Pathways to the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canada's Child Welfare System

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This study compares child welfare services provided to Aboriginal (Indian) and Caucasian children in Canada. The findings suggest that child welfare reports involving Aboriginal children are more likely to be classified as suspected or substantiated than reports for Caucasian children. Aboriginal children also are twice as likely to be placed in foster care. This overrepresentation in out-of-home placement is explained statistically by socioeconomic, child, parent, and maltreatment characteristics. In addition, these variables play a significant role in accounting for higher rates of case substantiation among Aboriginal children. These factors may reflect the multiple disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal families.

Annual reports from provincial and territorial ministries of child and family services for the years 2000–2002 estimate that 76,000 children and youth are living in out-of-home care in Canada (Farris-Manning

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and Zandstra 2003). An estimated 40 percent of those children are Aboriginal, or children labeled "Indian" or "Native American" in the United States (Farris-Manning and Zandstra 2003). Indeed, some provinces report that Aboriginal children comprise nearly 80 percent of children living in out-of-home care (foster care, group care, and institutional care; Aboriginal Justice Inquiry–Child Welfare Initiative 2001). Yet, fewer than 5 percent of children in Canada are Aboriginal (Human Resources Development/Statistics Canada 1996).[1] National statistics on placement in out-of-home care are available for First Nations children living on reserve.[2] Despite repeated calls to develop alternatives to removal, the number of First Nations children on reserve placed in out-of-home care increased by 71.5 percent between 1995 and 2001 (McKenzie 2002).[3] In reviewing Canada's report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child specifically raised concerns regarding the disproportionate risks faced by Aboriginal children. The report called for Canada to strengthen its efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to address the inequalities (United Nations 2003).

Although overrepresentation is well documented, its explanation is unclear. The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Maltreatment (CIS-98; Trocmé et al. 2001), the first national child welfare study in Canada to include a large sample of Aboriginal children, provides an opportunity to explore some of the factors associated with intervention decisions made during the intake investigation stage.

Historical Background

The disproportionate number of Aboriginal children placed in out-of-home care is of particular concern in light of the history of assimilationist education and child welfare policies in Canada (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Blackstock, Trocmé, and Bennett 2004). For more than a century, education for on-reserve Aboriginal children was primarily provided through church-run residential schools designed to assimilate Aboriginal children into both Caucasian culture and the churches (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Milloy 1999). The children were forbidden to speak their own languages, practice their spiritual traditions, or maintain their cultural traditions. Schools were usually too far from reserves to enable contact with parents. Siblings were separated in residence. Sexual and physical abuse and death from disease were common (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Milloy 1999). Children in residential schools did not encounter healthy parental role models and, as adults, frequently had diminished capacity to care for their own children (Bennett and Black-

stock 2002). The last residential school closed in Saskatchewan in 1996 (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada 2003).

Similarly, child welfare services for Aboriginal families relied heavily on adoption into non-Aboriginal families. Aboriginal children were often placed outside the province and sometimes outside the country. Over 11,132 children of Indian status were adopted between 1960 and 1990 (Department of Indian Affairs, quoted by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996). The statistic does not include children whose Indian status was not recorded or other nonstatus Aboriginal children.[4]

In response to these often quite explicit assimilationist programs, a range of provincial and territorial child welfare policies now acknowledges the importance of children's Aboriginal heritage. These policies give much greater control over the welfare of Aboriginal children to their communities. Some provincial and territorial statutes require that band representatives be party to proceedings in cases involving children with First Nations status (e.g., the Ontario Child and Family Services Act [2002] and the Alberta Child Welfare Act [2000]).[5] There have been several landmark cases in which bands sought to repatriate to Aboriginal communities Native children living in non-Aboriginal foster homes (Wente 2003*a*, 2003*b*; Bala et al. 2004). Aboriginal communities are also beginning to receive more control over the delivery of child welfare services, although this varies considerably from one jurisdiction to another. Their level of authority varies from providing support service before and after child welfare investigations to being fully delegated authorities with jurisdiction on and, in a few cases, off reserve. To be sure, the impact of these changes is limited by the relatively slow pace of implementation, the constraints inherent in provincially developed statutes and regulations, and the lack of resources to provide family support services.[6] It is nevertheless surprising that the number of Aboriginal children placed in out-of-home care continues to rise. In fact, more Aboriginal children are placed in out-of-home care today than in residential schools at the height of the residential school movement (Blackstock 2003). Ida Nicolaisen, a member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, observes that systemic racism and xenophobia in the welfare and justice systems have ensured that "indigenous children continued to be removed from their families by welfare agencies that equated poverty with neglect" (United Nations 2003, p. 5). Given the disappointing effects of these policy and service changes, it is particularly important to examine the factors leading to the dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

Previous Research on Overrepresentation of Cultural Minorities in Care

Year-end statistics from several provinces track the proportion of First Nations children in out-of-home care. In Manitoba at the end of 1999, First Nations (status and nonstatus) and Métis children constituted 68 percent of the minors in out-of-home care (Farris-Manning and Zandstra 2003). The best sources of national data in Canada are the statistics kept by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC), which funds child welfare services on reserves. As noted above, INAC year-end figures for children in care show a 71.5 percent increase in the number of on-reserve First Nations children in out-of-home care between 1995 and 2001 (McKenzie 2002). Of particular concern is the national trend toward placing growing numbers of First Nations children on reserves in group or institutional care and the amount of time spent in these settings. National statistics document an 80.9 percent increase in the number of days that First Nations children spent in group or institutional care during this period. This increase is dramatic when compared to the corresponding figure for the number of days spent in foster care (37.4 percent increase; McKenzie 2002).

Analyses of caseload dynamics in the province of Saskatchewan find that in the early 1990s, nearly two-thirds of children in out-of-home care were from First Nations' families. These children spent more time in foster care than did non-Native children. Less than 10 percent of these Native children were in race-matched foster homes (Rosenbluth 1995). However, with the exception of the study by David Rosenbluth (1995), there are no published investigations of the caseload dynamics associated with the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in Canada. While few provinces and territories track the proportion of Aboriginal children placed in Aboriginal homes, available data suggest that the proportion is small. For example, when the British Columbia Children's Commissioner's 1998 Annual Report reviewed case plans of Aboriginal children, it found that, despite a statutory requirement to give preference to Aboriginal homes, only 2.5 percent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care were placed in race-matched homes (Blackstock and Bennett 2003).

Aboriginal children also are overrepresented in the U.S. child welfare system. Examining Minnesota data from 1993–2000, Sheila Ards and associates (2003) compare by race and ethnicity the rates of substantiated maltreatment allegations with the representation of racial and ethnic groups in the child population. (Substantiated maltreatment allegations are reported incidents that meet the state's definition of maltreatment.) Ards and associates (2003) estimate that Native children are approximately four to five times more likely to be found among cases of substantiated maltreatment than is the case in Minnesota's total

child population. Edmund Mech (1983) finds that the prevalence of placement in out-of-home care is nearly three times higher for Native Americans (8.8 per thousand) and African-American children (9.5 per thousand) compared to Caucasians (3.1 per thousand). In a study of 9,000 Native American children in foster care in Arizona, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and North Dakota, Margaret Plantz and colleagues (1989) find that placement rates are 3.6 times higher for Indian than for non-Indian children. Native children enter care at a younger age. While the number of Native children being placed is increasing, placements are dropping for non-Native children. An analysis of a national survey of child welfare workers finds that Native American families with children in out-of-home care are the least likely to be recommended for services (Olsen 1982). Family restoration is inhibited by the absence of services to ameliorate conditions leading to child placement. While the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system is well documented, research has generally not taken the next step to examine underlying factors.

Overrepresentation of African-American Children in Child Welfare

More extensive research has been conducted on the overrepresentation of African-American children in child welfare in the United States. These studies may provide some insight into the complexity involved in unraveling the effects of race on rates of reported maltreatment, maltreatment substantiation, and child welfare placement.

Studies examining rates of reported maltreatment at the front end of the system consistently document an overrepresentation of African-American children and families (Sedlak 1991; Ards and Harrell 1993; Roberts 2002; Fluke et al. 2003). John Fluke and associates (2003) find that cases involving African-American children are accepted for investigation at higher rates than those cases involving Caucasian children. This suggests that differential treatment occurs once a report of maltreatment is received. Though some studies find no effect of race on maltreatment substantiation (Haskett et al. 1995; Trocmé, McPhee, and Tam 1995; Wells, Fluke, and Brown 1995; Freeman, Levine, and Doueck 1996; King, Trocmé, and Thatte 2003), several others document higher rates of substantiation among African-American families (Eckenrode et al. 1988; Zuravin, Orme, and Hegar 1995; Needell, Brookhart, and Lee 2003).

In their comprehensive review of race and ethnicity in child welfare, Mark Courtney and associates (1996) conclude that both race and ethnicity play an important role in determining the nature of child welfare services. Several studies document how rates of out-of-home placement

vary by race. Placement rates for African-American children are 3–12 times higher than for Caucasian children (Mech 1983; Goerge, Wulczyn, and Harden 1994; Garland et al. 1998; Hill 2001; Lau et al. 2003). While they comprise only 15 percent of the U.S. child population, African-American children represent 41 percent of the children in foster care (Pérez, O'Neil, and Gesiriech 2003). Once placed, African-American children spend significantly more time in temporary out-of-home care (Goerge 1990; McMurtry and Lie 1992; Courtney 1994), reenter care at significantly higher rates (Courtney et al. 1996), and are less likely to be adopted (Barth et al. 1994) or reunited with their families (Child Welfare League of America 2002). Although markedly overrepresented in out-of-home care, African-American children and families appear to receive proportionally fewer services than Caucasian children and their families (Olsen 1982; Fein, Maluccio, and Kluger 1990).

Numerous studies attempt to identify the factors that underlie these well-documented differences by race. Surveys of community professionals (Sedlak and Broadhurst 1996; Sedlak and Schultz 2001) and youth (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman 1994; Lau et al. 2003) in the general public indicate that high rates of involvement with child welfare services cannot be accounted for by disproportionately higher rates of maltreatment among African-American children and youth. When maltreatment occurs, differences in the rates of placement do not appear to be related to greater severity of maltreatment among African-American youth (Lau et al. 2003).

Though findings are mixed, numerous studies suggest that a variety of family, social, and economic characteristics may be primary determinants of child welfare involvement, reflecting the higher rates of adversity and disadvantage experienced by African-American families. Early studies were criticized for not adequately controlling for economic and social conditions that may underlie differential treatment of African-American children in the child welfare system (Courtney et al. 1996). More recent studies attempt to control for a range of factors. Elizabeth Jones and Karen McCurdy's (1992) analysis of data from the second National Incidence Study (NIS-2) finds that, when controlling for poverty, race is no longer a statistically significant determinant of the disproportionate number of reports involving African-American families. Several studies find no effect of race on the likelihood of placement after controlling for a broad range of factors, such as socioeconomic status, child and caregiver characteristics, functioning concerns, family configuration, maltreatment history, and maltreatment severity (Runyan et al. 1981; Katz et al. 1986; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997; Zuravin and DePanfilis 1997; Tittle, Harris, and Poertner 2000). However, other studies find race to be a primary determinant in county-level reports of neglect (Spearly and Lauderdale 1983) and foster care placement (Lau et al. 2003; Needell et al. 2003), even after con-

trolling for socioeconomic, child, and maltreatment factors. Thus, while differential treatment by race is clearly documented within the child welfare system, studies vary in whether the relationship between race and child welfare involvement is statistically significant, once other variables are controlled.

In contrast to the growing body of literature examining the factors that underlie disproportionate rates of child welfare involvement among African-American children, there has been little empirical research to explain the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. This article examines the factors that underlie disproportionate rates of substantiation and placement among Aboriginal children in Canada. Race may influence decisions regarding child welfare services in several ways for this population. Client race may affect workers' perceptions and attributions, influencing the ways in which information about caregivers and families is represented. Race-associated structural inequities may be manifested in the differential presence of risk factors for maltreatment. The present study attempts to examine the extent to which this disproportionality may be associated with socioeconomic, child, parent, and maltreatment characteristics, recognizing that the influence of worker bias on assessments of Aboriginal families cannot be taken into account statistically.

Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Maltreatment (CIS-98)

The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Maltreatment (CIS-98) presents a first opportunity to compare child welfare services provided in Canada to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children (Trocmé et al. 2001). A first analysis of the Aboriginal CIS data conducted by Cindy Blackstock, Nico Trocmé, and Marlyn Bennett (2004) finds that 16 percent of children under the age of 16 investigated in Canada (excluding Quebec) because of suspected maltreatment were identified as being of Aboriginal heritage, whereas Aboriginal children under the age of 16 comprise only 5 percent of the general population. In comparing children of Aboriginal origin to children representing other visible minorities (14 percent of investigated children) and to Caucasian children (70 percent of investigated children), the analyses find that Aboriginal families have significantly higher rates of poverty, less stable housing, younger parents, more parents who were maltreated as children, and higher rates of parent alcohol and drug abuse. Child welfare reports about Aboriginal children are more likely to be substantiated (50 percent of Aboriginal cases substantiated, as compared to 38 percent of non-Aboriginal cases). Aboriginal children are nearly twice as likely to be placed in out-of-home care (9.9 percent of Aboriginal children

placed, as compared to 4.6 percent of non-Aboriginal children). Building on these findings, the following article uses multivariate modeling to examine whether the type of maltreatment and selected child, parent, and socioeconomic risk factors explain the disproportionately high substantiation and placement rates for Aboriginal children.

Methodology

Sample and Measures

CIS-98 collected information on a sample of 7,672 reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. These reports were selected from a random national sample of 51 child welfare agencies. Cases opened in each site during a 3-month sampling period (October–December 1998) were considered for inclusion if those cases also met CIS-98 criteria for suspected maltreatment. For example, cases that involved requests for supportive services, without an allegation of maltreatment, were excluded.

The study compiled information from a direct survey of social workers. Using a standard set of definitions, study participants reported the results of their child welfare investigations, details about the specific maltreatment incidents, and key child and family characteristics (Trocmé et al. 2001). While the CIS-98 is the most comprehensive national child maltreatment data set available in Canada, the study did not track incidents that were not reported to child welfare authorities, reported cases that were screened out by child welfare authorities before being fully investigated, new reports on cases already opened by child welfare authorities, and cases that were investigated only by the police.

In this study, Aboriginal heritage includes families in three Aboriginal groupings: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Data on Aboriginal status were not collected in the Quebec portion of the CIS-98 ($N = 2,309$) and were missing on 10 additional cases. Because the Aboriginal status of each investigated child was determined by the status of the biological parent(s) living with the child, children who did not reside with a biological parent ($N = 225$) were also excluded. Children in a further 726 cases were classified as "other visible minority" status and were excluded because the present analysis focuses on the comparison of Aboriginal and Caucasian children (see Blackstock et al. 2004 for comparisons with other visible minorities).[7] Thus, from the original sample of 7,672 child investigations, 3,270 cases were excluded, leaving an effective sample of 4,402 child investigations (table 1). In the multivariate analyses, 1,504 cases lacked information on one or more of the 15 variables and were excluded from analyses. The result was a final sample size of 2,898.[8]

Data Analysis

Analysis is conducted in two stages. Chi-square bivariate analyses are first used to identify any significant differences between Aboriginal and Caucasian cases. In a second stage, logistic regression is employed to examine the relative role of Aboriginal status in determining both substantiation status and placement decisions. Maltreatment, child, caregiver, and socioeconomic characteristics are controlled. For each of the two sets of regressions (predicting substantiation and placement), five blocks of factors are added in a sequential and cumulative fashion: (1) child Aboriginal status; (2) family characteristics; (3) maltreatment characteristics; (4) child characteristics; and (5) parent characteristics.

Independent Variables

Child Aboriginal status is a dichotomous variable (Aboriginal or Caucasian). Family characteristics are represented by family structure plus three proxy indicators of family socioeconomic status. Family structure is classified as two-parent biological, two-parent blended, or lone parent. Three proxy indicators are used to represent family socioeconomic status: number of family moves in the year prior to survey (none, one, or two or more moves), whether family living conditions are considered unsafe (yes or no), and source of income. Primary source of income includes four categories: full-time employment, part-time employment, receipt of such benefits as social assistance or unemployment, and other source of income.

Characteristics of maltreatment include the primary form of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, or domestic violence) and the existence of previous case opening(s) for the child who is the subject of the maltreatment allegation. In analyses of child welfare placement, substantiation status is also included as a predictor. Child characteristics include the child age category and two child functioning concerns: substance abuse–related defects (noted or not) and number of child behavior concerns noted by the worker. The child behavior concerns assessed by each worker include violence toward others, running away, involvement in prostitution, inappropriate sexual behavior, criminal behavior, irregular school attendance, negative peer involvement, and substance abuse. Since the percentage of cases with three to eight behavior concerns was small (2 percent or less), the number of child behavior concerns is collapsed into three categories: no concerns, one concern, or two or more concerns.

Seven parent characteristics are considered in the analyses. These factors include age category of the youngest parent, parent history of maltreatment as a child (yes or no), and five parent functioning concerns: alcohol abuse, drug use, criminal activity, cognitive impairment,

Table 1

Case Characteristics by Racial Status, 1998 CIS (N = 4,402)

Variable	χ^2 Values	Aboriginal (%)	Caucasian (%)
Family characteristics:			
Family structure:***	30.25 (2)		
Two-parent biological		21.9	31.3
Two-parent blended		21.6	17.5
Single parent		56.5	51.2
Source of income:***	219.27 (3)		
Full-time employment		15.8	42.9
Part-time employment		10.2	9.4
Benefits		58.1	37.7
Other		16.0	10.1
Unsafe housing conditions***	13.50 (1)	7.9	4.6
Family moves in year prior to survey:***	43.24 (2)		
No moves		60.1	68.9
One move		22.9	22.8
Two or more moves		17.0	8.3
Maltreatment characteristics:			
Case substantiation status:***	62.01 (2)		
Unsubstantiated		26.3	40.8
Suspected		24.2	21.2
Substantiated		49.5	38.0
Previous case opening (for child)***	109.12 (1)	67.1	46.3
Primary form of maltreatment:***	161.74 (4)		
Physical abuse		18.6	35.3
Sexual abuse		10.1	10.8
Neglect		57.9	34.9
Emotional maltreatment		6.5	9.0
Exposure to domestic violence		7.0	10.0
Child characteristics:			
Age of investigated child:*	7.73 (3)		
0–3 years		24.5	21.3
4–7 years		29.1	27.6
8–11 years		25.1	26.2
12–15 years		21.4	25.0
Emotional harm (% yes)	.30 (1)	18.7	18.5
Physical harm (% yes)	1.86 (1)	9.4	11.0
Substance abuse–related defect*** (% yes)	93.21 (1)	6.1	1.0
Anxiety or depression (% yes)	1.93 (1)	7.6	9.1
Self-harm behavior (% yes)	2.17 (1)	4.0	3.0
Number of child behavior problems:*	5.83 (2)		
None		77.0	80.6
One		12.7	10.5
Two or more		10.3	8.9
Parent factors:			
Age of youngest parent:***	68.89 (3)		
30 years or younger		49.5	35.6
31–40 years		44.7	51.7
41–50 years		5.4	11.8
51+ years		.4	.8
History of child maltreatment (either parent)***	110.22 (1)	47.2	28.3

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Variable	χ^2 Values	Aboriginal (%)	Caucasian (%)
Parent functioning concerns (% noted):			
Alcohol abuse***	572.88 (1)	63.5	21.5
Drug abuse***	124.08 (1)	27.5	12.2
Criminal activity***	65.40 (1)	17.2	8.0
Cognitive impairment**	8.54 (1)	7.9	5.3
Mental health concern	.065 (1)	21.7	22.1
Physical health concern	.010 (1)	7.0	7.1
Few social supports***	16.55 (1)	33.9	26.8
N		833	3,569

Note.—Degrees of freedom are in parentheses. CIS = Canadian Incidence Study.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

and lack of social supports. Each parent functioning concern is included as a dichotomous variable (noted or not). Noted concerns include parent concerns that are suspected or confirmed by child welfare workers.[9] Parent functioning concerns are categorized as "confirmed" if the concern was diagnosed, disclosed, and observed by the worker or another worker, or on the file. A parent functioning concern is categorized as "suspected" if the evidentiary criteria for confirmation could not be met but, at the conclusion of the investigation, the worker thought that a particular concern was likely.

Each variable is treated as categorical. With the addition of each block of factors, the statistical significance of the coefficient attached to the Aboriginal status variable is examined. This determines which, if any, group of factors accounts for ethnoracial differences in substantiation or placement rates. Substantiation is coded as positive when it is suspected or confirmed. Given the large number of cases that have missing information for number of moves and unsafe housing (1,203 of 4,402 cases), analyses are rerun without these two variables for substantiation status and placement.

Findings

According to table 1, Aboriginal families are remarkably different from Caucasian families in a number of ways. Aboriginal family heads are younger and more often single. Their families often are dependent on social assistance and living in unsafe housing. They are more likely to have moved multiple times in the year prior to the survey. Compared to other families, Aboriginal families are statistically more likely to have previous child welfare case openings. Proportionately more of these

Table 2

Placement Rates by Racial Status, 1998 CIS (N = 4,394)

Placement Status	Aboriginal (%)	Caucasian (%)
Child welfare placement	9.9	4.6
Informal placement	11.2	3.4
Placement considered	3.9	2.4
No placement required	75.1	89.6
N	831	3,563

Note.—CIS = Canadian Incidence Study.

cases involve neglect. Alcohol abuse is noted as a concern for almost two-thirds of the Aboriginal parents, compared to 22 percent of Caucasian parents. Drug abuse, criminal activity, cognitive impairment, and lack of social support are also statistically more common among Aboriginal parents. However, Aboriginal and Caucasian children do not differ to a statistically significant degree on most child functioning variables: emotional or physical harm, depression or anxiety, and self-harm behavior. There are statistically significant differences in the rate of substance abuse–related birth defects and in the number of behavioral concerns. As table 1 suggests, 74 percent of investigations involving Aboriginal children are classified as suspected or substantiated, as compared to 59 percent of Caucasian children ($\chi^2 = 62.01$, df = 2, $p < .001$).

As table 2 suggests, 10 percent of Aboriginal children were placed in out-of-home care during the protection investigation. This compares to 4.6 percent of Caucasian children ($\chi^2 = 139.18$, df = 3, $p = .000$). Informal placements, such as a child going to live with grandparents or other extended family, are especially heavily stressed for Aboriginal children. Factoring in cases in which placement plans were still being considered, a full quarter of all Aboriginal children were placed, were moved to relatives, or were at imminent risk of placement. This compares to less than 11 percent of Caucasian children.

Substantiation

Table 3 summarizes the logistic regression that predicts substantiation. It focuses on the estimated effect of Aboriginal status on the odds of a case's being either suspected or substantiated when each block of independent variables is added. When all blocks are added, the results suggest that the probability of a case's being classified as suspected or substantiated is not significantly greater for Aboriginal children compared to Caucasian children (adjusted odds = 1.05).

When ethnoracial status (Aboriginal vs. Caucasian) is the only predictor of substantiation status, Aboriginal children are estimated to have

Table 3

Estimated Effect of Aboriginal Status on Substantiation Status as Each Block of Variables Is Added to the Multivariate Model

Block	χ^2 for Block	Adjusted Odds Ratio for Aboriginal Status	Significance of Aboriginal Status (p-value)
Aboriginal status (vs. Caucasian)	13.66 (1)***	1.46	<.001
Family characteristics	67.90 (8)***	1.40	.002
Maltreatment characteristics	177.93 (5)***	1.56	<.001
Child factors	83.50 (6)***	1.45	.001
Age of youngest parent	1.73 (3)	1.46	.001
Parent drug concerns	22.34 (1)***	1.39	.005
Parent criminal activity	40.96 (1)***	1.35	.011
Parent cognitive impairment	7.79 (1)**	1.36	.010
Parent few social supports	43.84 (1)***	1.34	.013
Parent history of maltreatment as a child	36.52 (1)***	1.24	.077
Parent alcohol concerns	30.89 (1)***	1.05	.678

Note.—Degrees of freedom are in parentheses.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

approximately 1.5 times the probability of having a case suspected or substantiated. The probability of suspected or substantiated Aboriginal cases remains 1.5 times greater after controlling for the effects of family structure, income source, unsafe housing, number of moves, form of maltreatment, previous case openings, child age, and child functioning concerns. The estimated effect of Aboriginal status is reduced to nonsignificance when adding the last block, parent functioning concerns. This suggests that the difference in substantiation status between the Aboriginal and Caucasian children is primarily accounted for by differences in parent functioning concerns.

To further examine which parent functioning concerns mediate the estimated effect of Aboriginal status, the analysis is rerun, and each parent functioning concern is added separately. Aboriginal status retains its statistical significance when adding age of youngest parent, drug concerns, criminal activity, cognitive impairment, and lack of social supports. The coefficient attached to Aboriginal status loses statistical significance when parent history of maltreatment as a child or alcohol concerns are included in the equation. The odds of a case's being classified as suspected or substantiated are doubled when alcohol concerns are noted. The odds are 1.7 times greater when a parent has a history of being maltreated as a child.

Three ancillary analyses examine whether parent alcohol concerns and parent history of maltreatment as a child are sufficient on their own to account for the higher rate of substantiation among Aboriginal

cases. Results suggest that neither variable, alone or in combination, accounts for the difference between Aboriginal and Caucasian children. Thus, it appears that a combination of many variables accounts for the difference between Aboriginal and Caucasian cases.

Table 4 presents the coefficients in the final model predicting if a case is suspected or substantiated. The table reports the regression coefficient for each variable and the corresponding *p*-values. The final model identifies the following statistically significant predictors: unsafe housing, frequent moves, receipt of social assistance, number of child behavior concerns, and form of maltreatment. It also finds a predictive role for emotional maltreatment, family violence, and neglect (negative). In addition, older child age (12–15 years), parent alcohol abuse, criminal activity, lack of social support, and parent history of maltreatment as a child are estimated to increase the odds that a case will be classified as suspected or substantiated.

Reanalysis of the data excluding number of moves and unsafe housing from the second block of factors yields slightly different findings. The second block of factors, including family structure and income source, does not contribute significantly to the model. The adjusted odds of a case's being classified as suspected or substantiated for Aboriginal as compared to Caucasian children declines from 1.8 to 1.3 when parent functioning concerns are included in the final block of the model. However, the coefficient attached to Aboriginal status retains its statistical significance ($p = .03$). This finding suggests that when all variables except family mobility and housing safety are controlled, cases involving Aboriginal children are statistically significantly more likely to be classified as suspected or substantiated than those involving Caucasian children.

Child Welfare Placement

According to table 5, the unadjusted odds of child welfare placement among Aboriginal cases is 2.3 times greater than for Caucasians ($p < .001$). However, once maltreatment, socioeconomic, parent, and child characteristics are controlled, the adjusted odds of placement are not statistically different for Aboriginal children compared to Caucasian children (odds ratio = 1.08, $p = .739$).

Table 5 illustrates the decline in the effect of Aboriginal status on placement as each block of variables is entered into the multivariate model. The table suggests that there are consistent decreases in the effect of Aboriginal status with the addition of each block. Aboriginal children continue to be statistically significantly more likely to be placed in a child welfare setting when the model includes family structure, income source, unsafe housing, and the number of moves ($p < .002$). It loses its statistical significance with the addition of variables repre-

Table 4

Estimated Effect of Maltreatment and Child and Family Characteristics on the Odds of a Case's Being Classified as Suspected or Substantiated (N = 2,898)

Variable	Coefficient	Effect on the Odds	p-Value
Aboriginal status:			
Caucasian*			
Aboriginal	.052	1.054	.678
Source of income:			
Full-time employment*			
Part-time employment	−.059	.943	.698
Benefits	−.226	.798	.046
Other	−.353	.703	.062
Unsafe housing conditions	.876	2.402	<.001
Family moves in year prior to survey:			
No moves*			
One move	.292	1.339	.007
Two or more moves	.691	1.995	<.001
Family structure:			
Two-parent biological*			
Two-parent blended	.076	1.079	.548
Single parent	.016	1.016	.881
Previous case opening (for child)	−.141	.869	.119
Primary form of maltreatment:			
Physical abuse*			
Sexual abuse	−.109	.897	.440
Neglect	−.238	.788	.020
Emotional maltreatment	.935	2.547	<.001
Exposure to domestic violence	1.76	5.814	.001
Child substance abuse–related defect	.423	1.526	.242
Number of child behavior problems:			
None*			
One	.502	1.652	.001
Two or more	.793	2.221	<.001
Age of investigated child:			
0–3 years*			
4–7 years	.098	1.103	.422
8–11 years	.220	1.246	.102
12–15 years	.362	1.436	.021
Age of youngest parent:			
30 years or younger*			
31–40 years	.054	1.055	.606
41–50 years	.228	1.256	.162
51+ years	.643	1.902	.297
Parent drug abuse	−.004	.996	.979
Parent criminal activity	.995	2.703	<.001
Parent cognitive impairment	.348	1.416	.072
Few social supports	.513	1.671	<.001
Caregiver maltreated as child	.532	1.702	<.001
Parent alcohol abuse	.641	1.898	<.001

Note.—Asterisks mark reference variables. Final model: $\chi^2 = 527.05$ (df = 29), $p < .001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.225$.

Table 5

Effect of Aboriginal Status on Placement as Each Block of Variables Is Added to the Multivariate Model

Block	χ^2 for Block	Adjusted Odds Ratio for Aboriginal Status	Significance of Aboriginal Status (*p*-value)
Aboriginal status (vs. Caucasian)	21.33 (1)***	2.33	<.001
Family characteristics	93.87 (8)***	1.80	.002
Maltreatment characteristics	106.22 (7)***	1.38	.108
Child factors	43.29 (6)***	1.24	.312
Parent factors	40.97 (9)***	1.08	.739

Note.—Degrees of freedom are in parentheses.
*** $p < .001$.

senting primary form of maltreatment, previous case openings, and substantiation status ($p = .108$). The inclusion of child variables in the fourth block and parent factors in the fifth block further reduces the estimated effect of Aboriginal status on the odds of placement.[10]

To determine whether placement differences could be mediated specifically by maltreatment characteristics, two ancillary analyses were conducted. As in previous analyses, child Aboriginal status and family socioeconomic factors are entered as the first and second blocks, respectively. However, one model enters child factors as the third block instead of maltreatment characteristics. Another enters parent factors as the third block. The coefficient attached to Aboriginal status remains statistically significant when socioeconomic and child factors are considered (odds ratio = 1.53, $p = .031$). However, the results suggest that the combination of socioeconomic and parent factors renders the coefficient statistically nonsignificant. Accordingly, it appears that different combinations of variables may account for the difference in rate of child welfare placement between Aboriginal and Caucasian children.

Table 6 presents the estimated effect of each variable on the odds of child welfare placement. The model reveals that the odds of child welfare placement are statistically significantly higher when maltreatment is substantiated. It is also higher among two-parent blended and single-parent families, families with two or more moves in the year prior to survey, and families with a part-time income source (vs. full time). Children with two or more child behavioral concerns are estimated to be three times more likely to be placed. The odds of placement are statistically significantly higher among cases with suspected or confirmed parent criminal activity, cognitive impairment, alcohol concerns, or parent history of maltreatment as a child. Cases involving sexual abuse and

Table 6

Estimated Effect of Maltreatment and Child and Family Characteristics on the Odds of Child Welfare Placement ($N = 2,891$)

Variable	Coefficient	Effect on the Odds	*p*-Value
Aboriginal status:			
Caucasian*			
Aboriginal	.075	1.078	.739
Source of income:			
Full-time employment*			
Part-time employment	.615	1.849	.043
Benefits	.267	1.306	.297
Other	−.857	.425	.139
Unsafe housing	.529	1.697	.066
Family moves in year prior to survey:			
No moves*			
One move	.421	1.524	.064
Two or more moves	1.12	3.057	<.001
Family structure:			
Two-parent biological*			
Two-parent blended	.581	1.787	.046
Single parent	.734	2.083	.004
Previous case opening (for child)	.189	1.208	.339
Case substantiation status:			
Unsubstantiated*			
Suspected	.595	1.81	.081
Substantiated	1.629	5.10	.000
Primary form of maltreatment:			
Physical abuse*			
Sexual abuse	−.799	.450	.053
Neglect	−.244	.783	.262
Emotional maltreatment	−.639	.528	.061
Exposure to domestic violence	−1.42	.241	.002
Child substance abuse–related defect	.075	1.078	.845
Number of child behavior problems:			
None*			
One	.469	1.598	.070
Two or more	1.22	3.384	<.001
Child age category:			
0–3 years*			
4–7 years	−.521	.594	.064
8–11 years	−.323	.724	.277
12–15 years	−.125	.882	.708
Age of youngest parent:			
30 years or younger*			
31–40 years	.367	1.443	.117
41–50 years	.441	1.555	.213
51+ years	.880	2.411	.319
Parent drug abuse	−.138	.871	.587
Parent criminal activity	.573	1.773	.025
Parent cognitive impairment	.891	2.438	.001
Few social supports	.331	1.393	.075
Caregiver maltreated as child	.400	1.492	.039
Parent alcohol abuse	.431	1.539	.052

Note.—Asterisks mark reference variables. Final model: $\chi^2 = 305.684$ (df = 31), $p < .001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.280$.

family violence are statistically significantly less likely (than cases involving physical abuse) to be placed.

Reanalysis of the data excluding number of moves and unsafe housing from the second block of factors yields a similar pattern of findings for out-of-home placement; that is, Aboriginal children are not statistically significantly more likely to be placed in out-of-home care when all blocks of variables are added to the model (odds ratio = 1.17, $p = .387$).

Discussion

This article examines factors that may explain the higher rates of case substantiation and child welfare placement for Aboriginal children. As the CIS-98 documents, there is an extremely high rate of hardship among Aboriginal families in the child welfare system. Compared to Caucasian families, Aboriginal families have statistically significantly less stable housing, greater dependence on social assistance, younger parents, more parents who were maltreated as children, and higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse. They are more likely to be investigated for neglect or emotional maltreatment.

The results of this study suggest that the disproportionate presence of risk factors among Aboriginal families contributes significantly to decisions regarding case substantiation and out-of-home placement. Higher rates of placement among Aboriginal children are statistically explained by a combination of family, child, caregiver, and maltreatment characteristics.

These blocks of factors also account for higher rates of substantiation among Aboriginal as compared to Caucasian children in the model including number of moves and unsafe housing. However, there may be limitations in the extent to which these findings can be generalized. Aboriginal status continues to play a statistically significant role in substantiation decisions when number of moves and unsafe housing are excluded from the model. This difference between the analyses may be indicative of a selection bias. That is, the subsample used in the first analysis may not be representative of the larger sample (i.e., cases are not missing at random). Alternatively, it is also possible that the significance of Aboriginal status in the second model may be attributed to the failure to control for socioeconomic disadvantage. Both the number of moves and unsafe housing are statistically significant determinants of substantiation status, and both are statistically more likely to occur among Aboriginal families. Thus, some of the variance attributed to Aboriginal status may be related to ethnoracial differences in socioeconomic disadvantage.

Overall, the findings suggest that worker decisions are not as strongly influenced by ethnoracial status as rates of overrepresentation may in-

dicate. This overrepresentation appears to be related to a combination of factors that reflect the multiple disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal families.

The limitations of the data must be considered in interpreting these findings. The CIS-98 data are collected directly from investigating child welfare workers. The accuracy of their ratings cannot be independently verified. The reports may be biased by misperceptions about Aboriginal families. This is a particularly difficult issue in interpreting the strong relationship between substantiation decisions and such parent concerns as alcohol abuse. While substance abuse is a well-documented problem in a number of Aboriginal communities (Health Canada 1999), the stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples as alcohol abusers may lead to an overestimation of the problem. Overestimation of substance abuse problems has been noted in cases involving neglect, the form of maltreatment that characterizes 58 percent of the Aboriginal children in this sample. For example, in a sample of families under child protection services supervision, Barbara Rittner (2002) finds no evidence of substance abuse in 22 percent of cases in which workers had noted substance abuse problems and subsequent court-ordered evaluations were conducted. While Rittner's study did not examine Aboriginal families specifically, it suggests that the accuracy of worker judgments about the characteristics of families and caregivers cannot be assumed.

Given the large influence of parent functioning concerns in the current study, some efforts were devoted to examining whether study findings are influenced by bias regarding these parent variables (see n. 9). Since suspected and confirmed ratings for parent functioning concerns are collapsed, it is possible that findings are driven by suspected concerns, which may be more influenced by worker impressions and bias than the confirmed category. Multivariate analyses were rerun to examine separately the effects of suspected and confirmed parent concerns on substantiation status and placement. Results suggest that, with the exception of cognitive impairment, suspected and confirmed categories for each parent concern have similar effects on the odds. To the extent that confirmed concerns may be considered valid, these findings suggest that effects of parent functioning variables reflect differences in the experiences of Aboriginal and Caucasian parents rather than biased perceptions of workers. Again, however, even in the case of confirmed parent concerns, it is possible that concerns investigated or documented in files may be influenced by bias or racial stereotypes.

Notwithstanding the possible biases, the findings are consistent with previous studies that find that the overrepresentation of minority children in the child welfare system can be partially explained by higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage and by related problems. The larger number of child and family characteristics tracked by the CIS-98

contributes to research by identifying additional risk factors, such as substance abuse and parent history of maltreatment during childhood, that appear to contribute further to this overrepresentation.

A somewhat surprising finding is that while parent characteristics appear to weigh heavily in substantiation and placement decisions, few child characteristics are significantly related to these decisions. Although they are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care, the Aboriginal children in the CIS-98 study are not more likely than Caucasian children to have emotional or physical harm related to maltreatment. The greater influence of parent over child functioning factors is consistent with the findings of Diane DePanfilis and Maria Scannapieco (1994). Parent functioning difficulties are hypothesized to compromise both the affected parent's ability to cope with current and future difficulties and the ability to protect the child from future maltreatment (Zuravin and DePanfilis 1997).

Conclusion

This analysis of the CIS-98 substantiation and placement data for Aboriginal children suggests that a complex set of factors underlies the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the Canadian child welfare system. Higher rates of maltreatment substantiation and out-of-home placement appear to be related to the disproportionate presence of risk factors among Aboriginal families. It is likely that the high rates of parents' own histories of childhood abuse contribute to the complexity of the problems facing Aboriginal communities; experience of abuse, particularly in residential schools, might undermine the capacity of the present generation of parents. The multiple disadvantages and challenges documented among Aboriginal families place Aboriginal children at higher risk for future maltreatment.

The factors that lead to this overrepresentation are problems well beyond the child welfare system. While shifting control of child welfare services to Aboriginal communities should help in the development of services that are more appropriately geared to the needs of Aboriginal children and families, a significant decrease in admission rates may not occur until resources are allocated to address social problems that undermine parents' abilities to care adequately for their children. In order to correct the effects of an Aboriginal history of colonization and the forced removal of children, a comprehensive set of measures must address the social problems that these communities inherit.

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Notes

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1. The term "Aboriginal" includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. "First Nations" is a term that came into common usage in Canada in the 1970s to replace the word "Indian" and describes all the Aboriginal people in Canada who are not Inuit or Métis.

2. There are nearly 2,300 reserves in Canada. The term "reserve" refers to land set aside by the federal government for the use and occupancy of an Indian group or band. Under the terms of the Indian Act (1876), Canadian federal legislation outlines the obligations of the federal government and regulates the management of Indian reserve lands. The act requires the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to manage certain money belonging to First Nations and Indian lands and to approve or disallow First Nations bylaws. Canadian reserves differ from reservations in the United States. Reservations are generally granted more self-government powers, are larger in geographic area, and are defined by treaty arrangements. Reservations in the United States have tribal courts and much more control over economic and social policies.

3. National statistics on placement in out-of-home care are available only for First Nations

children living on reserve. There is currently insufficient information to provide national estimates of the proportion of Métis, Inuit, and off-reserve First Nations children placed in out-of-home care.

4. Aboriginal people may be "status" or "nonstatus." "Status" refers to an individual's legal status as an Indian, as defined by the Indian Act (1876). "Nonstatus" refers to Aboriginal persons who are not registered as Indian under the Indian Act, either because their ancestors were never registered or because Indian status was lost under former provisions of the Indian Act.

5. The term "band" refers to a group of First Nations people for whom lands have been set apart and money is held by the Crown. There are 551 bands in Canada. Each has a governing council that consists of one or more chiefs and several councillors.

6. In regard to slow implementation, the province of Ontario, e.g., delegated three northern First Nations agencies in the 1980s, but this authority has not been delegated to any new agencies since then. An example of the constraints in provincial statutes and regulations is that adoption orders are made by provincial courts that do not necessarily recognize the open adoption arrangements customary in some Aboriginal communities. The federal government, the primary source of funding for on-reserve services, uses a funding formula that covers children placed in out-of-home care but does not cover alternative in-home family support services.

7. The CIS-98 includes information regarding the ethnoracial heritage of caregivers living with the child. Ethnoracial information is not available for caregivers living outside of the family home. In this study, children are classified as Aboriginal if either biological parent is Aboriginal. If neither biological parent was Aboriginal and one parent was from a visible minority, the child is classified as being from a visible minority. Children are classified as Caucasian if the available ethnoracial information indicates that neither parent was Aboriginal or from a visible minority.

8. Two variables accounted for 1,203 of the 1,504 missing cases: number of moves in the year prior to survey and housing safety. Despite the number of missing cases, these variables were retained in the models because of their statistically significant effect on the odds of substantiation and placement. Given the large number of missing cases, analyses were rerun without these two variables.

9. Since parent concerns are rated as suspected by child welfare workers, these concerns may involve greater worker discretion and potential bias than confirmed cases. Multivariate analyses were also conducted with three levels of parent concern variables (not noted, suspected, and confirmed). With the exception of cognitive impairment, suspected and confirmed caregiver concerns have similar effects on the odds of substantiation and placement. Suspected cognitive impairment significantly increases the odds of substantiation and placement, but confirmed cognitive impairment has no significant effect.

10. Multivariate analyses are also run with informal placement excluded (137 cases). Aboriginal status is no longer significant once child and parent factors are added to the model.