



No racial bias at child protective services: study

By Frederik Joelving
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(Reuters Health) - Child abuse really is more common in African American than white homes, according to a new study that dismisses earlier claims of racial reporting bias in the child welfare system.

But the blame lies with circumstances out of parents' control, say the authors of the report.

"The problem is not that (Child Protective Services) workers are racists," said Brett Drake, who studies child welfare at Washington University in St. Louis and led the new research.

"The problem is that huge numbers of black people are living under devastating circumstances," he told Reuters Health. "Mitigating poverty, and the effects of poverty, would be the most powerful way to reduce child maltreatment."

It's long been clear that a disproportionate number of black kids end up in foster care. What has been a matter of debate is whether that reflects a higher degree of abuse at home, or is really a product of racial bias that makes social workers more likely to suspect maltreatment among Blacks.

The new report, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, bolsters the former explanation.

Tapping into national estimates, Drake and colleagues found that about 17 per 1,000 black kids had been abused or neglected in 2009, compared to only nine white children.

Almost three times as many blacks as whites live below the poverty line, and economic need plays a huge role in abuse, Drake said.

To get an idea about whether racial bias in reporting added to that disparity, the researchers used child death rates, birth weight and preterm births as reference points. Those statistics are also influenced by poverty, but presumably are free of bias.

They found no more disparity between blacks and whites in child abuse and neglect than in any of the other measures.

"It looks like the child welfare system is a fairly accurate system with regards to abuse and maltreatment," Drake said. "There has never been any good evidence of racial bias."

The Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services did not respond to requests for comments.

Roughly 772,000 children were found to be victims of maltreatment in 2008, according to U.S. government, and 267,000 were removed from their homes -- usually due to neglect.

The new findings run counter to early government-mandated studies from 1986 and 1993, which reported no race differences in child abuse between races.

Those studies helped fuel claims of bias in the child welfare system that led to cultural sensitivity courses for social workers in several states.

Andrea J. Sedlak, vice president of the research company Westat and a researcher on the government studies, did not return requests for comment. Neither did Casey Family Programs, a national foundation that has promoted the claims of racial bias.

Elizabeth Bartholet, a professor at Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and an expert in child welfare, said the new results add weight to earlier findings that hint abuse is more common in Black families.

Just last month, Harvard Law School hosted a conference on race and child welfare.

"There is no good evidence black kids are removed for reasons related to (Child Protective Services) bias," Bartholet said. "They are removed because of higher rates of actual maltreatment of serious nature."

"We need to focus on prevention of maltreatment and protection of black children as well as white," she added.

SOURCE: bit.ly/hqJOVa Pediatrics, online February 7, 2011.