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Poverty, social disadvantage, and the black/white placement gap

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine whether county-level measures of poverty and social disadvantage are correlated with county-level variation in the black/white foster care placement gap. The black/white placement gap refers to the fact that when the rate of placement into foster care for black children is compared to the rate for white children living in the same area, the black placement rate is almost always higher than the rate for whites. Although differential exposure to poverty is often used to explain why the placement gap is so large, the problem has rarely been studied. Using Poisson event count models, we find that poverty, measured at the county ecological level, is associated with a narrower gap rather than a wider gap. The counter-intuitive finding is due to the fact that the relationship between poverty and placement rates depends on race.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine whether county-level measures of poverty and social disadvantage are correlated with county-level variation in the black/white foster care placement gap. The black/white placement gap refers to the fact that when the rate of placement into foster care for black children is compared to the rate for white children living in the same area, the black placement rate is almost always higher than the rate for whites. Evidence suggests that the gap is quite large, with black children entering placement at an average rate that is 2.7 times greater than the average rate for whites (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). More often than not, the gap is attributed to the differing needs of black children and families, differing treatment of black children within the child welfare system, policy differences, or some combination of the three explanations (Fluke, Jones, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2010; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). That said, there have been surprisingly few systematic attempts to describe the black/white placement gap and its correlates.

This is an *exploratory* study. A comprehensive study of the black/white placement gap that addresses the range of plausible, interconnected theories for why black placement rates exceed those observed for whites is certainly needed, but the foundation for such a study has yet to be developed. With that in mind, our paper begins laying that foundation by working toward three specific objectives.

The literature review focuses on gaps in knowledge. Of particular interest, we observe that most, if not all, research carried out thus far has examined individual-level differences in the experience of black children as compared to white children. This is an important but rather narrow question. Because we acknowledge the placement gap exists, our focus is instead on the gap itself and how much it varies.

The second objective has to do with establishing the relationship between the placement gap, poverty, and other macro structural measures of social disadvantage. Although the differing needs of black children are used to explain why black children have higher placement rates, the fact is these assertions have rarely, if ever, been tested using contemporary social ecological models. To address this issue, we draw from the work of Sampson and Wilson (1995) to develop a series of specific questions. We are particularly interested in how black child poverty is related to black child placement, whether the relationship resembles what we find when we examine white child poverty and white child placement, and whether the connection between poverty and the placement gap offers any guidance as to how one ought to examine the black/white placement gap in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Our third objective touches on methods. To make full use of the complex ecological structure of the data, we introduce multilevel Poisson event count models to the study of placement rate disparity (Gibbons, Hur, Bhaumik, & Bell, 2007; Hedeker & Gibbons, 2006). Doing so provides us with a way to take the structure of the data into account, measure the placement gap, and assess directly how the gap varies with respect to county-level poverty rates and other measures of social disadvantage.

2. Prior research and knowledge gaps

Foster care is used to protect children exposed to the risk of harm from maltreatment. From 2000 to 2009, 1.8 million US children were

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placed in foster care. Among industrialized nations, the annual incidence of foster care placement in the US is 30% higher than Sweden, the country of those studied with the second highest incidence rate (Thoburn, 2008). The cost of placement to federal, state, and local governments is substantial. From 2000 to 2009, federal estimates put the cost of providing foster care at nearly $85 billion nationally, a price tag that includes neither the cost of preventative services designed to keep children out of foster care nor the cost of health, dental, mental health, special education, or any other specialty services needed to meet the needs of children who have been removed from their families.

Whether any given maltreated child is placed into foster care varies substantially. Children under one year old and youth above the age of 11 are the children most likely to be placed. Among black children in these age groups, the risk of placement is particularly high. Once in foster care, placement trajectories vary considerably. Although group and other forms of congregate care have been linked to negative developmental sequelae (Barth, 2005; Berger, Bruch, Johnson, James, & Rubin, 2009), 22% of all children and 48% of all teenagers are placed in some type of group facility at admission. Caregiver changes, which are also associated with negative developmental sequelae (Aarons et al., 2010; Barth et al., 2007; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), affect more than half of all children who are placed, with roughly 30% of foster children experiencing three or more placements. About 60% of all placed children are reunified with their family, 20% are adopted, and the remainder leaves for other reasons, including aging out (6%). Frequently unaccounted for, however, is the significant variation between and within states with respect to how long children remain in foster care. The median length of stay ranges from 5 months to 24 months at the state level and 2 to 35 months at the county level. Finally, about 1 in 5 children will return to care within two years of exit; for some populations, the reentry rate is as high as 35% (Wulczyn, Chen, Collins, & Ernst, 2011; Wulczyn, Chen, & Hislop, 2007).

Against this backdrop, black children use far more foster care than white children do, adding to the already significant burdens facing young blacks. The available evidence suggests that per capita placement rates are 2.7 times higher for blacks than whites (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Blacks leave placement at a rate that is about 32% slower than the rate for whites, after controlling for age, gender, and placement type. Blacks also use more group care, have lower adoption and reunification rates, have less stable placements, and have higher reentry rates. Despite their significantly higher risks, black children are less likely to receive services (Stahmer et al., 2005).

Explanations as to why black children are overrepresented tend to focus on differing needs, racial bias, and policy effects (Fluke et al., 2010; Hines, Lee, Osterling, & Drabble, 2007; Osterling, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2008), a framework that mimics how the Institute of Medicine differentiates the sources of health disparities (Smedley et al., 2003). On nearly all measures of risk – poverty, family structure, unemployment, and adult education levels – blacks face significantly higher risks. Maltreatment is the main entry point into the child welfare system and there is a significant body of research pointing to higher rates of maltreatment among blacks (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2010; Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2008; Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). Research also suggests that, along the various decision points that determine whether a child will be placed (i.e., investigation, disposition, and service choice), blacks have a greater likelihood of moving forward in the system than either Hispanics or whites (Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003; Rivaux et al., 2008), perhaps because they are less likely to be offered in-home services (GAO, 2007; Marts, Lee, McRoy, & McCroskey, 2008).

Despite the substantial body of research that has already been done, there are important deficits in knowledge that impinge on efforts to address the black/white gap. First, research has focused almost exclusively on the residual direct effect of race on leaving as opposed to entering foster care (Lê Cook, McGuire, Lock, & Zaslavsky, 2010). For example, after controlling for age, Medicaid eligibility, substance use, mental health disorder, developmental disability, placement type, and place of residence, Becker and Jordan (2007) found that whites left foster care at a rate 35% faster than children of other races. Courtney (1994) and Courtney and Wong (1996) focused on age, poverty, family structure, health, and residence and found a residual direct effect of race regardless of the discharge reason (i.e., reunification or adoption). Connell, Katz, Saunders, and Tebes (2006), Hines et al. (2007), Akin (2011), and Harris and Courtney (2003) all adopted similar analytic strategies with different covariate sets and found comparable results: blacks exit foster care more slowly.

By way of comparison, very few published articles or reports assess entry rates and only two were carried out with an eye toward explaining the black/white placement gap. Gibbons et al. (2007) used a random effects Poisson regression model to examine county-level placement rates, but their focus was on assessing whether efforts carried out by the public agency in Illinois had an impact on placement rates over time. Lery (2009) examined neighborhood structure and foster care entry risk in an effort to understand whether spatial scale affects parameter estimates. Freisthler, Gruenewald, Remer, Lery, and Needell (2007) studied spatial variation across a range of child welfare events, including entry to foster care, but their main objective was to understand the role of alcohol outlets on entry patterns. Wulczyn, Lery, and Haight (2006) and Wulczyn and Lery (2007) are the two studies that examined entry rate disparities with the explicit purpose of describing the variability in black/white placement gap. Their studies produced counterintuitive findings that showed a narrower placement gap in counties with higher poverty rates.

More importantly, nearly all of the studies done to date, including those in California where much of the research has been carried out (Cheung et al., 2004; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Hines et al., 2007; Lau et al., 2003; Needell et al., 2003; Newton et al., 2000), have ignored the nested structure of the data (Hedeker & Gibbons, 2006). The nested structure of the data is important to consider because between-county entry rates in California, for example, vary from 4 to 12.2 per 1000 children. Variation in exit rates is equally telling. Eighteen-month reunification rates in California vary from 30 to 80% at the county level. Coupled with the fact that counties differ significantly with respect to their social ecological makeup, the failure to consider ecological structure leaves open the possibility that the individual-level results are confounded by community-level processes (Ards, Myers, Chung, Malkis, & Hagerty, 2003; Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004; Sampson & Wilson, 1995).

Finally, research into black/white placement disparity lacks a clear conceptual underpinning linked to poverty and other measures of social structural disadvantage. Specifically, little of the research done to date into foster care placement explicitly considers the role of poverty as an ecological determinant of what happens to children and why. The blind spot in the literature arises from a failure to differentiate poverty as an individual-level phenomenon versus poverty defined as the context in which individuals live out their lives (Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). In the broader literature on children and youth, the work of Sampson and Wilson (1995), Earls and Carlson (2001), Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) and others (Goodnow, 2002; Kirk, 2008) explicate how differing exposure to ecological risk affects children whereas Marmot (2009), Thomas, Quinn, Butler, Fryer, and Garza (2011), and Larson, Russ, Crall, and Halfon (2008), among others (Acevedo-Garcia, Osypuk, McArdle, & Williams, 2008; Koh et al., 2010; Williams & Jackson, 2005), adapt a similar, social determinants perspective on health disparities and child health. In the child welfare literature, Korbin, Coulton, Chard, Platt-Houston, and Su (1998), Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, and Earls (2003), Drake, Lee, and Jonson-Reid (2009), and Drake and Jonson-Reid (2010) found that the black/white maltreatment gap (i.e., disparity) is contingent on the race-specific ecological context but this approach has yet to influence the methods used to study placement disparities. Consequently,