

Report: Racial Bias Not Only Culprit in Child Abuse

By Stacey Patton
Special to the NNPA from
thedefendersonline.com

Once again, National Child Abuse Prevention Month is here and the conversation on the physical safety and welfare of children is taking place amid blazing headlines over the controversial issue of paddling in schools. A recent study on race and child abuse reporting published in the March issue of Pediatrics is making waves throughout the social services community.

As disproportionate numbers of Black children continue to enter foster care, and a higher number die each year as a result of abuse and neglect, researchers at Washington University in St. Louis have sparked a serious debate over the causes. Are the high numbers of Black child victims reflective of a higher degree of abuse at home? Or are the numbers a product of racial bias in reporting from mostly White social workers who are more likely to suspect maltreatment among Blacks?

The study titled "Racial Bias in Child Protection? A Comparison of Competing Explanations Using National Data," says that child abuse really is more common in Black than White homes. The study also challenges long-held suspicions that the disproportionately high numbers of Black abuse cases are driven by racial bias in the largely White social welfare workforce that reports abuse.

"We knew [abuse of] Black kids was reported about twice as often as it was for White kids, and we were concerned that that might be due to racism," said Brett Drake a social work professor at Washington University and the study's lead author. "We also knew Black kids, in terms of economics, were facing a lot of problems that most White kids were not facing."

Using national reports and the most recent available data from the Census Bureau, the

study found that of the 702,000 cases of substantiated child abuse in 2009, 44 percent involved White children who make up 75 percent of the population, and 22 percent involved Black children, who comprise 12 percent of the population. In 2009, Black children represented 21 percent of the total population of abused children.

"The problem is not that (child protective services) workers are racist," Drake said. While the study does not preclude the possibility of a racial thread in reporting child abuse, Drake argued that the main problem

as well as White," she added.

The study is not without its critics.

Sondra Jackson, Executive Director of the Washington, D.C.-based Black Administrators in Child Welfare said that this study is yet another attempt to shift the discussion away from race and toward other causes like poverty. "People can use research to disprove stuff they don't want to deal with," she said.

Richard Wexler, Executive Director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform (NCCPR) offered critical comments about this and other studies, saying they are rife with fatal flaws in that they fail to take into account that child welfare decisions are affected by both class and racial biases, and they reinforce each other.

"Three-quarters of all "substantiated" cases of child maltreatment involve neglect," said Wexler. He noted that state statutes typically define neglect as lack of adequate food, clothing, shelter or supervision - "the definition of poverty." Wexler added, "It makes perfect sense that poverty, in addition to causing higher rates of infant mortality, low birth weight, etc. would both contribute to more actual maltreatment, if only due to the additional stress that comes with being poor, but also, more important, to the appearance of more maltreatment when the poverty itself is confused with neglect."

Wexler and other critics have noted that since Blacks are disproportionately poor,

they are disproportionately at risk for being mislabeled as guilty of neglect. "To know where the class bias leaves off and the racial bias begins, it's necessary to use methods that control for poverty," said Wexler. He noted that studies conducted by the NCCPR has shown that caseworkers are more likely to describe a child as "at risk" when the family is Black.

Wexler asked: "Why do these distinguished researchers believe that the bias that still is part of every facet of American life somehow disappears at the child welfare agency door, or the office of a doctor or some other mandated reporter of child abuse?" While acknowledging that he has seen improvement in attitudes about poverty and child protection, Wexler said the fact remains that so many are willing to "cop to class bias rather than be accused of racial bias is at least a small step in the right direction."

The Washington University study also concluded that the rate of abuse among Hispanic children was proportionately higher than that of Whites but lower than that of Blacks. Researchers call it the "Hispanic Paradox." So why is it that Hispanics, who suffer high poverty rates and poor access to health care, have fewer numbers of child abuse cases?

Researchers explain that the answer may lie in cultural factors. Drake and others have explained that Hispanic communities tend to be more child-centered and have stricter mores against the maltreatment of

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Brett Drake, Washington University

is that huge numbers of Black people are living under devastating circumstances. "Mitigating poverty, and the effects of poverty, would be the most powerful way to reduce child maltreatment," Drake said.

Drake and his colleagues found that about 17 per 1,000 Black children were abused or neglected in 2009, compared to only 9 in 1,000 White children. The study noted that almost three times as many Blacks as Whites live below the poverty line, and that economic need plays a huge role in child abuse.

Elizabeth Bartholet, a professor at Harvard Law School supports the study's findings. "There is no good evidence Black kids are removed for reasons related to bias," she said at a recent conference on race and child welfare hosted by Harvard. "We need to focus on prevention of maltreatment and protection of Black children

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