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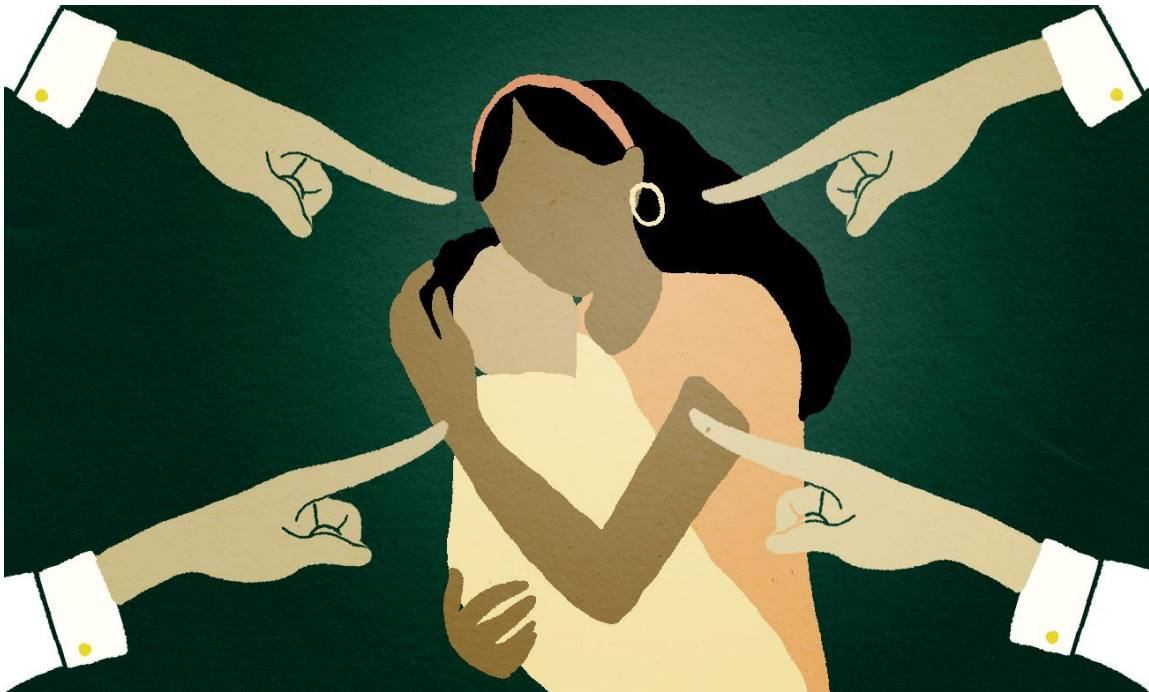
YOUTH & FAMILY NEWS

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More Than A Third of Children Experience CPS Investigations For Abuse And Neglect Before 18, New Estimates For Large Counties Show

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD



According to estimates from a recent study, investigations into child abuse and neglect are more common than previously thought. Illustration by Christine Ongjoco.

Following an international uprising over the breadth and depth of institutional racism and systemic injustice, a new peer-reviewed study released in a prominent scientific journal this month estimated child protection investigations to be far more common than previously thought — especially for [children of color](#).

In 11 of the 20 large counties studied, Black children had risks of investigation that exceeded 50%. In Maricopa County, Ariz. (Phoenix) more than 60% of Black children's homes could be scrutinized by abuse and neglect investigators.

And the heightened risk continues at later stages in child welfare cases — in some counties, more than one in ten Indigenous children could be removed from their parent's home and taken into foster care, the new findings show.

“These are pretty remarkable rates, much over what anyone would have envisioned the child welfare system should be doing,” said study author Frank Edwards, a sociologist at Rutgers University’s School of Criminal Justice.

Across all 20 large counties studied, 35% of children could be investigated by Child Protective Services by age 18, estimates by Edwards and his three co-authors indicate. Individual county estimates ranged from around 16% in Washington’s King County, to over 44% in Michigan’s Wayne County. In New York City, and the Fort Lauderdale, San Antonio and Los Angeles regions, as many as four or five children out of 10 could expect a knock on the door of their family home from a civil servant responding to a child abuse or neglect allegation.

The [study](#) published online last week by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences also found racial disparities varied the further into the foster care system that the children proceeded: Nearly 10% of kids in Maricopa County, Arizona — including nearly 20% of all Black children, and over 15% of the county’s American Indian and Alaskan Native children — may not simply have their family investigated, but also be removed from home and enter foster care before turning 18. Those were the highest rates of any county measured.

By comparison, fewer than 4% of Cook County, Illinois children can expect that outcome, with all five racial groups studied below 5%.



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The findings underscore what previous research and some child welfare professionals have long asserted: Practices vary widely in these high-stakes, locally run systems, resulting in vastly different outcomes for kids and their families.

For example, the counties with the highest percentage of “confirmed victims” were not the same counties that had the highest percentages of kids in foster care.

The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect housed at Cornell University provides some of the data scholars use to estimate what’s called the “cumulative risk” or “lifetime exposure” of children with the child welfare system. This growing field of inquiry relies on anonymized national or local datasets that can categorize system-involved children in different ways, explained Christopher Wildeman, co-director of the archive. Thus the authors from Duke and Rutgers acknowledge their estimates could be inflated to a limited extent by duplicate records, for example, or by children listed in maltreatment databases because they were on probation, and not necessarily in the child welfare system.

Wildeman also said scholars still need to learn more about why there’s so much variation across counties: Is there more serious maltreatment in some counties than others, or is it simply that systems respond to reports in wildly different ways?

“At the county level, we don’t have a good handle on that at this point,” he said.

A peer-reviewed study published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences looked at child welfare investigations in 20 large counties across the United States. Graph courtesy of the National Academy of Sciences.

Arizona's Department of Child Safety is responsible for child neglect and abuse investigations statewide, including in Maricopa County with some of the highest racial disparities. A spokesperson said the agency had not had an opportunity to closely review the Proceedings study. But he noted the actual maltreatment records from which long-term estimates were derived, covering the years 2014 to 2018, "spanned a time in Arizona history that experienced the highest child removal rates ever."

"Since that time, we have made vast systemic improvements, including reducing entries into care and reducing our out-of-home care population by 24%," said Darren DaRonco, a public information officer with the agency. DaRonco said his Department of Child Safety is "working with African American families and community advocates to address disproportionality in our system," adding: "As a department, we are committed to ensuring there is no racial bias in our practice while continuously improving our services and working to strengthen all Arizona families."

In the sprawling and diverse Middlesex County west of Boston — home to more than 300,000 children — 26.5% of Black children, and similar percentages of Latino and American Indian children, were estimated to be "confirmed victims" of maltreatment at some point in their first 18 years. Like in Arizona, a spokesperson for the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families acknowledged that public agencies, and the larger child welfare field, had a responsibility to address those disparities.

"Families of color have been historically overrepresented on child welfare cases nationwide and it is incumbent on all partners in this work to take action so that children whose safety is at risk receive appropriate services and support," said the department's Director of Public Affairs Andrea Grossman. "Although federal data shows Massachusetts victimization rates have gone down across races and ethnicities since 2016, there is more work to be done."

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Laws for mandated reporting and evidence standards for substantiating maltreatment allegations vary from state to state. That could also contribute to different reporting rates as well, something that is mostly beyond the control of local child welfare agencies.

Previous research of national and statewide databases had found lower prevalence rates for investigations — the most widely cited estimates are 37% or lower. But this new paper was one of only a few that has taken a more granular look at local operations in large counties, including some city-level data.

“Consistent with national data, the results documented the ubiquity of having a CPS investigation for US children, especially Black children,” wrote the four co-authors. “Although there was variation across jurisdictions in the percentage of children experiencing this event, risks were consistently high.”

Professor Edwards, who worked with foster youth in an emergency shelter in Texas before he entered academia, said the findings provide a “rich picture of the geography of where racial inequities in the child welfare system are happening,” and signal higher risk of CPS involvement for Black children in urban areas.

Note: This article was updated on October 14 after researchers disclosed that a coding error caused, in some cases, multiple investigations of the same child to be counted twice. The article, and accompanying chart, have been updated to reflect the corrected numbers.

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