Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Black children are overrepresented in the Child Protective Services (CPS) system. One explanation for this over representation is that black children are more likely to be reported to the CPS than are white children. In our paper (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998a) we contend that once account is taken of selection bias, there is little evidence of racial disparities in reporting. We conclude that this finding is inconsistent with contentions, such as those reported by the authors of the National Incidence Studies (NIS), that there are no underlying racial differences in child maltreatment.

We are in substantive agreement with Thomas Morton that there are other possible explanations for the apparent contradiction between the NIS findings of no racial differences in the incidence of maltreatment between blacks and whites and the overrepresentation of blacks in the child protective services system.

The three plausible hypotheses advanced by Morton, but not tested by us, include:

a. Racial differences in rates of investigation
b. Racial differences in substantiation rates
c. Racial differences in the rates of opening of cases

The three hypotheses raised by Morton are only relevant to cases that are already known to the CPS: Substantiation, investigation, and opening of cases all require that the cases be known to the CPS. In order for the cases to be known to the CPS, they must have been reported. We do not find racial bias in reporting among the mandated officials and agencies included in the NIS design.

Nevertheless, each of these alternative hypotheses is worthy of a full and sustained research effort and we welcome the opportunity to share the methods we used in our analysis with those who wish to explore these alternative hypotheses further. We believe that the main point of our paper is that there is a sample selection bias because of the design of the NIS study; thus, uncritical acceptance of findings from the NIS data that do not correct for sample selection bias may be unwarranted.

However, Morton’s objection could be viewed as not about the need to correct for sample selection bias in the NIS data, but rather about the conclusion we draw that racial bias in reporting does not appear to exist once correction for sample selection is made. He is absolutely correct that there may be other factors contributing to the overrepresentation of blacks in the CPS. But for now, at least, we believe that we have ruled out one of them: that blacks are disproportionately reported to the CPS. We believe that still another reason can be ruled out as well.

Morton believes it is premature to question the central findings of the NIS studies that there are no underlying differences in child maltreatment between blacks and whites. Most of our research and the research of the individual authors over the years has been devoted to demonstrating that both in the criminal justice system and in the child protective services Blacks are not more “criminal” than whites, but that they are more often adjudicated (or arrested, convicted, or sentenced) than whites (see, for example, Myers, 1984, 1993). In fact, Ards (1989) and Ards and Harrell (1993) both contend that race is not a determinant of child abuse incidence once other relevant factors are controlled for. Thus, there is ample reason to believe that there may be racial differences in reporting by law enforcement, medical authorities, or school officials that account for
the overrepresentations of blacks in the CPS. That we did not find this expected result is what prompts Morton’s concerns.

Correctly, Morton notes there are other pathways by which discriminatory barriers might create an illusion of racial disparities in child maltreatment. One such pathway is a difference in substantiation rates. One might expect that if black cases are more likely to be substantiated than white cases, then in states with larger percentages of black victims, substantiation rates will be higher. We have assembled data from the 1993, 1994, and 1995 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) to test this hypothesis. Figure 1 plots the state substantiation rates against the racial composition of the child victim population. We do not find a positive relationship between the two. A linear regression, in fact, shows an inverse relationship, although the coefficient is statistically indistinguishable from zero. In other words, we must reject the hypothesis that race influences substantiation rates.

While Morton’s claim may be correct that some states reveal higher representation of Blacks among substantiated cases than in the general population, that claim does not overcome the counter-claim that blacks are more likely to be abused than whites.

To see this in another way, we have examined the 1980 NIS-Wave 1 data to measure whether there are racial differences in substantiation rates by CPS authorities among reported abuse cases. We have also examined whether there are any racial differences in the NIS post-review examination of the substantiated and unsubstantiated cases. Two measures we explored are whether the reviewer believed the cases were “very probable” or whether there was “insufficient information.” As Table 1 reveals, we find no racial differences in the probability of substantiation and no statistically significant racial differences in the probability of a “very probable.”

Together, the results of Figure 1 and Table 1 may rule out Morton’s hypothesis that black child maltreatment cases are disproportionately substantiated.

Of course, these basic measures do not take account of possible selection bias (since these cases are only reported cases) nor possible confounding effects. Such analysis requires replicating the logistic regression with selection bias correcting for a model of substantiation rates. We are encouraged by Morton’s letter to pursue this research further and hope in the near future to share with the readers of this Journal our results. In the meantime, however, the findings do not support the claim that there are racial differences in substantiation rates. Consequently, we believe that caution must remain in uncritically accepting the NIS conclusions that there are no underlying racial disparities in child maltreatment.

Even if we are to believe that there are no underlying racial disparities in child victimization or child maltreatment, evidence on child homicide does contradict the NIS conclusion of no racial disproportionality. When we observe the most reliable indicator of disproportionality based on child homicides, we see a clear inconsistency with the NIS data. More than 40% of all infant and toddler (under age 5) homicides are black, almost all of which are perpetrated by parents and caretakers when children are under 5 years. Yet only about 15% of children under 5 are Black. Thus, black children are two and two-thirds as likely to be victims of child homicides as to be found in the population of young children (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998b). It is difficult to imagine how or whether differences in investigation or differences in opening of cases will somehow narrow or eliminate this enormous gap in the most visible and horrible manifestation of child abuse. Nonetheless, Morton has pointed us in a different direction and we are eager to pursue these alternative explanations.

The policy implications of this debate are profound. If we are to believe the NIS data, we should focus our resources on combating racial bias in reporting, substantiation, and case openings. And, there is every reason to believe that the potential exists for racial bias in the child protective services. However, if this racial bias is not the cause of the overrepresentation of black children among abused children, then we should look elsewhere to confront the disparities that we observe. We are concerned that too little attention has been paid to the structural factors that may contribute
Source:  
- Child Maltreatment 1993: Reports From the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System  
  Section III.6, Section IV:10  
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  Section III.6, Section IV:10  
- Child Maltreatment 1995: Reports From the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System  
  Section III.6, Section IV:10  

*Excludes States with non reporting Race, none substantiation rate and none un-substantiation rate.

Figure 1. Relationships between race vs. substantiation rates.
to underlying racial differences in abuse. For example, welfare reforms that require paternity establishment or child support enforcement in more punitive fashions have the potential for increasing intimate partner abuse and/or child abuse from intimate partners. Since blacks are disproportionately welfare recipients, these punitive measures promise to affect blacks disproportionately. While such a structural phenomenon does not predict that blacks are naturally or genetically more violent than whites, it may predict greater violence in the black family, violence that needs to be confronted whatever the source. Neglecting to explore the structural roots of racial disparities in abuse and violence in black families serves no purpose and contributes to the further deterioration in the conditions these families face.

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Table 1. T-tests for Racial Differences in Substantiation Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>T-statistic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Substantiation Ratea</td>
<td>0.3213</td>
<td>0.3103</td>
<td>0.0110</td>
<td>0.7874</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1495</td>
<td>6241</td>
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<tr>
<td>For Substantiated Cases</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIS Evaluation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very probableb</td>
<td>0.2844</td>
<td>0.3268</td>
<td>−0.0424</td>
<td>−1.6093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient informationc</td>
<td>0.2090</td>
<td>0.1207</td>
<td>0.0883</td>
<td>4.5738</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>1721</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For Unsubstantiated Cases</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NIS Evaluation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very probabled</td>
<td>0.1925</td>
<td>0.1859</td>
<td>0.0066</td>
<td>0.2237</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insufficient informatione</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>1098</td>
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*a 1 if PSASS = 1 else 0.
*b 1 if PSASS = 1 and COUNT0 = 1 else 0.
*c 1 if PSASS = 1 and COUNT0 = 3 else 0.
*d 1 if PSASS = 0 and COUNT0 = 1 else 0.
*e 1 if PSASS = 0 and COUNT0 = 3 else 0.

All cases were weighted for the computation.