Understanding Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System

By Michael T. Braun & Yu-Ling Chiu

Disproportionality in the child welfare system refers to the over- or underrepresentation of a group involved with the system compared to that group's representation in a base population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). This research brief defines racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, including how it is measured and how disproportionality rates should be interpreted. It is the first brief in a series exploring disproportionality in the child welfare system.

What is Disproportionality?

Disproportionality in the child welfare system is the examination of proportional representation of children of different groups (often racial/ethnic groups) and examines if a group's involvement in the child welfare system is proportionate with their representation in a base population. One of the most consistent patterns found when examining disproportionality rates is that African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system; that is, they consistently make up a higher percentage of children involved with the child welfare system compared to their percentage in the general population. State child welfare agencies are concerned about disproportionality because of its relationship with possible racial biases at different decision points in the child welfare system. A decision point is any part of the child welfare system in which a worker must make a choice about a child's safety or placement.

How Is It Measured?

Disproportionality is usually represented by a racial disproportionality index (RDI), which is calculated by dividing the percentage of children in a given group involved in the child welfare system by the percentage of children in a relevant base population. For example, if African American children make up 20% of the children reported to child protective services (CPS), but only 10% of the general population, then their RDI would be

$$20\% / 10\% = 2.0$$

The Children and Family Research Center uses two types of RDIs to measure disproportionality in the child welfare system: absolute and relative. Absolute RDIs are calculated using representation in the general population as the denominator for all decision points. Relative RDIs, however, change the denominator based on the decision point of the child welfare system that is being investigated. At the earliest decision point (e.g., reports of maltreatment

received), we use the general population[1] as the denominator; at later stages, we use reports, investigations, substantiated investigations, and so on, as the denominator.

Relative RDI helps us clarify the sources of disproportionality in the child welfare system. For example, imagine African American children make up 20% of children reported to CPS but only 10% of the general population. As noted above, this produces an RDI of 2.0 for this group. Unless CPS reduces the number of African American children involved in the child welfare system after reporting, absolute RDIs will show numbers well above 1 for all additional stages investigated. This means we cannot use absolute RDI to suggest ways to reduce disproportionality, because it appears as if all stages of the child welfare system overrepresent African American children.

How Can Relative RDI Help Us Understand Sources of Disproportionality?

If we use relative RDI, then we can understand how representation changes at each decision point. For example, perhaps African American children make up 20% of the reports assigned for investigation. When compared against their makeup at the reporting stage, we find African American children have a relative RDI of 1.0. This suggests there is no bias against African American children when received reports are assigned out to investigation because the two stages show equal representation of children in this racial group.

When we calculate relative RDI for all decision points of the child welfare system, we can identify decision points where disproportionality may grow because of possible systematic biases. For example, imagine African American children make up 20% of the reports assigned to investigation but 30% of the children taken into protective custody. This produces a relative RDI for protective custody of 1.5 (30% / 20%) and shows us that African American children are disproportionality more likely to be taken into protective custody relative to the rate at which they are investigated.

When this information is used as part of an effort to reduce disproportionality, it may help administrators guide resources to better understand why relative RDIs are above 1 for African American children at this stage. That is, why are CPS workers more likely to use protective custody with African American children compared to other racial groups? There are many reasons why this might occur, and further study of this pattern can help elucidate them.

How Should We Interpret the Results?

It is important to note that absolute and relative RDIs, by themselves, do not represent good or bad outcomes. Because we do not know the true rate of child maltreatment in the general population, our RDIs will never be perfect. For example, if White children make up 60% of the general population and 60% of CPS reports, then their RDI would be 1.0. However, if White

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[1] To calculate the general population, we use data from the U.S. Census Bureau, including the 2011–2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for the most recent year.

children represent 75% of the children who are maltreated, then their true RDI should be less than 1, indicating that they are abused at a rate higher than they are reported to CPS, which is a negative outcome.

Because we cannot know the true rate of maltreatment, we cannot put all the impetus on the child welfare system to reduce disproportionate representation of different racial groups. Instead, society itself must work to ensure that race is unrelated to child maltreatment and that child maltreatment is rare and dealt with swiftly to promote the safety and well-being of all children. Only then can we be sure that proportionate representation in the child welfare system means a child welfare system free of racial biases at all levels.

Recommended Citation

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Related Publications

Children and Family Research Center. (2017). *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois: 2016 monitoring report of the B.H. consent decree*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Braun, M. T., & Chiu, Y. (2017). *Exploring disproportionality in the Illinois child welfare system.* Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

References

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Other Recommended Reading

Rolock, N. (2011). New methodology: Measuring racial or ethnic disparities in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 1531–1537. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.03.017

United States Government Accountability Office. (2007). *African American children in foster care: Additional HHS assistance needed to help states reduce the proportion in care*. (GAO Publication No. 07-816). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.