



Ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system: A Norwegian national cohort study



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ABSTRACT

This study of Norwegian child welfare clients examined the extent to which ethnic disparities in involvement with the child welfare system can be attributed to ethnic differences in sociodemographic background. Using logistic regression models and a unique dataset constructed by linking child welfare records to national administrative registers for the 1993–1994 birth cohorts, we computed ethnic disparities in the odds of child welfare involvement at age 6–12 ($N = 122,894$), both before and after adjustments for sociodemographic background. Compared with ethnic Norwegian cohort peers, non-Western children had twice the unadjusted odds of entering the child welfare system (odds ratio = 2.13). However, the data also indicated pronounced ethnic disparities in eight sociodemographic correlates of child welfare involvement. When adjustments for these background factors were modeled, we found no ethnic differences in the odds of child welfare involvement. Our findings suggest that the association between ethnicity and child welfare involvement is confounded by differences in socioeconomic status, maternal social assistance, family size and family structure.

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1. Introduction

The disproportionate representation of minority children in child welfare services (CWS) relative to their prevalence in the general population has been the subject of policy debates and research activity for decades, particularly in North America (Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004) and Australia (Delfabbro, Hirte, Rogers, & Wilson, 2010; Tilbury, 2009). In Scandinavia, research on ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system has been fairly limited despite pronounced and increasing ethnic disparities in rates of child welfare involvement in all three countries. With certain exceptions,¹ Scandinavian studies on the subject have mainly reported unadjusted rates of child welfare involvement, mostly from cross-sectional samples (Vinnerljung, Franzén, Gustavsson, & Johansson, 2008). These studies depict an increasing overrepresentation of immigrant groups in the CWS, but generally do not include risk estimates adjusted for socioeconomic and demographic background, which limits our understanding of the effect of sociodemographic factors on minority children's risk of child welfare involvement.

Norwegian child welfare records indicate pronounced ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system, with children from ethnic minority groups strongly overrepresented in child welfare statistics

relative to their prevalence in the population as a whole. For example, 6.7 percent of all first-generation immigrant children and 5.1 percent of the children born in Norway to foreign-born parents received services in 2009. Corresponding figures for ethnic Norwegian children indicate that only 2.9 percent of them were involved with the CWS, and the gap is increasing. Figures on child welfare involvement from 2004 to 2009 indicate a 60 percent increase in the number of immigrant clients during the period as opposed to a mere 16 percent increase in non-immigrant clients. Although great diversity and highly varying degrees of child welfare contact exist within the Norwegian immigrant population, immigrants of non-Western origin are primarily overrepresented in Norwegian CWS (Kalve & Dyrhaug, 2011). Non-Western immigrants are defined as first- and second-generation immigrants from Africa, Asia, South and Central America and Turkey.

The increasing rate at which immigrant children and youth are involved in the Norwegian child welfare system warrants an improved understanding of the association between ethnic disparities in CWS involvement and child welfare clients' backgrounds. This study employs data from several Norwegian administrative registers. We aim to assess ethnic disparities in child welfare involvement for children aged 6–12 and to examine its relationship to ethnic disparities in parental unemployment, poverty and other measures of social disadvantage.

1.1. Previous research

Numerous hypotheses have been proposed in recent years to explain why ethnic disproportionality and disparity exist in child welfare

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¹ For example, Franzén et al., 2008; Vinnerljung et al., 2008.

(for a review, see [Fluke et al., 2010](#)). Despite extensive research on the topic, researchers have not reached a conclusion about the extent to which the disproportionality stems from ethnic bias in the child welfare system and other ecologies, child welfare system processes and resources, or the disproportionate and disparate needs of minority children and their families ([Fluke et al., 2010](#)). Proponents of the argument that children and families from certain minority backgrounds have a disproportionate need for child welfare services note the vulnerability of this population in the form of disparate exposure to socioeconomic and demographic risks and the resulting disparate need for child welfare interventions. Poverty, single parenthood, large families, receipt of social benefits, parental unemployment and low parental educational levels are consistently reported to be characteristics that are disproportionately held by minority families (e.g. [Beiser, Hou, Hyman, & Tousignant, 2002](#); [Hernandez & Darke, 1999](#); [Østby, 2004](#)). These factors are all associated with an elevated risk of both maltreatment and CWS involvement ([Franzén, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2008](#); [Gilbert et al., 2009](#); [Needell & Barth, 1998](#)). Moreover, considerable research literature indicates higher rates of maltreatment—one of the main entry points into the CWS system—among minority families (e.g. [Drake & Johnson-Reid, 2010](#); [Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010](#)).

A wide range of studies emphasize poverty as a key contributor to ethnic disproportionality in child welfare services. Research has repeatedly indicated that children in poor or low-income families are more likely to be involved with CWS than are children whose parents are financially better off ([Ejrnæs, Ejrnæs, & Frederiksen, 2011](#); [Lee & Goerge, 1999](#); [Paulsen, Thorshaug, & Berg, 2014](#); [Needell & Barth, 1998](#)). A significant body of research has also revealed that children in low-income families are more likely to experience abuse or neglect ([Barth, 2009](#); [Conger, Xiaoja, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994](#); [Fløtten, 2009](#)). However, studies of the relationship between poverty and CWS disproportionality have mixed results. For example, according to a study by [Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Harden, and Landsverk \(2005\)](#), the difference between substantiation rates for African American and White children was greatest in areas where overall poverty was less severe. Other studies have indicated that poverty has a smaller influence on minority maltreatment rates in neighborhoods with high social organization ([Korbin, Coulton, Chard, Platt-Houston, & Su, 1998](#)), and several studies have found fairly similar levels of child welfare contact for ethnic groups that have rather different socioeconomic profiles (e.g. [Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013](#)). Findings also conflict as to whether ethnic disparities in child welfare involvement persist after adjustment for socioeconomic background. Whereas some studies find that ethnic differences in child welfare involvement persist once SES is controlled ([Miller, 2008](#); [Schuck, 2005](#)), others find low-SES minority children to be less likely than low-SES majority children to be reported or enter child welfare ([Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013](#)).

The extent to which ethnic differences in child welfare involvement are attributable to disparities in sociodemographic background has rarely been investigated within the Scandinavian context ([Vinnerljung et al., 2008](#)). Two recent Swedish studies based on population registers constitute exceptions. In an investigation of crude and adjusted risks of care entry for Swedish children from fifteen cohorts, [Franzén et al. \(2008\)](#) found that children with a mother born outside Europe had crude overrisks of entering out-of-home care of 1.4–1.6 depending on age group. However, after adjustment for sociodemographic background, these same children had lower odds of care entry than did their Swedish peers (0.5–0.8). [Vinnerljung et al.](#) employed Swedish national register data for 10 birth cohorts to investigate children's risk of entering out-of-home care and found small or insignificant ethnic differences in the risk of care entry after adjustment for sociodemographic background. Whereas immigrant children were more likely than their ethnic Swedish cohort peers to be in lower social positions, ethnicity per se had little statistical effect on care placement ([Vinnerljung et al., 2008](#)).

1.2. Research objectives

This study seeks to disentangle the dynamics related to ethnic disparities in Norwegian children's risk of involvement with CWS at ages 6–12.

We employ data from several Norwegian population registers to investigate ethnic differences in the odds of child welfare involvement, both before and after adjustment for sociodemographic background. Our analyses encompass the full cohorts of children born in Norway from 1994 to 1995 as well as their cohort peers who immigrated to Norway between the ages of 0 and 1.

2. Data and method

2.1. Sources of data

Norway has a long tradition of keeping national, individual-based registers with demographic, socioeconomic and health-related information about the population. Moreover, all Norwegian residents are assigned a personal identification number. This personal identifier may serve as a key to merge individual records from the various registers, which creates a unique opportunity to perform reliable descriptions and analyses of the population.

Data included in the present study are drawn from a range of administrative registers provided by Statistics Norway and contain records for the full Norwegian resident population born from 1945 to 2011. Our analyses are based on a unique dataset constructed by linking child welfare records for the 1993–2009 period to registers containing individual socioeconomic and demographic information (age, ethnicity, education level, earned income and transfers, parity and household composition), which makes it possible to trace the sociodemographic background of the children involved with CWS and to estimate the extent to which various sociodemographic factors pose a risk of child welfare involvement. All record linkages were conducted by Statistics Norway, the authority responsible for official statistics in Norway.

2.2. Study population

The population for this study included all Norwegian residents born from 1994 to 1995 with one restriction: only individuals who were Norwegian-born or who immigrated to Norway between the ages of 0 and 1 were included in the analyses to ensure the availability of sufficient background information for all study subjects and to confirm that the time for exposure to the child welfare risk factors that we consider in our analysis was as similar as possible for all subjects. Cohort members were identified in the Norwegian Population register.

The outcome of interest in this study was child welfare involvement at ages 6–12. We wanted to examine ethnic background (Norwegian and non-Western)² as a possible predictor of involvement with CWS. Thus, child welfare clients were identified in the child welfare register, and dichotomous variables were derived to separate children who were involved and not involved with CWS within the selected age range. Children were defined as having a non-Norwegian ethnic background if at least one parent or the child was not born in Norway. These criteria resulted in a study sample ($N = 122,894$) comprising 7541 children born from 1994 to 1995 who were involved with CWS at ages 6–12 and 115,353 children born from 1994 to 1995 who did not enter the child welfare system at ages 6–12. Of these, 104,674 had a Norwegian ethnic background, 7492 were of Western origin and 10,728 were of non-Western origin. Because they had a sociodemographic profile that largely resembled the Norwegian population, immigrants

² Because they had a sociodemographic profile that was quite similar to the Norwegian population, immigrants of Western/Nordic national backgrounds were excluded from the tables. However, they were included in all analyses.

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