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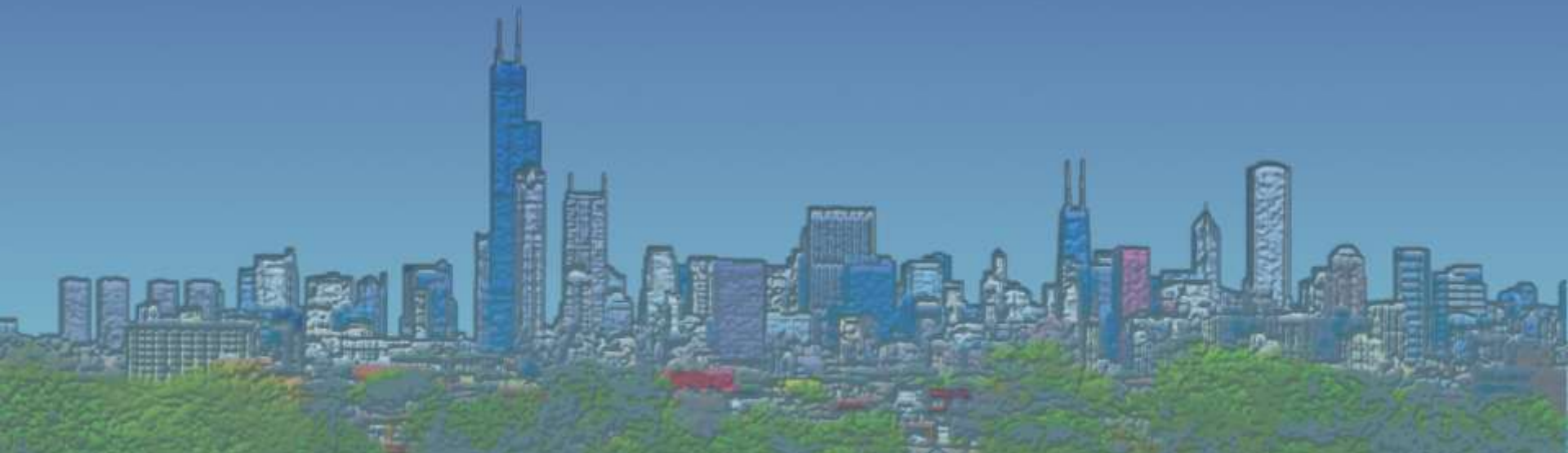
Child Welfare Research Collaborative



Advancing  
social,  
racial,  
economic  
justice.

**Racial Bias or Differential Risk?  
Deconstructing Racial Disparities in the Child Welfare  
System**

**Alan J. Dettlaff**



# Framing the Issue

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

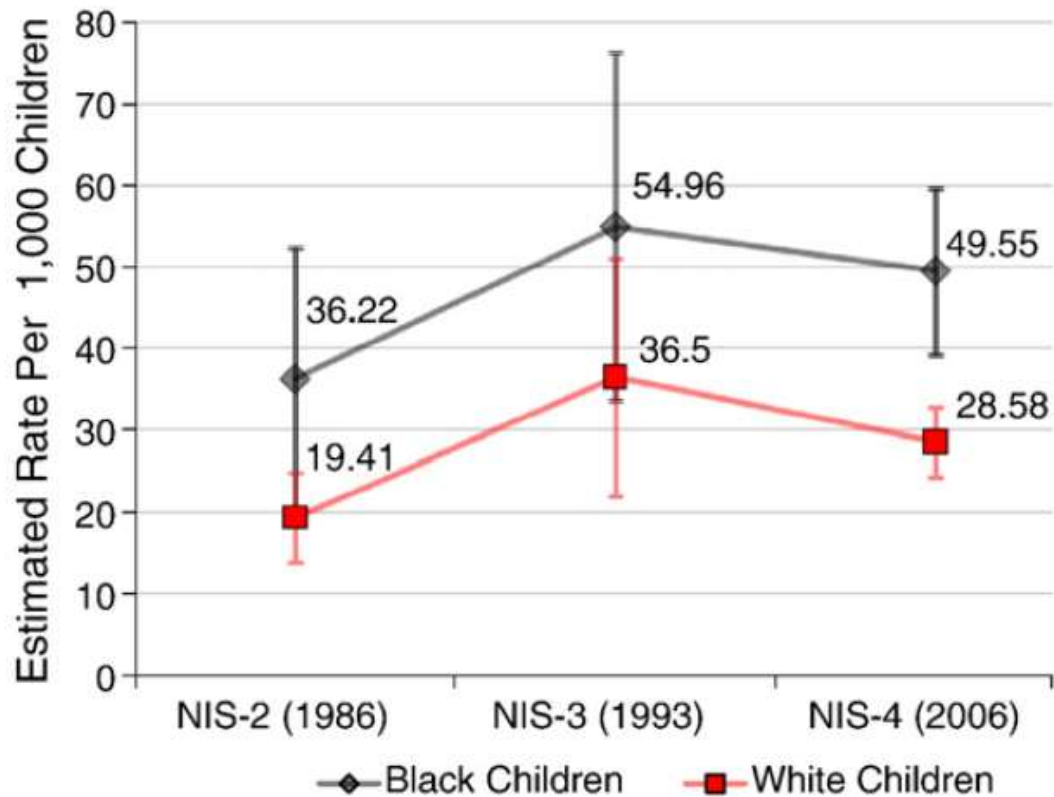
# Defining Disproportionality & Disparities

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

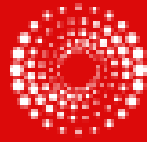
# Evolving Understanding

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

# Estimated Maltreatment Rates by Race



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



REUTERS

## No Racial Bias at Child Protective Services: Study

“Child abuse really is more common in African American than white homes, according to a new study that dismisses earlier claims of racial reporting bias in the child welfare system.”

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

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

# Texas Disparity Studies (2008 – 2011)

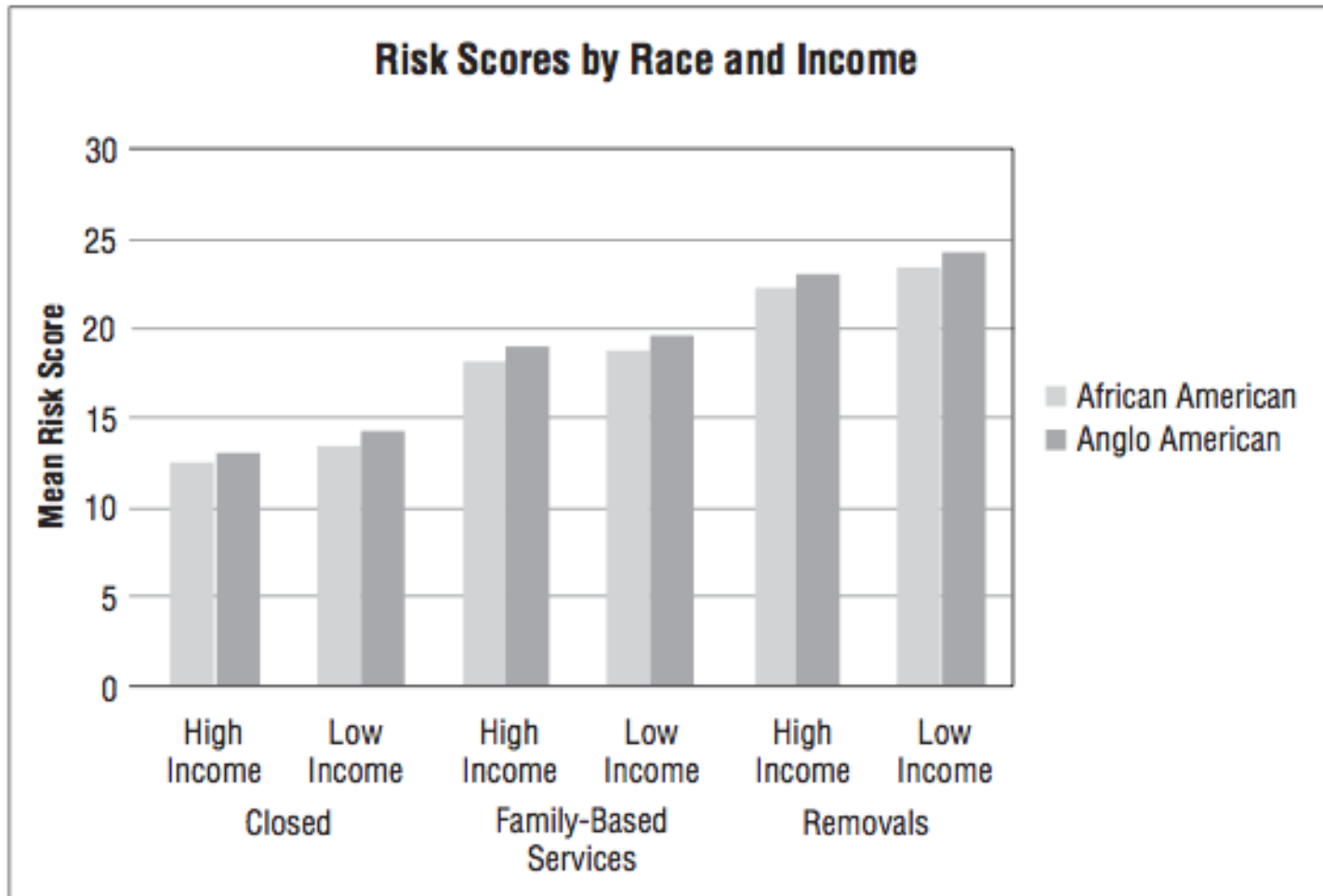
- Study of racial/ethnic disparities in the Texas child welfare system
- Focus on disparities at 2 decision points
  - Substantiation
  - Case disposition
    - Taking action on a case (close vs. service provision)
    - Service decision (family-based services vs. substitute care)

# Texas Disparity Studies (2008 – 2011)

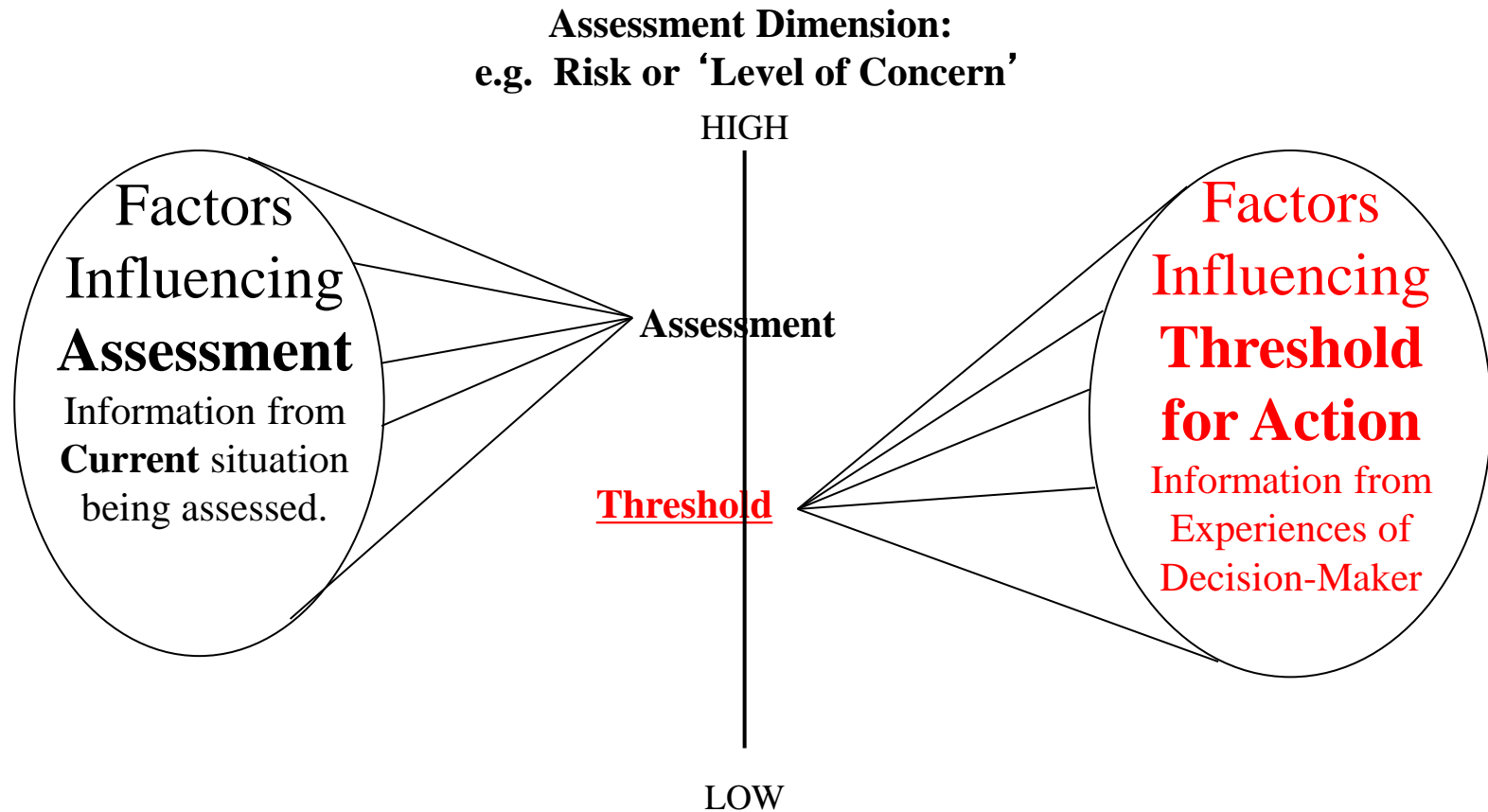
- Used logistic regression models to examine the impact of race on the likelihood of case decisions.
- When controlling for poverty and risk:
  - African American children were 15% more likely than White children to be involved in a substantiated case
  - *Among maltreated children*, African American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



# Texas Disparity Studies (2008 – 2011)



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



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

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

# Current and Emerging Understanding

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

# Contact Information

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