

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Racial Disparities in Child Physical and Sexual Abuse Substantiations: Associations with the Child's and Accused Individual's Race

BOTTOM LINE

The race of the person accused of harming a child significantly influenced substantiation of abuse allegations by child welfare agencies, particularly for Black children and families.

RESEARCH

There is a growing awareness by our institutions of the racial and ethnic disparities among children and teens with reported cases of child sexual abuse; this study explores the factors that contribute to these disparities. Although these disparities are well documented, there is less research about which case characteristics might impact the outcomes.

Using data from the 2016 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the survey found that both the child's and the accused's racial identity significantly influenced the substantiation of child sexual abuse cases. The results include that:

- Cases involving Black children were the least likely to be substantiated.
- Cases with Native North American, Latinx and Asian America/Pacific Islander children were significantly more likely to be substantiated.
- Economic insecurity significantly decreased substantiation in CSA cases
- Relatives and Blacks accused were significantly less likely to have their case substantiated.
- Latinx and Native North Americans accused of CSA had significantly higher odds of substantiated CSA.

The authors noted that there are many possible reasons for these differences, and offered insights into some of the noted disparities. For example, children living in foster care, group homes, or residential care had a significantly higher likelihood of substantiated child sexual abuse. Black children are over-represented in this system. The authors noted that educational

referrals from schools were least likely to be substantiated so differential reporting by schools may also impact the results.

Given the overrepresentation of black children in the child protection system, the importance of considering race/ethnicity of the child, the person accused and even the caregivers cannot be overstated. It can be a determinant in whether a case is responded to or needed services provided.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals should always bear in mind that injustices and inequities not only exist, but may have contributed to who is, and isn't on their caseload. There is a practice skill that we must all develop – a shift from viewing racial disparities as a social issue that is “out there” to one that is clear and present in our work. Just as we show up to the office, we also need to “show up” to the fact that disparity can be rampant in our work. Our goal is to ensure that each of our clients ultimately become responsible for their behavior. However, to get there, it's critical to understand that our clients have often faced trauma, violence, systemic racism and other disadvantages that they may not be ready, willing, or able to verbalize. Working with our clients means that this deep exploration of these areas involves significant skills, ongoing training, and most of all, our own motivation to examine the issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

There is an old saying that “the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist.” In this case, the statement means that it is difficult for some people to see racial disparities when they've been told they aren't there or that it's all just hype. This study is another in an entire body of research finding that racial and ethnic disparities have been rampant in systems such as child welfare and corrections from the very start. This study examines the racial disparities in substantiation that are dependent upon the child harmed or the harm doers' race. The results challenge us to consider this body of research and adapt our policies and practices accordingly. Fortunately, professional organizations and many policymakers have started to lead the way in keeping this work moving forward.

CITATION:

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ABSTRACT:

Racial and ethnic disparities are documented among children and adolescents with reported cases of child physical abuse (CPA) and child sexual abuse (CSA) and with substantiated and unsubstantiated cases in the United States. Yet, little is known about factors contributing to

disparities, including how characteristics of the child and the person accused of maltreatment influence child maltreatment substantiation. Utilizing data from the 2016 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the current study assessed which factors contribute to racial and ethnic group disparities in CPA and CSA substantiation. Results indicated characteristics of the child and accused person differentially influence CPA and CSA case outcomes. Altogether, relative to White children, findings indicate CPA and CSA cases are more likely to be substantiated among Native North American children whereas Black children have a reduced likelihood of CPA and CSA substantiation. The race of the person accused of harming a child also significantly impacted child case outcomes. Findings from this study suggest we must re-examine and likely modify select policy and clinical practices in relation to reporting and substantiation (versus outcomes involving no substantiation) of CPA, CSA, (and likely neglect – which needs to be examined in follow-up research) considering observed racial inequities in child maltreatment case outcomes.

Highlights

- Economic insecurity significantly increased substantiation in CPA cases and decreased substantiation in CSA cases.
- Children racialized as Black were significantly less likely than White children to have cases of CPA and CSA substantiated.
- Race of the person accused of harming a child significantly influenced substantiation, particularly for Black people.