Memento

Study Overview

Visible-Minority Children

Are Visible-Minority Children Overrepresented in Montreal's Child Protection Services System?

Results of a study comparing reporting of visible-minority and non-visible-minority children

Definitions

Visible minority. The term "visible minority" (VM) refers to a national minority whose members are more likely than others to be subjected to systemic discrimination on the basis of their physical appearance (e.g., skin colour) or certain easily recognizable cultural characteristics (e.g., religious signs) [1, 2]. Canada's Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour" [3]. Blacks, Arabs and Asians are among the categories designated as VMs.

Disproportionate representation. Relative proportion of any given VM group in the child protection services (CPS) system that does not reflect its demographic weight in the general population [4].

Background

It is well known that visible-minority children are disproportionately represented in the CPS system. Research results in the U.S.A. underscore the overrepresentation of African American children in that country's CPS system [5–7]. In Canada, similar findings have been made with respect to Aboriginal children [8, 9], although they are not recognized as a visible minority under the law.

> **In Montreal, VM children make up an increasingly larger proportion of CPS systems clientele.**

In Montreal, VM children make up an increasingly larger proportion of CPS systems clientele. The few studies on the subject indicate that children of Haitian origin, for instance, are overrepresented in the system [10, 11].

There is no consensus on why VM children are overrepresented in the CPS system. Researchers suggest that a combination of individual, family and community risk factors, bias in reporting and decision making, and a lack of culturally appropriate services [12–14] may be involved. Further studies are needed for a better understanding of the problem.
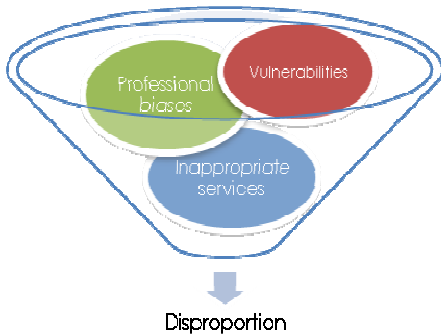
Objectives, questions and research methods

Chantal Lavergne (Centre jeunesse de Montréal-Institut universitaire), Sarah Dufour (Université de Montréal) and two of their colleagues conducted a study to compare the situations of non-VM children, Black children and other VM children who were assessed by Montreal CPS agencies. Clinical and administrative data from computer records on 3,918 children who were reported to and assessed by the CJM-IU or the Batshaw Youth and Family Centres child protection services between July 2007 and July 2008 were analysed. Four questions were examined in depth:

○ Are VM children over- or underrepresented in Montreal's CPS system ?

○ Are the individual and family characteristics of VM children in the Montreal CPS system different from those of other children ?

○ Are the characteristics of reports on VM children different from those of reports on non-VM children ?

○ Do VM children receive different protection services from other children ?

The disparity index [see reference 4 for further details] was calculated to assess the disproportionate representation of the three ethnocultural groups at three stages in the CPS system: reporting, need for protection and placement (question 1). The children from the three groups were then compared with respect to variables related to their individual or family characteristics, their reports and the protection services they received (questions 2, 3, 4).

In order to assess disproportionate representation of VM children, the researchers compared the situation of Black , other VM and non-VM children investigated by Montreal's CPS system.

Results

1. Are VM children over- or underrepresented in Montreal's CPS system ?

Relative probabilities of ethnocultural groups being in Montreal CPS system compared with their representation in the general population, at three stages

Stages	Non-VM	Black *Caribbean and Africa*	Other minorities *Southern and East Asian, Arab, etc.*
Reporting *Citizen or professional concerns about possible maltreatment or serious behavioural problems*	0.89	1.96	0.72
In need of protective services *Decision made to keep file open following assessment*	1.06	1.77	0.62
Placement *Child placed with adults outside of home*	1.40	1.64	0.44

The results show that Black children are almost twice as likely as other children to be reported, to be assessed as in need of protective services and to be placed. However, these rates decline at each stage of the process. In contrast, the disparity index for non-VM children increases over the course of the service trajectory, but still remains lower than for Black children. Of all children in the system, those from other visible minorities are the least likely to receive protective services and their underrepresentation tends to increase at each stage along the service trajectory.

2. Are the individual and family characteristics of VM children in the Montreal CPS system different from those of other children?

Individual and family characteristics of children reported to Montreal protection services, by ethnocultural group

Individual and family characteristics	Non-VM (*n* = 2,294)	Black (*n* = 798)	Other minorities (*n* = 826)
Recurrence *At least one substantiated report in last 5 years*	**33%**	29%	28%
Parents with at least one risk factor *Such as alcohol or drug abuse, family violence, mental or physical health problems, or intellectual disability*	**53%**	43%	49%
Mother's youth (≤ 20) at child's birth	**17%**	15%	10%
Number of children in family			
One child	**36%**	29%	30%
Two children	32%	30%	32%
Three or more children	32%	**42%**	**38%**
Single-parent family	**73%**	**72%**	55%

The results suggest that the characteristics of VM children and families are more favourable than those of non-VM children. In particular, non-VM children are more likely to have been the subject of a substantiated report in last 5 years, their parents are more likely to have at least one risk factor, and their mothers are more likely to have given birth before the age of 21. A larger proportion of single-child families is also seen among non-VM children than among VM children (Black and other), who, in contrast, are more likely to live in families with three or more children. Last, both Black children and non-VM children are more likely than other VM children to live in a single-parent family.

3. Are the characteristics of reports on VM children different from those of reports on non-VM children?

Report characteristics, by ethnocultural group

Report characteristics	Non-VM (n = 2,294)	Black (n = 798)	Other minorities (n = 826)
Source			
Citizen	**25%**	17%	15%
Professional	75%	**83%**	**85%**
Reasons			
Neglect/Abandonment	25%	25%	17%
Mistreatment/Physical abuse	12%	**29%**	**23%**
Harsh discipline	*10%*	*21%*	*16%*
Physical injury	*15%*	*29%*	*28%*
Sexual abuse	10%	5%	9%
Serious behavioural problems	10%	7%	6%
Psychological abuse	8%	11%	11%
Co-occurrence	35%	22%	34%

The results indicate that regardless of their ethnocultural group, children are most often reported by the members of various professional groups: social services, schools, daycares, hospitals and police forces. Ordinary citizens are more likely to report non-VM children than VM (Black or other) children. On the other hand, professionals are more like to report VM children. The biggest difference with respect to reasons for reports concerns physical abuse, which is often an indication of harsh discipline. This kind of abuse is more often reported for VM (Black or other) children than for non-VM children. Physical injuries are also more commonly reported among VM than among non-VM youngsters. Since no information is available about the seriousness of these injuries, however, caution must be exercised in interpreting this finding.

4. Do VM children receive different protection services from other children?

Characteristics of protection services, by ethnocultural group

Characteristics of protection services	Non-VM (*n* = 2,294)	Black (*n* = 798)	Other minorities (*n* = 826)
Substantiation rate *Cases substantiated ÷ cases assessed X 100*	80%	78%	79%
In need of protective services *Files kept open following assessment*	**62%**	55%	52%
Types of measures			
Voluntary	45%	40%	45%
Court-ordered	55%	60%	55%
Placement *Child placed with adults outside home*	**32%**	29%	24%

There is no significant difference between groups with respect to substantiation rates. However, among substantiated cases, non-VM children are more likely than VM (Black or other) to require protective services. Further analysis showed that when the seriousness of the situation is controlled for, the rate of need for protective services is similar between the groups. This suggests that the characteristics of a situation play a bigger role than a child's ethnocultural group in decision making. Data analysis did not reveal any significant difference in types of measures (voluntary or court-ordered). Finally, the results show that non-VM children are more likely than VM children (Black or other) to be placed outside the home.

Conclusion

Disproportionate representation varied markedly at different stages in the service trajectory, as well as in the report profile of children and their families:

- Black children are more likely to receive child protection services in Montreal.

- Black children are more overrepresented at the reporting stage than further on in the system.

- Non-VM children reported to the Director of Youth Protection more often live in high-risk situations than VM (Black or other) children, who are more often in low-risk situations.

- Children of all ethnocultural backgrounds are more often reported by professionals.

- Professionals proportionnally report more VM (Black or other) children. Ordinary citizens more often report non-VM children.

- A larger proportion of reports on VM (Black or other) children concern physical harm, and most are related to different disciplinary or childrearing methods from those generally used by the majority culture.

In short, the professionals and ethnocultural minorities seem to define physical harm differently. These findings tend to confirm that there is a negative bias against Black children and their parents in the identification and reporting of endangerment.

Actions to deal with the matter of disproportionate representation of certain visibile minorities, especially at the threshold of the child protection system should target disparities in access to culturally appropriate support and assistance, risk assessment and decision making by people who make reports.

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