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## African-American Families and Child Protection

**Murray Levine**  
**Howard J. Doueck**  
**Jennifer B. Freeman**  
**Cheryl Compaan**  
University at Buffalo

Two hundred and seventy African-American and Caucasian families referred to child protection for alleged maltreatment were compared to assess the degree to which they were differentially referred to and processed by child protection. Results indicated that, although African-Americans were referred to child protection by different sources than Caucasian families, reporter bias was unlikely to account for the differences. Those African-American families referred to child protection were more likely to come from female headed households and presumed to be poorer as a result. However, once reported, they were neither substantiated at a higher rate nor kept open for services at a higher rate compared to Caucasian families. Finally, there was very little evidence of differential caseworker attention to African-Americans compared with Caucasian families. The study concluded that differential referral source and/or differential worker attention were inadequate explanations for the overrepresentation of African-Americans in the child protection system.

Although a recent national incidence study found “no significant relationships between the incidence of maltreatment and a child’s race-ethnicity” (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988, p. 5-25, emphasis in the original), African-Americans are disproportionately represented on child protection caseloads compared to their numbers in the general population (Gil, 1970; Hampton, 1987; Johnson & Showers, 1985; Lauderdale, Valiunas, & Anderson, 1980; National Center on Child Abuse

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[sswdouhj@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu.]

and Neglect, 1995; National Research Council, 1993). In addition, although African-Americans constitute only 12% of the general population, they consistently represent about 25% of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1991, 1995), and they are overrepresented in the most serious category of abuse, abuse related fatalities (Levine, Compaan, & Freeman, 1994; Tatara, 1991).

The reasons for the apparent overrepresentation of African-American families on child protection caseloads and among substantiated cases of child maltreatment are somewhat less clear, however, and depend upon whether one is examining the front end of the child protection system, that is referral and investigation of possible child maltreatment, or the back end of the system, substantiation and case disposition.

One hypothesis suggests that the disproportionate numbers of African-American families living in poverty may be an explanation. A number of large scale studies have found a strong association between child maltreatment and socio-economic status (NCCAN, 1981; 1988; Pelton, 1994). In fact, the relationship between child maltreatment and SES has been so consistent across studies, Wolfe concluded "there is a consensus that child maltreatment is related to economic inequality and occurs disproportionately more often among economic and socially disadvantaged families" (1987, p. 21).

Poverty has both a direct and an indirect negative impact on a family (Pelton, 1989). Being poor means that there is the day to day stress of trying to purchase life's necessities, adequate food, clothing, and shelter for example, much less having discretionary funds for adequate child care or other amenities. Further, poor families are more likely to live in higher risk, disintegrating neighborhoods (see for example Garbarino & Kostelny, 1994; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). These neighborhoods typically have higher densities of substance abuse, teenage parents, unsafe and deteriorating housing, inferior schools, and inadequate health care facilities. These two factors, poverty and disintegrating neighborhoods, may be "the most powerful factors" responsible for child maltreatment in the United States (Melton et al., 1995, p. 50, emphasis in the original). For poor African-American families, racism may also play a role, blocking access to the few resources that may be available (National Research Council, 1993). As a result, maltreatment may occur more frequently in African-American communities because of the higher density of poor families in those communities (Pelton, 1978, 1994). If accurate, the economic hypothesis suggests that the differences between African-American and Caucasian families in the

proportion of alleged maltreatment reported to child protection and maltreatment substantiated by child protection would disappear if socioeconomic considerations were controlled (Pelton, 1994).

A second hypothesis suggests that differential exposure to and treatment by mandated reporters causes African-American families to be disproportionately represented on child protection caseloads. Poor and minority families are much more vulnerable to the kind of social problems that bring them to the attention of certain groups of reporters (Derezotes & Snowden, 1990), emergency room and clinic physicians, law enforcement personnel, and public social service workers for example. Because they are under greater public scrutiny, that is they are differentially exposed, African-American families have a greater statistical likelihood of being reported to child protection. Moreover, once exposed to mandated reporters, African-American and poor families are more likely to be reported to child protection compared to their Caucasian and more affluent counterparts (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Rubin, 1992). Although some have suggested that mandated reporters may be applying simplistic but well-intentioned assumptions about cultural (and social) factors to the complex issues of assessing and treating child maltreatment (Derezotes & Snowden, 1990), others suggest that mandated reporters are, in some instances, applying biased and/or prejudicial standards when reporting minority families (Rubin, 1992). Regardless of the motivation, the result is that African-American families are more likely to be reported to child protection compared to Caucasian families. According to this hypothesis, this combination, differential exposure to and treatment by mandated reporters, is the major factor contributing to the disproportionate representation of African-American families on child protection caseloads.

A third hypothesis suggests that, regardless of how referrals come to child protection, worker values, professional judgments, and biases may be related to the overrepresentation of African-American families in the group of substantiated cases. Indication or substantiation of child maltreatment is a complicated process made more so by the fact that evidence can be incomplete and inconclusive (Rubin, 1992). Perhaps in partial recognition of this fact, 15 states and Puerto Rico have a three tiered system of confirmation, not substantiated and substantiated, and a third category when there is insufficient evidence to confirm substantiation but "for which there is sufficient reason to suspect that the child may have been maltreated or was at risk for maltreatment" (NCCAN, 1995, p. 1-4). Moreover, regardless of the evidence in a case, it is possible that worker judgment can become idiosyn-

cratic over time, screening in or placing special emphasis on some evidence while screening out, ignoring, or placing less value on other equally important evidence. For example, experienced child protection workers reported changing client scores on risk assessment instruments if, in their professional judgement, the family was at greater or lesser risk than the instrument reflected (Doeck, Levine, & Bronson, 1993). As a result, there is always the potential for workers to misunderstand culturally specific child rearing practices, or to allow ethnocentric or culturally insensitive values and biases into their investigations of minority families (Gray & Cosgrove, 1985; Rubin, 1992; Stein & Rzepnicki, 1983). Regardless, this hypothesis suggests that while the actual incidence of child maltreatment across African-American and Caucasian families may be comparable, especially when the effects of SES are controlled for, the child protection system may process these cases differently. Workers from the dominant culture may be unresponsive to the unique issues of African-American and other minority families and African-American families may be processed differently from potentially culturally insensitive, ethnocentric, biased, or simply misinformed workers (Derezotes & Snowden, 1990; Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1991; Rubin, 1992). This differential processing, it is suggested, leads to an increased likelihood that African-American families would be substantiated for maltreatment at a higher rate than Caucasian families.

The three hypotheses briefly described above serve as background for the present study, which examines whether the disproportionate representation of African-American families among substantiated cases of child maltreatment can be attributed to differential handling of these cases by child protection workers during the investigative process. In doing so, the study also addresses the role of poverty and differential exposure to mandated reporters as factors related to the disproportionate representation of African-American families among child protection caseloads.

### Method

The study was conducted in a county in western New York that investigates over 8,000 cases of alleged child abuse and neglect annually. The county receives reports of suspected child maltreatment from the state's central hot line and has responsibility for the investigation of the report. Once a report is accepted for investigation, a case record is established that documents the results of the investigation and other worker activities. Child

maltreatment is substantiated and recorded in a case record based upon a worker's determination that "some credible evidence" is present that indicates maltreatment has occurred. In 1994, 73.8% of all intakes were unfounded, or not substantiated (NS), 13.6% of all intakes were substantiated and closed the same day (SC), and 12.6% of intakes remained open for further services after determination (SKO) (R. Deisz, personal communication, December 13, 1995).

*Sample.* A total sample of 293 case records was selected for abstraction from the population of cases containing reports that were investigated by child protection between July 1, and December 31, 1993. This sample consisted of 3 categories of cases: (1) cases where maltreatment was substantiated and the case was closed the same day (SC,  $n = 108$ ); (2) cases where maltreatment was substantiated and the case was kept open for further services (SKO,  $n = 82$ ), and; (3) cases where maltreatment was not substantiated and the case awaited expungement (NS,  $n = 103$ ). The first two categories were randomly selected from computer generated lists of all reports investigated and substantiated by county workers. The third category of cases consisted of a systematic random sample of every 15th case drawn from among those cases where maltreatment was not substantiated at the county level and the record was maintained in supervisory files awaiting a review and an expungement order from the state's central social services office. Compared with the 1994 statistics cited above, cases from the NS category were under sampled whereas cases from the other two categories were oversampled in order to obtain approximately equal size categories for analysis. The number of cases in each category varied slightly because some of the cases selected could not be readily located.

Case records from the total sample were sorted by race of the child, resulting in a final sample of 270 cases, 47% ( $n = 128$ ) were African-American and 53% ( $n = 142$ ) were Caucasian. All subsequent analyses are based on this final sample of 270.

The two groups were comparable demographically on a number of items. There were no statistically significant differences between groups on the sex of the primary victim, or on the total number of other children, the total number of adult females, the mean age of the primary adult male, and the mean age of the primary adult female in the household. The difference between groups on this last item, however, approached significance ( $M = 32.30$ ,  $SD = 8.64$  for adult Caucasian females and  $M = 30.38$ ,  $SD = 7.06$  for adult African-American females),  $t(252) = 1.93$ ,  $p = .055$ .

In contrast, Caucasian children who were the subject of the allegations were likely to be older than African-American children who were similarly identified ( $M = 6.53$ ,  $SD = 5.48$  and  $M = 5.05$ ,  $SD = 5.21$  respectively),  $t(268) = 2.26$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Also, Caucasian families were statistically more likely to have an adult male in the household than African-American families ( $M = 0.71$ ,  $SD = 0.62$  and  $M = 0.40$ ,  $SD = 0.66$  respectively),  $t(262) = 3.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , and statistically less likely to have more than one child identified as an alleged victim of maltreatment,  $\chi^2(1, N = 270) = 4.39$ ,  $p = .036$ .

Thirty four percent of the cases were not substantiated (NS,  $n = 93$ ), 36% were substantiated and closed for services (SC,  $n = 97$ ), and 30% were substantiated and kept open for services (SKO,  $n = 80$ ). Twelve percent ( $n = 32$ ) contained allegations of sexual abuse, 33% ( $n = 88$ ) allegations of physical abuse, and 86% ( $n = 233$ ) allegations of physical neglect. The total percents in these last categories are greater than 100 because some cases contained multiple allegations.

### *Procedure*

Case records were abstracted by trained graduate student abstractors. A manual was developed to assist in the procedure and research assistant supervisors were on site to provide guidance when needed. Most of the codes required little or no judgment on the abstractor's part. Reviewing case records was, for the most part, a clerical task which required transferring information from the case file to the abstracting form developed for the study. The abstracting form was adapted from a similar instrument developed and used for an earlier study of child protection case records (see Doueck, Levine, & Bronson, 1993). Pilot work for this project showed high reliability for the major coding categories that will be reported here. In order to insure that no single coder's bias was confounded with a specific group, a number of steps were taken. First, cases were pulled in a somewhat random manner, as time permitted, by county workers and supervisors. Second, the cases pulled for review were batched and placed in a pile made available to the coders. Finally, each coder selected the top case for review, working on that case until completion, before proceeding to the next available case in the pile. When a pile of cases was completed, a new pile would be selected for review. In this manner, coders completed approximately equal numbers of cases across each of the groups. The coders were blind to the specific hypotheses of this study.

In addition to the case data contained on standard state forms in the record, caseworkers routinely file brief narrative reports about every contact they make. They keep track of home visits, telephone calls, visits to other locales, and office visits related to investigating the report. Their notes also include any offers of service to the family as well as formal referrals to service agencies and/or other professionals. A list of 40 potential service items was developed, such as case monitoring, recommendations for counseling or substance abuse treatment, suggestions to contact a self-help group, and discussions about child development or parenting to name a few, and coders were instructed to note each service that was mentioned in the caseworkers' notes. The notes are not standardized, but they are kept regularly during the process of investigation.

Identification by race was taken directly from the records. The referral form identifies each child and each caretaker by race. In most, but not all, instances the race of the alleged maltreater and the alleged victim were the same. A case was classified by race based upon the race of the youngest child identified as an alleged victim of maltreatment.

## Results

Results are presented following the typical sequence of events, starting with the source of the report and culminating with the decision of whether or not to substantiate the case allegations.

### *Source of the Report*

Both African-American and Caucasian families were slightly more likely to be referred to child protection by mandated reporters, 52.4% vs 55.6% respectively, then by nonmandated reporters, 47.6% vs 44.4% respectively. These small differences were not statistically significant,  $X^2(1, N = 261) = 0.61, p = \text{ns}$ . Overall, reports from nonmandated reporters accounted for 46% of all reports. This last figure is comparable to recent national data, 47.1% of all reports come from nonmandated sources (NCCAN, 1995). However, there were differences between the groups within each category of reporter. Stated differently, African-American in this study were more likely to be referred from different sources than Caucasian families (see Table 1).

The overall chi-square distribution by source of report was statistically significant,  $X^2(7, N = 260) = 27.31, p < .001$ . Three times as many Cauca-

sian children were reported by a family friend or neighbor compared to African-American children,  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 7.31, p < .001$  ( $n = 24, 16.9\%$  vs.  $n = 8, 6.3\%$  respectively), but nearly twice as many reports came from other relatives among African-Americans ( $n = 31, 24.2\%$ ) than among Caucasians.

**Table 1**  
**Chi Square Analysis of Race by Source of Report**

Source of report	African-American		Caucasian		df	$X^2$
	n	%	n	%		
Anonymous	18	14.1	10	7	1	3.57
Parent	2	1.6	8	5.6	1	3.13
Friend, Neighbor	8	6.3	24	16.9	1	7.31**
Other Relative	31	24.2	18	12.7	1	6.04*
Law Enforcement	10	7.8	24	17	1	5.05*
School	11	8.6	16	11.3	1	0.34
Medical Professional	32	25	19	13.4	1	5.93*
Social Services Agency	13	10.2	16	11.2	1	0.787

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .

sians ( $n = 18, 12.7\%$ ),  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 6.04, p < .05$ . There were almost twice as many anonymous reports among African-Americans ( $n = 18, 14.1\%$ ) compared to Caucasians ( $n = 10, 7.0\%$ ), approaching significance,  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 3.57, p = .059$ . Finally, although a small number overall, almost 4 times as many Caucasian children were reported by a custodial or noncustodial parent compared to African-American children ( $n = 8, 5.6\%$  vs.  $n = 2, 1.6\%$ ), also approaching significance,  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 3.13, p < .077$ .

Among mandated reporters, twice as many reports on Caucasian families ( $n = 24$ , 17.%) originated with law enforcement sources than reports on African-American families ( $n = 10$ , 7.8%),  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 5.05, p < .05$ . About twice as many reports on African-American families ( $n = 32$ , 25.4%) originated with medical sources, compared with Caucasian families ( $n = 19$ , 14.1%),  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 5.93, p < .05$ .

Medical sources accounted for about 20% of all reports in this sample. Almost all medical reports came from either a hospital or clinic and these findings may reflect the greater use of such facilities by African-American families. In addition, the results may reflect the fact that African-American families were significantly more likely to have been reported for a positive toxicology compared to Caucasian families ( $n = 14$ , 10.9% vs.  $n = 4$ , 2.8%),  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 7.13, p = .008$ .

#### *Nature of the Allegations*

Though not statistically significant, cases with African-American families were more likely to contain allegations of physical neglect, 89% compared to 84%, less likely to contain allegations of physical abuse, 30% compared to 35%, and less likely to contain allegations of sexual abuse, 8% compared to 16%. This last comparison approached significance,  $X^2(1, N = 270) = 3.80, p = .051$ .

Case records were examined for any indication that the initial report may have been motivated by a desire to harass the identified family. A case record was coded positively for harassment if either a family member or the caseworker believed that to be the case. Evidence of harassment was found more often in cases involving Caucasian children ( $n = 24$ , 17.1%) than in cases among African-American children ( $n = 12$ , 9.4%), though the difference was not significant,  $X^2(1, N = 267, p = .066)$ . Though evidence of harassment appeared almost exclusively in cases in the NS group, it is not clear whether the caseworker was justifying the decision not to substantiate or the decision was based on the belief that the allegations were without merit. Finally, the case records were also examined to determine if there was evidence of a divorce or custody dispute. There was no statistically significant difference between African-American and Caucasian families, but such evidence appeared more often in Caucasian ( $n = 19$ , 14.0%) than in African-American cases ( $n = 10$ , 7.9%).

*The Investigation*

Once a report is received by the county social service office, it is assigned to a worker for investigation. Worker activity was used as a surrogate measure for investigation intensity. Specifically, the number of home visits, telephone calls, and visits to other locations made by the investigative worker, as well as the number of contacts made at the social services office were counted and compared across groups (see Table 2). Such a surrogate is, at best, a crude measure of intensity. However, it is likely that the data relative to these items are reliably kept by the caseworker because they can help provide a degree of caseworker accountability during case records reviews and they provide data to show "diligence of effort" if a court procedure is initiated.

**Table 2**  
**Comparison of Means for Home Visits, Phone Calls, Office Visits, and Other Visits by Race**

	African-American			Caucasian		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Home Visits	4.18	3.16	121	3.40	2.67	141
Phone Call	9.87	9.04	122	8.79	8.68	140
Office Contacts	0.57	1.05	120	0.57	1.08	140
Other Visits	0.98	1.43	121	0.90	1.55	140

*Note.* Mean number of Home Visits was statistically significant,  $t(260) = -2.16, p < .05$ . All other comparisons were not significant.

With the exception of mean number of home visits, worker activity as measured by phone calls, other visits, and office contacts was comparable across groups. Home visits were made, on average, more often to African-American families than Caucasian families ( $M = 4.18, SD = 3.16$  vs.  $M = 3.40, SD = 2.67$ ),  $t(260) = -2.16, p < .05$ . Because attempted visits were counted in addition to completed visits, the meaning of this finding is

somewhat unclear. For example, it may be that workers made more home visits in African-American cases because they didn't find the party at home when they arrived and so scheduled further visits; it may be the situation was somewhat more complex and needed additional visits; it may be that the worker on average stayed longer with Caucasian families, and thus needed fewer visits on average; or it may be some other explanation. However, cases were also examined to determine if the worker thought the parents were uncooperative during the investigation. Such a note was present in 10.2% of African-American cases and in 10.6% of Caucasian cases. Stated differently, if African-American families were not at home more often, the worker did not appear to consider this a sign of a lack of cooperation.

### *Services Offered during the Investigation*

CPS workers are authorized to offer services on a voluntary basis to families during an investigation, especially when the case is substantiated. Case records were examined for 40 potential service categories to see whether the service was mentioned by the CPS investigator. The mean number of services mentioned of all kinds was 1.8. There were few statistically significant differences in the frequency of the 40 services offered to African-American and Caucasian families. As a result, some of the Chi-Square statistics should be interpreted cautiously because the cell frequencies were quite small. However, CPS workers advocated more often with other agencies to obtain resources for African-American families ( $n = 14$ , 11.2%) than they did for Caucasian families ( $n = 1$ , 0.7%),  $X^2(1, N = 266) = 13.70$ ,  $p < .001$ . African-American parents were more often referred for public assistance than Caucasian parents ( $n = 8$ , 6.4% compared to  $n = 1$ , 0.7%),  $X^2(1, N = 266) = 6.56$ ,  $p = .010$ . These differences are consistent with the view that African-American families have fewer economic resources than Caucasian families. Court work was initiated somewhat more frequently for African-American families ( $n = 32$ , 25.6%) than Caucasian families ( $n = 24$ , 17.0%), approaching significance,  $X^2(1, N = 266) = 2.93$ ,  $p < .10$ . Also approaching significance, Caucasian families were more likely than African-American families to be referred for counseling ( $n = 8$ , 5.7% and  $n = 2$ , 1.6% respectively),  $X^2(1, N = 266) = 3.04$ ,  $p < .10$ , and advised to file a PINS (Person in Need of Supervision) petition ( $n = 6$ , 4.3% and  $n = 1$ , 0.8% respectively),  $X^2(1, N = 266) = 3.09$ ,  $p < .10$ . No other differences approached significance.

*Result of Investigation*

There were some differences in the type of maltreatment that was substantiated. For example, allegations of physical abuse were substantiated more often among the Caucasian sample ( $n = 30, 21.3\%$ ) than among African-Americans ( $n = 14, 10.9\%$ ),  $X^2(1, N = 269) = 5.24, p = .022$ . African-Americans were more likely to be substantiated for "other" types of maltreatment ( $n = 25, 19.5\%$  compared to  $n = 15, 10.7\%$ ),  $X^2(1, N = 268) = 4.09, p = .043$ . However, this category included substantiation for positive toxicologies referrals noted above. There were no differences in the overall rates of substantiated neglect or substantiated sexual abuse, though African-American cases ( $n = 10, 7.8\%$ ) were substantiated for failing to provide adequate nourishment more often than Caucasian cases ( $n = 3, 2.1\%$ ),  $X^2(1, N = 269) = 4.71, p = .03$ .

The CPS worker completed a risk assessment instrument on each substantiated case. The risk assessment instrument includes an item measuring the severity of the maltreatment. There was no statistically significant difference on this rating, nor on any other of the risk factors on the scale, between African-American and Caucasian cases.

**Table 3**  
**Chi-Square Analysis of Investigation Outcome by Race**

Status of Case	African-American		Caucasian		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Not Substantiated	225	73.1	240	71.9	465	72.4
Substantiated & Closed	45	14.6	52	15.6	97	15.1
Substantiated & Kept Open	38	12.3	42	12.6	80	12.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>642</b>	

*Note.* The Not Substantiated rate was weighted by a factor of 5 to approximate the actual rate of 74%,  $X^2(2, N = 642) = .136, p = ns$ .

Table 3 shows the result of the investigation by race. Specifically, the Table shows the rate at which cases were not substantiated, substantiated and closed, or substantiated and kept open for services. Recall that not substantiated cases were undersampled. Weighting is a procedure that enables

the proportions within a sample to more closely resemble the proportions in the population of interest (Norušis, 1990). In order to more closely approximate the overall county substantiation rate, the not substantiated category was weighted by a factor of 5. While this weighting changes the within racial group rates, it does not effect the across group relationships.

There were no differences in the rates of unsubstantiated, substantiated, or substantiated and kept open cases between African-American and Caucasian families. The proportions across all three case status categories were virtually identical, varying by no more than 2.6% (NS category).

There was no statistically significant difference in the presence or absence of a previous substantiated report on either the alleged child or the alleged perpetrator between African-American and Caucasian families. However, in order to determine if a previously substantiated report effected the outcome of the present investigation for some cases and not others, a race by prior report by investigation result comparison was done. The presence of a prior substantiated report on a Caucasian child was more likely to lead to substantiation of the present report compared to the presence of a prior substantiated report on an African-American child ( $n = 24$ , 49% compared to  $n = 16$ , 28.6%),  $X^2(2, N = 105) = 6.22, p = .045$ .

### *Overrepresentation and Economics*

Because the records did not contain individual level data about income or occupation, in order to test the hypothesis that overrepresentation of African-American families on the CPS rolls may be associated with poverty status, the data from the present study were compared to census data for the geographic region.

According to the 1990 census, African-American families constituted 11.3% of the county's population for which CPS has jurisdiction. Taking that as the base, African-Americans were grossly overrepresented, constituting 47% ( $n = 128$ ) of the total sample compared to 53% ( $n = 142$ ) that were Caucasian. However, that comparison may be misleading because it does not control for socio-economic status. The 1990 census data indicated that 53% of African-American households in the county had incomes below \$15,000/year, while among Caucasian households the figure was 23%. Moreover, African-American families constituted 45% of all households with related children under age 18 living in poverty, compared to 55% for Caucasian families. If child maltreatment is closely associated with economic insufficiency (see e.g., NCCAN, 1988), then judged by these fig-

ures, African-Americans were not overrepresented compared to their proportions in the poverty population within the county.

### Discussion

The present study examined the overrepresentation of African-Americans on child protection caseloads and as substantiated cases of child maltreatment. Specifically, the study examined the source of referrals, whether child protection investigators differentially investigated these families, and whether child protection workers substantiated and serviced these families differently compared to Caucasian families.

Findings from this study should be interpreted cautiously. The retrospective design did not allow for a direct test of whether mandated reporters or child protection workers would have differentially handled African-American families compared to their Caucasian counterparts with the same presenting case facts and family dynamics. In addition, it is possible that differential handling by child protection workers was not evident because the factors that were examined were insufficient measures of worker decision making. Finally, we do not know how African-American families perceived their contacts with mandated reporters and child protection workers. A finding of few or no differences may indicate that there were "differences" if the intervention and services offered were not perceived as culturally sensitive or relevant.

Additionally, generalization from these data may be limited because they were gathered in one jurisdiction, and included the activities of one county's department of social services and its CPS workers. Further, the narrative records may not be reflective of all of the activity engaged in by the CPS worker, and different workers may have different recording biases. (These data would have been more valuable if it were feasible to interview a sample of workers about the cases as they pursued their investigations.) Regardless, the jurisdiction was reasonably typical of northeast metropolitan areas in its demographic characteristics. The county population was slightly less than 1,000,000 and included a large urban area, and several suburban, exurban, and rural areas. The racial minority population of the county included African-Americans, and smaller percentages of Latinos and Native Americans. Overall, minorities constituted approximately 15% of the total county population, with African-Americans comprising 11% of the total (Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1995). The re-

mainder were Caucasians from numerous ethnic backgrounds. In addition, the pattern of reporting, the pattern of allegations, and the pattern for substantiating allegations were not very different from the patterns reported statewide and nationally.

Despite these limitations, the present study is potentially useful because of the relatively microscopic focus on casework decision making, one that is rarely reported in the literature (Melton, et al., 1995). Overall, the findings indicated that African-American families were not handled differentially by CPS investigators compared to Caucasian families.

It has been suggested that, because of differential exposure to mandated reporters and differential treatment by mandated reporters, African-Americans are more likely to be reported to child protection. Consistent with past studies (see Wolfe, 1987), "reporter bias" did not appear to be operating in the present study. The reporter by race analysis was statistically significant. However, that difference was caused by differences in reporting patterns among both mandated and nonmandated sources. Among mandated sources, more reports on African-Americans came from medical sources, but more reports on Caucasian families came from law enforcement and the schools. (Anonymous reports are more difficult to interpret because they can be initiated by both mandated and nonmandated sources.) It is possible that, as Hampton and Newberger (1985) stated, medical reporters are more likely to report an African-American family than a Caucasian family with the same pattern of suspected maltreatment. While this study did not test that assertion directly, neither the nature nor the severity of the allegations, the substantiated allegations, nor the risk assessment ratings of severity of maltreatment in our sample supports that viewpoint.

Alternatively, most of the medical reports originated from clinics or hospitals where there tends to be little physician familiarity with the patient. McPherson and Garcia (1983) found physicians were significantly more likely to diagnose an injury as chronic with "low familiarity subjects" and less likely to report "high familiarity subjects" given the same stated facts about a case. In addition, African-Americans in our study were more likely to have been referred for a positive toxicology when compared to the Caucasian sample. The seeming intractability of a problem, that is the belief that a problem cannot be solved without outside intervention, has been shown to affect physician reporting as well (Saulisbury & Campbell, 1985). Either of these two explanations may have been operant.

Almost half of all reports came from nonmandated sources. If there was a bias in the reporting system accounting for the overrepresentation of Af-

frican-American families, then that bias should be sought among nonmandated reporters as well as mandated reporters. The one area of nonmandated reporter that was more likely to be the source of a referral for a Caucasian family was "friend or neighbor." In contrast, African-American families were almost two times as likely to be reported by other relatives compared with Caucasian families. This observation appears to be consistent with the view that extended families are more often involved with African-American families, while Caucasian families tend to be more isolated (Thompson, 1994). These findings suggest that different strategies for prevention may be useful among predominantly African-American and Caucasian neighborhoods (see Melton & Barry, 1994). In the one instance, family resources need to be mobilized, and in the other, neighborhood resources.

As already noted, there were no individual level data in the case record to assess the economic status of families to test the hypothesis that controlling for economic status, the representation of Caucasian and African-American cases in reports is no different. However, when the proportion of African-American families in the study were compared to data examining the poverty rates among African-American and Caucasian families living within the county, there did not appear to be as sharp a difference in the percentages of each group that was represented on CPS caseloads. Stated differently, the apparent "overrepresentation" was attenuated when judged against the base of low incomes and below-poverty incomes among African-American and Caucasian families. Differences in the maltreatment rates found in other studies between African-American families and other groups may be as related to the overall economic conditions among the African-American population in general as much as any other factor (see Pelton, 1994).

However, even if maltreatment is related to poverty, poverty alone is an insufficient explanation of maltreatment, if for no other reason than the majority of poor families do not maltreat their children. Moreover, although there were some data to suggest that the African-American families in this study were more deprived economically than the Caucasian families, there was no difference in the overall substantiation rate for neglect between the groups. These data may support the view that one ought to look at other life conditions for those in poverty to better understand the overrepresentation of African-Americans among the child protection population.

Once cases enter the CPS system, do workers differentially investigate and substantiate African-American families? Once again, there appeared to be little evidence of differential treatment of African-American families.

Though it might be concluded that the services offered to all families was quite modest, there were few differences between the type of and total number of services offered to African-American families compared with Caucasian families. In addition, there was virtually no differences in the rates of substantiation and keeping cases open after substantiation between the groups. Also, with the exception of home visits, there were no differences in worker activities between the groups. In short, the two groups appeared to be handled in a similar manner once they entered the CPS system.

Toshio Tatara (1991), when commenting on the rising numbers of reports of alleged child maltreatment across all groups, suggested that increased attention be paid "to ameliorating such social problems as poverty, unemployment, alcohol/substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition, inadequate health care, and racial discrimination" (p. 215). Many of these problems are systemic in nature. Stated differently, adequately addressing these problems may require rethinking our current approach to child maltreatment and fundamental structural change rather than simply tinkering with the current child welfare system (Gould, 1991). For example, it may be that communities, friends, neighbors, and/or families can be mobilized to help troubled families, in part through the development of community based family service centers that emphasize neighbor to neighbor support and the helping function of child protection over its policing function (Melton & Barry, 1994; U.S. Advisory Board, 1993).

Regardless, the current study examined the problem of overrepresentation of African-American families on child protection caseloads and worker decision making relative to those cases. We believe the information provided in this study adds somewhat to our understanding of that problem and encourage other researchers to do similar studies in other jurisdictions in order to go beyond the limitations of the present research.

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