

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 295 – Child Maltreatment: An Examination of Rural Counties and Reporting Inequities

Speaker 1 [00:00:09] Hi, everybody, welcome to inSocial Work. I'm Peter Sobota. Our podcast is getting a makeover. We'll be expanding our focus, our format and our website, among some other changes. And you'll see this all rolling out during the summer and the fall. In the meantime, here is a new episode that was recorded before we started this evolution.

Speaker 2 [00:00:31] Hello from Buffalo and welcome to inSocial Work. This is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. In this podcast, Dr. Brenda Smith examines the topic of inequities among states and counties and child maltreatment, reporting findings and implications from her research examining rural counties in child maltreatment report rates are discussed. Dr. Brenda Smith is associate professor and PhD program director at the University of Alabama School of Social Work. Her research focuses on social justice in the child welfare system and ways that organizational and policy contexts affect practice and child welfare and other human service settings. She was interviewed by Dr. Patricia Logan-Greene, associate professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

Speaker 4 [00:01:22] Hello, I am Patricia Logan-Greene and I am here today with Dr. Brenda Smith. Dr. Smith, you've studied a range of child welfare topics in your career. How did you get interested in inequities among states and counties in child maltreatment reporting?

Speaker 5 [00:01:39] Thanks, Dr. Logan-Greene. It's great to be here with you. And actually, it's an interesting story. It started a few years ago. I was looking at the new Kids Count data book that had just come out, and I was looking online at some of the maps associated with different indicators and looking at Alabama's map for child maltreatment reporting. And I familiar with the county maps in Alabama. I look at them a lot and I saw a familiar pattern in the child maltreatment reporting where certain counties with many risk factors were shaded a lighter color and other counties with more resources were darker. But I noticed that the counties with many risk factors were quoted as having lower child maltreatment rates.

Speaker 3 [00:02:30] And so my

Speaker 5 [00:02:31] first thought was, oh, my goodness, the person who made the maps made a mistake in the key and they got it reversed. And so I thought, oh, I better contact them and let them know. But before doing so, I checked the raw data and I saw that no. In fact, the map was perfectly correct, that the counties with many risk factors did have lower child maltreatment report rates. So that was just so intriguing to me. And it got me looking at nearby states, Mississippi and Georgia, to see if they had similar patterns. And I ultimately contacted the National Data Archive on child abuse and neglect to request county level data from all U.S. counties, including rural

Speaker 3 [00:03:19] counties and

Speaker 5 [00:03:21] the child maltreatment report rates. There's data available from the National Data Archives for counties with at least one thousand reports. That's very easy to get, but it's harder to get access to data from rural counties. But because I didn't need any individual level data and no identifying information, I

Speaker 3 [00:03:42] just wanted that aggregated report rates. I was able

Speaker 5 [00:03:46] to get the data and that started me off on many fun investigations.

Speaker 4 [00:03:51] So what have you done with that data?

Speaker 5 [00:03:53] Well, the first thing I did is a study involving four states in the south, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, because these

Speaker 3 [00:04:03] states had

Speaker 5 [00:04:04] counties similar to the ones I noticed on that kids count data map. They have rural counties with majority African-American populations. Most rural counties in the United States are majority white. Nearly all of them are. But there are a small number of counties in the south that are both rural and have majority African-American populations. And so I set out to analyze and compare counties in these four states. And I looked at the child maltreatment report rates for counties that were rural and majority African-American and had other classifications, rural majority, white, non-rural cetera. And I discovered that the kids count map wasn't a fluke, that despite the fact that rural majority African. Can counties in the South have many risk factors for child

Speaker 3 [00:05:04] maltreatment, very high

Speaker 5 [00:05:06] child poverty rates, high food insecurity, high infant mortality, low primary health care provider rates, low mental health provider rates, many risk factors despite these risk factors. They also have low child maltreatment report rates. And even when controlling for child poverty, which is a very strong risk factor for child maltreatment, they had lower child maltreatment report rates compared to other county types following that study. Some funders expressed interest in a national study. So I did a national study at the county level of child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:05:45] reporting and

Speaker 5 [00:05:46] identified counties that were rural and have majority populations of color. There are other counties that are majority African-American but are majority Latino X or a combination of different races and ethnicities that are majority populations of color.

Speaker 3 [00:06:05] And I did a

Speaker 5 [00:06:06] national study to determine whether rural counties with majority populations of color also

Speaker 3 [00:06:13] had lower

Speaker 5 [00:06:14] child maltreatment report rates compared to other

Speaker 3 [00:06:17] county types and found

Speaker 5 [00:06:18] that they did and that that effect was largely driven by the rural counties with majority African-American populations. And that study also found something new in the relationship between county level child poverty and child maltreatment

reporting. There's lots of research that demonstrates a positive association between child poverty at the county level and child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:06:44] reporting, which is true overall.

Speaker 5 [00:06:47] But among these counties that are rural, that have majority populations

Speaker 3 [00:06:52] of color, there's a

Speaker 5 [00:06:54] negative relationship between child poverty and child maltreatment.

Speaker 3 [00:06:58] Reporting that is,

Speaker 5 [00:06:59] the poorest counties have the lowest rates of child maltreatment reporting

Speaker 4 [00:07:07] for most listeners. They may know that poverty and child maltreatment are meant to be related. So tell us why it is that those would be inversely related. What does what does this mean?

Speaker 5 [00:07:19] Well, I think that the findings raise lots of questions that I'm currently not able to answer. But I think most of the times when I talk about this relationship, people think of three possible explanations. The first one that most people think of is that it's possible that in counties that are rural with majority African-American populations, that there are strong networks and social support. This follows on Carol Stack's research from the 1960s, where she found strong networks among African-American families. One explanation might be that there are strong networks of social support that are preventing child maltreatment in the counties. A second possible

Speaker 3 [00:08:07] explanation relates

Speaker 5 [00:08:08] to trust in state authorities or formal child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:08:14] intervention. The counties that

Speaker 5 [00:08:16] I'm talking about in the South have long histories of marginalization, discrimination and poor treatment from state authorities. These are some of the same counties where the original Tuskegee study was conducted. So there's good reason for residents of the counties to lack trust in formal authorities or state child welfare hotlines. So it could be that due to that

Speaker 3 [00:08:46] lack of trust, both

Speaker 5 [00:08:48] community residents and professionals are reluctant to place formal child maltreatment reports. And the third possible explanation focuses on the professionals, where usually professionals do file most child maltreatment reports.

Speaker 3 [00:09:04] So teachers, nurses, doctors. It could be that

Speaker 5 [00:09:08] the professionals in the communities I'm talking about realize that there are very few resources available to families in the communities,

Speaker 3 [00:09:18] and consequently they

Speaker 5 [00:09:21] feel reluctant to involve child welfare authorities because they fear

Speaker 3 [00:09:26] that there would be no

Speaker 5 [00:09:27] helpful resources available to the families anyway. As I mentioned, I don't know which of the explanations is the case, but there's certainly room for further research.

Speaker 2 [00:09:38] So just to clarify for the listeners, you

Speaker 4 [00:09:40] can't distinguish at this point whether or not

Speaker 5 [00:09:43] the different reporting rates that you're seeing across

Speaker 3 [00:09:44] types of counties reflect actual

Speaker 2 [00:09:46] differences in child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:09:48] rates versus the reporting

Speaker 5 [00:09:50] of child maltreatment rates. My research focuses only

Speaker 3 [00:09:54] on investigated

Speaker 5 [00:09:56] reports, and you raise a really important. In between the incidence of child maltreatment and official report rates, we don't have good measures of the incidence of child maltreatment. The best we have comes from the national incident study that's conducted periodically, but interviews wise people called sentinels who work in emergency rooms or schools, have contact with children.

Speaker 3 [00:10:24] And through those

Speaker 5 [00:10:24] interviews, the national incident study derives an estimate

Speaker 3 [00:10:28] of the

Speaker 5 [00:10:29] likely level of the incidence of child maltreatment. That incidence level is higher than official reports, and there's quite a bit of recognition that official child maltreatment reports are the so-called tip of the iceberg when it comes to child maltreatment. Those reports are nonetheless very important

Speaker 3 [00:10:49] because official reports

Speaker 5 [00:10:52] of child maltreatment have big consequences for families. That means there is going to be an investigator in their home, families can be separated, etc. So the official

Speaker 3 [00:11:02] reports are important.

Speaker 5 [00:11:04] It's important to distinguish them from the actual incidents. And when I was talking earlier about possible explanations for my findings, the explanations sort of

Speaker 3 [00:11:15] center on different

Speaker 5 [00:11:16] ideas

Speaker 3 [00:11:17] about how closely

Speaker 5 [00:11:19] the reports reflect the incidents.

Speaker 3 [00:11:21] So, for example, if the

Speaker 5 [00:11:22] explanation for the low reports is that social support networks

Speaker 3 [00:11:27] are preventing

Speaker 5 [00:11:28] child

Speaker 3 [00:11:29] maltreatment, that

Speaker 5 [00:11:30] explanation sort of trust that the report rates are close to the actual

Speaker 3 [00:11:35] incidence rate. But if an

Speaker 5 [00:11:37] explanation is that community members and professionals are reluctant to file

Speaker 3 [00:11:43] reports, that

Speaker 5 [00:11:44] explanation suggests that the incidence of child maltreatment could

Speaker 3 [00:11:48] be higher than it appears based on the formal

Speaker 5 [00:11:53] report

Speaker 3 [00:11:54] rates, which raises

Speaker 5 [00:11:55] new questions

Speaker 3 [00:11:56] about inequity and

Speaker 5 [00:11:58] meeting need.

Speaker 4 [00:12:00] Given these unknowns, tell us more about the implications of these findings.

Speaker 3 [00:12:04] Sure. I think there's

Speaker 5 [00:12:06] three primary

Speaker 3 [00:12:07] implications. First of all,

Speaker 5 [00:12:08] and this isn't a finding from this work, but it's sort of a

Speaker 3 [00:12:12] byproduct.

Speaker 5 [00:12:14] We generally think about rural counties in the US or rural areas. We think

Speaker 3 [00:12:19] about them

Speaker 5 [00:12:20] being predominantly

Speaker 3 [00:12:21] white. And we have

Speaker 5 [00:12:23] those thoughts for a good reason because most rural areas are

Speaker 3 [00:12:26] predominantly white. But as a

Speaker 5 [00:12:28] consequence of that generalization, the counties that don't fit that pattern, this small proportion of counties that are rural with majority populations of color can be forgotten or overlooked. And so a byproduct of this research is just simply to acknowledge that these rural areas exist, that all rural areas aren't the same. Secondly, I think that there's so much emphasis in child welfare for good reason on the disproportionate involvement of African-American children and families in the child welfare system. African-American families have in general higher report rates, higher investigation rates, higher substantiation rates and higher rates of out-of-home placement compared to white families.

Speaker 3 [00:13:17] And because we

Speaker 5 [00:13:20] worry about racial bias in the child welfare system

Speaker 3 [00:13:24] and the consequences

Speaker 5 [00:13:26] of that disproportionate over

Speaker 3 [00:13:28] involvement of the

Speaker 5 [00:13:29] child welfare system on African-American families, it can be easy to assume

Speaker 3 [00:13:35] that

Speaker 5 [00:13:36] all areas in the country with majority African-American populations also have over involvement of the child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:13:44] system. But this

Speaker 5 [00:13:45] research suggests that that assumption isn't

Speaker 3 [00:13:48] warranted.

Speaker 5 [00:13:49] And for any of the reasons I've mentioned or possibly

Speaker 3 [00:13:53] others, it's

Speaker 5 [00:13:54] important to be able to see that there are areas in the country with majority African-American populations that may be overlooked by the child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:14:03] system that may be

Speaker 5 [00:14:05] experiencing a different kind of bias or a different kind of inequity

Speaker 3 [00:14:10] that has been

Speaker 5 [00:14:11] sort of overlooked due

Speaker 3 [00:14:13] to the

Speaker 5 [00:14:14] important emphasis on this other bias, this other type of bias and inequity. And then finally, just this relationship between child poverty and child maltreatment, reporting to ponder how it could be that the counties with the highest child poverty rates, these rural counties with majority African-American populations with the highest child poverty rates would have the lowest child maltreatment. Reporting just underscores their questions related to social justice and meeting need and what may be contributing to what's going on and the possible neglect

Speaker 3 [00:14:56] of certain

Speaker 5 [00:14:58] regions of the country. We are certain communities,

Speaker 4 [00:15:02] what will you be working on next?

Speaker 5 [00:15:04] Sure. Well, one of the projects I hope to do next is some qualitative work in rural counties in the south.

Speaker 3 [00:15:12] I would like

Speaker 5 [00:15:13] to interview child welfare workers, professionals and community members to learn more about trust in the child welfare system,

Speaker 3 [00:15:22] perceptions

Speaker 5 [00:15:23] of resources available for families, networks of social

Speaker 3 [00:15:28] trust.

Speaker 5 [00:15:29] I think that it's going to take some qualitative work to begin understanding some of the interpretations of the findings I talked about. The other thing I'm working on is I'm still working with county level data creating indices of risk and protective factors at the county level, child maltreatment, risk and child maltreatment, protective factors so that it will be possible to identify counties in the country where, let's say, the level of child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:16:02] risk doesn't align

Speaker 5 [00:16:03] with child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:16:05] reporting or the

Speaker 5 [00:16:06] child maltreatment risk. Plus, protective factors don't align with child maltreatment.

Speaker 3 [00:16:11] Reporting what the

Speaker 5 [00:16:12] original studies I was telling you about, I sort of stumbled on this discovery about this area of me. But I think there could be other counties in the country where there is a misalignment between risk factors for child maltreatment

Speaker 3 [00:16:26] and child

Speaker 5 [00:16:27] maltreatment reporting, and it might be in other surprising

Speaker 3 [00:16:30] places. So I'm

Speaker 5 [00:16:32] creating these indices to

Speaker 3 [00:16:34] continue finding these

Speaker 5 [00:16:36] places where there's a mismatch.

Speaker 4 [00:16:38] Do you have any advice for students who are interested in addressing social justice in the child welfare system?

Speaker 5 [00:16:45] Yes. Thank you for asking. Well, first of all, I think the advice is just to keep at it. Don't give up, keep raising questions and following your intuition. I know in social work for good reason, and I do this myself. There's so many reasons to

Speaker 3 [00:17:05] support front line

Speaker 5 [00:17:06] child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:17:08] workers.

Speaker 5 [00:17:08] They're doing such difficult work under difficult conditions and they deserve support.

Speaker 3 [00:17:15] I think sometimes social work

Speaker 5 [00:17:18] researchers fear that it's not possible to both support frontline child welfare workers and be a critic of the child welfare system or do research that identifies challenges or problems in the child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:17:35] system.

Speaker 5 [00:17:35] I don't think that there is a problem there. I think that frontline child welfare workers

Speaker 3 [00:17:41] appreciate research

Speaker 5 [00:17:43] that helps to understand issues of racial bias, bias affecting low income families, issues related to fairness and justice and equity and adequacy. So I guess my advice is just keep asking the tough questions and holding the child welfare system to a high standard,

Speaker 3 [00:18:06] because both the

Speaker 5 [00:18:07] families involved with the child welfare system and the workforce need research that routes out the issues and the problems in the child welfare

Speaker 3 [00:18:16] system and helps us work

Speaker 5 [00:18:18] toward a fairer, more

Speaker 3 [00:18:20] just child

Speaker 5 [00:18:21] welfare system.

Speaker 4 [00:18:22] Dr. Smith, thank you so much for talking to us today about your research. Thanks.

Speaker 2 [00:18:32] You've been listening to Dr. Brenda Smith discuss her research on inequities among states and counties and child maltreatment reporting for more information on this episode, please visit our website at inSocialWork.org and please join us again at inSocialWork.org.