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# Child Maltreatment Reporting by Educational Personnel: Implications for Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System

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African American children are disproportionately overrepresented in the U.S. child protection system. Because educational personnel are a significant source of reports of suspected child maltreatment across the country and in all states, the present study examines the impact of these reports on racial disproportionality and disparity at the national, state, and local levels, with an examination of New York State specifically. Geographic information systems technology is used to report differences in county-level experiences through maps. This study's findings highlight that racial disproportionality and disparity in reporting by educational personnel exist at the national level and significantly differ within a state. These findings demand that efforts to address racially disproportionate and disparate reporting should be tailored to local experiences, and highlight the importance of involvement of school personnel, including school social workers, in these efforts.

KEY WORDS: *child maltreatment; child welfare; educational personnel; mandated reporting; racial disproportionality*

African American children are overrepresented in the child protection system (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2007). African American children are the subjects of 22 percent of the reports of suspected maltreatment, make up 22.2 percent of cases substantiated after investigation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], Administration on Children, Youth and Families [ACYF], 2012), and constitute 23 percent of children placed in foster care (HHS, ACYF, 2012). At any time, almost 30 percent of children in foster care are African American (HHS, ACYF, 2012). However, African American children make up only 14 percent of the children in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This phenomenon of racial overrepresentation is called “racial disproportionality” or disproportionate minority representation.

There is widespread concern expressed for the impact that racial disproportionality in the child welfare system has on children of color, their families, and the communities they live in (GAO, 2007). Because child maltreatment leads to physical health, mental health, behavioral, and societal consequences for vic-

tims in their childhood and through adulthood (HHS, ACYF, 2007), greater prevalence of child maltreatment in a particular community can result in greater prevalence of these associated negative outcomes. There is also concern that racial disproportionality is, at least in part, caused by racial bias. A better understanding of disproportionate representation in the child welfare system can result in better services designed to mitigate all causes and consequences.

In response to growing concern over racial disproportionality, research has explored the mechanisms through which racial disproportionality occurs (Courtney & Skyles, 2003). Although racial disproportionality has consistently been found in the reporting phase of a child's involvement in the child welfare system, much research on the mechanisms of racial disproportionality focuses on foster care and child protection system practice. Less emphasis has been placed on the phenomenon at the reporting phase. In addition, there is a dearth of research on racially disproportionate reporting and the role of specific professional reporters (Krase, 2013a). This article explores the role of educational personnel in racially disproportionate reporting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Educational Personnel as Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect

More than 3.3 million reports of suspected child maltreatment were made in the United States in 2011, more than 55 percent from professional reporters (HHS, ACYF, 2012). Most professional reporters are mandated by law to report suspicions of child maltreatment (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2009). Educational personnel, including school social workers, are mandated reporters in all states. Mandated reporters of varying professional roles have different access to children and families, providing diverse opportunities to observe signs of maltreatment. These differences may affect the type of maltreatment reported, the characteristics of children and families reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) and the quality of the report itself. Examination of reports from different sources is needed to inform policy and training (Krase, 2013a).

The term “educational personnel” includes employees of public and private institutions charged with the education of children. School social workers are one player in a complex system of educational personnel within a school (Chanmugam, 2009). Individuals within this system often work together when a report to CPS is considered. Although many reports may originate from the concerns of classroom teachers, these concerns are often vetted through other school personnel before they are reported (Lau et al., 2009). Social work education prepares school social workers for this role differently than preparation of other players, such as teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, and administrators. Unlike these other professionals, school social workers assess students and their families using the person-in-environment perspective and apply ecological systems theory to families and the child welfare system (Corbin, 2005). These skills and related knowledge make school social workers vital to teams that consider reporting concerns to CPS.

Educational personnel, including school social workers, were responsible for 16 percent of reports in the United States in 2011, second only to law enforcement personnel who made 16.7 percent of reports (HHS, ACYF, 2012). Educational personnel may be in a privileged position to identify signs of child abuse (Kenny, 2001; Tite, 1993) due to their sustained contact with children and repeated access to parents (Crosson-Tower, 2003). Requirements

in all states for educational personnel to report suspicions (Crosson-Tower, 2003), along with their unique vantage point, may lead to the relatively high proportion of reports coming from schools.

Unfortunately, due to confusion, concern, and lack of information, educational personnel, like all types of reporters, report only a small proportion of their suspicions to CPS (Kenny, 2004; Kesner & Robinson, 2002). However, reports from educational personnel are distinguished from those of other professional reporters, in that they are the least likely in the United States, and in most states, to be substantiated after investigation, when compared with reports from other professional reporters (Krase, 2013b). In a few states, reports from educational personnel were less likely to be substantiated than those of neighbors and anonymous sources (Krase, 2013b).

As a major source of reports to CPS, it is important to consider the role of educational personnel as we examine the alarming phenomenon of racially disproportionate reporting. If educational personnel are a source of racially disproportionate reporting, then efforts to explore and address this phenomenon with this particular source of reports could yield significant results.

### Disproportionate Reporting of African American Children to CPS

African American children are more likely than white children to be reported to CPS by educational personnel than any other report source (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998). There are three main hypotheses offered in the literature to explain why African American children are disproportionately reported to CPS by any source:

1. They 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.
3. Bias influences reports of suspected child abuse and neglect.

Any and all of these factors may contribute to racially disproportionate reporting by any reporter.

***Are African American Children More Likely to Be Abused or Neglected?*** African American children are more likely to experience maltreatment than white children, but socioeconomic factors are thought to account for the difference. The National Incidence Studies (NIS) found over three waves of

data that risk of maltreatment did not differ by race when socioeconomic factors were controlled (Ards et al., 1998). However, NIS-4 found that African American children of middle and high socioeconomic status were two times more likely than similar white children to be at risk of physical abuse (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). Differences in cultural acceptance of corporal punishment as a means of discipline may explain this disparity, and changes in acceptance of this form of discipline over the past 20 years may explain the findings of the most recent NIS wave compared with previous waves.

***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 risk factors for abuse and neglect (Bartholet, 2009; Cross, 2008), such as poverty (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Children in single-parent-headed families are more likely to be maltreated, and African American families are disproportionately headed by single parents (Hill, 2006). However, single-parent-headed families are also more likely to live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Therefore, poverty may be the mechanism through which African American children are disproportionately reported, and not family structure.

***Does Bias Influence Reports of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect?*** There are three types of bias most commonly associated with racially disproportionate reporting: visibility/exposure bias, labeling bias, and reporting bias.

*Visibility/exposure bias* occurs when the “visibility” of families increases their likelihood of being reported (Harris & Hackett, 2008). Poor families may be more likely to be reported because their use of social services subjects them to increased exposure of mandated reporters (Drake & Zuravin, 1998). African American children are more likely to live in poverty and may receive more services, making them more “visible.” This type of bias is supported by research (Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003). African American children may be more likely to be reported when they live in a geographic area where they represent a small proportion of the population (Garland, Ellis-Macleod, Landsverk, Ganger, & Johnson, 1998), and thus the challenges they face are more visible. This type of visibility bias is also supported by research (Garland et al., 1998).

*Labeling bias* means that reporters see maltreatment among certain groups (Drake & Zuravin, 1998). Social

distance (Hampton & Newberger, 1985) and cultural differences between the reporter and the family (Ards et al., 1998) may influence the tendency to report. Ambiguous definitions of maltreatment may also influence bias (Ibanez, Borrego, Pemberton, & Terao, 2006). Reporters unsure of what constitutes child abuse or neglect may fall back on biases to determine whether to report behavior (Berger, McDaniel, & Paxson, 2005).

*Reporting bias* occurs when similar cases are reported differently (Ards et al., 2003). African American children are more likely than white children to be reported by medical personnel for similar injuries (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Jenny, Hymel, Ritzen, Reinert, & Hay, 1999; Lu et al., 2004), even after controlling for presenting complaint and socioeconomic status (Lane, Rubin, Monteith, & Christian, 2002).

A series of vignette studies failed to find that race affected teachers’ decisions to report suspected maltreatment (O’Toole, Webster, O’Toole, & Lucal, 1999; Webster, O’Toole, O’Toole, & Lucal, 2005). White teachers, however, were more willing to report suspected child abuse than other teachers regardless of the race of the child (Webster et al., 2005). Contrary to research on medical personnel, the teacher studies were based on hypothetical cases (Ibanez et al., 2006). In addition, no vignette in these studies included neglect, the most frequent category of maltreatment reported by educational personnel.

The present study examined actual reports of all types of suspected maltreatment by educational personnel in the United States and in New York State. The purpose was to determine the impact of reports by educational personnel on disproportionate representation of African American children in the child welfare system and provide data that could inform efforts to address this troubling phenomenon.

## METHOD

### Study Design

This study involved secondary analysis of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File from 2006 (National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012). NCANDS is administered by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) at Cornell University, and has been used with permission. The data originally were collected under the auspices of the Children’s Bureau. Funding was

provided by the Children’s Bureau, ACYF, Administration for Children and Families, HHS. The collector of the original data, the funder, NDACAN, Cornell University, and the agents or employees of these institutions bear no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. The information and opinions expressed reflect solely the opinion of the author. NCANDS provides detail on reports of suspected maltreatment in most states in the United States (NDACAN, 2012). This study analyzed reports made at the national, state, and New York State county level. Ten out of 62 New York State counties had fewer than 1,000 reports and were deidentified to protect the confidentiality of report subjects.

County-level social, demographic, and economic data were culled from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) 3-Year Estimates and the New York State Education Department (NYSED). ACS uses random sampling to create representative samples of the population at different geographical levels (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Fewer than half of New York counties reported the percentage of African American children living in poverty. Data collected by the NYSED were used to define the proportion by race of the county stu-

dent population. County-level data from all sources were combined into one data set to conduct statistical analyses and populate tables and maps.

### County-level Examination

Most research on the reporting of suspected child maltreatment focuses on state and national data (Krase, 2013a). Aggregating data results in loss of detail, distortion (Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003), and affects the ability to distinguish the experiences of unusual counties (Ards et al., 2003). Distortion is especially concerning in New York, where demographics vastly differ across counties (see Map 1). For instance, African American children make up 20 percent of the children in New York State but make up less than 1 percent of the child population in Wyoming and Allegany counties, and 47 percent of the child population in Brooklyn (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Any statewide statistics in states like New York would not accurately represent the experience of any particular locale in the state and could result in bad policy decisions.

### Geographic Information Systems

People understand information more quickly when it is presented in a map (Hillier, 2007; Robertson &

**Map 1. Counties of New York State**



Wier, 1998). Trends and disparities are quickly identified when viewing a map because one can make a simple visual comparison across geographical units (Robertson & Wier, 1998). Data through maps can support policy and practice change in a particular community (Felke, 2006). Using ESRI's (2009) ArcView 9.3 GIS software, the research showed the distribution of variables across counties through maps, and differences across spatial units were analyzed.

### 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 population. This study used the Disproportionality Representation Index-Educational Personnel for African-American Children [DRI-EP(AA)] (Fluke et al., 2003) to measure racially disproportionate reporting by educational personnel. The DRI-EP(AA) represents the ratio of African American children in reports of child abuse and neglect compared with their representation in the population of school children of the given spatial unit (country, state, and county) (Fluke et al., 2003). A DRI-EP(AA) greater than 1 indicates that African American children are overrepresented. A DRI-EP(AA) less than 1 indicates that African American children are underrepresented. The higher the DRI-EP(AA), the greater the level of disproportionality. For example, African American children in counties with a DRI-EP(AA) of 2.2 are overrepresented at even higher levels than in a county with a DRI-EP(AA) of 1.7.

Disparity refers to differences between groups. The Disparity Index-Educational Personnel [DI-EP(AA/White)] (Fluke et al., 2003) represents the likelihood of an African American child being reported by educational personnel in comparison to the likelihood of a white child being reported by educational personnel. The DI-EP is calculated by dividing the DRI-EP(AA) by a DRI-EP for white children. A DI-EP(AA/White) greater than 1 means African American children are more likely than white children to be reported. A DI-EP(AA/White) less than 1 means African American children are less likely than white children to be reported. The higher the DI-EP(AA), the greater the disparity. For example, African American children in counties with a DI-EP(AA) of 2.2 are even more likely to be reported than white children than in a county with a DI-EP(AA) of 1.7.

## RESULTS

### Reports by Educational Personnel in 2006

Educational personnel were the largest source of reports in the United States in 2006, making 547,367 reports or 16.4 percent of total reports. Educational personnel were the second largest report source in New York State, making 35,195 reports or 15.7 percent of reports. Social services personnel made the most reports in New York in 2006 (39,531 reports, 17.6 percent).

### Racially Disproportionate Reporting by Educational Personnel

African American children were overrepresented in reports by educational personnel nationally, in New York State as a whole, and in most counties of the state. Nationally, the DRI-EP(AA) was 1.63, higher than that for all reports (1.59), as well as that for mental health personnel (1.26), day care providers (1.32), and law enforcement (1.6), but lower than that of social services workers (1.85) and medical personnel (1.9).

In New York State, the DRI-EP(AA) was 1.65 (see Table 1), higher than the national DRI-EP(AA). The New York DRI-EP(AA) was higher than the DRI for all reports (1.59), mental health personnel (1.21), day care providers (1.34), law enforcement (1.54), and medical personnel (1.56), but lower than that of social services personnel (1.68) in New York State.

**Table 1: New York State Characteristics, 2006**

Number of reports to Child Protective Services (CPS) from educational personnel	35,195
Percentage of reports to CPS from educational personnel	15.7
Percentage of child population that is African American	18.6
Percentage of reports by educational personnel that include African American children	30.4
DRI-EP(AA)	1.63
DI-EP(AA/White)	2.12
Percentage of reports by educational personnel to CPS involving	
White children who are substantiated after CPS investigation	34.6*
African American children who are substantiated after CPS investigation	40.1*

Notes: DRI-EP(AA) = Disproportionality Representation Index-Educational Personnel for African-American Children, DI-EP = Disparity Index-Educational Personnel.

\*Chi-square analysis found statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ).

Racially disproportionate reporting differs by county (chi square,  $p = .000$ ) (see [Map 2](#)). African American children were underrepresented in 10 counties but overrepresented in 42 counties. Overrepresentation was most prevalent in counties with major urban areas and suburban counties (see [Map 2](#)).

Counties with the highest DRI-EP(AA) (Genesee, Livingston, and Warren counties) have relatively few African American children (see [Map 3](#)). However, the DRI-EP(AA) was not high in *all* counties with low percentages of African American children. African American children made up less than 5 percent of the child population in nine of the 10 counties with DRI-EP(AA)'s under 1.

African American children were generally overrepresented in counties where they were more likely to live in poverty. The exception was Wayne County, where 57 percent of African American children, but only 12 percent of white children, live in poverty, and the DRI-EP was less than 1 (see [Map 4](#)).

**Disparity by Race in Reports to CPS**

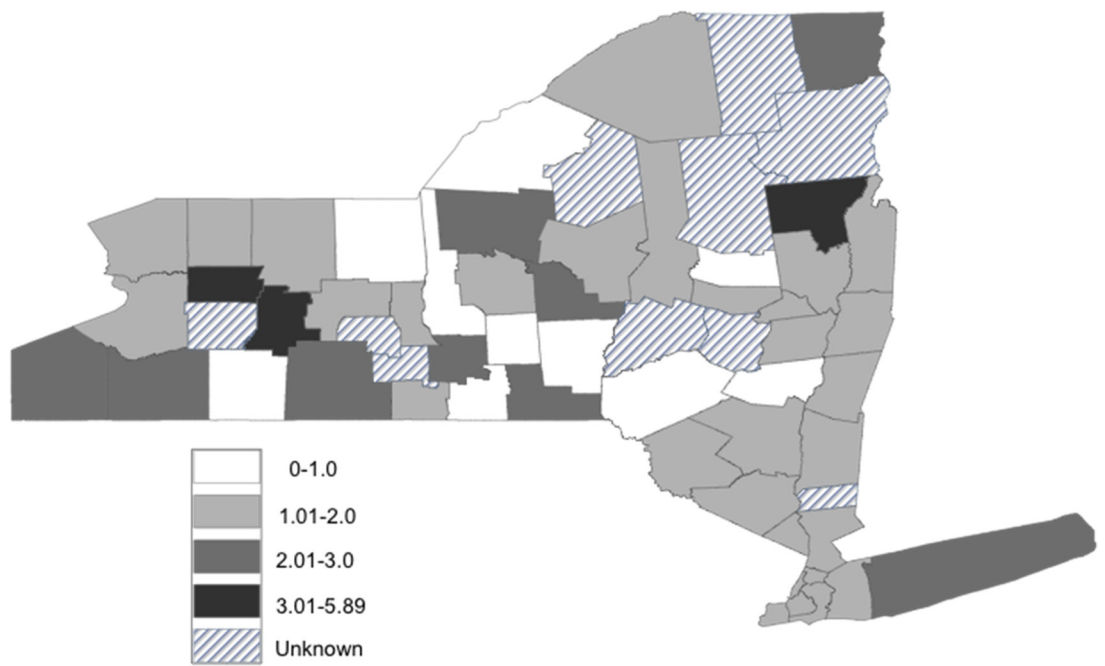
Nationally, African American children are almost twice as likely as white children to be reported by

educational personnel [DI-EP(AA/White) = 1.94]. The national DI-EP(AA/White) is higher than that for all reports (1.69), child care providers (1.22), mental health (1.38), and law enforcement personnel (1.74), but lower than social services (1.97) and medical personnel (2.3). The DI-EP(AA/White) for New York State is 2.12, lower than the national DI-EP(AA/White), but higher than that for all reporters in the state (1.57), child care providers (1.28), mental health personnel (1.3), and law enforcement (1.8), and lower than that of medical personnel (2.13) and social services personnel (2.15). Racial disparities significantly vary across counties (chi square,  $p = .000$ ) (see [Map 5](#)). African American children were less likely to be reported than white children in 13 counties. African American children were up to seven times more likely than white children to be reported in 39 counties. Racial disparities are prevalent in certain areas of the state (See [Map 5](#)).

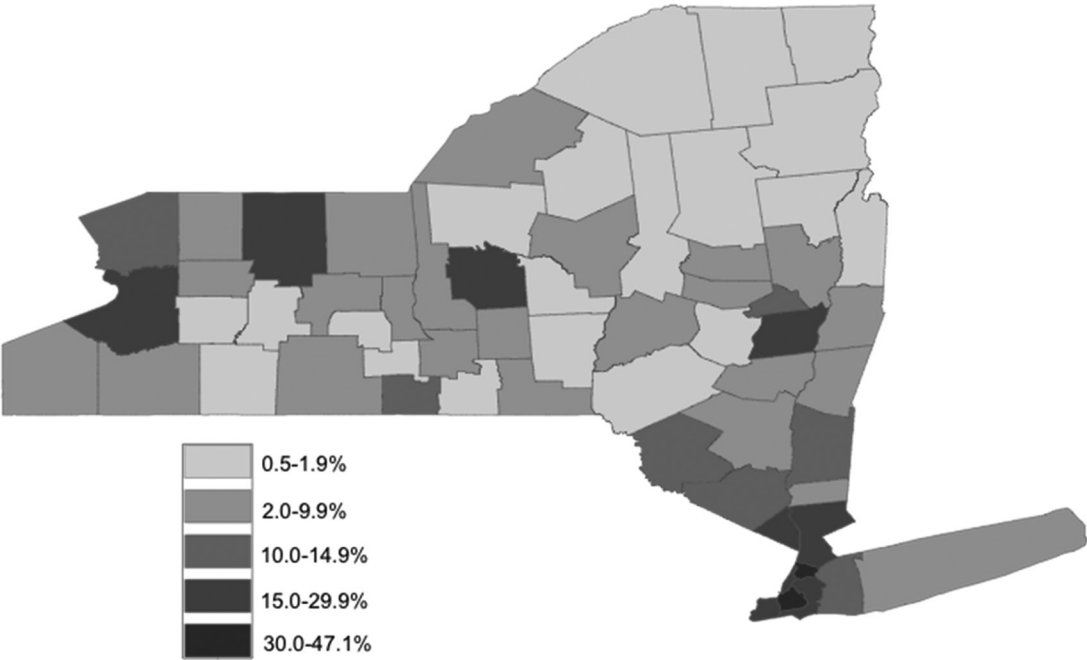
**Influence of Race on the Disposition of Reports by Educational Personnel**

Reports involving African American children were significantly more likely to be substantiated than re-

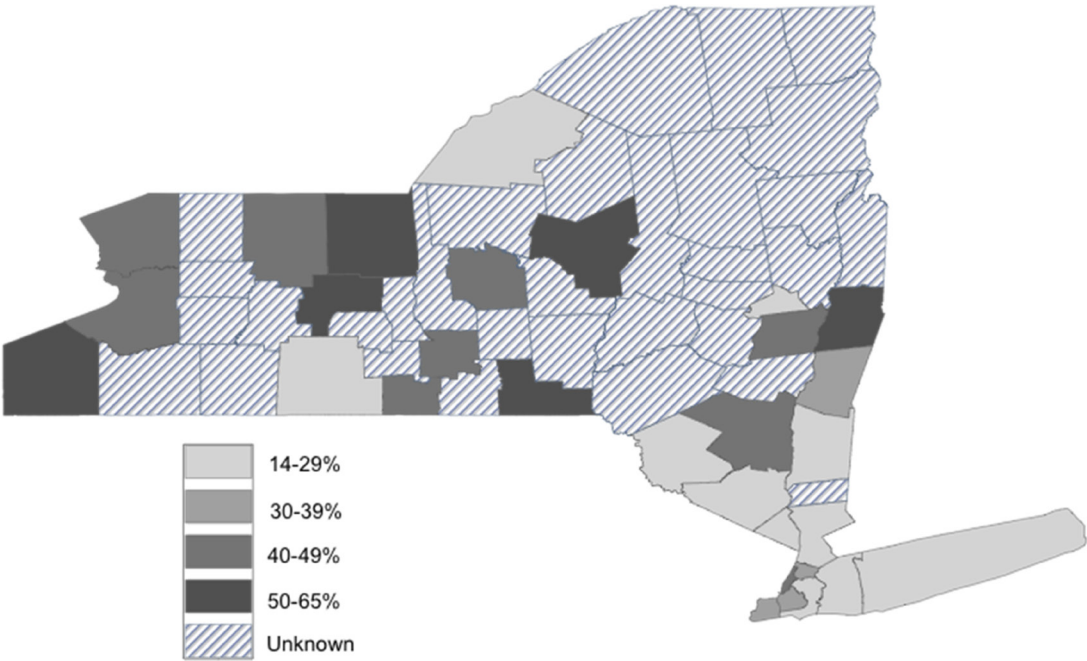
**Map 2. Disproportionate Reporting by Educational Personnel of African American Children to Child Protective Services, by New York State County: Disproportionality Representation Index-Educational Personnel for African-American Children**



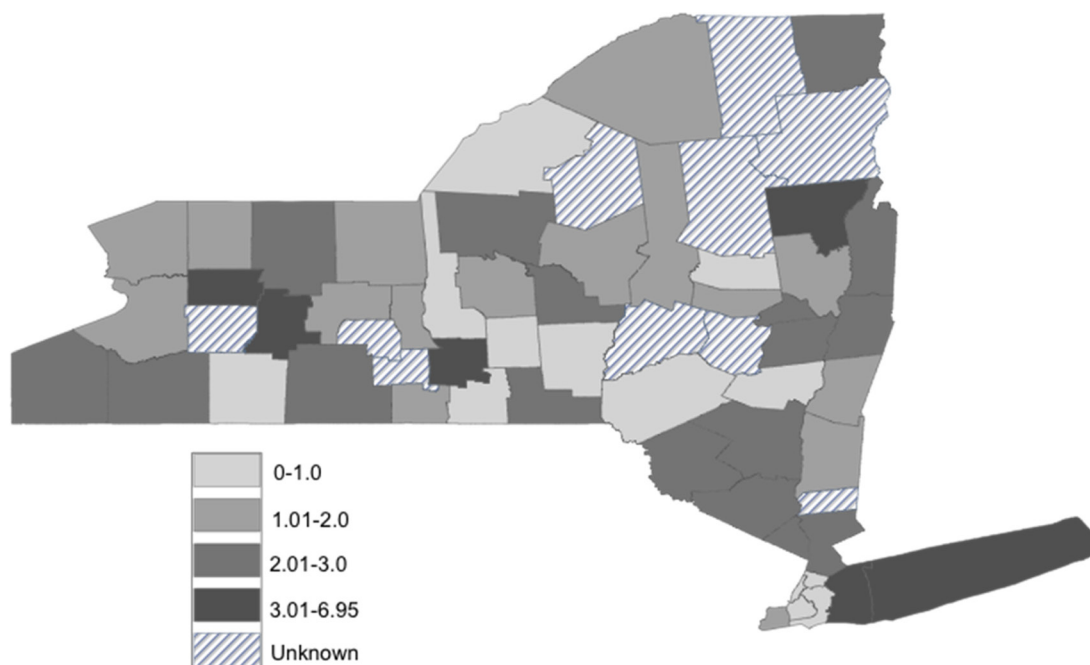
**Map 3. Percentage of School Children Who Are African American, by New York State County**



**Map 4. Percentage of African American Children Living in Poverty, by New York State County**



**Map 5. Disparity by Race in Educational Personnel Reports to Child Protective Services, by New York State County: Disparity Index-Educational Personnel (African American/White)**



ports involving white children across New York State (chi square,  $p = .000$ ) (see Table 1). However, this substantiation disparity was not in all counties (see Map 6). Chi-square analysis found that there were no significant differences in 38 counties. In 12 counties, reports involving African American children were more likely to be substantiated than reports involving white children. Reports involving white children were more likely to be substantiated than reports involving African American children in only two counties.

## DISCUSSION

Reports from educational personnel contribute to racial disproportionality and disparity in reporting to CPS at the national, state, and county levels, warranting further review at all levels. The results of this study show that “place matters” when studying the reporting of suspected child maltreatment, highlighting the limitations of aggregating data to the national and state levels.

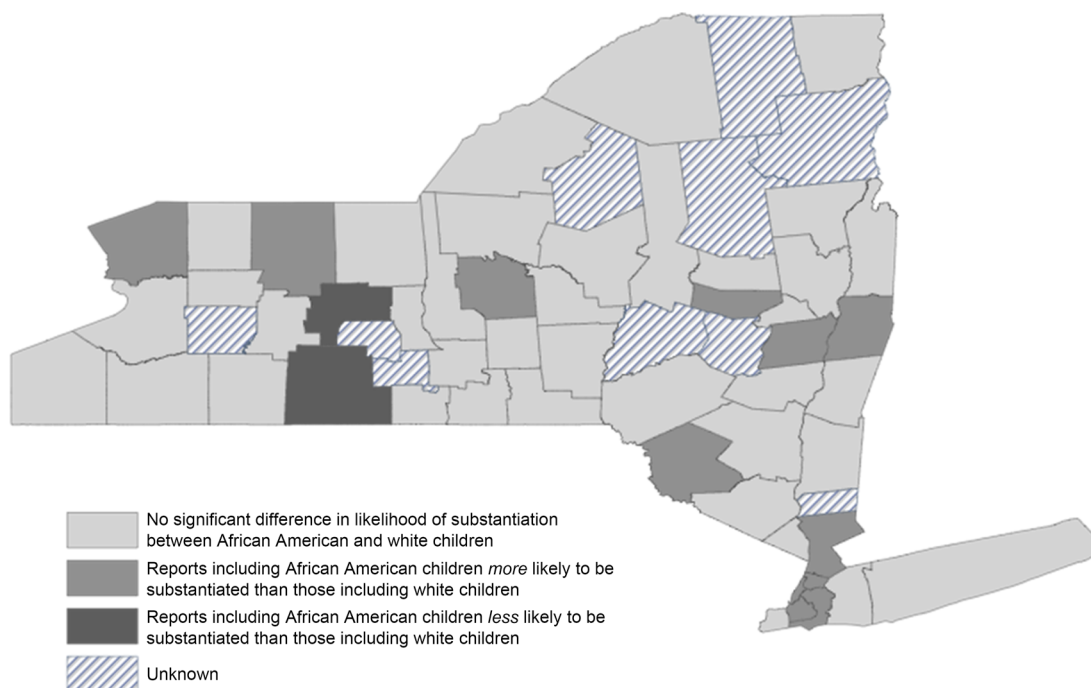
In New York State in particular, the experiences of New York City (and surrounding communities) greatly influence state measures due to the large proportion of reports that come from those jurisdictions. Focusing on school districts and even indi-

vidual schools would best inform policy, training, and practice to improve reporting by educational personnel. Agencies that collect relevant data should provide data across smaller units for analysis.

African American children are more likely to be overrepresented in reports by educational personnel than from most other report sources, and racial disparities are more prevalent as well. Although the mechanisms through which these differences arise cannot be determined by this research, the findings from this study suggest avenues for future research.

Disproportionate risk factor exposure for African American children may explain racial disproportionality and disparity in general, but does not explain differences across report sources. Visibility/exposure across report sources may vary. For instance, social services personnel may be more likely to come in contact with poor and single-parent families who are at higher risk of child maltreatment and more likely to be African American, thus explaining why the DRI and DI for social services personnel is higher. Mental health personnel may be less likely to work with these families due to lack of health insurance coverage for such services (Chow, Jaffee, & Snowden, 2003), and thus have lower DRI and DI. There were

**Map 6. Disparity by Race in Disposition of Reports by Educational Personnel to Child Protective Services, by New York State County**



contradictory findings in regard to the increased likelihood of African American children to be reported in communities where they made up a smaller proportion of the child population. These findings highlight that a combination of factors, and not just one theory alone, may explain these phenomena.

The maps showing the results of this study are easier to understand than just numbers. Because CPS and schools are both designed to serve geographically defined communities (counties, cities, towns, and so forth), maps can be useful to understand the local context of their work and the characteristics of the children and families they work with.

Educational personnel are an important resource for combating child maltreatment. Their unique position should not be discounted, but the limitations in their reporting skills should not be overlooked. Effective training for educational personnel in their role as reporter of suspected child abuse and neglect should be designed in response to the needs of a particular community. Educational personnel need to be aware of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, and how their reports contribute to this phenomenon. Educational personnel should be encouraged to think critically about the

role race might play in their decision to report. Increased awareness of the potential for racial bias in reporting should be included in training, especially in counties where racial disproportionality is an identified concern.

School social workers, in particular, are vital to informing the educational system's response to the concerns highlighted through this research. Social work education provides school social workers with the foundation necessary to evaluate and understand the impact of institutional, structural, and individual racism on the factors that may affect racially disproportionate reporting at large, and in schools.

School social workers are also well prepared to serve as liaisons between schools and CPS. School social workers can aid CPS workers in better understanding the needs of the particular community they serve. CPS workers can help school social workers, and educational personnel at large, by connecting schools with community-based resources that provide preventive services.

## CONCLUSION

African American children are disproportionately reported (for suspected maltreatment) by educational

personnel nationally, in New York State, and in a majority of counties in the state. Racial disparity in reporting and report disposition should not be characterized by national and statewide statistics. The mechanisms affecting these phenomena are unclear, and further local exploration is needed. Emphasis on policy and training in the reporting of suspected maltreatment aims to increase reporting and ignores racial disproportionality.

The findings of this research suggest that trainings, specifically those targeted at educational personnel, should be tailored to local experiences and should focus on increasing consciousness of the role of race in reporting, thus improving reporting, not just increasing it. Additional attention should be paid to the impact of socioeconomic status and gender, and the intersections of these factors with race, on the decision to report. School social workers are vital to the success of any effort to improve reporting of suspected child maltreatment. **CS**

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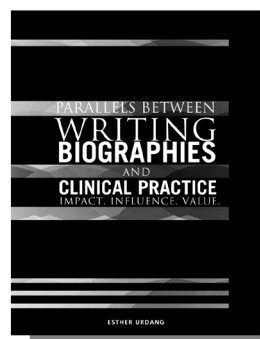
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