

Race and Child Welfare Conference
Synopsis from Brett Drake
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The National Incidence Studies (NIS) are among the most relied-upon measures of child maltreatment occurrence in the United States. It is commonly believed that the NIS-2 and NIS-3 demonstrated that Blacks and Whites are actually maltreated at the same rate. Since Blacks are officially reported more than Whites, many have interpreted this as convincing proof of child welfare system bias towards over-reporting Black children. However, NIS-2 and NIS-3 did not, as is commonly accepted, show equivalence between Black and White maltreatment rates. Furthermore, recent assertions that the NIS-4 produced radically different results than the NIS-2 and NIS-3 are false. The NIS-2 estimated that Blacks are actually maltreated 87% more often than Whites, the NIS-3 reported that Blacks are maltreated 51% more often than Whites, while the NIS-4 reported that Blacks are maltreated 73% more often than Whites. What was new about the NIS-4 was that this difference achieved statistical significance for the first time. The lack of statistical significance in the NIS-2 and NIS-3 has been widely, and incorrectly, reported as constituting evidence that Blacks and Whites are actually abused at the same rate. Such evidence never existed in the NIS-2, NIS-3 or NIS-4. In point of fact, the NIS estimates of Black/White racial disproportionality are very close to that observed in recent (2006) national official report rates from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, which found Blacks 85% more likely to be subjects of validated official reports than Whites.

Moving away from NIS data, disproportionality was reviewed in a different manner. If child welfare is subject to bias in overreporting Black children, then Black children should have higher disproportionality in child welfare reports as compared to unbiased measures of child well-being, such as infant mortality. Data from the state of Missouri show this is not the case. Black/White racial disproportionality among child abuse reports in Missouri is somewhat lower than a range of other (unbiased) measures, including infant mortality, low birth weight and prematurity. Given these findings, it appears that in Missouri, Black children are, if anything, somewhat underreported compared to Whites.

Taken together, these data speak strongly against the presence of large scale overreporting of Blacks in the public child welfare reporting system.