

Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare: Implications for Social Work Education

Alan Dettlaff, PhD

Framing the Issue

- Racial disproportionality and disparities have long represented preeminent concerns in child welfare.
- Recent research concerning differential rates of maltreatment and increased awareness of differential risk factors has brought increased attention to these concerns and has called into question the appropriateness of efforts to address them.

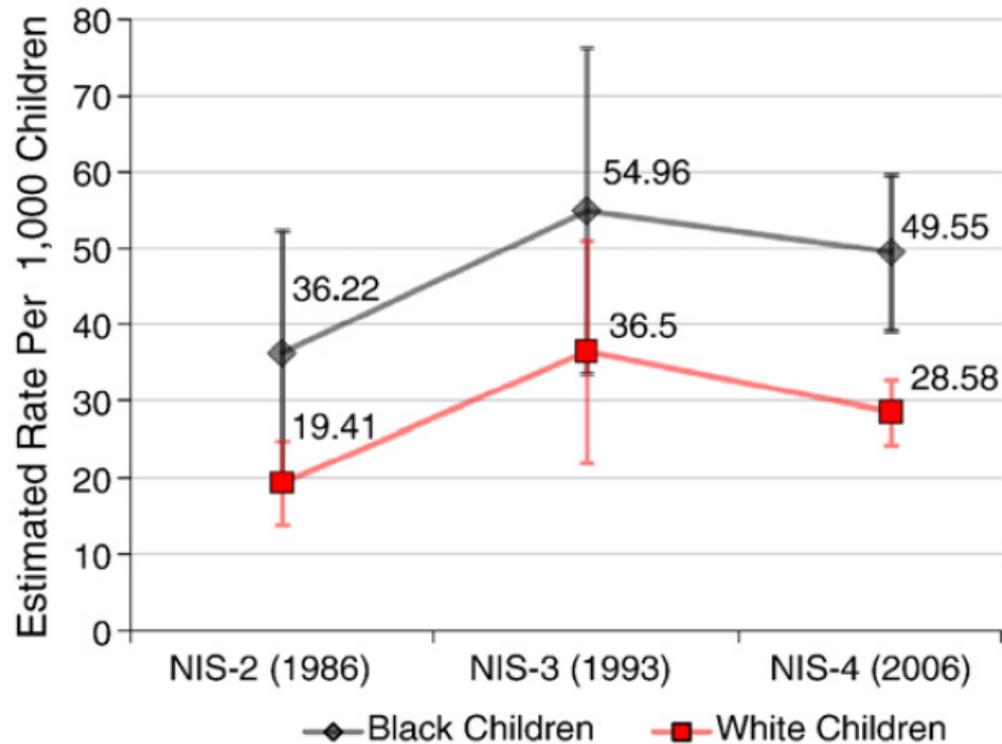
Definitions

- Disproportionality refers to the state of being out of proportion.
- Disproportionality occurs when the proportion of one group in the child welfare population is either proportionately larger or smaller than in the general population.
- While disproportionality refers to the state of being out of proportion, disparity refers to a state of being unequal.
- Disparities can occur at every decision-making point:
 - Initial report of alleged maltreatment
 - Substantiation of maltreatment
 - Entries into substitute care
 - Exits from care

An Evolving Understanding

- Early research focusing on disproportionality
- Emphasis on National Incidence Studies (NIS-3 and prior) as evidence of the problem
- Emergence of disparity as a more useful indicator
- Impact of shifting dialogue and NIS-4

Estimated Maltreatment Rates by Race



Source: Drake, B. & Jonson-Reid, M. (2010). NIS interpretations: Race and the National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 16-20.



REUTERS

No Racial Bias at Child Protective Services: Study

“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.”

“These findings suggest that racial bias in reporting and in the child welfare system are not large-scale drivers of racial disproportionality.”

Drake, B., Jolley, J. M., Lanier, P., Fluke, J., Barth, R. P., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2011). Racial bias in child protection? A comparison of competing explanations using national data. *Pediatrics*, doi: 10:1542/peds.2010-1710

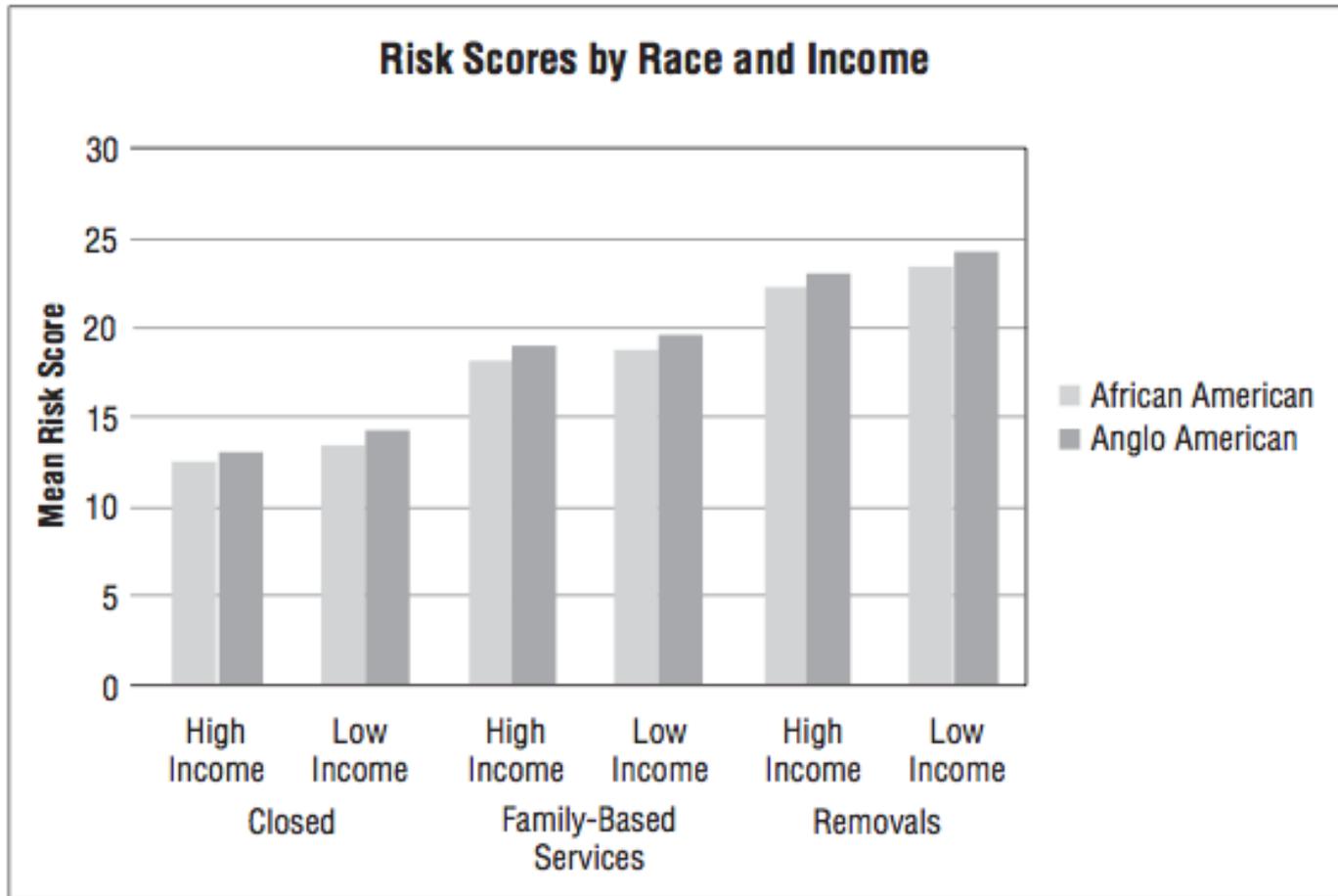
Texas Disparity Studies (2008-2011)

- Study of racial/ethnic disparities in the Texas child welfare system
- Focus on disparities at 2 decision points
 - Substantiation
 - Case disposition
 - Taking action on a case (close vs. service provision)
 - Service decision (family-based services vs. substitute care)

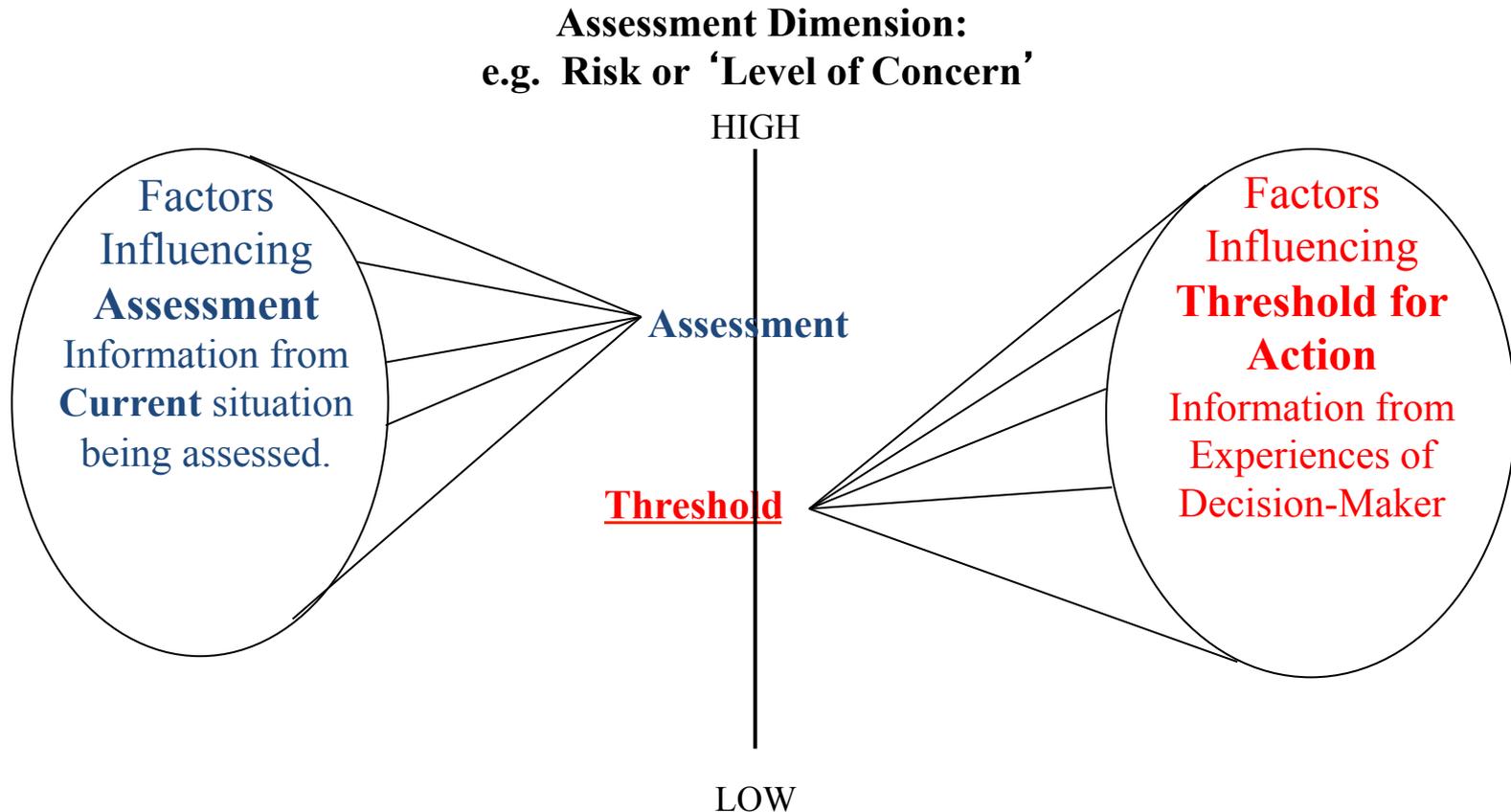
Texas Disparity Studies (2008-2011)

- Used logistic regression models to examine the impact of race on the likelihood of case decisions.
- When controlling for poverty and risk:
 - African American children were 15% more likely than White children to be involved in a substantiated case
 - *Among maltreated children*, African American children were 20% more likely than White children to be involved in a case that is opened for services
 - *Of cases opened for services*, African American children were 77% more likely than White children to be removed in lieu of in-home services

Texas Disparity Studies (2008-2011)



A General Model for *Assessing* the Situation and *Deciding* what to do about it



If the **Assessment** is *ABOVE* the **Threshold**, then ACTION is taken.

If the **Assessment** is *BELOW* the **Threshold**, then NO ACTION is taken.

Current & Emerging Understandings

- Disproportionality and disparities have become value laden terms that imply inequities.
- Although much research has documented the presence of disproportionality and disparities, much less research has examined the factors explaining their presence.
- Differences in poverty and risk exposure are likely significant contributors to observed disparities.
- Differences in poverty and risk do not mean that bias is not present within child welfare systems.
- Disproportionality and disparities are complex phenomena that cannot be explained by a single cause.

Implications for Social Work Education

- Acknowledge that structural and institutional racism impact outcomes
- Acknowledge the influence of implicit bias
- Prepare social work students to practice through an anti-racist lens