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Research article

Geographic variation in racial disparities in child maltreatment: The influence of county poverty and population density

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ABSTRACT

There are documented disparities in the rates at which black children come into contact with the child welfare system in the United States compared to white children. A great deal of research has proliferated aimed at understanding whether systematic biases or differential rates of risk among different groups drive these disparities (Drake et al., 2011). In the current study, county rates of maltreatment disparity are compared across the United States and examined in relation to rates of poverty disparity as well as population density. Specifically, using hierarchical linear modeling with a spatially lagged dependent variable, the current study examined data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and found that poverty disparities were associated with rates of maltreatment disparities, and densely populated metropolitan counties tended to have the greatest levels of maltreatment disparity for both black and Hispanic children. A significant curvilinear relationship was also observed between these variables, such that in addition to the most densely populated counties, the most sparsely populated counties also tended to have higher rates of maltreatment disparity for black and Hispanic children.

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Introduction

The United States child welfare system (CWS) has a history of differential treatment for children of different races. In the past, minority children were excluded from the CWS entirely, with black children initially excluded from the developing foster care system (Roberts, 2002). However, black and Hispanic children are currently represented in the CWS at rates that are different than their representation in the general population. In 2013, black children made up 15% and Hispanic children made up 23% of the total child population, but they were represented among child maltreatment victims at proportions of 21% and 22%, respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2014a; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Additionally, a recent study of the cumulative prevalence of confirmed child maltreatment by age 18 years estimates that black children have a cumulative prevalence of 20.9%, while the rates for Hispanic and white children are 13.0% and 10.7%, respectively (Wildeman et al., 2014).

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An abundance of research has documented associations between child maltreatment and negative long-term outcomes that last into adulthood. Children who are maltreated are more likely to struggle with behavioral problems (Felitti et al., 1998; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002), mental health conditions (Holmes & Sammel, 2002), increased risk for criminal behavior and violent behavior (Fang & Corso, 2007; Widom & Maxfield, 2001), lower health-related quality of life (Corso, Edwards, Fang, & Mercy, 2008; Lanier, Kohl, Raghavan, & Auslander, 2015) and lower long-term economic well-being (Currie & Widom, 2010). Given the disproportional representation of black and Hispanic children among child maltreatment victims and the significant sequelae for victims, it is essential that we understand why racial disparities occur. If overrepresented children are not involved in this system as a result of need, but rather, systematic bias on the behalf of CPS workers, changes must be made immediately to reverse this trend. If, however, this phenomenon results from disproportionate risk of child maltreatment due to other inequalities within our society, then the problem is not that ethnic minority children are over-served by CPS, but rather, that they are maltreated at a higher rate than their non-minority peers. Under the latter scenario, intervention needs to occur prior to CPS involvement.

In addition to variation by child/race ethnicity, child maltreatment rates vary geographically (Ernst, 2001; Fryer & Miyoshi, 1995; Paulsen, 2003; Vinson & Baldry, 1999; Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006). At the county level, researchers have found associations between a number of poverty-related (Albert & Barth, 1996; Freisthler & Weiss, 2008; Hon-Yei, 1989; Searly & Lauderdale, 1983) and substance use-related (Albert & Barth, 1996; Freisthler & Weiss, 2008) factors and child maltreatment rates, with important differences when comparing urban, suburban, and rural areas (Albert & Barth, 1996). These areas differ in terms of service accessibility and availability, social connections, and poverty rates (Slovak & Carlson, 2009), which may have important implications for rates of racial disparity in child maltreatment.

To the extent that ethnic minority families are concentrated in counties with higher levels of poverty and lower access to resources that address these challenges, they may be at an increased risk for child maltreatment; thus contributing to the racial disparity in child maltreatment. For example, in a study of aboriginal children in Canada, it was found that race and ethnicity of individual families was not driving differential placement rates, but rather, certain characteristics of agencies in areas with high concentrations of aboriginal children, which the authors attributed to a lack of resources for aboriginal children (Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010). In the U.S., Hispanic families are significantly more likely to live in highly segregated communities that have higher rates of social isolation and greater resource deprivation (Hipp & Yates, 2011; Lee, 2000; Parker & McCall, 1999). Further, neighborhoods that are highly segregated with a high concentration of black residents are less likely to have access to basic needs assistance, mental health and substance abuse providers, and employment services (Allard, 2009). Therefore, the disproportional representation of ethnic minority children in the U.S. CWS may be partly explained by disproportional residence in high poverty geographic areas.

Theories of Disparity

We use the term “disparity ratio (DR)” to refer to the ratio of the rate of a phenomenon in one racial group compared to the rate in another racial group and “disparity” to refer to the extent to which the ratio is not equal to 1 (Myers, 2010). It should be noted that while some researchers have used the term “disparity” to refer explicitly to unequal treatment of a minority group (Hill, 2006), we are not referring to that definition of the term. We use “disparity” to refer simply to the existence of differences in rates of phenomena, and do not assume that the cause of such difference is due to unequal treatment.

Black–White Disparity

Among researchers and advocates, there have been three major arguments to explain the overrepresentation of black children in the CWS. All three of these theories are based on the hypothesis that the long and complicated history of racial discrimination in the United States has had profound and lasting impacts on families, which contribute to disparity. The key difference between these theories lies in the level at which discrimination occurs and the mechanism through which it contributes to disparity. The first hypothesis is that racial bias at the individual level causes caseworkers to interpret observations differently for black children compared to white children (Chand, 2000; Webb, Maddocks, & Bongilli, 2002). In this scenario, caseworkers are thought to be more likely to substantiate maltreatment allegations and remove a child into out-of-home care when the child is black compared to a white child. A second theory, proposes that institutional racism has created policies and procedures for mandated reporters, social service caseworkers, and family court judges that are inherently biased against black children and families (Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003; Hill, 2004). The third and final explanation is that current and historic discrimination has put black families at a significant disadvantage economically, which increases their risks for maltreatment (e.g. poverty, single parenthood, substance use), and as a result, black families have higher rates of maltreatment (Bartholet, Wulczyn, Barth, & Lederman, 2011; Drake, Jolley, & Lanier, 2011; Font, Berger, & Slack, 2012; Lanier, Maguire-Jack, Walsh, Drake, & Hubel, 2014). Though official statistics show that black residents of the United States are much more likely to live below the poverty level (approximately 27% of blacks compared to 10% of whites; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014b), such numbers significantly understate the level of socioeconomic disadvantage black families experience. Black children are roughly three times more likely to be poor, but are up to 14 times more likely to live in high childhood poverty neighborhoods compared to white children (Drake & Rand, 2009). Further, blacks have roughly 1/10 the assets of whites in the United States (Kochhat, 2015).

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