

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Racial Disparities in Child Abuse Reports

BOTTOM LINE

Research suggests that children in non-White and Hispanic/Latinx communities are at higher risk for child maltreatment. This is especially true for children from Black communities.

RESEARCH

Luken, Nair, and Fix utilized the 2018 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and state-level population estimates from the US Census Bureau to identify racial disparities that emerged from these data systems. Although the focus of this MASOC newsletter is on child sexual abuse, the research article examined all forms of child maltreatment including child physical abuse, and emotional/psychological abuse and neglect.

The authors point out that for a child to be found a victim of child maltreatment and to receive services depends entirely on decisions made for them by others. At each stage of the process, from screening to service referrals, decisions take place that could be affected by racial, ethnic, and economic biases. Based upon previous research, the authors note that there is already clear evidence for systemic differences in child maltreatment reports and case outcomes for children from non-White and Latinx communities. Existing research also describes how risk levels for maltreatment is elevated among the children of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, due to higher exposure to community violence, lower access to harm reduction resources and services, and fewer economic resources. This study takes our knowledge a step further and illustrates how state-level maps can offer evidence of disparities for certain racial and ethnic groups in specific states.

The authors found significant disparities for children from non-White communities in many states and especially for children in Black communities. Across all maltreatment types (physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological), children identified as Black were the highest over-represented group in this study. In reports of child sexual abuse, Black children were over-represented in 30 of 51 states. In Massachusetts, children identified as Latinx and multiracial were also significantly over-represented. For children identified as Asian-American, the Disparity Ratio was low across all 50 states.

The authors end with a suggestion that this exploratory mapping offers insights into how prevention resources could be allowed to these non-White communities where there is significantly higher reporting of child maltreatment. They described the need for a multi-faceted and culturally informed approach to have the greatest impact.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals who assess and treat adolescents who have sexually abused should always be aware that they are at risk of biases that can influence our work in many directions (for example, over-estimating risks by not taking into account that a teenager with some criminal record is living in a community that is overpoliced). Further, there is a risk that this bias may take place beyond our awareness. It further points to our need to better understand how contextual factors such as community violence and disenfranchisement can influence our assessments and treatments. Even what we see as factors interfering with the treatment process may themselves reflect a legacy of understandable mistrust by clients and their families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

In considering the various racial disparities at the intersection of mental health and the legal system, perhaps the greatest implication is that those who work in the field need to do far more to recognize these disparities and be willing to engage in dialog about them. While these results may not be a surprise to many of us, it is (or should be) shocking that so many studies' findings have resulted in so little attempts to remediate these issues. The good news, however, is that this paper comes at a time when people and organizations are making a renewed (or first time) commitment to recognizing the impact of racism and this movement is gradually gaining momentum.

CITATION:

Luken, A., Nair, R., & Fix, R. L. (2021). On racial disparities in child abuse reports: exploratory mapping the 2018 NCANDS. *Child maltreatment*, 10775595211001926.

ABSTRACT

Research suggests children from non-White and Hispanic/Latinx communities are at higher risk for child maltreatment. This study identified in which states children from specific non-White communities were overrepresented in child protective services reports for child physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological abuse through exploratory mapping. Reports on child maltreatment originated from the 2018 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and state-level population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. Racial disparities were identified in states with unequal proportions of reported child maltreatment among a non-White child population compared to the proportion among the White child population. We found disparities for children from non-White communities in many states, especially for Black communities (Disparity Ratio [DR]: 15.10 for child physical abuse, DR: 12.77 for child sexual abuse in Washington DC, and DR: 5.25 for child emotional/psychological abuse in California). The ability to identify high disparities among Pacific Islanders highlights one of the study's strengths, given we separately examined Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and multiracial communities. Results from our exploratory mapping provide insight into how preventive resources might be differentially allocated to non-White communities with higher child protective services reporting compared with White communities, and manifest states with multiple non-White communities overrepresented across maltreatment types.