

Exploring Racial Disproportionalities and Disparities for Black Families Involved with the Child Welfare System: A Scoping Review Protocol

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ABSTRACT

Background: The overrepresentation of Black families in child welfare systems across the various geographical locations (e.g. America, Canada, United Kingdom) is a growing concern. There are competing explanations for the causes of overrepresentation and recommendations for eliminating racial disproportionalities and disparities in child welfare system. This systemic scoping review will provide a succinct synthesis of the current literature on Black disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

Methods/Design: This systemic scoping review will employ Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five stage framework. This will direct our search of the seven academic databases (EBSCO: Criminal Justice Abstracts OVID: Social Work Abstracts Pro Quest: PsychINFO, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, International Bibliography of Social Sciences and Web of Science Core Collections). These seven databases have been chosen due to their interdisciplinary resources on the issue of overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare sector. The thematic findings will be systemically synthesized using qualitative analysis and presented visually through a chart. Eligible articles for this scoping review include literature that speaks directly to the experiences of Black families involved with the child welfare system. The results of this scoping review will increase the understanding of how racial disproportionalities and disparities emerge, common outcomes and ways to begin tackling this phenomenon for Black families.

Discussion: In order to tackle this gap in knowledge regarding the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system, this comprehensive scoping review will systematically organize the literature in order to understand how this issue manifests and to fill this gap in research. This methodological approach will allow for the development of practical and intentional methods to move forward in mitigating this issue.

Keywords: racial, disparities, disproportionality, ethnicity, black families, child welfare

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1. Background

There is a considerable body of literature in the United States (US) that identifies issues of racial disproportionalities and disparities for Black families as they have greater likelihoods of being reported for suspected maltreatment at the initial reporting phase, substantiated for maltreatment, placed into out-of-home care, and held in care for longer periods of in comparison to white families (Barth, 2005; (Fluke et al., 2010) Harris & Hackett, 2008; Krase, 2013; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; United States General Accounting Office, 2007; Wulczyn et al., 2013). Furthermore, Black families are more likely to obtain fewer and poorer quality services (e.g. mental health access and interventions, foster parent services, caseworker support) in comparison to other racial ethnic groups (Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 2004; Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003; McRoy, 2004; Urquiza, Wu, & Borrego, 1999). Other research postulates worker level racial bias (Dettlaff et al., 2011). This area is less researched within the Canadian context where there may be differences in the ways in which Black families come into contact with the child welfare system, but emerging literature is beginning to demonstrate the overrepresentation of Black families within the child welfare system (Hasford, 2015; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). There are various developing conceptualizations of this particular phenomenon and its specific historical and cultural context in Canada, which distinctly relates to Black communities from everywhere in the global diaspora (Phillips & Pon, 2018).

Across the US, there are different explanations of the understandings, causes and recommendations for tackling racial disparities in child welfare (Bartholet, 2009; Cross, 2008; Drake et al., 2011). Several researchers contend that the disproportionate representation of Black children is caused by structural and worker-level factors characterized by racial bias and systematic discrimination (Derezotes et al., 2005; Pon et al., 2011; Roberts, 2008). Some scholars argue that disproportionate involvement of Black children in the child welfare system is an effect of their overrepresented experiences of poverty and other risk factors associated with maltreatment (Barth, 2005; Drake et al., 2009, 2011; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Other academics argue that there are multiple factors that are interacting, including worker bias, agency-level policy and decision-making, and larger structural forces that result in greater poverty rates for Black families (Boyd, 2014; Dettlaff, 2011; Drake et al., 2011; Fluke et al., 2010).

Currently, increasing Canadian research indicates that Black families are overrepresented in the child welfare system and in provincial specific agencies, which often begins at the initial reporting phase of the investigation and then continues at deeper levels of decision-making within the child welfare system (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2015; King et al., 2017; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). The Black population in Canada represents 3.5% of the population and 15.6% of 'visible minorities' (Statistics Canada & Do, 2019). Ontario has the largest Black population (627,710) in the nation, with more than half of Black folks in Canada living in Ontario (52.4%) (Statistics Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada & Do, 2019). The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) report found that among 30% of the participating CAS agencies in Ontario (8 out of 27), Black young people were disproportionately admitted into foster care (OHRC, 2018). A study in a Quebec found 9.6 per 1,000 Black children underwent a screened-in report to child protective services in comparison to 3.5 per 1,000 White children, demonstrating that Black children were over five times more likely to be reported and have that report be screened in than their White peers (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020). An agency-based study which also

relates to these findings revealed that Black youth in Toronto reflected 29% of active ongoing cases and 41.8% of children in out-of-home care (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2015), while only representing 7% of the overall child population. Another agency found that in Peel region, 22% of children and youth in care are Black (22% Black and 19% mixed race) while only representing 9% of the population in the region (Peel Children's Aid Society, 2018; Phillips & Pon, 2018; Social Planning Council of Peel, 2015). In Ontario, King et al.'s study (2017) also found that Black children were more likely to be investigated than their White counterparts, and when coupled with greater social, emotional, and financial vulnerability, Black families were more likely to experienced continued involvement with child protection services.

Alongside these quantitative findings, there is also qualitative research that highlights how experiences of Black families and Black child welfare workers in Ontario are characterized by anti-Black racism (ABR) (Bonnie & Pon, 2015; Clarke, 2011, 2012; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Hasford, 2015). ABR is a specific type of violence aimed at Black individuals and their resistance to such violence (Phillips & Pon, 2018; Pon et al., 2011). More specifically, it is a complex phenomenon that manifests the "internal and external, conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional, personal and social-political, global and local" (Kumsa et al., 2014, p. 30). Other academics assert that the disproportionate involvement of Black young people in the child protection system is intrinsically connected to the history of racism (Clarke et al., 2018; Pon et al., 2011; Thobani, 2007) and that the child welfare system has participated in its perpetuation (Teklu, 2012).

There have been efforts to highlight and address the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system. In Ontario, this has been achieved through community initiatives (Hasford, 2015; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016), qualitative empirical studies (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Phillips & Pon, 2018), and quantitative research (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; King et al., 2017) but to our knowledge there has been no effort to systemically research, disaggregate and organize these issues within the literature. This significantly limits the ability to tackle issues of overrepresentation, disproportionality and disparity for Black families in the child welfare systems in a manner that is inductively grounded in research. Bringing all these data points together can considerably help to understand how overrepresentation manifests across child welfare systems in multiple international contexts and support in addressing this absence in knowledge. Most research regarding to racial disparities has come from the US which has a specific socio-political context but is not unique in terms of the experiences of ABR within the child welfare system (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Phillips & Pon, 2018). In order to tackle this gap in knowledge regarding the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system, this comprehensive scoping review aims to systematically organize the literature in order to understand how this issue manifests and to fill this gap in research. This methodological approach will allow for the development of practical and intentional methods to move forward in mitigating this issue. It will also provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of racial disparities across various regions (e.g. Canada). As there are assertions that racism may be a factor in the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare and racism is a global issue (United Nations, 2016), this scoping review will draw on literature from across all geographical locations.

This study will be guided by the following four research questions: (1) What are common factors within the literature that contribute to the overrepresentation of Black families in child welfare systems across various geographical regions? (2) Are there any differences on how racial disparities for Black families have been explained across various geographies? (3) What are the risk factors, protective factors and outcomes for Black families who are

navigating the child welfare system? (4) What are key recommendations for eliminating the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare system? This scoping review will be the first scoping review of its kind focusing on the overrepresentation of Black families in the child welfare systems within a global context.

2. Methods/Design

This comprehensive scoping review seeks to understand the explanations of racial disproportionality and disparities of Black families in the child welfare system across various geographical regions (e.g. Canada, American, United Kingdom). Due to the lack of empirical research on racial disparities in various geographical regions, a scoping review is a valuable methodology for addressing the gap of knowledge in these research questions and to systemically lay out the findings as they connect to social work, child welfare policy and practice. These findings may emerge from other related disciplines such as child and youth care, children and youth studies, criminology, sociology, and law and socio-political science.

Within the forthcoming scoping review, the term child welfare is synonymous with child protection as they are used interchangeably throughout the literature. This systemic review will also use the terms African, African-Canadian, Afro-American, African American and Black to capture the nuances of African ancestry throughout various vocabulary indexes. African descendants across the globe cannot be viewed as a homogenous group, as there is substantial diversity across multiple aspects of identity, such as culture, class, language, religion, gender and sexual orientation (Edwards & Parada, forthcoming; Kumsa et al., 2014; Phillips & Pon, 2018; United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, 2016). Within the literature, the constructed group “Black” is not used uniformly; some researchers use varying terminology and some participants identify as African, Caribbean, Afro-Latin and much more. The diversity in the ways in which Black is constructed across the globe is complex. In this scoping review we will be using the term Black to speak to the diversity of all individuals of African ancestry, including those who immigrated from the Caribbean, Latin America, and elsewhere.

This scoping protocol employs Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five-phase scoping review framework which involves the following: (1) outlining the key research questions; (2) highlighting relevant studies; (3) gathering studies that fit the determined inclusion criteria; (4) mapping out the results and key findings and (5) synthesizing and disseminating the gathered results. This review will follow the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines (PRISMA-ScR). By tackling the research questions, this scoping review will identify valuable knowledge that can support social work workers, child and youth care practitioners, policy analysts, and community advocates supporting and empowering Black families in the child welfare setting. Findings are also intended to outline key recommendations to advance service provision for the Black community at a practice, policy, and research level.

Stage 1: Outline the research question

This research interest emerged from a combination of the first author’s lived and academic experiences working with Black families and communities in Ontario, Canada. Much of the explorations of racial disproportionalities and disparities in regards to Black families has been conducted in the United States (King et al., 2017). Yet, there exists an increasing concern in Ontario about the extent and dynamics of child welfare involvement for Black families, since community consultations, advocacy groups, and early research illustrate that Black-white disparities exists in reporting, service involvement, and placement in out-of-

home care (King et al., 2017; Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2016; OHRC, 2016; OHRC, 2018).

Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

This scoping review search strategy will be led by the first author in collaboration with his reading course supervisor, academic mentors and peers. The search strategy was reviewed and edited in collaboration with a librarian from the Ontario Institute Studies for Education at the University of Toronto (UofT) and in consultation with the Health Sciences Writing Centre at the UofT. Electronic databases were selected due to their unique interdisciplinary perspective and relevancies to the social work discipline. The seven databases include: EBSCO: Criminal Justice Abstracts OVID: Social Work Abstracts, Pro Quest: PsychINFO, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, International Bibliography of Social Sciences and Web of Science Core Collections.

In order to improve the rigour in developing the key search terms for constructs such as Black, child welfare, disproportionality and disparity, the first author utilized each database’s respective vocabulary index in order to understand each database-controlled vocabulary to assure that each term was adopted based on a journal’s linguistic uniqueness. All selected articles will meet the inclusion criteria, determined through all the authors screening the key words, titles, and abstracts. Selected articles will then be gathered and organized through the online platform of Covidence to support us in conducting a rigorous and efficient systemic review. Throughout the screening process for articles selected, only the articles that mention racial disproportionalities and or disparities in child welfare for Black families, children and or youth broadly (including factors, risk and experiences, investigations, reporting, outcomes) will be incorporated into the title and abstract screening.

As anti-Black racism is a fairly new conversation for policy makers in Canada (Government of Ontario, 2017), and the scholarship is much more developed in the U.S context (King et al., 2017), this scoping review will solely include articles published within the last 20 years (2000-2020). Given the sociopolitical changes impacting the child welfare system in North America over the last two decades, this time frame will allow us to incorporate articles that can provide information on racial disparities within the current sociopolitical context. Any literature that was published prior to 2000 was excluded from this study. This search also excluded, books, book reviews, any non-peer reviewed academic journal articles with the exception of governmental documents. This systemic review will also exclude any studies of Black families who have not had any direct experiences with the child welfare systems, racial disparities focusing on any other racial group other than people of African ancestry and any dissertations and blogs as literature sources.

Figure 1. Search string.

| Search | Database | Results |
|---|------------------------|---------|
| (“African American*” or “African Canadian*” or Caribbean or “African Cultural Group*” or Black or Negro* or Black Fam*) AND (“Child welfare” or “child protection*” or “child abuse” or “child abuse reporting” or “child neglect”) AND (Dispar* or disproportion*) | Sociological Abstracts | 2,474 |

Stage 3: Selecting studies that meet the inclusion criteria

Once a summary of relevant literature from the various databases is retrieved, a peer review of the selected title and abstract screening will be conducted by two of the respective authors. The chosen articles from the first phase of the peer review process will be followed up with a full text review in the second phase. The supervisor Michael Saini and Bryn King will resolve any conflicts or inconsistencies due to his vast experience in conducting systemic reviews and her wealth of knowledge regarding the child welfare system.

In order to ensure this scoping review maintains its quality and rigour, we will begin with all raters screening 100 articles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For this subset of selected articles, we will use the Kappa score to assess inter-agreement. We will aim to have an inter-agreement score of at least 90% before continuing the scoping review. If we fail to meet the minimum score, we will regroup and discuss the emerging conflicts. We will then re-run a screening of 100 articles to re-test our inter-agreement. This process will continue until a minimum score of 90% is achieved.

Within the title and abstract screening process, the peer reviewers will assure that the selected articles have been published within the last 20 years (2000-2020), focused on the experiences, factors, and risks and outcomes associated with racial disproportionality and or disparities for Black families in the child welfare system; specifically the inclusion criteria will include scholarly based articles, and book chapters that clearly focus on racial disproportionality and disparity factors, risk and or experiences of Black families, and within the context of child welfare and protection broadly. In the title and abstract screening stage articles that also use more general colourblind terminology (e.g ethnicity, immigrant, ethnic, racialized, people of colour) will be included in the full text screening, as well as abstracts that mention demographic characteristics will be included within the analysis. These articles will then be more thoroughly screened at the full text stage to assure they are to some degree related to Black families and have direct results/findings that are related to Black families involved with child welfare. Within the full text screen review, articles that speak to the relationship of Black families, child welfare, policy, practice and community engagement within the context of racial disparities will be included. Articles that solely focus on racial disparities for other racial and ethnic groups (e.g. Hispanic, Indigenous, Asian) will not be included in this review.

Stage 4: Chart data key results

The selected articles will be organized, extracted into tables and explored for relevant themes in order to respond to the guiding research questions. The extraction of data will be organized in the tables with the following categories: country where the article was disseminated, country where the research took place, year of publication, title of journal, discipline, type of literature (scholarly, government), methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, conceptual), intersystem relationships (education, judicial, mental health, immigration), family risk factors, protective factors, outcomes, and recommendations for solutions (practice and policy). The data extraction will be conducted by two independent raters. All inconsistencies and discrepancies within the charting process will be mediated collaboratively amongst the authors; if a disagreement still persists, a University of Toronto librarian will be consulted for revision.

Stage 5: Synthesis and report findings

Since no specific methods of the primary studies will be excluded, we will first organize and sort out the qualitative, quantitative and mixed method within our analysis and synthesis. For all quantitative data we will extract descriptive statistics and aggregate frequencies and variances within the data. For all qualitative studies, we will thematically synthesize all relevant themes that emerge from the primary studies. The findings of this scoping review will be disseminated as part of the first author's doctoral scholarship and in relevant scholarly and community conferences. We aim for the findings to be a meaningful and leading contribution in clearly identifying the gaps in knowledge pertaining to racial disproportionalities and disparities for Black families in Ontario's child welfare sector. The results will support policy decision making, training for services providers in various sectors (e.g. social workers, child and youth workers, teachers, police officers) and the future teaching of emerging custody practitioners across the globe.

Declarations

Availability of data and material: N/A

Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests

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