

What is the True Source of Racial Disparities in Child Welfare?

[New research](#) indicates that, once poverty is controlled for, Black families enter child protection and foster care at lower rates than Whites. This complements other studies showing that poverty, which disproportionately impacts BIPOC families, is the biggest driver of racial disparities in child welfare.

Part of the message is that an all-star team of thirteen noted child welfare researchers published this paper jointly. They're trying to make it hard to ignore. It's the academic equivalent of jumping up and down and waving their arms to get our attention.

This does not mean that worker bias never affects decision-making. However, the authors contend that racial disparities in child welfare "cannot be resolved by any reform strategy that focuses solely on the actions of Child Protection Services or the behavior of mandatory reporters." Instead, efforts to alleviate poverty should get more weight.

Narrative for podcast on Brett Drake Putnam-Hornstein et. al. paper

As mentioned in the blog, I suspect that the approach used by these authors was deliberate. There were 13 co-authors, including some of the most well-known and well-respected researchers in the field such as Brett Drake as the lead author as well as Richard Barth, Emily Putnam-Hornstein, and Melissa Jonson-Reid. By having all of them on this one paper it suggests that they were trying to make some sort of a statement that people should pay attention to these results.

However I spoke with one of the authors directly who shared that she has low expectation in terms of whether their efforts will make an impact on the views of people they are hoping to engage in discussion, particularly those who are committed to the perspective that child welfare as an institution is biased, that it interferes with families and communities inappropriately, that racial bias frequently affects workers decisions whether to screen in maltreatment reports, substantiate maltreatment, or place children in foster care, and that therefore it should be abolished.

We are hoping to get the authors to let us post it on our website but the paper came out less than a month ago, so they probably don't want to be giving it away for free just yet.

The actual methodology of the report is somewhat complex, at least to someone like me who isn't trained academically. The authors studied Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics because the pool of other groups was too small for this approach. They correlated child protection reports, substantiations and foster care placements first with "risk variables", i.e. factors that increase risk to children, such as children in poverty, children in single-parent families, teen birth rate, and parents without a high school degree. They also correlated child protection involvement with metrics that indicate "harm variables", which include public health metrics such as the prevalence of very low birth weight babies and infant mortality, as well as the rate of child homicides, and unintentional deaths.

The question they were asking is “Do racial disproportionalities in CPS contacts (i.e., maltreatment reports, investigation, substantiation, or placement in foster care) exceed disproportionalities in independently documented indicators of social risk that are not subject to systemic measurement bias within the child welfare system?” In other words, they used measures that are outside of the child protection system and therefore are not subject to internal control, but which research has shown to be closely correlated with child maltreatment, to measure whether different groups enter the child welfare system in disproportionate numbers. This methodology ensures that there is an outside metric which is independent of the data kept within child protection foster care system, so the potential bias in the system doesn’t affect the results.

What they found is that when they compared involvement in the child protection system to risk measures such as infant mortality and poverty, that have been significantly higher among Black and Hispanic families forever, there was actually less disproportionality in child welfare than in these across-the-board measures of societal inequality. In other words, they found that racial disparities in child welfare were less than in society at large.

In fact, once poverty was controlled for, the rate for Black families getting to any stage of child protection, i.e. a screened-in report, a substantiated report, or placement in foster care, has been lower than for Whites since about 2012. The authors also found that; “Available data provide no evidence that Black children were overreported relative to observed risks and harms reflected in non-CPS data.”

This was not true however for Hispanic families. This is the so-called Hispanic paradox. Although Hispanic children face far greater exposure to social risks than White children (e.g., poverty), they experience harm and CPS reporting at about the same rates as White children. There is some evidence that this is more true for recently immigrated Hispanic children, who experience well-being indicators similar to those of Whites, but there needs to be more research on this subject to confirm this. This Hispanic paradox has been pretty well established for some time, although the reasons for it are not yet clearly known. A few researchers have speculated, very cautiously so since this would be a sensitive topic, that this is related to a culture that is particularly nurturing and child centered, and that this is particularly true for Hispanics who are newly arrived to this country.

In the final section of the paper, the authors get to the implications of the data which are first to point our attention to the importance of addressing conditions that most commonly lead to CPS involvement— they list multigenerational poverty, unequal access to substance abuse treatment programs, under-resourced schools, and poorly coordinated mental health supports. As mentioned in the blog, they point out that these factors cannot be resolved by any reform strategy that focuses solely on the actions of CPS or the behavior of mandatory reporters.

In the final section they also get to the nub of the matter, which is their reasons for doing this project, and also for taking so much trouble to get people to pay attention to their findings. I am quoting here:

“Our findings have implications for the current policy debate about whether CPS and the foster care system should be abolished in the United States.” Well there you have it. The reason they

assembled the All-Star team and did this particularly intensive and extensive analysis of the data is out of concern that the movement to abolish child welfare entirely may be gaining momentum and credibility. The authors go on to say: "Proponents of abolishing this system routinely cite racial disparities in reporting and subsequent decision-making as justification for their policy preferences, arguing that Black children's contact with CPS is grossly in excess of their exposure to risk or harm. In the current analysis, we found that the racial disparities in CPS contact do not exceed, and are generally smaller than, racial disparities in external measures of social risk and harm." The authors go on to advocate for addressing the broader reasons for racial disparities in child welfare, which go to the need for addressing the systemic economic inequities that drive a disproportionate number of BIPOC families into poverty, which in turn is a primary driver of involvement in child protection.

The authors then go on to say that "Abolition proponents believe that abolishing child protection would—in and of itself—help Black children, premised on the assumption that CPS is not only racially discriminatory but also provides no essential protective service. It is possible that a narrow focus on reducing Black children's CPS involvement without addressing the pronounced inequities documented by the external indicators will result in disproportionate and systematic unresponsiveness to abuse and neglect experienced by Black children".

What this is saying in more plain terms is that pressures not to address maltreatment in Black children will leave them worse off. This is exactly the concern we identified in our recent study of child fatalities in Minnesota. We found that the percentage of Black children in child protection was 18% statewide but the number of child fatalities was 26%, or 44% higher. In contrast White children are 50% of those in the system statewide but only represent 24% of the fatalities. We do not have the resources or access to case information to anyone this difference, but we believe the question that child protection authorities need to answer is whether, because of pressures from abolitionists and communities, they are leaving Black children in high risk situations where they remove White children? If that turned out to be the case, the pressures to not remove Black children from high risk situations would be making things worse for them, as the authors suggest, and in fact so much worse for children who have been killed.

This group of scholars has been actually making his case in other papers for number of years and they have not been able to persuade their colleagues and activists who are trying to abolish child welfare that they should look at this data and adjust their strategies accordingly. It's a shame. How much more effective would advocates for a better child welfare system be we combined forces and tackled the true systemic society-wide open factors that are causing child maltreatment in the first place and racial disparities in child welfare as a result?

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