

## **Differences in Racially Disproportionate Reporting of Child Maltreatment Across Report Sources**

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*Recent attention on disproportionate representation of African-American children in the child welfare system highlights the phenomenon in foster care, with less emphasis placed on the reporting stage. This study examines racial disproportionality and disparity in reports of suspected child maltreatment, across report source, and comparing state experiences. Geographic information systems (GIS) technology is used to report findings through maps. This study's findings highlight that racial disproportionality and disparity in reporting is not a universal phenomenon across the United States, nor across report sources. Efforts to address these phenomena should take notice of differences between states, and trends across report sources.*

**KEYWORDS** *child maltreatment, child protection, policy issues, research methodology*

African-American children are disproportionately represented in the American child protection system (United States Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2007). African-American children are the subjects of 22% of the reports of suspected child abuse and neglect in the United States, are 22.2% of cases substantiated after investigation (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), and include 23% of children placed in foster care (United States Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2012). At a given time, approximately 30% of children in foster care in this country are African-American (United States Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2012). However, African-American children are only 14% of the

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child population of the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2011). This phenomenon of racial overrepresentation at any point in the child welfare continuum is often referred to as *racial disproportionality*.

The disproportionate representation of African-American children in the child protective system has received recent attention in child welfare research and policy. A federal General Accounting Office Report cites the need for government action to address this growing problem (United States Government Accountability Office [US GAO], 2007). Casey Family Services partnered with Race Matters Consortium Westat to analyze racial disproportionality in child protective services at the national, state and county levels in an effort to identify policy solutions (Hill, 2007). The Child Welfare League of America devoted an entire volume of their journal, *Child Welfare*, to the subject in 2008, and published two books on the subject (Derezotes, Poertner, & Testa, 2004; Green, Belanger, McRoy, & Bullard, 2011). In 2011, Harvard Law School's Child Advocacy Program and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago hosted an invitational interdisciplinary conference to share best evidence on this topic and explore innovative policy and practice responses (Bartholet, Wulczyn, Barth, & Lederman, 2011).

This exploratory study aims to determine if differences in racially disproportionate reporting to child protective services exist across report sources, and between states. The results of this study will inform efforts aimed at addressing racially disproportionate representation of African-American children in the child welfare system, highlighting the role of reporting on this phenomenon.

## RACIALLY DISPROPORTIONATE REPORTING

Although there has been substantial research and policy discussion in the area of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system the focus for change has largely focused on foster care and child protection system practice (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, & Gourdine, 2003; Derezotes, Richardson, King, Kleinschmit-Rember, & Pratt, 2008; Detlaff et al., 2011; US GAO, 2007; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007; Wulczyn, Lery, & Haight, 2006). Less emphasis has been placed on responding to the phenomenon at the reporting phase.

Existing research on racial disproportionality in reporting focuses on national level data (US GAO, 2007) or on the experience of a particular state (Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003; Derezotes & Hill, 2004). Some research focuses on the experiences of particular professional report sources, such as educational personnel (Egu & Weiss, 2003; O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999) and medical personnel (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Jenny, Hymel, Ritzen, Reinert, & Hay, 1999; Lane, Rubin, Monteith, & Christian, 2002). No existing literature could be found that compares

racial disproportionate reporting across states or between report sources. By distinguishing report sources and locations where racially disproportionate reporting is most prevalent, the findings of the present study can further the understanding of the phenomenon and inform efforts to address it.

Over-representation of African-American children in the child welfare system as a whole can be created by two different mechanisms: disproportionate entrance into and disproportionate exit from the system (Courtney & Skyles, 2003). The import of both mechanisms is supported by research (Ards, Myers, Malkis, et al., 2003; Carrion, 2007; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Derezotes & Hill, 2004; Lu et al., 2004; Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003). This study focuses on the first mechanism: disproportionate entrance into the child welfare system through reports to CPS. Research shows that over-representation of African-American children in CPS begins as early as when the report of suspected child abuse or neglect is first made to CPS (Hill, 2007; Lu et al., 2003; US GAO, 2007). Analysis in Minnesota found that African-American children were 7.4 times more likely than the general population to be reported for maltreatment (Ards et al., 2003). In Illinois, African-American children were found to be the subject of CPS reports at a rate three times that of White children (Derezotes & Hill, 2004).

Disproportionate reporting of African-American children can vary within a particular state (Krase, 2010). For example, in New York disproportionate reporting by race was found in the State as a whole, but the rate of disproportionate reporting of African-American children was greater in New York City versus the rest of the state (Carrion, 2007).

The National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) has often been used to analyze the disproportionate involvement of African-American children with CPS. NIS data measures known or alleged cases of abuse and neglect (Ards et al., 2003). According to findings from the NIS-1, poor African-American victims were just as likely as non-poor African-American victims to be known to CPS, whereas non-white poor were less likely than white poor to be known to CPS, suggesting that the intersection of race and class might contribute to disproportionality (Ards et al., 1998). African-American children were more likely to be reported to CPS if they were living in rural areas, among the lower socioeconomic class, and if the allegations involved physical or sexual abuse (Ards et al., 1998).

Some research has found that the representation of African-American children is more disproportionate at the reporting stage than at the substantiation stage (Ards et al., 2003; Fluke et al., 2003). However, other research, has found that the over-representation of African-American children increases at the substantiation stage, and again at foster care placement (Carrion, 2007; Hill, 2007; Harris & Hackett, 2008). These conflicting findings may be due to differences in the locations of the samples studied.

Research has consistently found that professional reporters refer a disproportionate number of African American children to CPS (Derezotes & Hill,

2004; Fluke et al., 2003; Lu et al., 2004). Professional reporters include social service personnel, medical personnel, legal personnel (including police), mental health personnel, and educational personnel. Analysis of the NIS-1 found that African-American children are more likely than white children to be known to CPS through reports from educational personnel than any other report source (Ards et al., 1998).

There are three main hypotheses offered in the literature to explain why African-American children are disproportionately reported to CPS:

- 1) African-American children are more likely to be abused or neglected than children of other races;
- 2) Race serves as a proxy for risk factors for abuse and neglect, such as poverty, and;
- 3) Bias influences reports of suspected child abuse and neglect.

Any and all of these factors may contribute to this phenomenon.

### Are African-American Children More Likely to Be Abused or Neglected?

The overrepresentation of African-American children in the child welfare system suggests that they are maltreated more than children of other races. While much research suggests African-American children experience maltreatment at a higher rate than White children, income, poverty and other social, demographic and economic considerations are believed to largely account for these differences. Over three waves of data, the NIS found that the risk of child maltreatment does not differ by race, when socioeconomic factors were controlled for (Ards et al., 1998).

The most recent wave of the NIS (NIS-4), however, did find that the maltreatment rate was higher for African-American children than for White children in certain maltreatment categories even when socioeconomic factors were controlled for (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). Differences in maltreatment rates by race were small or nonexistent for families with low socioeconomic status (Sedlak et al., 2010). However, African-American children from families of middle and high socioeconomic status were two times more likely than White children from similar socioeconomic status to be at risk of physical abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010).

### Does Race Serve as a Proxy for Risk Factors for Abuse and Neglect?

African American children may be disproportionately reported to CPS because of their disproportionate predisposition to multiple risk factors for

abuse and neglect (Bartholet, 2009; Cross, 2008; Hill, 2006). Poverty is a risk factor for child maltreatment (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Since African-American children are more likely to live in poverty than other children in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2011), and poverty is a risk factor for maltreatment, poverty may be the mechanism through which African-American children are disproportionately reported to CPS.

Children in single-parent headed households are more likely to be abused and neglected (Hill, 2006). Since African-American families are disproportionately headed by single-parents (Hill, 2006) racially disproportionate reporting may result. However, single-parent headed families are also more likely to live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Therefore, poverty may be the main mechanism through which African-American children are disproportionately reported to CPS.

### Does Bias Influence Reports of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect?

When controlling for social and demographic factors, race of the child still has a significant impact on the likelihood of a report to CPS in certain professional groups (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Jenny et al., 1999; Lane et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2004; Newberger, 1983). Therefore, another mechanism may be involved in the disproportionate reporting of African-American children to CPS; perhaps bias.

Bias in reporting of child abuse and neglect is a “perennial concern” (O’Toole, Webster, O’Toole, & Lucal, 1999, p. 1084). In fact, the framers of original mandated reporting laws were concerned that the system they were designing might result in bias against poor families and families of color (Sussman & Cohen, 1975). Bias can skew the reporter’s judgment when making a report. However, not all bias is based on race. There are three types of bias most commonly associated with reporting suspected child abuse and neglect: *visibility/exposure bias*; *labeling bias*; and *reporting bias*.

#### VISIBILITY/EXPOSURE BIAS

*Visibility/exposure bias* refers to a situation where certain children and families are more “visible” to potential reporters of suspected child maltreatment, increasing the likelihood of being reported to CPS (Harris & Hackett, 2008, p. 202).

Poor families may be more likely to be reported to CPS because of their frequent use of public services (Drake & Zuravin, 1998). A family in poverty may turn to the public social service system for support, thus subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of mandated reporters. Families without such service involvement are in contrast shielded from such scrutiny. Living in poverty,

and perhaps receiving social services, at higher rates than other children may make African-American children more “visible” to reporters. This type of visibility/exposure bias is supported by research as a contributing factor to the disproportionate representation of African-American children (Ards, Myers, Malkis, et al., 2003).

Another form of visibility bias suggests that there is a higher probability for African-American children to be involved with CPS when they live in a geographic area where they represent a minority of the population (Garland, Ellis-Macleod, Landsverk, Ganger, & Johnson, 1998). African-American children may be more likely to be reported to CPS when they live in communities where there are fewer families of color, and thus the challenges they face are more “visible.” This hypothesis was supported by research on San Diego County in California (Garland et al., 1998). A comparison of the experiences in the seven Major Statistical Areas (MSAs) of San Diego County found that in MSAs where African-Americans represented a smaller proportion of the child population, they were more likely to be involved in child protective services (Garland et al., 1998).

#### LABELING BIAS

*Labeling bias* refers to an increased tendency by reporters to look for maltreatment among certain groups (Drake & Zuravin, 1998). Social distance (Hampton & Newberger, 1985) and cultural differences in child rearing between the reporter and the family (Ards et al., 1998) may impact the tendency to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Professional reporters may be less likely to label a parent with whom he or she shares similar characteristics as a “child abuser” (Ards et al., 1998; Hampton & Newberger, 1985). Professionals may report parental behavior that they themselves do not practice, nor experienced. Socially marginalized families, not represented in reporting groups, may suffer from a process in which their personal characteristics label them as deviant to potential reporters (Hampton & Newberger, 1985).

Ambiguous definitions of child maltreatment may add to bias in reporting (Ibanez et al., 2006). Reporters unsure of what constitutes child abuse or neglect may fall back on beliefs (or biases) about families to determine whether to report behavior (Berger, McDaniel, & Paxson, 2005).

#### REPORTING BIAS

*Reporting bias* occurs when otherwise identical cases are reported differently because of bias (Ards et al., 2003). When race drives the bias, racism is at play. There is no consistent finding as to the significance of race as a factor in the reporting of abuse and neglect. Studies that use case file reviews to examine actual reporting find race is a factor in the decision to report

(Hampton & Newberger, 1984; Jenny et al., 1999; Lane et al., 2002), where as, research that utilizes vignettes generally find race is not a significant factor in that judgment (O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005).

Studies of hospital case files find that medical personnel are more likely to report cases of alleged child maltreatment if the family is African-American (Hampton & Newberger, 1984; Jenny et al., 1999; Lane et al., 2002). Non-white children are more likely to receive skeletal surveys (for the purpose of searching for a history of injury) than white children, even after controlling for presenting complaint and socioeconomic status (Lane et al., 2002). Research also finds that African-American children are more likely than white children to be reported to CPS for similar injuries (Lu et al., 2004), even after controlling for presenting complaint and socioeconomic status (Lane et al., 2002). Cases where abuse was suspected, but not reported were more likely to involve white families, and families with higher incomes (Hampton & Newberger, 1985).

A series of studies, using hypothetical situations in the form of vignettes, attempted to determine if factors, including race, make teachers more likely to report suspected child maltreatment. Two studies identified the race of the child or perpetrator in the narrative of the vignette itself (O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005). Another study developed hypothetical case files where the only classification of the child or perpetrator's race could be made from seeing the child's picture in the vignette file (Egu & Weiss, 2003). None of these studies found race played a significant role in predicting a teacher's likelihood to identify a situation as child maltreatment, or influence their willingness to make a report to CPS (Egu & Weiss, 2003; O'Toole et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2005). One study found White teachers were more likely to express willingness to report suspected child abuse than other teachers regardless of the race of the child (Webster et al., 2005).

Although the findings of these vignette studies suggest no racial bias in the reporting of child maltreatment by teachers, significant limitations to these studies should be noted. These studies were based on hypothetical, not real, cases. Hypothetical situations presented through vignettes may not provide an accurate representation of real life scenarios and may exclude information that reporters in reality would have to guide their decisions (Ibanez et al., 2006). Social desirability bias might also have impacted the teachers' responses. Additionally, no vignette study included neglect, the most frequent category of maltreatment reported.

Findings from the current study cannot prove, nor disprove, the hypotheses that may explain racial disproportionate reporting of suspected child maltreatment. However, by determining what differences, if any, exist between report sources and across states, efforts to address racially disproportionate reporting can be better informed, and narrowly tailored to improve effectiveness.

## METHODS

This study involves secondary analysis of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File FFY 2010. NCANDS has become the primary source of information on reports of abused and neglected children in the United States (National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect [NDACAN], 2011). NCANDS provides detail on every report of suspected child abuse or neglect submitted by participating states. Report details include demographic characteristics of the alleged victim, as well as the type of maltreatment alleged, among other variables. The NCANDS is administered annually (NDACAN, 2011). Data for the NCANDS are collected through case reviews at the state level. States that agree to provide data for the given year of the study are given a list of variables to extract from their own data systems. This analysis includes information on every report of alleged child abuse or maltreatment, including allegations that were later unsubstantiated. NCANDS for 2010 provides data on reports of suspected child abuse and neglect that reached a disposition during the 2010 fiscal year (October 1, 2009, through September 30, 2010). The NCANDS Child File FFY 2010 includes 3.5 million reports from 49 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (NDACAN, 2011).

### Limitations

The two significant limitations to the NCANDS data are its age and missing data. NCANDS data is not provided for independent analyses until the annual publication *Child Maltreatment* is published. As a result, there is a time lag of more than 1 year before the data are made available to outside researchers. Another limitation of NCANDS is the data missing from particular states. Not all states contribute data to NCANDS, though the number of states that do has rapidly increased over the past 10 years. In NCANDS 2010, Oregon was the only state that did not supply data to NCANDS. A number of states provided limited data, including Pennsylvania, which did not provide racial and ethnic demographic data.

An additional limitation in this particular study is the comparison of administrative data across states. For example, categorization of type of maltreatment, report disposition, and even child's race are locally determined events that the researcher in the present study did not have control over. It is possible, and even plausible, that a comparison of what seems to be similar reports across states will not be comparable if more carefully analyzed. A report categorized as including an allegation of neglect in one state might be categorized as emotional maltreatment in another state. Categorization of race is a function of the CPS worker, and not the family. Therefore it is possible, and even likely, that dissonance between actual and observed racial categorization occurs.

There are various burdens of proof required for different levels of report disposition across states, ranging from the low level of reasonable suspicion to the high level of clear and convincing evidence. Even states that share the same burden of proof may categorize similar cases differently. CPS in different states, and even different counties within the same state, may have different standards for indicating cases. Additionally report disposition determinations made by CPS may reflect responses to local and high profile cases of a particular nature, or recent training on a particular fact pattern.

## Geographical Information Systems

This study explores data through technology that is not often utilized in social work research: Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The use of maps to display data for geographic units can have a greater impact than a written description of the information (Ernst, 2000). People understand information more quickly when it is presented in graphical form, such as a map (Robertson & Wier, 1998). Mapping of data allows for easy visual comparison across geographical units, such as states and counties. Trends are quickly identified when viewing a map (Robertson & Wier, 1998). Maps can provide “powerful evidence of disparity” (Hillier, 2007). By showing disparity across spatial units, mapping can support the call for policy and practice interventions in a particular community (Felke, 2006).

Social work has been slow to adopt GIS as a tool for research and practice, especially when compared to other fields (Hillier, 2007; Queralt & White, 1998). However, social work is not new to mapping. Among the earliest social workers (including Jane Addams herself), settlement house workers and charitable foundations used mapping to document the living conditions and resulting needs of impoverished and disenfranchised communities (Felke, 2006; Hillier, 2007).

The use of technologies like GIS can help social workers and social service agencies better respond to the changing needs of their constituencies (Coulton, 2005). Social work is a community focused profession, but many social workers do not take full advantage of the technological resources available to them, like GIS, to better understand the communities they serve (Coulton, 2005). From identifying clusters of child maltreatment to informing the placement of support services for families, the use of GIS in child protective services is particularly encouraged (Hillier, 2011).

In this particular study, ESRI's ArcView 9.3 GIS software was used to produce maps that show variables distributed across states. State level data were aggregated from the NCANDS Child File then imported into the ArcView program spreadsheet. With the use of a Windows format interface, maps were created simply by choosing which variable's values to display across states.

## Measuring Racial Disproportionality and Disparity

Racial disproportionality occurs when members of a certain race are observed at a rate different from their representation in the general population. Disproportionality can be in the form of over-representation or under-representation. This study utilized the Disproportionality Representation Index for African-American Children, DRI(AA), to measure and compare racially disproportionate reporting across the United States. The DRI(AA) represents the ratio of African-American children in reports of child abuse and neglect compared to the group's representation in the child population (Fluke et al., 2003). A DRI(AA) greater than 1 indicates that African-American children are disproportionately over-represented in reports. A DRI(AA) less than 1 indicates that African-American children are disproportionately under-represented in reports.

Disparity refers to differences between group experiences. The Disparity Index-Educational Personnel, DI(AA/White) is the likelihood of an African-American child being reported to CPS in comparison to the respective likelihood of a White child being reported to CPS. The DI is calculated by dividing the DRI for African-American children by a similarly calculated DRI for White children (Fluke et al., 2003). A DI(AA/White) greater than 1 indicates that African-American children are more likely than white children to be the subject of reports to CPS. A DI-EP(AA/White) less than 1 indicates that African-American children are less likely than white children to be the subject of reports to CPS.

## RESULTS

There were over 3.5 million reports, from 13 different report sources, made to child protective services in the United States in 2010 (Table 1). African-American children were disproportionately reported to child protective services in the United States in 2010. The DRI for all reports to child protective services in the United States in 2010 was 1.57. However, African-American children were not proportionally over-represented in all states. The DRI ranged by state from 0.50 in Vermont to 3.67 in Alaska (Figure 1).

African-American children were more likely to be reported than White children in the United States. The DI(AA/White) for all reports to CPS in the United States in 2010 was 1.68. However, African-American children were less likely to be reported than White children in a handful of states. The DI(AA/White) ranged by state from 0.47 in Vermont to 27.46 in the District of Columbia (Figure 2).

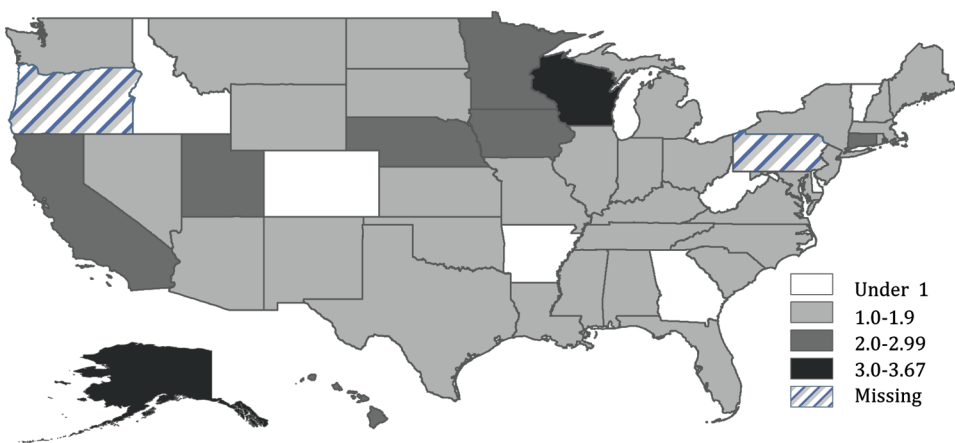
In the United States as a whole, the DRI by report source ranged from 1.26 for reports from alleged victims to 2.0 from Social Services Personnel and Day Care Providers (See Table 1). However, the report source with the

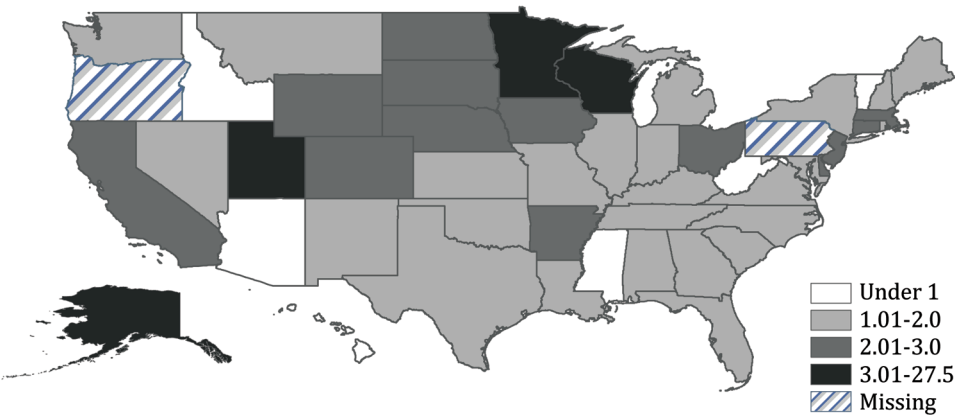
**TABLE 1** Comparison of U.S. 2010 Report Sources: Total Reports (%), Disproportionality Representation Index (DRI), and Disparity Index (DI)

Report source	Percentage of reports (%)	DRI	DI
Law Enforcement	16.1	1.60	1.75
Educational Personnel	15.6	1.57	1.88
Social Services Personnel	10.6	2.00	2.22
Medical Personnel	7.0	1.76	2.07
Mental Health	4.4	1.26	1.45
Day Care Providers	0.7	2.00	2.22
Substitute Care Providers	0.4	1.76	2.07
Alleged Victims	0.4	1.26	1.45
Parents of Alleged Victims	6.7	1.60	1.75
Other Relatives of Alleged Victims	7.0	1.57	1.88
Friends/Neighbors	4.8	1.48	1.42
Alleged Perpetrators	<.01	1.76	1.75
Anonymous Reporters	9.8	1.54	1.66
ALL REPORTS		2.00	1.71

Highest DRI varied by state. For approximately half of states, victims were the report source with the highest DRI. When only looking at professional report sources, social service personnel had the highest DRI in 18 states. In the United States as a whole, reports from professional report sources were more racially disproportionate ( $\text{DRI}[\text{Professional}] = 1.66$ ) than reports from non-professional report sources ( $\text{DRI}[\text{Non-Professional}] = 1.45$ ). The same was true in the majority of States (Figure 3).

In the United States as a whole, the  $\text{DI}(\text{AA/White})$  by report source ranged from 1.42 for reports from Friends/Neighbors to 2.22 for reports

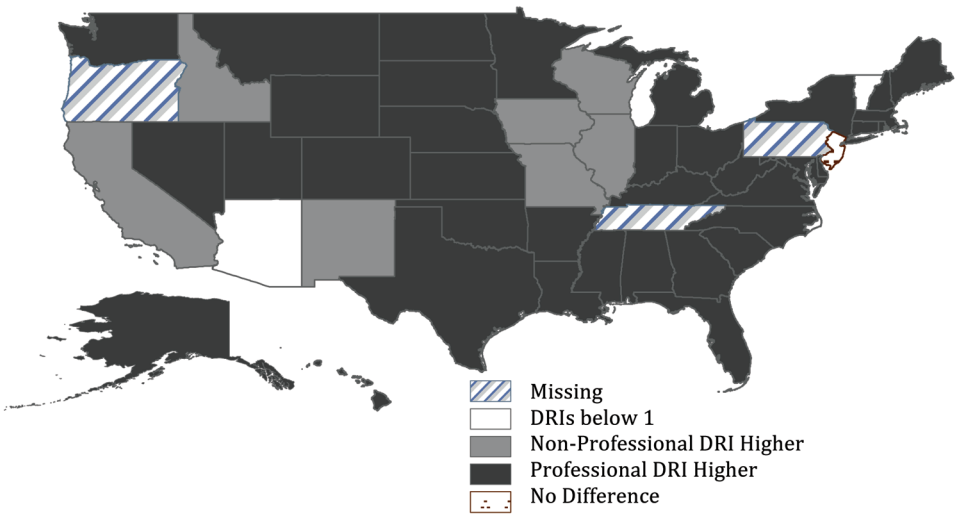
**FIGURE 1** Map of the statewide disproportionality representation index (DRI) for all report sources (color figure available online).



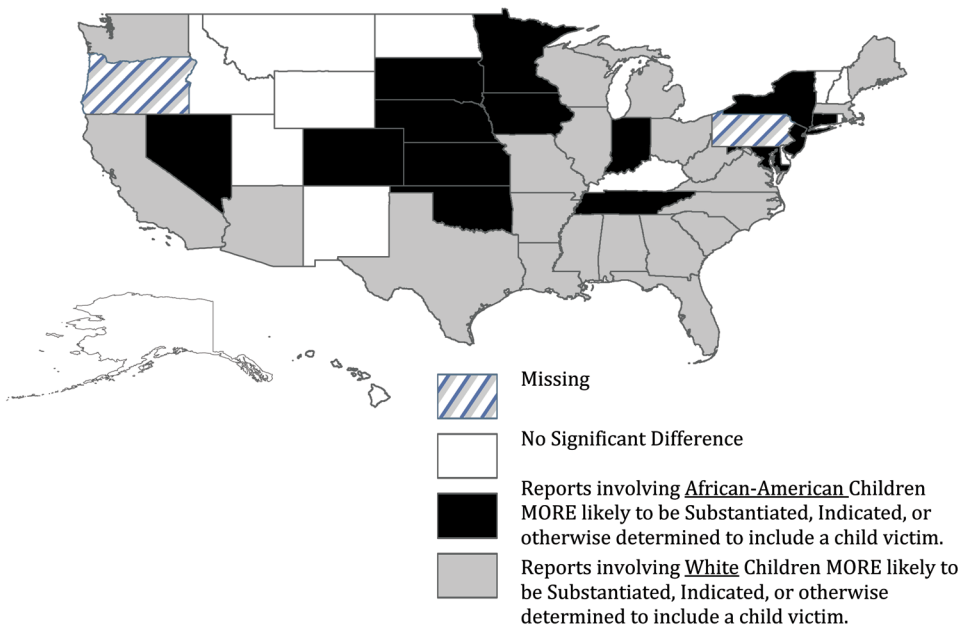
**FIGURE 2** Map of the statewide disparity index (DI) for all report sources (color figure available online).

from Social Services Personnel and Day Care Providers (Table 1). The report source with the Highest DI varied by state. Victims had the highest DI in 15 states. When only looking at professional report sources, social service personnel had the highest DRI in 17 states. In the United States as a whole, racial disparity was higher in reports from professional report sources ( $DI[Professional] = 1.89$ ) than those from non-professional report sources ( $DI[Non-Professional] = 1.42$ ). The same held true in the majority of states.

When looking at reports from all sources, chi-square analysis found reports involving African-American children were more likely to be substanti-



**FIGURE 3** Map of the comparison of disproportionality representation index (DRI) for professional and non-professional report sources (color figure available online).



**FIGURE 4** Map of the differences in report disposition by race (color figure available online).

ated, indicated, or otherwise determined to include a child victim after investigation (21.0%) than reports involving White children (20.6%) when looking at the United States as a whole ( $p = 0.00$ ). Differences in report disposition by race were found in many states, however, not all in the same direction as observed in the national statistic (Figure 4). Disposition by race was also significantly different across report sources at both the national and state levels.

Examining reports from professional sources only, chi-square analysis found that reports involving African-American children were more likely to be substantiated, indicated, or otherwise determined to include a child victim after investigation (26.3%) than reports involving White children (25.7%,  $p = 0.00$ ). On the contrary, when examining reports from non-professional sources only, chi-square analysis found that reports involving African-American children were less likely to be substantiated, indicated, or otherwise determined to include a child victim after investigation (14.0%) than reports involving White children (14.3%,  $p = 0.00$ ). Differences in report disposition by race were found in many states, however, not all in the same direction as observed in the national statistic.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm disproportionality and disparity by race in the reporting of suspected child maltreatment. However, the extent of dis-

proportionality and disparity is not the same across states or report sources. African-American children were under-represented in reports in a handful of states. Proportional under-representation of African-Americans may be the result of over-representation of other racial/ethnic groups, such as Hispanics or Native Americans, in the reports of a particular state. It is possible that in states with very small populations of African-American children, like Vermont, that the numeric difference between proportionate and disproportionate representation is minimal.

However, differences in racial disproportionality and disparity across report sources in the same state cannot be explained by these statistical phenomena, and thus warrant a localized examination. The results of local examination may justify the inclusion of a discussion of the potential for racial bias in reporting in related training.

The comparison of these phenomena across professional vs. non-professional sources shows differences between these two categories of reporters. If the hypothesis through which racial disproportionality could be singularly explained was that African-American children experienced child maltreatment at rates higher than children of other races, then it would be logical that there would be no differences in disproportionality and disparity across report sources. Since these differences DO exist, it is important to focus examination of the reporting experiences of certain report sources. Such examination should begin with the largest groups of reporters: law enforcement, educational and social service personnel. The results of such studies would shape training and awareness campaigns by informing the inclusion of racial and/or class bias awareness in those curricula.

Visibility bias, in one form or another, may be the primary basis for racial disproportionality and disparity in reports of suspected child maltreatment. Social service personnel had among the highest DRI and DI, when compared to all report sources, and are a large source of reports in all states. The access of these reporters to low-income families, which are disproportionately African-American, may explain the higher DRI and DI for these professionals. Further examination of these report sources is warranted, as well as examining possible correlation of poverty among African-American families to racial disproportionate reporting.

However, the higher level of racial disproportionality and disparity in reports from professional reporters may also suggest labeling bias and/or reporting bias on the part of the reporter. Perhaps social distance between professional reporters and the families of color they report to CPS is the mechanism through which disproportionality and disparity is higher for this group. More research, focusing on specific groups of professional reporters, and in specific communities is needed.

While the professional report sources highlighted through this research are mandated reporters in all states, training requirements for these professionals vary. Most states actually lack any training requirement for most

mandated reporters. Even when training is available, or required, the quality and quantity of available training varies.

The lower level of racial disproportionality and disparity in reports from non-professional reporters suggests conscious efforts to avoid contact with child protective services may be more prevalent in communities of color. However, within the category of non-professional reporters, one particular category, alleged victim, had some of the highest state levels of disproportionality and disparity, though the proportion of reports that originate from this source is minimal.

Differences in report disposition by race, and across report source, may involve a variable not examined through this research: the role of child protective services in the determination of disposition. Differences in report disposition by race across professional versus non-professional report sources may be impacted by the quality of the report, the impression of the report source by the child protective services worker, as well as the quality of the investigation itself. The findings from the present study related to differences in disposition by race and report source can only inform further exploration.

## CONCLUSIONS

Over representation of African-American children in the child welfare system has been a long-standing phenomenon and the current interest in understanding and addressing this issue is commendable. However, in this time of fiscal austerity when fewer resources are being made available to address domestic social concerns, efforts to reduce racially disproportionate reporting should be targeted to geographic areas and report sources where the phenomena are most pronounced. GIS analysis of reporting at smaller geographic levels (e.g., county, zip code, census block) would be helpful to identify areas ripe for intervention.

Existing research has been limited in geographic scope and has not addressed differences across report sources. As evidenced through the findings in this study, reporting on racially disproportionate reporting by grouping all report sources into a single category fails to acknowledge the intricacies of the reporting process. It is important to highlight that this study focuses on disproportionality and disparity as it relates to African-American children. In certain states and localities, analysis of disproportionality and disparity for other racial or cultural groups, namely Native Americans and/or Hispanic children would be more relevant.

The results of this study are just the beginning. Further examination of disproportionality and disparity should be conducted at the county or even more local level. Targeted examination of child maltreatment reporting by specific report sources is another important area for future research. Future

research should control for covariates including race and socioeconomic status of the alleged victim, as well as the type of maltreatment alleged. Characteristics of reporters themselves should also be considered, including work experience, personal experiences, and training. The results of future research in this area should be used to inform training and awareness campaigns aimed at professional and non-professional reporters. Such efforts can ensure that all victims of child maltreatment are reported to child protective services so that they are provided services to protect them from further harm.

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