged with data from the U.S. Census and other publicly-available sources for the 354 counties in four southern states. Results from multiple regression models indicated that, despite a greater preponderance of risk factors typically associated with child maltreatment, rural, majority African-American counties had lower rates of reported and substantiated child maltreatment compared to other southern counties. Cross-sectional results were consistent across three years: 2012, 2013, and 2014. The findings suggest that children and families in rural, majority African-American counties in the South may not be receiving adequate or equitable responses from the formal child welfare system.

1. Introduction

Efforts to understand the disproportionate representation of African-American children in the child welfare system have revealed a lot about race, poverty, and child welfare system involvement, but questions remain. While past research has addressed racial disparities in maltreatment report and victimization rates at various levels of the social ecology, less is known about inequities in the child welfare response to entire communities, and, in particular, how such inequities vary by community racial composition. Questions also remain about the United States (U.S.) South, with its distinct patterns of racial segregation, and where matters of race and poverty have special resonance. In particular, little is known about child welfare efforts in rural southern counties with predominantly African-American populations. Focusing on southern counties, this study addresses the following research question: Are child maltreatment report rates and victimization rates associated with county racial composition and rurality?

2. Background

Official child maltreatment reports reflect only a portion of all child maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2010), but official reports and their substantiation outcome are important due to their effects on children and families. Child welfare reports can lead to investigations, court appearances, child removal and out-of-home placement. Observing that African-American children have higher rates of maltreatment reports, substantiation, and out-of-home placement compared to white children (Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013; Wildeman et al., 2014), researchers have sought to explain the disparity. Although studies have

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shown that greater exposure to maltreatment risk factors, especially poverty, is largely responsible for higher report and victimization rates among African-American children (Drake et al., 2011; Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2009; Lanier, Maguire-Jack, Walsh, Drake, & Hubel, 2014; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), efforts to understand other ways that racial bias could influence child welfare system involvement continue (Maguire-Jack, Lanier, Johnson-Motoyama, Welch, & Dineen, 2015; Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013).

To date, most investigations of racial bias in child welfare have focused on potential over-reach and consequent unnecessary involvement of African-American families with the child welfare system. Less attention has been devoted to the question of whether some communities may be overlooked by child welfare services, resulting in unmet needs or inadequate formal help. In addition, whereas report and child maltreatment victimization rates are often viewed as functions of family or community conditions, official report rates also reflect the propensity of community members to reach out to public officials by filing an official maltreatment report. Whereas some researchers have observed that propensities to file maltreatment reports can vary at the community level (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Finno-Velasquez, He, Perrigo, & Hurlburt, 2017), additional research is needed to understand community characteristics that affect community members' likelihoods of filing official maltreatment reports.

A sizable body of research has investigated whether community-level factors are associated with child maltreatment report rates. Researchers have assessed whether, in addition to family-level factors, neighborhood or community conditions may influence the likelihood of child maltreatment, or the chance of coming to the attention of child welfare services. Studies have identified some consistent findings. Most notably, community poverty is consistently positively associated with child maltreatment reports (Coulton et al., 2007; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Maguire-Jack, 2014). In addition, rates of single parenthood, unemployment, neighborhood disorder, and inadequate housing have also been associated with child maltreatment rates (Coulton et al., 2007; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Freisthler et al., 2006). Most child welfare studies assessing community-level effects have focused on neighborhoods, and the theories or mechanisms linking community factors to child maltreatment are clearest at the neighborhood level (Aron et al., 2010; Coulton et al., 2007), but several recent studies have found similar associations at the zip code (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017) and county (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Maguire-Jack et al., 2015) levels. Moreover, wide variation in child maltreatment reports and foster care placement at the county level underscores the importance of efforts to explain the variation (Smith, Kay, & Womack, 2017; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007).

Researchers have been challenged when addressing the child welfare relevance of community or county-level racial composition because community racial composition is often highly associated with population density. In most parts of the U.S., white, non-Hispanic residents constitute the majority population of rural counties, and African-American residents and other racial and ethnic minorities cluster in more populous areas. Only in the South are there rural counties with majority African-American populations (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, 2011). These rural, majority African-American counties are sometimes referred to as the "Black Belt," which was originally a reference to the dark soil for farming (Harress, 2017; Tallos, 2004). The counties are part of a rural-agricultural section in the U.S. that had among the largest population of enslaved people prior to the Civil War (Mullen, 2014). Today, these counties face many challenges, including high poverty rates, high unemployment, poor educational outcomes, and poor health indicators, including infant mortality, diabetes, and obesity (CHR, 2016).

2.1. Gaps and research focus

Because rural, majority African-American counties face many risk factors for child maltreatment, existing evidence could generate expectations of high child maltreatment report and victimization rates in the counties. To our knowledge, however, previous studies have not focused specifically on counties in the U.S. South to assess whether associations identified in urban areas in other parts of the country also apply to southern states and to rural, majority African-American counties. In addition, some theory points to expectations that contrast with empirical findings from other regions. Rural, majority African-American counties in southern states have a history of political marginalization, poor services, under-funded schools, and few resources. Policy feedback theory (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018) would suggest that county residents with histories of inadequate or unhelpful responsiveness from public services would have very low expectations of government services and low levels of trust in public authorities. Consequently, policy feedback theory would predict that residents of rural, majority African-American counties in southern states may be reluctant to engage public authorities by filing official maltreatment reports. In addition, theory addressing implications of the social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) would predict that stigmatized, high poverty, majority African-American rural counties would receive less helpful responses from public authorities than would residents of other counties in southern states. Hence, theory would predict comparatively lower maltreatment report and victimization rates in rural, majority African-American counties compared to other counties in southern states.

This study seeks to fill a knowledge gap related to the adequacy and equity of child welfare services by focusing on county-level child maltreatment report rates and victimization rates in four southern states. Because the states have rural counties with majority-African-American populations and rural counties with majority white populations, it is possible to independently assess effects of county racial composition and county population density on the child welfare response.

3. Methods

3.1. Design/approach

The study involves a cross-sectional study of county-level child maltreatment rates. We assessed associations between

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