

Myths in Child Welfare

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Washington University in St. Louis



WashU



Center for Innovation in
Child Maltreatment Policy,
Research and Training

Brown School

DataSMART Project NICHD 1P50HD096719

Disclaimer: This is not my work alone. Many other people have contributed (see screenshot citation later)

Warning:

We've got one myth that's kind of complicated to address. We're getting that out of the way first.

It gets easier for the other myths....


Myth #1:

Black Children are Overreported to CPS Because of Racism Among Reporters and Inside of CPS*

**Even though CPS doesn't make a lot of reports to itself....*

We can look at the 2021 Hotline Report and Population Data for the USA

	A	B	C	D	E
1		CPS Rpts	Population	Rate/1000 Kids	Ratio B/W Rates
2	W	1,561,372	35,864,829	43.53	77.59 / 43.53
3	B	781,279	10,069,442	77.59	1.782227432

	NATIONAL DATA ARCHIVE ON NDACAN CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT
Dataset Number	Study Title
263	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2021

	KIDS COUNT DATA CENTER
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION	

This myth has gotten a lot of play. A lot of people believe the CPS system is badly racially biased.

You might possibly have noticed this...

Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity

The child welfare field has moved from acknowledging the problem of systemic racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity to formulating and implementing solutions. As jurisdictions and agencies evaluate their systems to identify where and how disproportionalities and disparities are occurring, they are increasingly seeking practices that use an antiracist approach and show promise for their own populations.

This bulletin provides a brief overview on the issue of racial disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system and the factors that contribute to the problem. It then describes practices that child welfare caseworkers, administrators, program managers, and policymakers can implement to address these issues in general and at specific decision-making points along the child welfare continuum.

WHAT'S INSIDE

The problem of racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare

Contributing factors to racial disproportionality and disparity

Systemwide strategies to address racial disproportionality and disparity

Casework strategies to address racial disproportionality and disparity

Conclusion

References

“The child welfare field has moved from acknowledging the problem of systemic racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity to formulating and implementing solutions.” (p.1)

“Racial disparities occur at nearly every major decision-making point along the child welfare continuum. (p.3)”

Race and Bias in Child Maltreatment Diagnosis and Reporting ✓

Vincent J. Palusci, MD, MS, FAAP ✉; Ann S. Botash, MD, FAAP

“It happens at every level”
idea again

“...cases with Black children are more likely to be accepted for investigation, be confirmed, be brought to court, result in removal of the children from their families for longer periods of time, and take longer to be closed, possibly related to surveillance bias. Multiple points in this process are subject to bias...”



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October 13, 2022 **ARTICLE**

Racial Discrimination in Child Welfare Is a Human Rights Violation—Let's Talk About It That Way

Public acknowledgement of the discriminatory harms perpetrated by the child welfare system is long overdue.

By Shereen A. White and Stephanie Persson

Share:



What Does Racial
Discrimination in the U.S....



What Role Does the Federal
Government Play?

The Trauma of Removal and
Child Welfare Involvement

What Is the United Nation's
Committee on the Eliminati...

What Did the United Nations
Committee Have to Say?



YOUTH SERVICES INSIDER

United Nations Panel Presses Biden Officials on Racial Discrimination in Child Welfare

BY [MICHAEL FITZGERALD](#)

FILED 8/18/2022 4:13PM

A ccusations of racism in the U.S. child welfare system reached the United Nations this month, with American officials pressed on why so many Black families are torn apart by foster care.

During a public hearing Friday in Geneva, Switzerland, the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination confronted officials with the Biden administration.

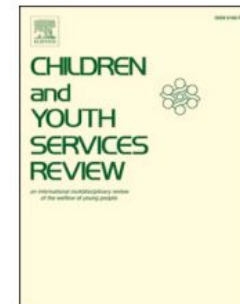
Speaking in French, Ibrahima Guissé, a [sociologist](#) at the University of Geneva and one of 18 independent experts elected to the committee, singled out three federal laws for review, suggesting they perpetuate racism against Black children and families: The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, and 1997's Adoption and Safe Families Act.



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth



Interrogating the carceral state: Re-envisioning social work's role in systems serving children and youth

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^c College of Social Work, University of Utah, United States

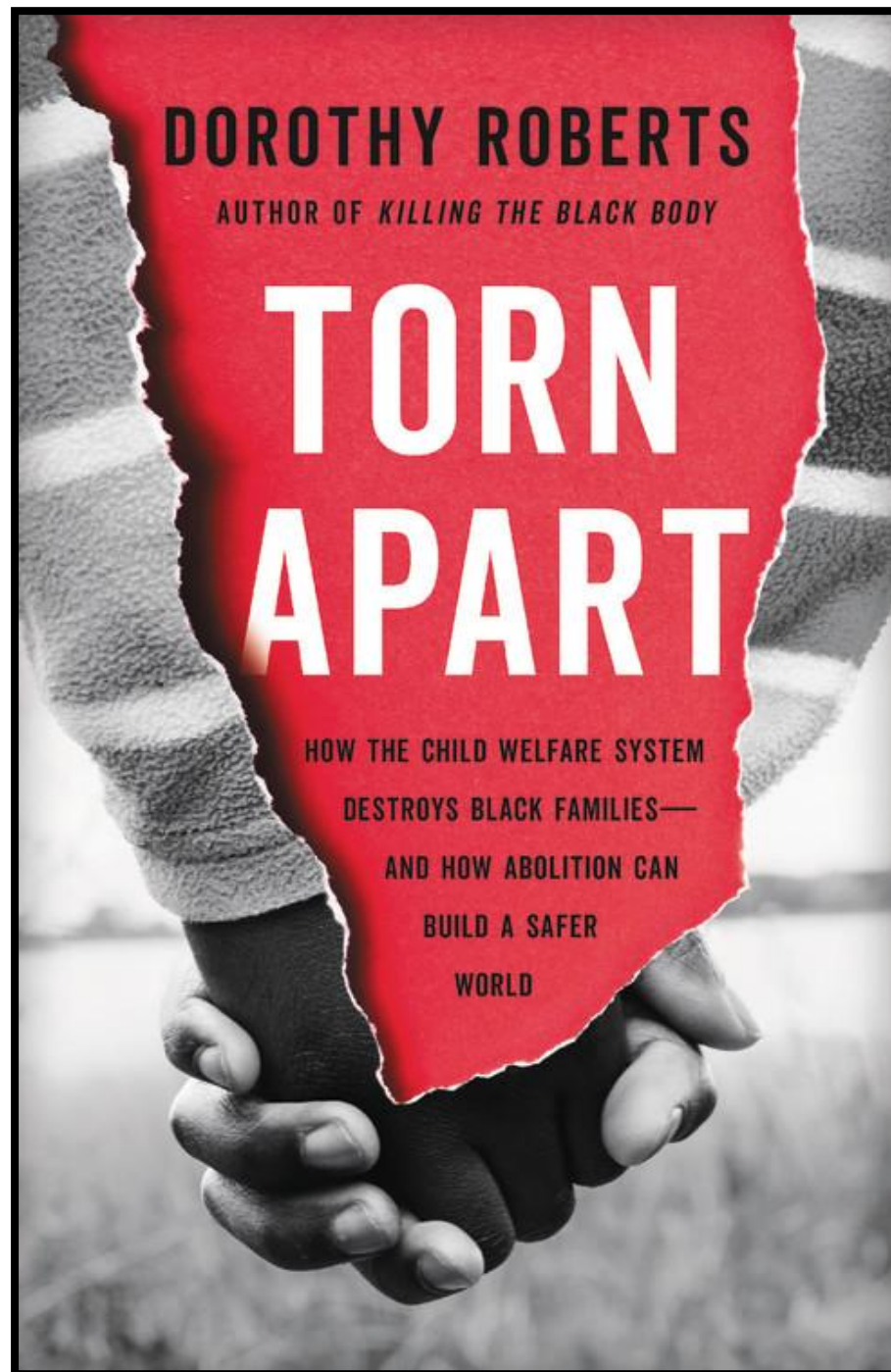
ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Carceral state
Social work
Child welfare
Juvenile justice
School policing

ABSTRACT

This paper traces social work's historical and current relationships with three major child and youth serving carceral systems in the United States—the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, and school policing. In each section, we examine the racialized origins of these systems and the current practices that perpetuate racial harm, particularly for Black children, youth and families. Given this knowledge, we consider if social work's stated professional values to oppose racism, injustice, and oppression can exist alongside the carceral practices that these systems perpetuate. The article concludes with critical questions and guidance for the future of the profession.



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So it would be easy to think that is settled. There was even coverage of this on CBS Sunday Morning.



<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/experts-say-a-system-designed-to-protect-children-is-breaking-up-families/>

New York May Soon End Anonymous Calls to the State's Child Abuse Hotline

BY [SUSANTI SARKAR](#)

FILED 6/16/2025 12:42PM



This is kind of depressing...



Let's say you run a lead abatement not-for-profit service in St. Louis City.

Fifty percent of the families you serve are Black.

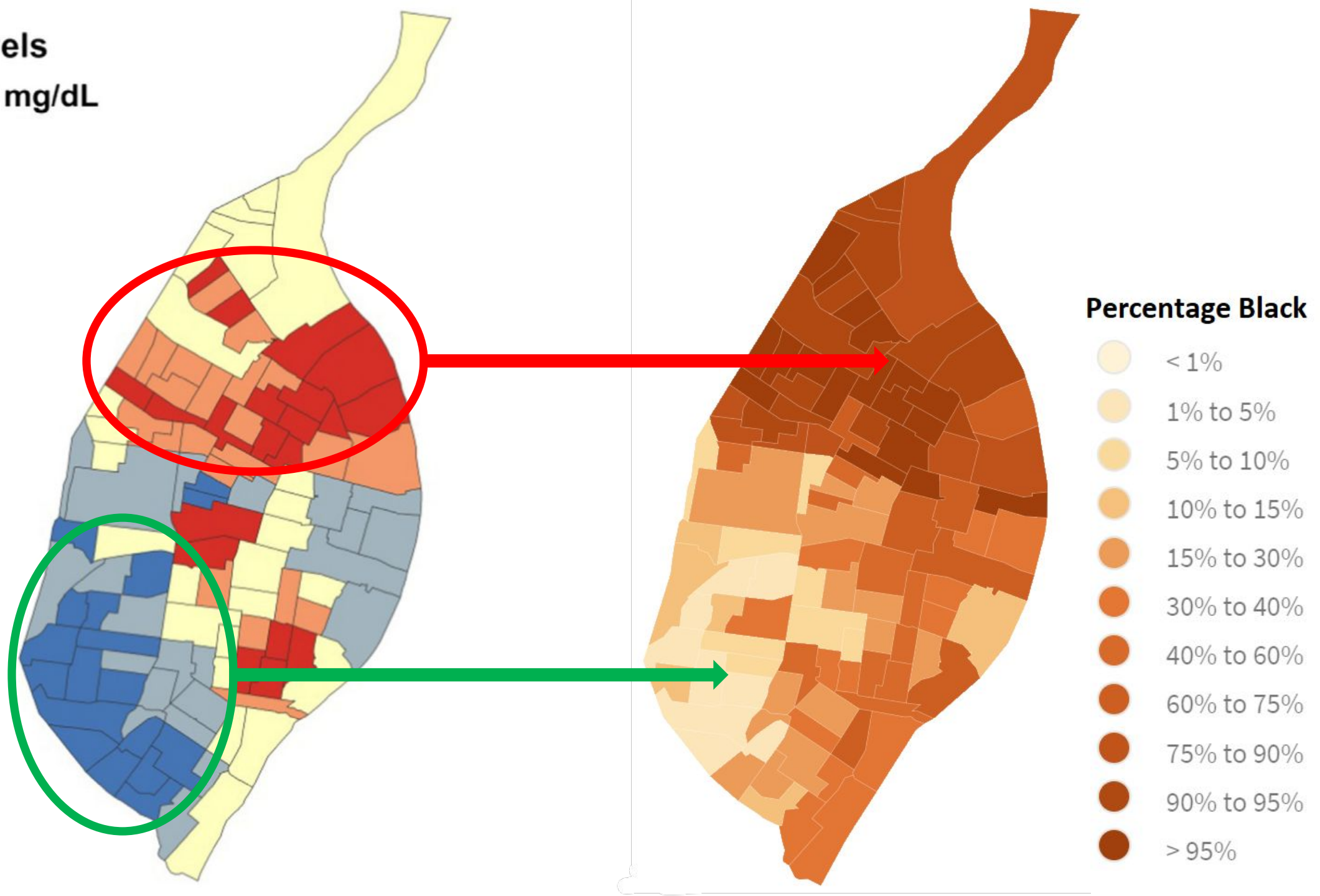
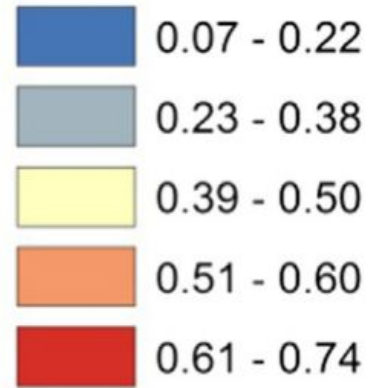
Someone asks you “is that an ideal proportion? Are you perhaps underserving that community”?

You Google St. Louis City and find that 50% of the residents are Black. So you say “Yeah – it's cool. Half the people in our area are Black and Half the people we serve are Black. They are served at the same rate as everyone else. No problem”

But is that really true?

Blood lead levels

Proportion ≥ 5 mg/dL



FAIL

Bottom Line:

The goal **SHOULD NEVER** be to provide services to different groups on a 1:1 basis. (*unless the groups have exactly the same level of need*).

The goal **SHOULD ALWAYS** be to get people the services they need to have a chance to thrive. If one group has more need of services, then that group should get more services.



In CPS terms, the real question isn't, never was and never should be "Are Black children and White children served by CPS at the same rate?". Since groups have different levels of risk, *the question makes no sense.*

The question must be "are children being served according to their risk and need for protection?"

So what data do we need to answer this?



DATASETS

The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) distributes the data for each study listed below. All datasets are distributed free of charge. Dataset ordering requirements vary: click on a dataset name to read its details and to access its ordering instructions.

[All Datasets](#) [NIS](#) [NSCAW](#) [NYTD](#) **AFCARS:** [Foster Care](#) [Adoption](#) [6-month File](#) **NCANDS:** [Child File](#) [Agency File](#)

Dataset Number	Study Title
263	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2021
253	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2020
237	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2019
233	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2018
220	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, FFY 2017

Only need one other thing – a good measure of how much **ACTUAL** maltreatment exists.

FAIL

We'd *really, really* like a “gold standard” way to know how much actual maltreatment exists in Black and White families, **but we don't have one.**

This is maybe the “holy grail” question in our field.
“How much actual maltreatment exists, really and truly?”

Why? People won't disclose sometimes. People don't remember well sometimes (or maybe “often”). Some events are known, for example, only to a perpetrator and a preverbal child.

But we took our best shot....

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Child Protective Services Reporting, Substantiation and Placement, With Comparison to Non-CPS Risks and Outcomes: 2005–2019

Child Maltreatment
2023, Vol. 28(4) 683–699
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DOI: 10.1177/10775595231167320
journals.sagepub.com/home/cmx



Brett Drake¹ , Dylan Jones¹ , Hyunil Kim² , John Gyourko³ , Antonio Garcia⁴ ,
Richard P. Barth⁵, Sarah A. Font⁶ , Emily Putnam-Hornstein⁷, Jill Duerr Berrick⁸ ,
Johanna K. P. Greeson³ , Victoria Cook⁴, Patricia L. Kohl¹, and Melissa Jonson-Reid¹



Lots and lots of people here.
They deserve a lot of the credit for this presentation

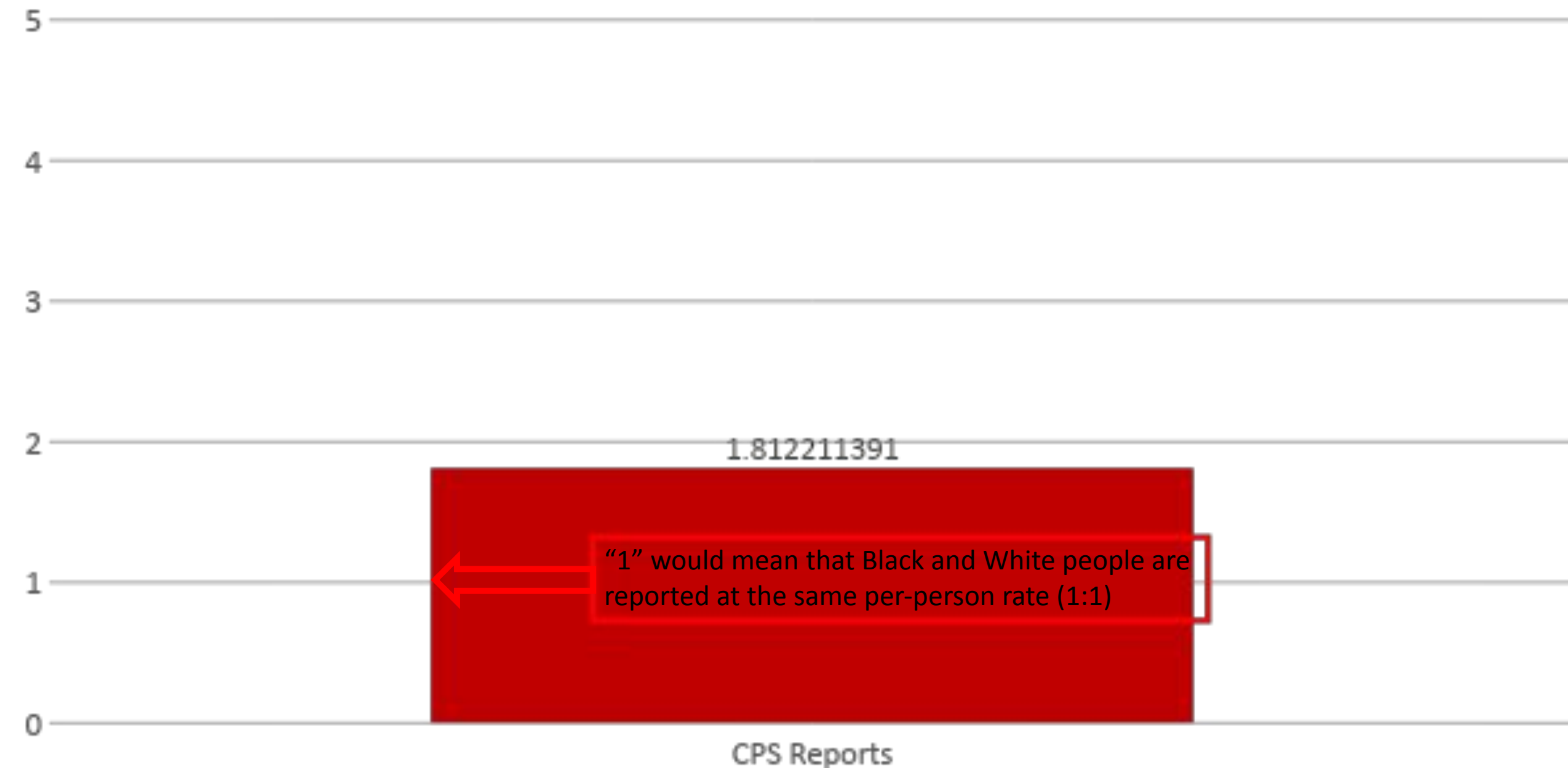
Abstract

We used National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and Census data to examine Black–White and Hispanic–White disparities in reporting, substantiation, and out-of-home placement both descriptively from 2005–2019 and in multivariate models from 2007–2017. We also tracked contemporaneous social risk (e.g., child poverty) and child harm (e.g., infant mortality) disparities using non-child protective services (CPS) sources and compared them to CPS reporting rate disparities. Black–White CPS reporting disparities were lower than found in non-CPS risk and harm benchmarks. Consistent with the Hispanic paradox, Hispanic–White CPS reporting disparities were lower than risk disparities but similar to harm disparities. Descriptive and multivariate analyses of data from the past several years indicated that Black children were less likely to be substantiated or placed into out-of-home care following a report than White children. Hispanic children were slightly more likely to be substantiated or placed in out-of-home care than White children overall, but this difference disappeared in multivariate models. Available data provide no evidence that Black children were overreported relative to observed risks and harms reflected in non-CPS data. Reducing reporting rates among Black children will require addressing broader conditions associated with maltreatment.

Data from NCANDS, Census, CDC (NVSS, WISQARS, WONDER)

USA 2019 Data:

B/W Disparity on Left: For Example, "2" Means "Twice as Much"

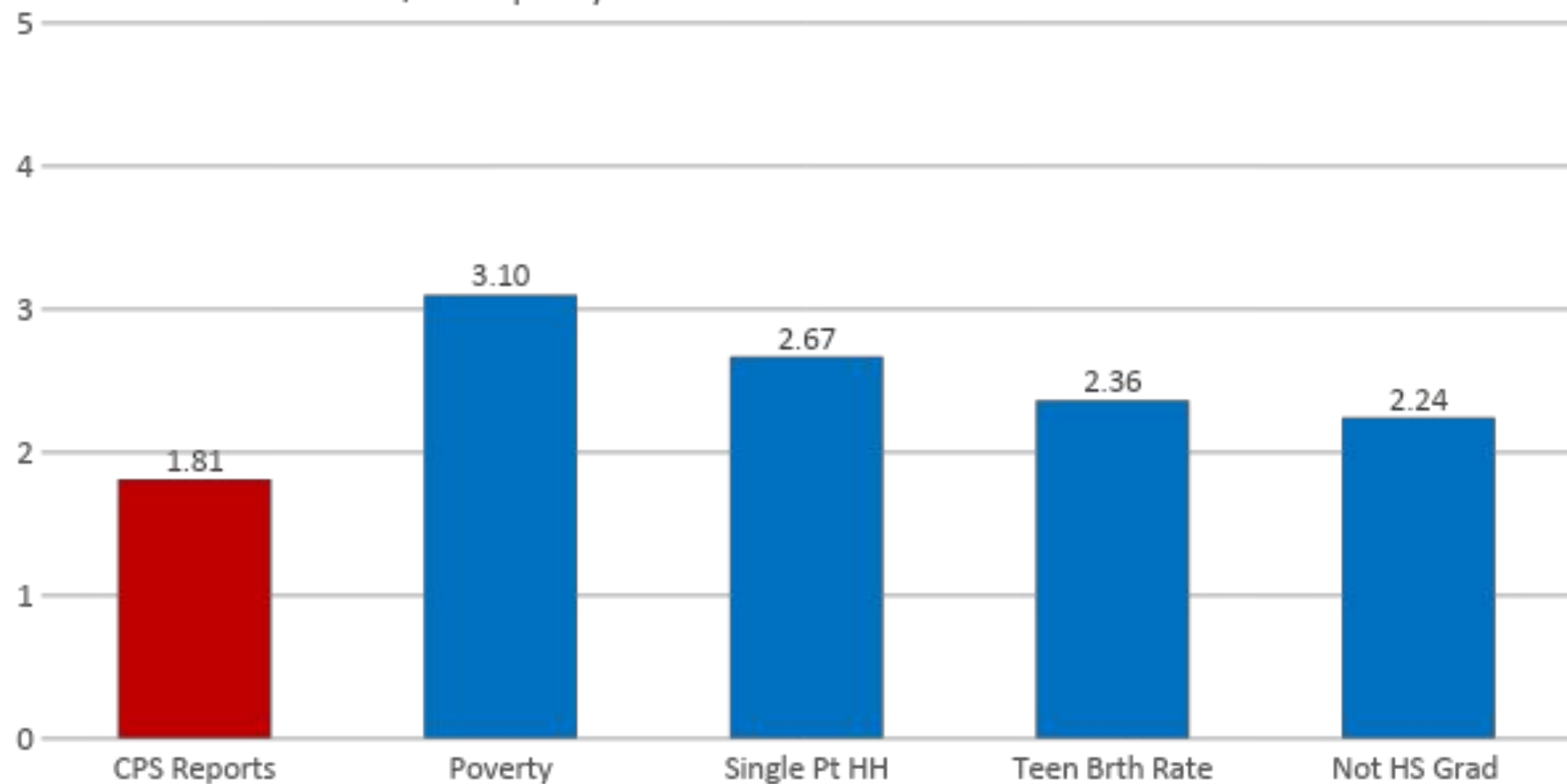


Since we can't look at "actual" maltreatment data (doesn't exist)...

... how about we add some context by looking at other stuff which we know is strongly correlated with maltreatment?

USA 2019 Data:

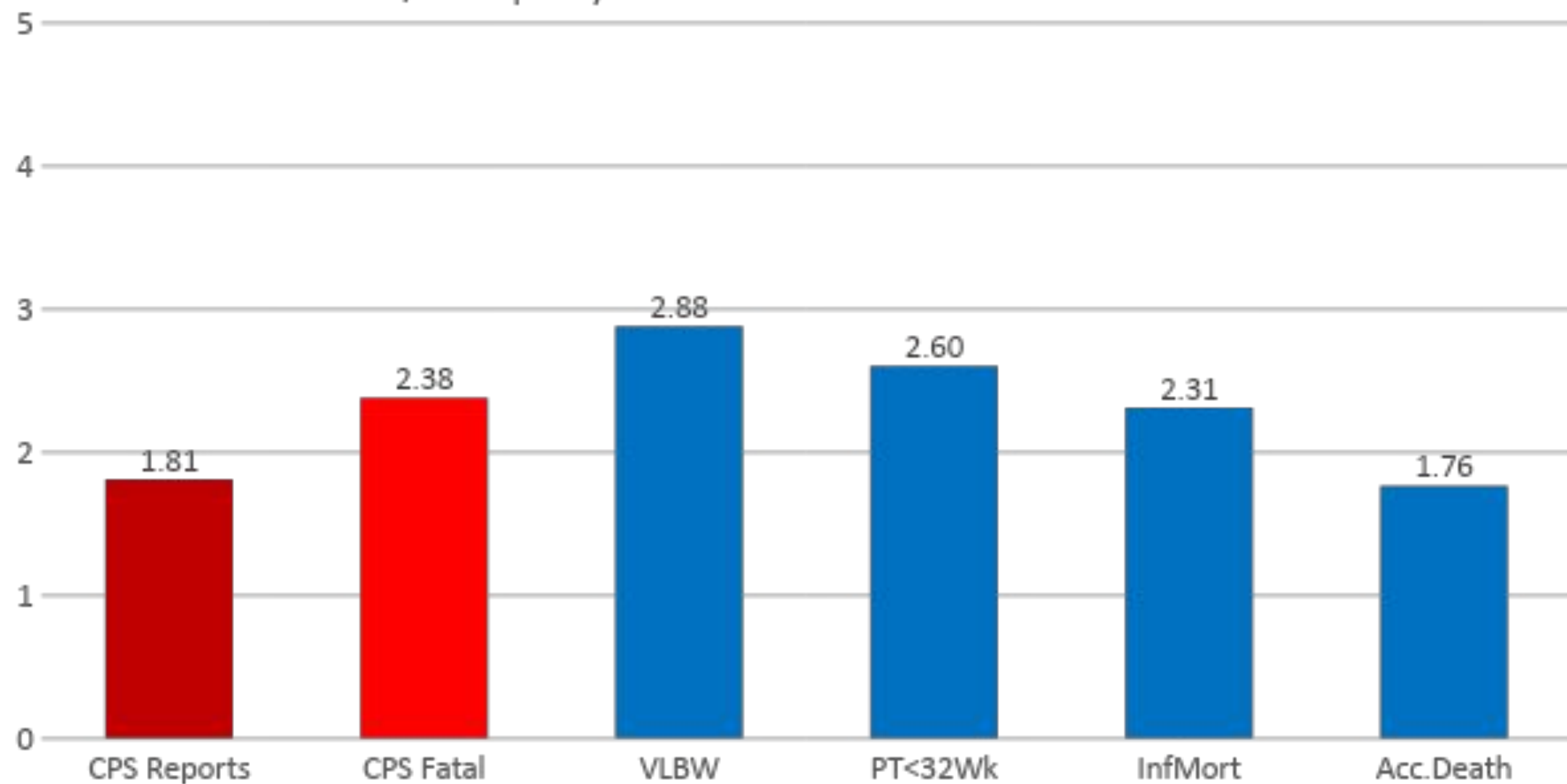
B/W Disparity on Left: "2" Means "Twice as Much"



So that's "Risks".

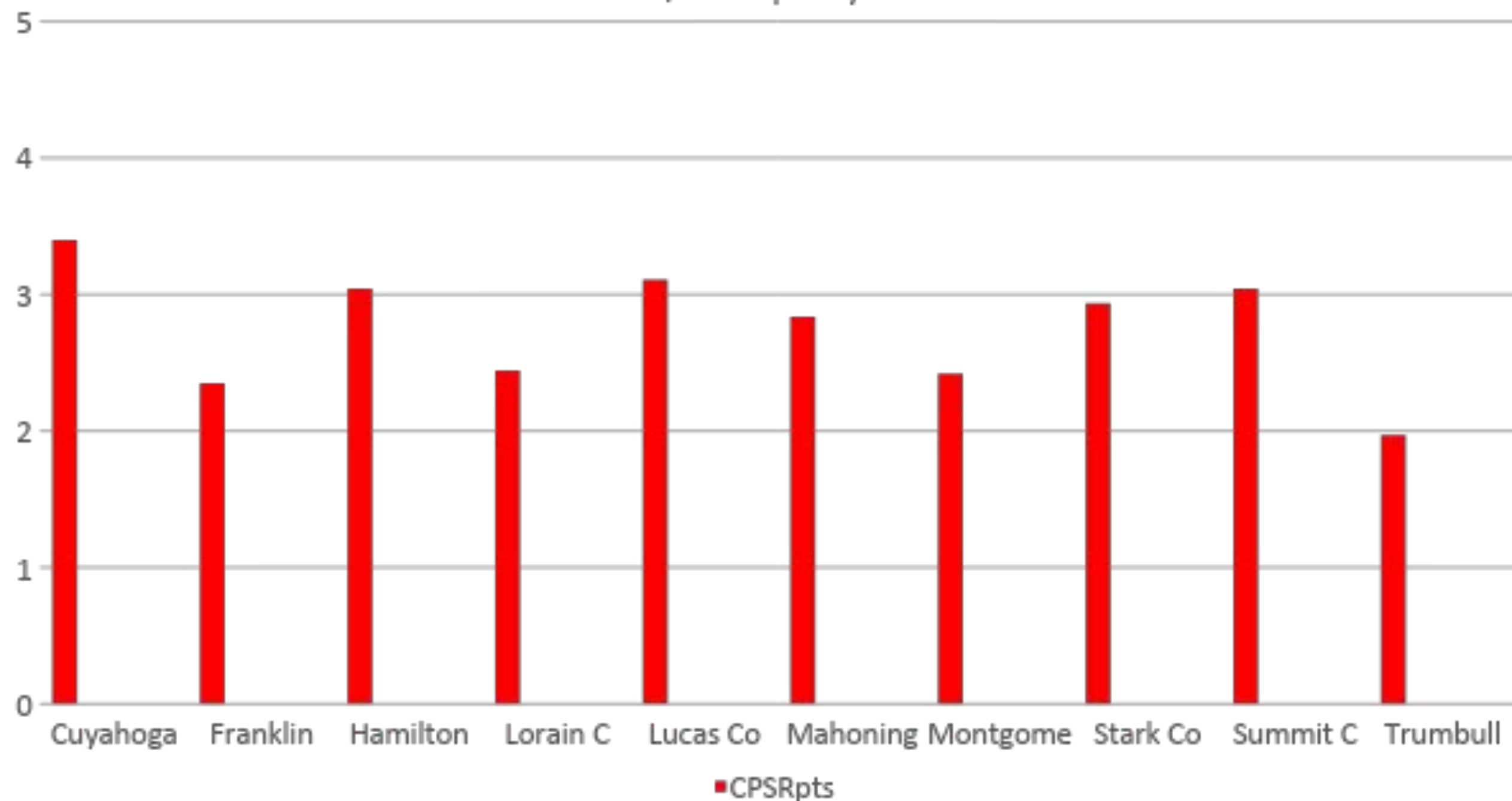
What about "Outcomes"?

USA 2019 Data:
B/W Disparity on Left: "2" Means "Twice as Much"

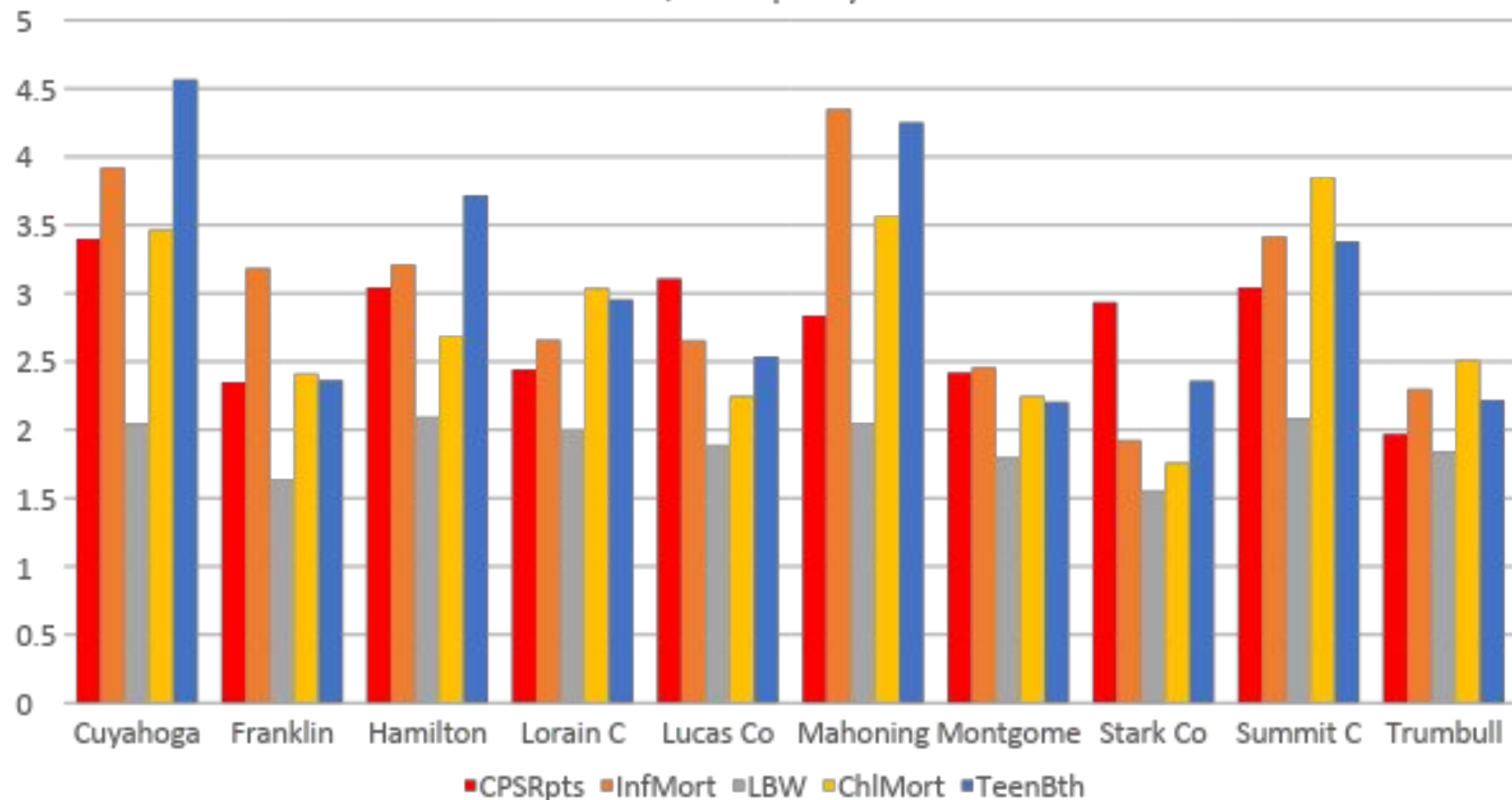


What About Particular States?

Counties in Ohio: B/W Disparity on the Vertical Axis



Counties in Ohio: B/W Disparity on the Vertical Axis



I know what you're thinking....

You wish you could easily run stuff like this in your own state.

(at least I hope that's what you're thinking)

Well, you can.

More about that later....

Conclusion on Myth #1:

Black children **are** reported about 2x as much as White children.

On the surface, this sounds **bad**.

But when you look at differences in risks and outcomes, that higher report rate makes sense, **It actually shows we are appropriately responding to higher need among Black Children.**

Efforts to reduce B/W racial disproportionality are misguided and dangerous.

Next Myth:

**Racial bias happens at every stage of the Child
Welfare System**

After Contacting CPS are Black children...

...Substantiated more than White children?

...Placed more than White children?

FEATURES | JULY 01 2021

Race and Bias in Child Maltreatment Diagnosis and Reporting

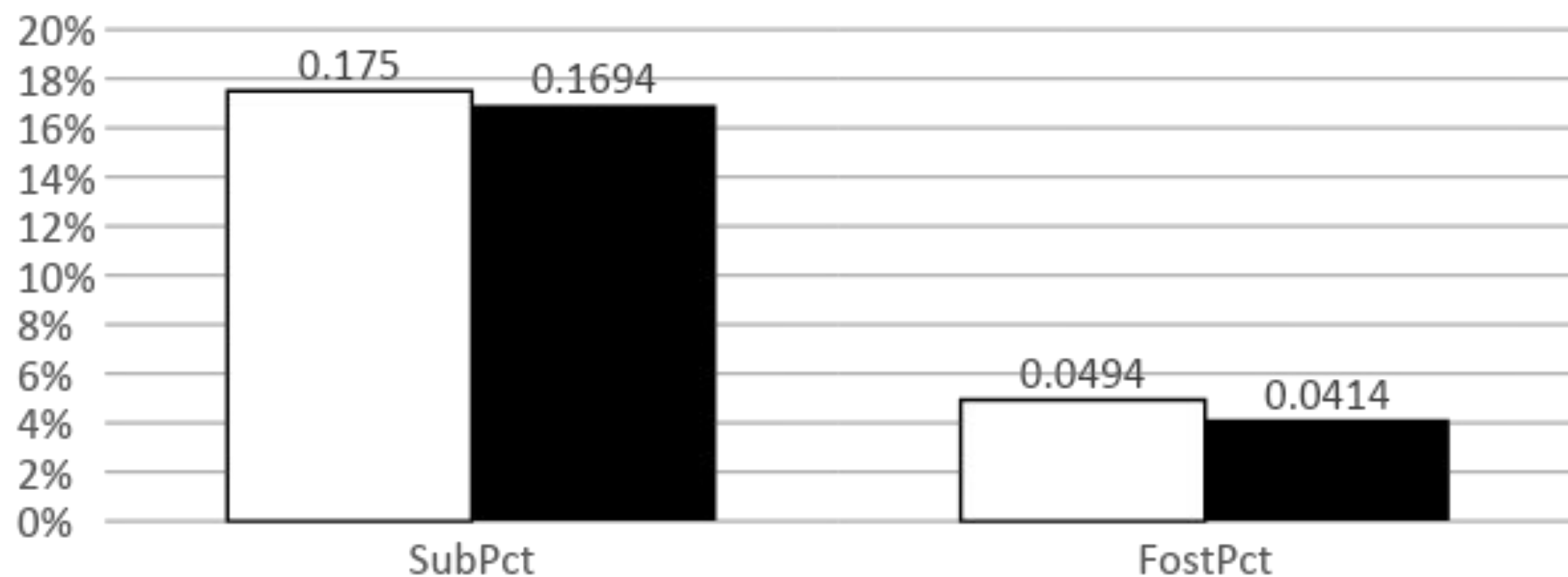
Vincent J. Palusci, MD, MS, FAAP ; Ann S. Botash, MD, FAAP

“...cases with Black children are more likely to be accepted for investigation, be confirmed, be brought to court, result in removal of the children from their families for longer periods of time, and take longer to be closed, possibly related to surveillance bias. Multiple points in this process are subject to bias...”

Can we fact check that?



Substantiation and Foster Care Percentages, USA 2023











▣ W ▣ B

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Child Protective Services Reporting, Substantiation and Placement, With Comparison to Non-CPS Risks and Outcomes: 2005–2019

Child Maltreatment
2023, Vol. 28(4) 683–699
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DOI: 10.1177/10775595231167320
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Brett Drake¹ , Dylan Jones¹ , Hyunil Kim² , John Gyourko³ , Antonio Garcia⁴ , Richard P. Barth⁵, Sarah A. Font⁶ , Emily Putnam-Hornstein⁷, Jill Duerr Berrick⁸ , Johanna K. P. Greeson³ , Victoria Cook⁴, Patricia L. Kohl¹, and Melissa Jonson-Reid¹

Abstract

We used National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System and Census data to examine Black–White and Hispanic–White disparities in reporting, substantiation, and out-of-home placement both descriptively from 2005–2019 and in multivariate models from 2007–2017. We also tracked contemporaneous social risk (e.g., child poverty) and child harm (e.g., infant mortality) disparities using non-child protective services (CPS) sources and compared them to CPS reporting rate disparities. Black–White CPS reporting disparities were lower than found in non-CPS risk and harm benchmarks. Consistent with the Hispanic paradox, Hispanic–White CPS reporting disparities were lower than risk disparities but similar to harm disparities. Descriptive and multivariate analyses of data from the past several years indicated that Black children were less likely to be substantiated or placed into out-of-home care following a report than White children. Hispanic children were slightly more likely to be substantiated or placed in out-of-home care than White children overall, but this difference disappeared in multivariate models. Available data provide no evidence that Black children were overreported relative to observed risks and harms reflected in non-CPS data. Reducing reporting rates among Black children will require addressing broader conditions associated with maltreatment.

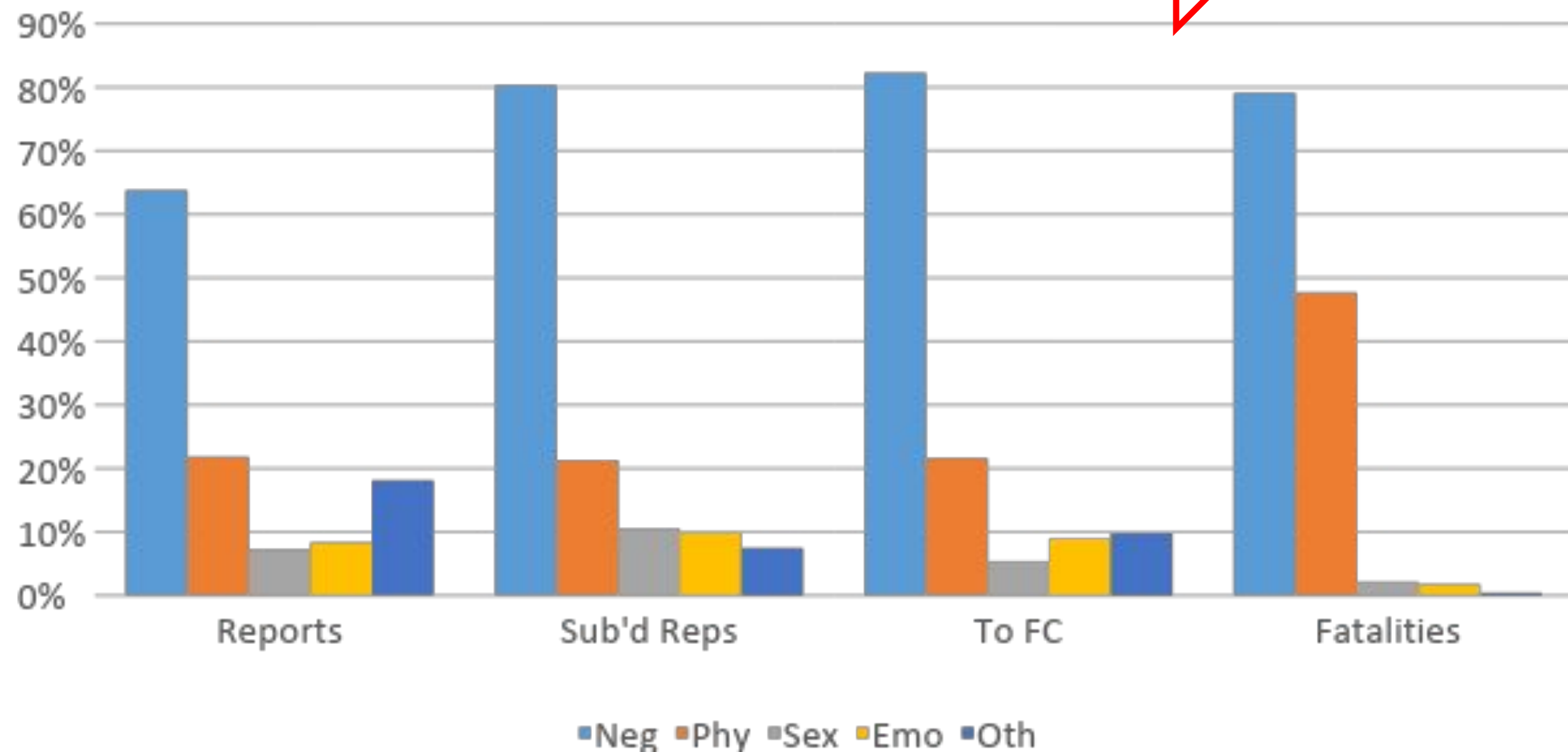
For more info about this
than you probably want...

Myth: Neglect is Less Serious Than Abuse

This has been looked at a lot. A very large number of scientific studies have looked at outcomes by type of maltreatment, and neglect is just not found to have less serious outcomes. There just isn't a serious debate about this. In order to keep things specifically data focused, though, let's look at the national report data, which shows what's going on as well as anything.



Types of Maltreatment As We Move Thru CPS



Next Myth: Neglect is “only poverty”

No, it isn't.

There seems to be some kind of dystopian baseline assumption that CPS just swoops into poor communities and randomly scoops up kids who aren't wearing warm enough winter coats.

There is science on this and it shows very clearly that CPS is involved with children who are not “just poor” but are a very particular, highly at-risk subset of poor children.

Research article

It's not "Just poverty": Educational, social, and economic functioning among young adults exposed to childhood neglect, abuse, and poverty

Sarah A. Font^{a,*}, Kathryn Maguire-Jack^b

The findings of this study also have implications for the CPS system. Our results suggest that current child protection practice (what is reported to CPS and screened in for investigation) is, on average, identifying a subset of impoverished children at disproportionately high risk of adverse life outcomes – it is not targeting low-income families indiscriminately.

Is the overrepresentation of the poor in child welfare caseloads due to bias or need?

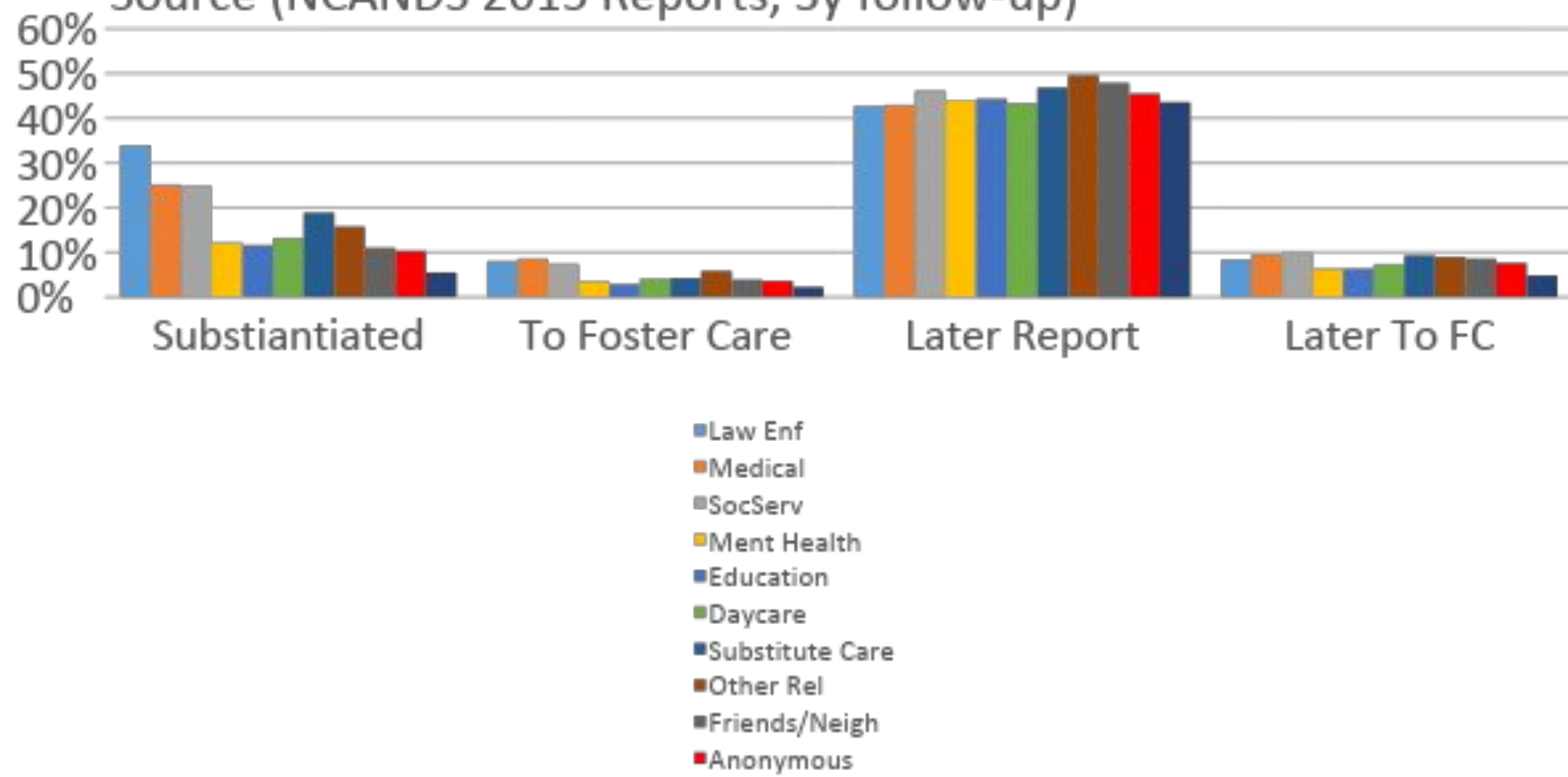
Melissa Jonson-Reid, Brett Drake^{*}, Patricia L. Kohl

George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, United States

These data suggest that the overrepresentation of poor children is driven largely by the presence of increased risk among the poor children that come to the attention of child welfare rather than high levels of systemic class bias.

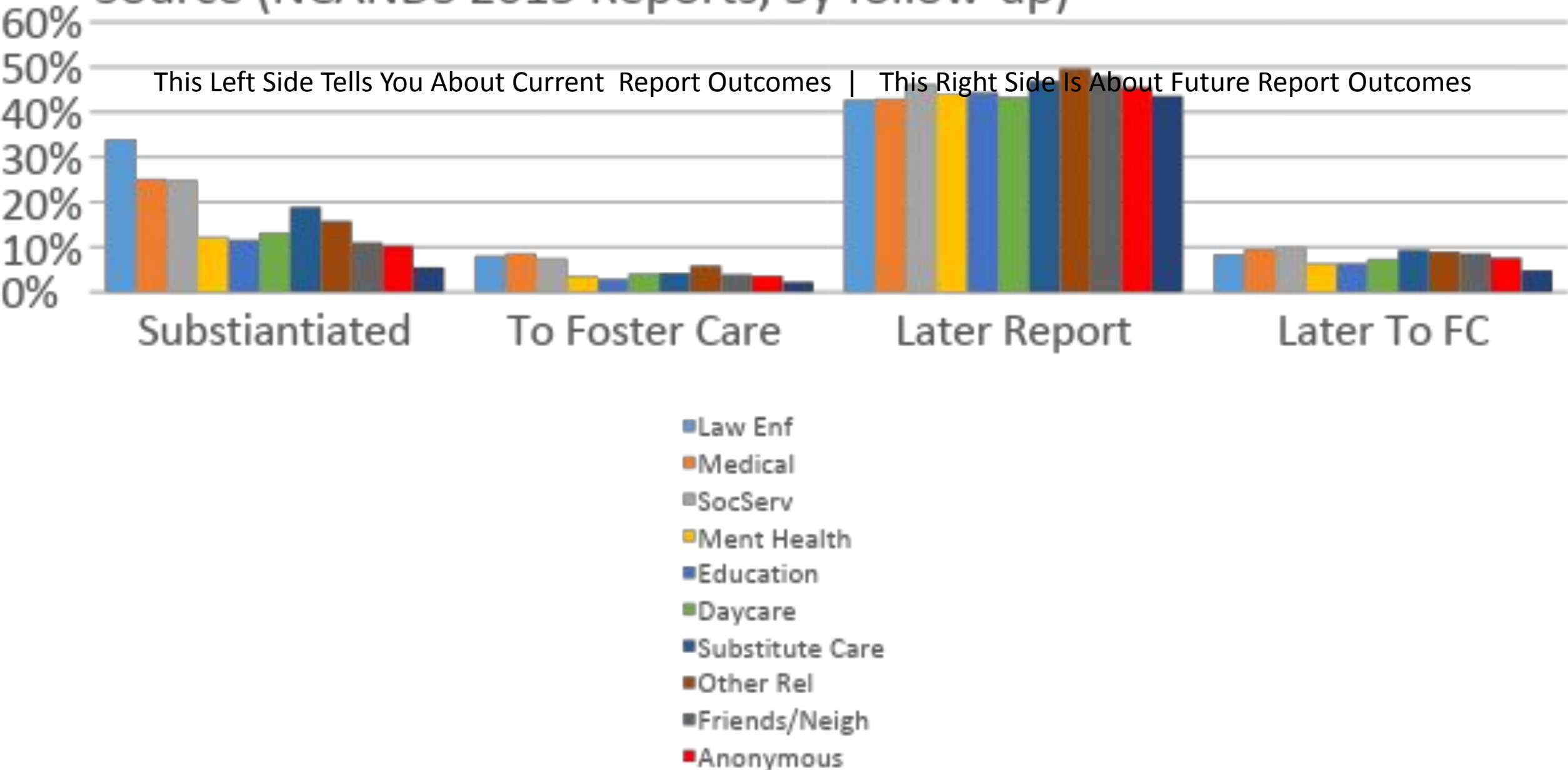
Myth: Anonymous Reports are Probably
Baseless and Can Be Safely Ignored

Immediate (Sub & FC) and Later (ReRept and Later FC) By Source (NCANDS 2015 Reports, 3y follow-up)



Immediate (Sub & FC) and Later (ReRept and Later FC) By Source (NCANDS 2015 Reports, 3y follow-up)

This Left Side Tells You About Current Report Outcomes | This Right Side Is About Future Report Outcomes



Bottom Line:

Law Enforcement, Medical And Social Services have “better” Initial results (more Substantiation and Foster Care). They look like everyone else for later re-reports and later Foster Care, though.

Anonymous Reports look a lot like the other sources (e.g. Educators, Neighbors) at the initial stage. They perform pretty “well” for re-reports and later placements (rates as high as other sources).

Is CPS
Overwhelmed by
Unnecessary
Calls?

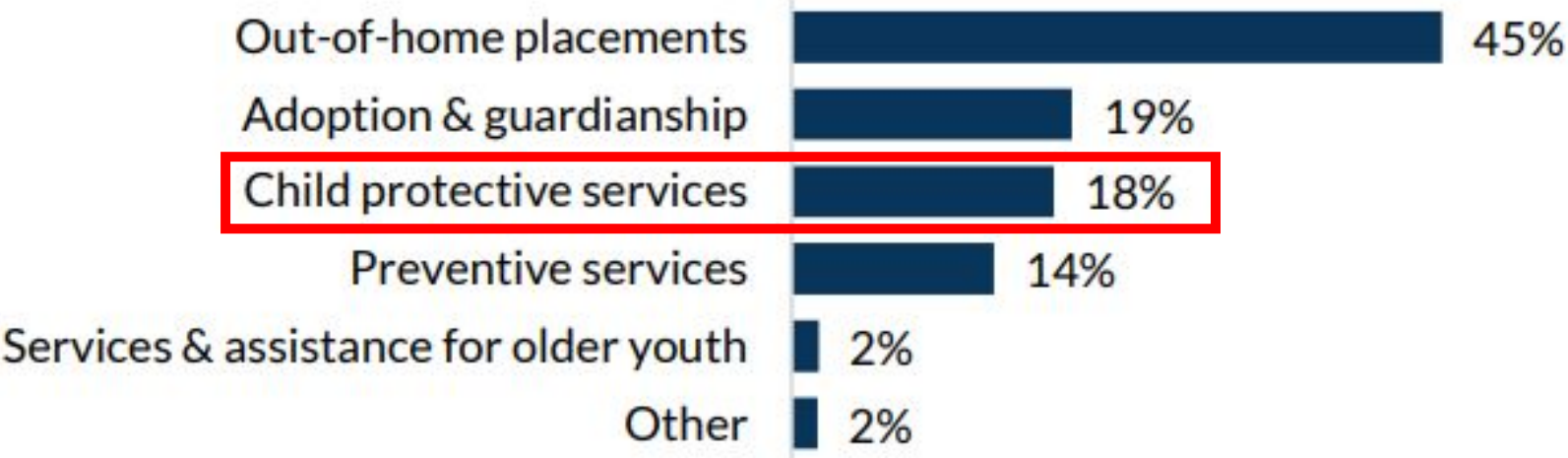
Child Welfare Financing SFY 2020

A survey of federal, state, and local expenditures

Kristina Rosinsky, Megan Fischer, and Maggie Haas



Figure ES1. Proportion of total expenditures on categories of services (38 states with sufficient data)



Note: See page 55 for definitions of each of these categories.

Child protective services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intake/screening• Family assessment• Investigation• Services provided during the investigation/assessment• All associated administrative costs
---------------------------	--

You could cut your hotline and investigations by half and only reduce your overall cost by 9%.

Last One – is Foster Care Toxic to Kids?

Scientifically, this is a nightmare to answer. Who do we use for comparisons? Obviously, kids in foster care will have more problems than kids not in foster care – that isn't a fair comparison. The question really is "Do kids in foster care do worse than if they were not removed?" Very tricky to study since we can't randomly assign endangered children to either be removed or to stay in danger.

So, accepting that foster children start out and to some degree remain a troubled population, what can tentatively say?

We could ask the kids.

Table 12. Experiences in Foster Care ($n = 621$)^a

	#	%	
<u>I was lucky to have been placed in foster care</u>			
Very strongly agree	146	22.6	68.4%
Strongly agree	104	15.9	
Agree	185	29.9	
Neither agree nor disagree	111	18.6	13.0%
Disagree	40	7.5	
Strongly disagree	14	1.6	
Very strongly disagree	20	3.9	
<u>I was generally satisfied with my experience in foster care</u>			
Very strongly agree	76	11.8	57.4%
Strongly agree	84	13.9	
Agree	196	31.7	
Neither agree nor disagree	120	20.9	21.7%
Disagree	86	12.9	
Strongly disagree	37	4.6	
Very strongly disagree	21	4.2	

Note: Unweighted frequencies and weighted percentages.

^a One youth was not asked questions about experiences in foster care during the interview.

Temporary Stays and Persistent Gains: The Causal Effects of Foster Care[†]

By MAX GROSS AND E. JASON BARON*

Six percent of children in the United States enter foster care by age 18. We estimate the effects of foster care on children's outcomes by exploiting the quasi-random assignment of child welfare investigators in Michigan. We find that foster care improved children's safety and educational outcomes. Gains emerged after children exited the foster system when most were reunified with their birth parents, suggesting that improvements made by their parents were an important mechanism. These results indicate that safely reducing the use of foster care, a goal of recent federal legislation, requires more effective in-home, prevention-focused efforts. (JEL H75, I21, J13, K42)

1. “Among infants reported for maltreatment, periods of foster care placement reduced the risk of death by roughly half”:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34426532/>

2. “We find that foster care improved children’s safety and educational outcomes...”:

<https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20200204>

3. “...we show that foster care placement substantially reduced the chances of adult arrests, convictions, and incarceration for children at the margin. Exploring mechanisms, we find that foster care also improved a range of children's safety, academic, and behavioral intermediate outcomes.”: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29922>

The science is early here. I might venture the following, though...

1) We definitely have no body of evidence showing that foster care is toxic to kids compared to kids being left at home.

2) On balance, my preliminary read of the literature is that foster care may be more protective than harmful in terms of child outcomes, but I wouldn't place any bets this soon.

So that's the myths at a national level.

Allow me a couple of minutes to show you something you can use to explore these myths in *your state*.



swag

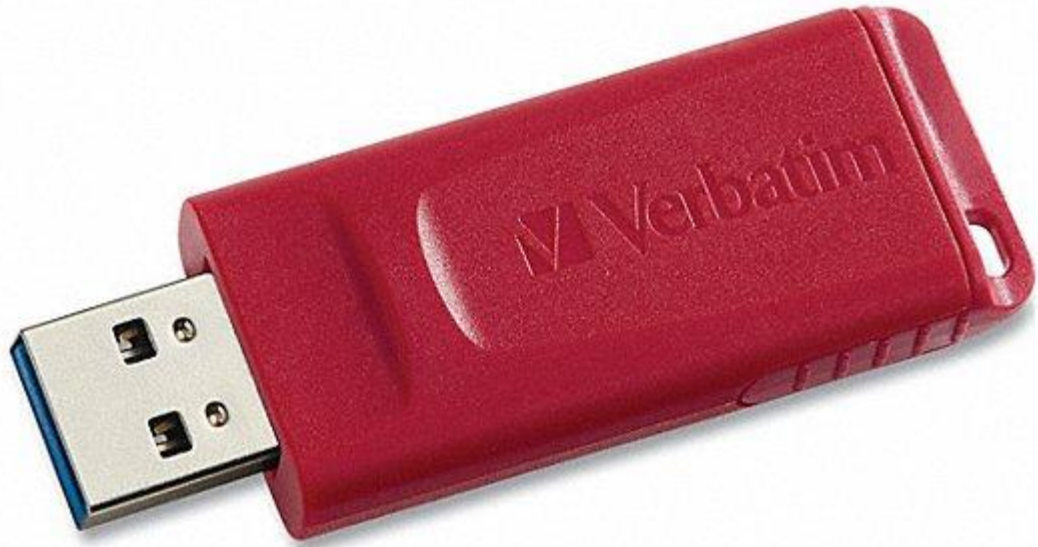
[swag] noun.

Stuff we all get. A promotional item that's too good not to keep (or wear!).

Introducing

“Social Determinants of Health For Child Welfare
Services”

(SDoH4CWS)



I have provided the SDoH4CWS data and programs on a thumb drive. You can also download directly from LDBase (a free data and program repository). Just google “LDBase” and search for “SDoH4CWS”

SDoH4CWS combines Census and Social Determinants of Health data we collected from all over the Internet **with your data**. You need to create a *very, very simple* extract file from your state system. The program then uses your data and our data together and outputs tables and graphs. An IT person should be able to run everything in an afternoon. Below data are fictional.

“County.CSV” file structure: All variables numeric.

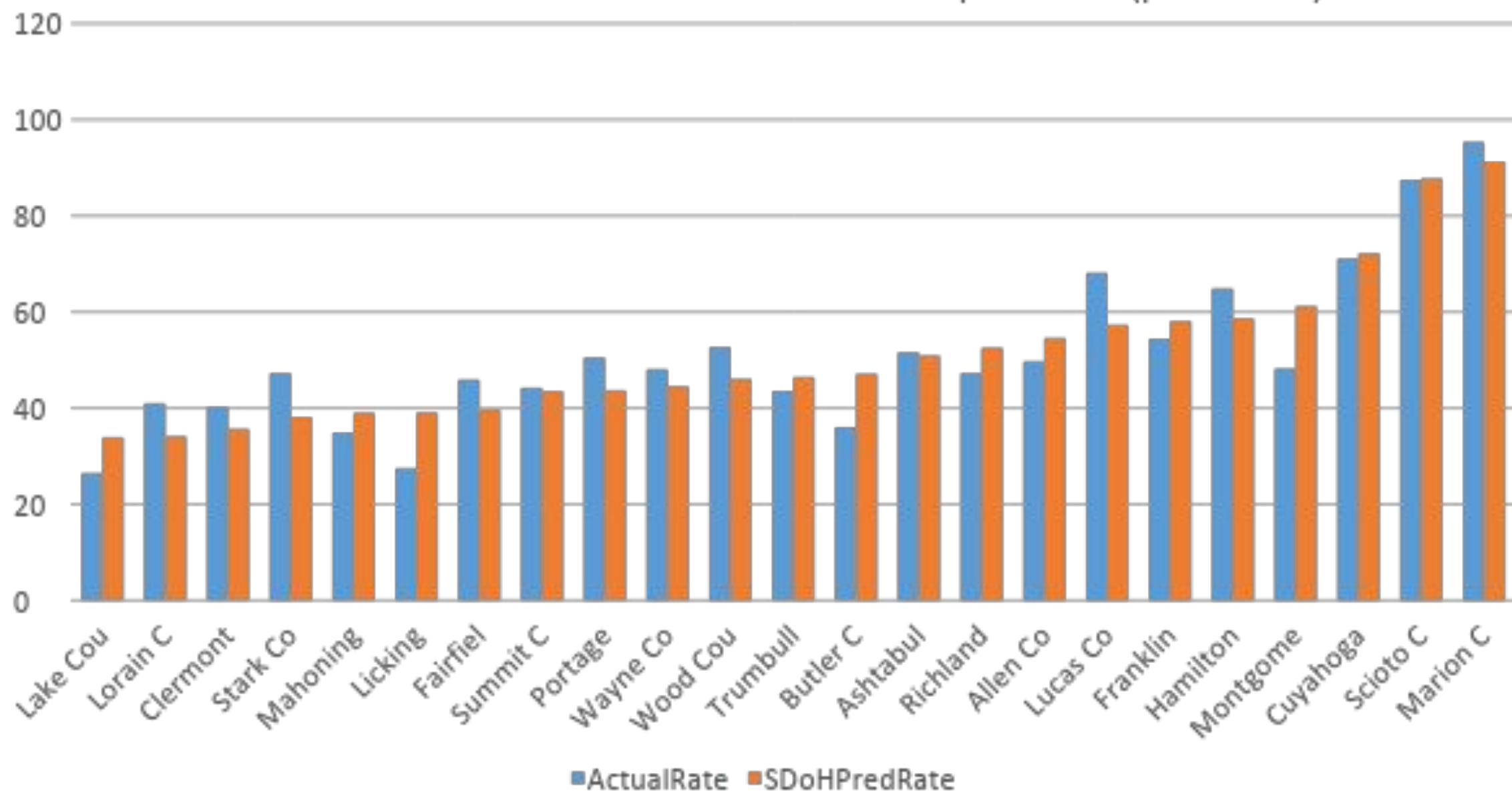
FIPS	Tot	<u>TotBl</u>	<u>TotWh</u>	<u>TotAs</u>	<u>TotNH</u>	<u>TotAI</u>	<u>TotHi</u>
9002	7929	2404	963	707	50	20	2752
9008	1230	44	672	20	0	40	151
9010	6421	1563	1597	385	39	18	2223
9013	1457	18	616	15	0	15	222
9015	19051	2242	2370	700	11	85	11441

Obviously, there are more counties (going downwards), but you only need to derive these 8 variables from your data system.

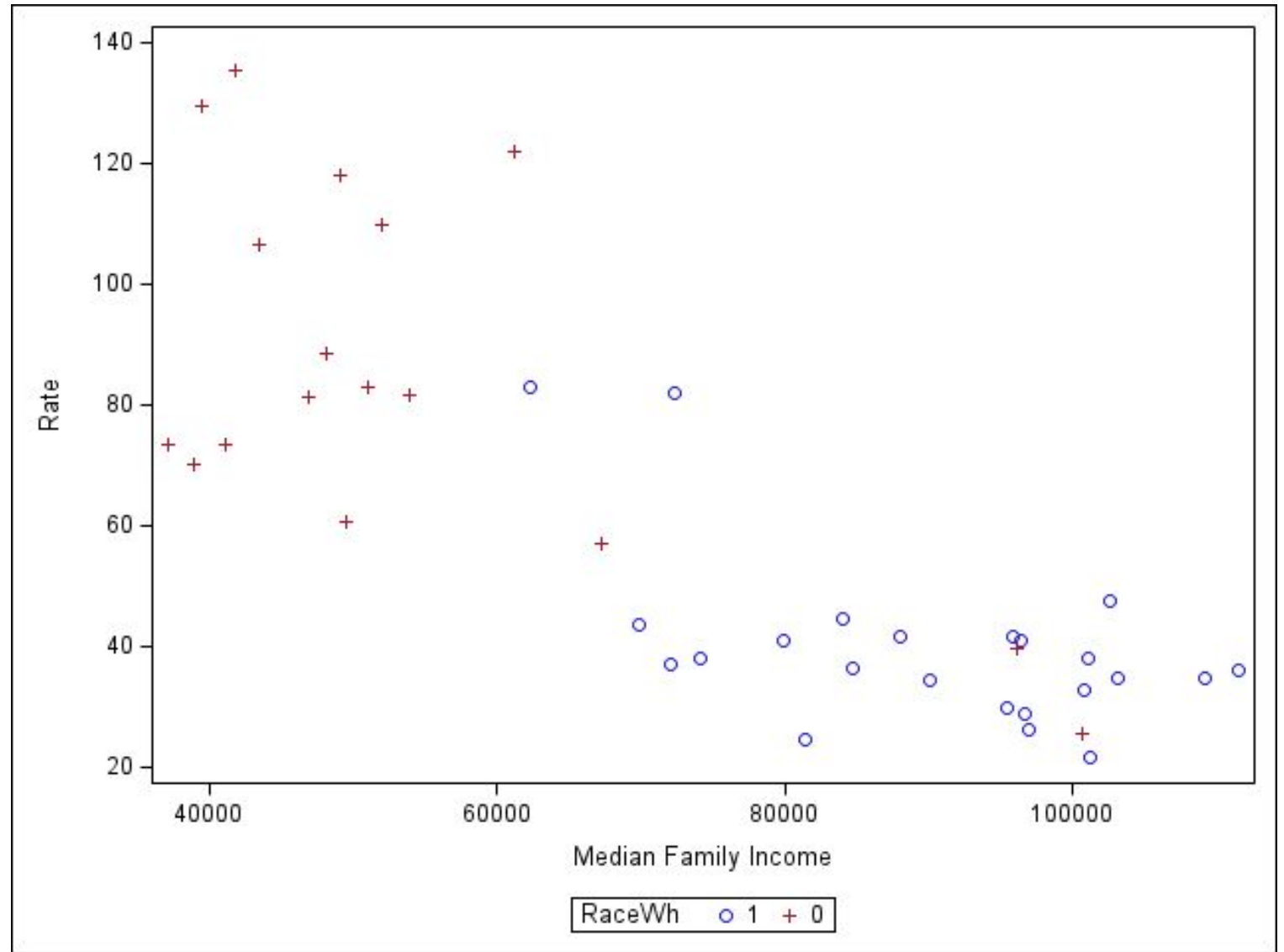
So you take your data, and we provide our data...

Put them together and what have you got?

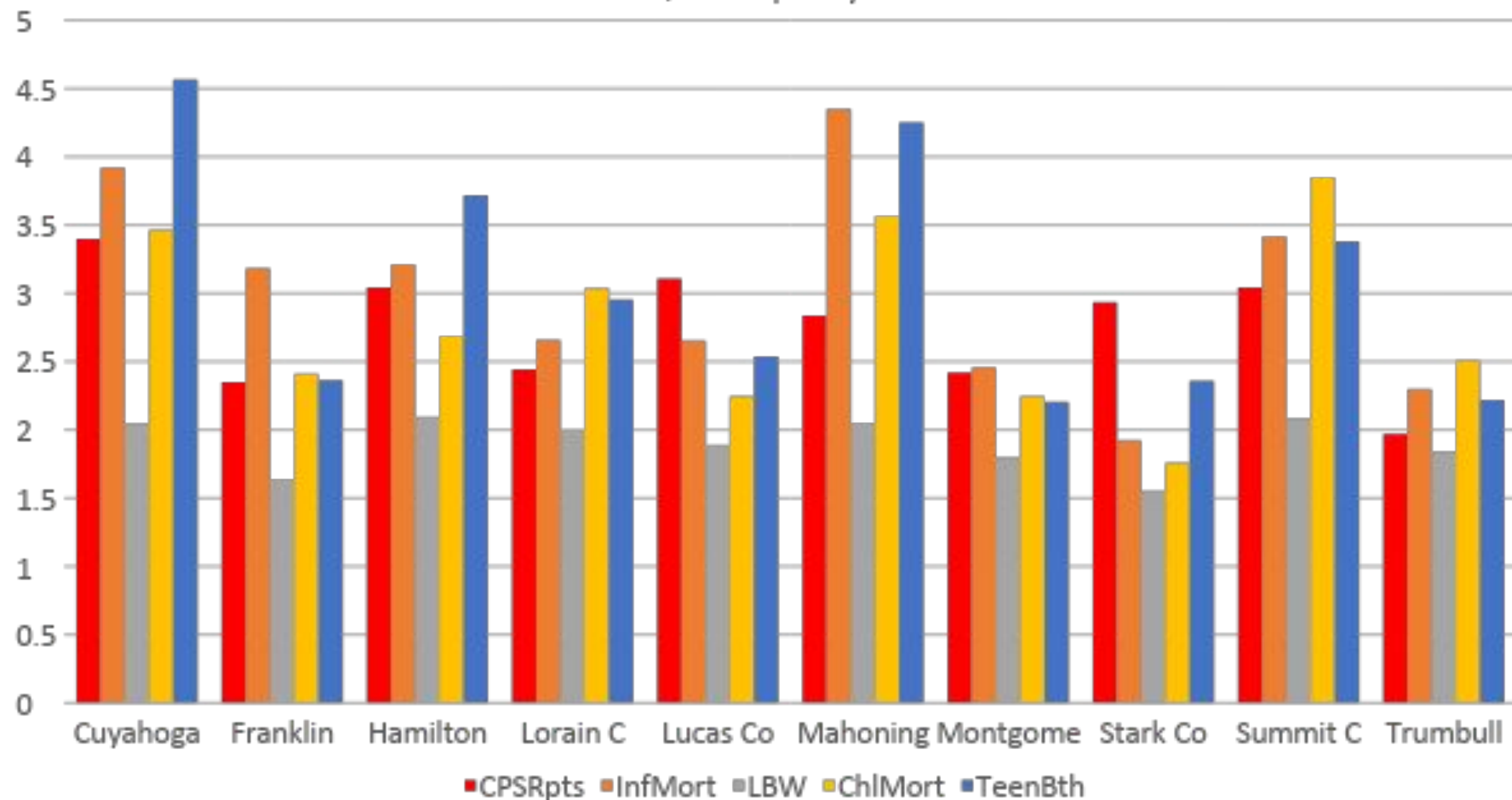
Ohio Counties: Actual Vs. SDoH-Predicted CPS Report Rates (per 1K kids)



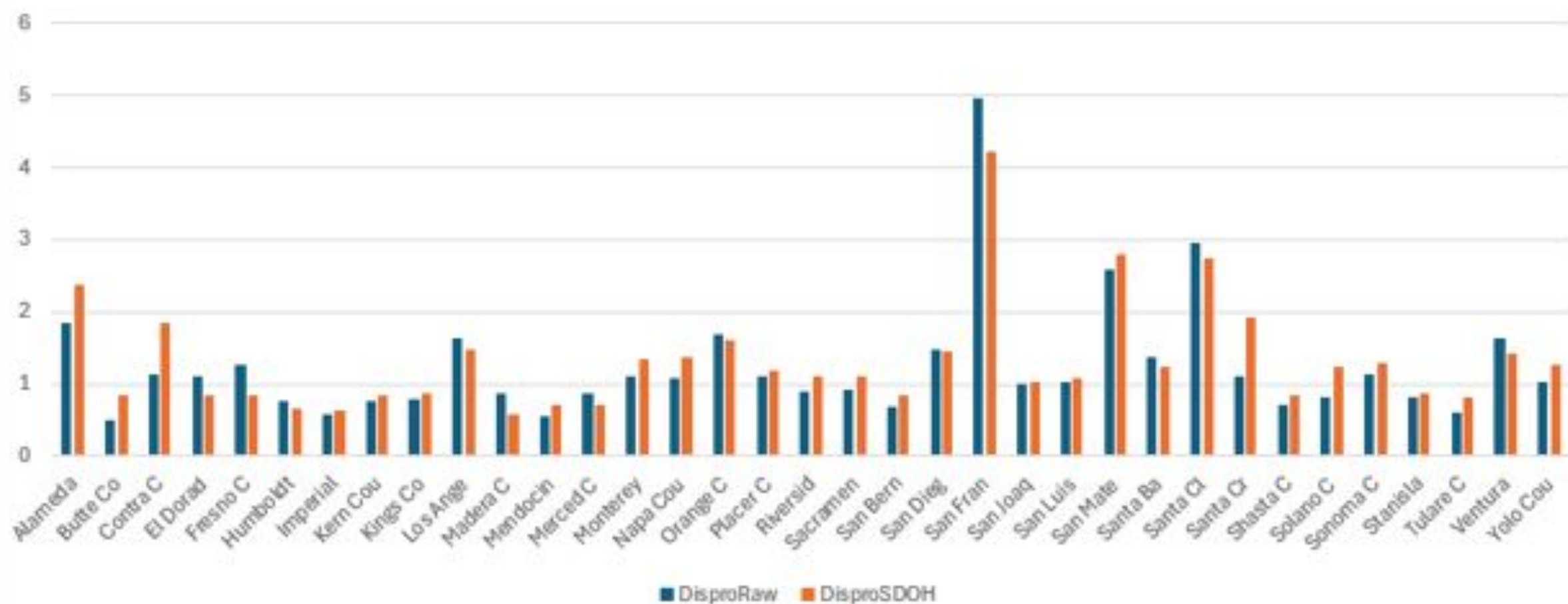
SDoH4CPS has various outputs – here's another example using Ohio Data where the Blue circles are counties with Black income and Black CPS rates, and the Red Plus signs are for Whites



Counties in Ohio: B/W Disparity on the Vertical Axis



Actual and SDoH-Predicted Hispanic/White Disparities in California, 2019



SDoH4CWS also provides a bunch of county-level tabular data your analysis team might like:

Census Data. Lots of Census Data.

Comparison outcomes by County: LBW, Infant Mortality, drug use, injury, stuff like that (mainly available for large counties only). These are from County Health Rankings.

All the publically available SDoH indexes we could find, along with documentation. We think the Area Deprivation Index and the Yost Index work best in our area.

Tech Support for SDoH4CWS is me.

314 805 8422

Final Note: Many of the ideas in this presentation were from this source:

Research on Social Work Practice
Volume 32, Issue 5, July 2022, Pages 483-498
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<https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211050000>



Invited Article



Research to Consider While Effectively Re-Designing Child Welfare Services

Richard P. Barth ¹, Jill Duerr Berrick ², Antonio R. Garcia ³, Brett Drake ⁴, Melissa Jonson-Reid ⁴, John R. Gyourko ⁵, and Johanna K. P. Greeson ⁵

Abstract

An intense appetite for reforming and transforming child welfare services in the United States is yielding many new initiatives. Vulnerable children and families who become involved with child welfare clearly deserve higher quality and more effective services. New policies, programs, and practices should be built on sound evidence. Reforms based on misunderstandings about what the current data show may ultimately harm families. This review highlights 10 commonly held misconceptions which we assert are inconsistent with the best available contemporary evidence. Implications for better alignment of evidence and reform are discussed.

And obviously, from the recent AEI publication



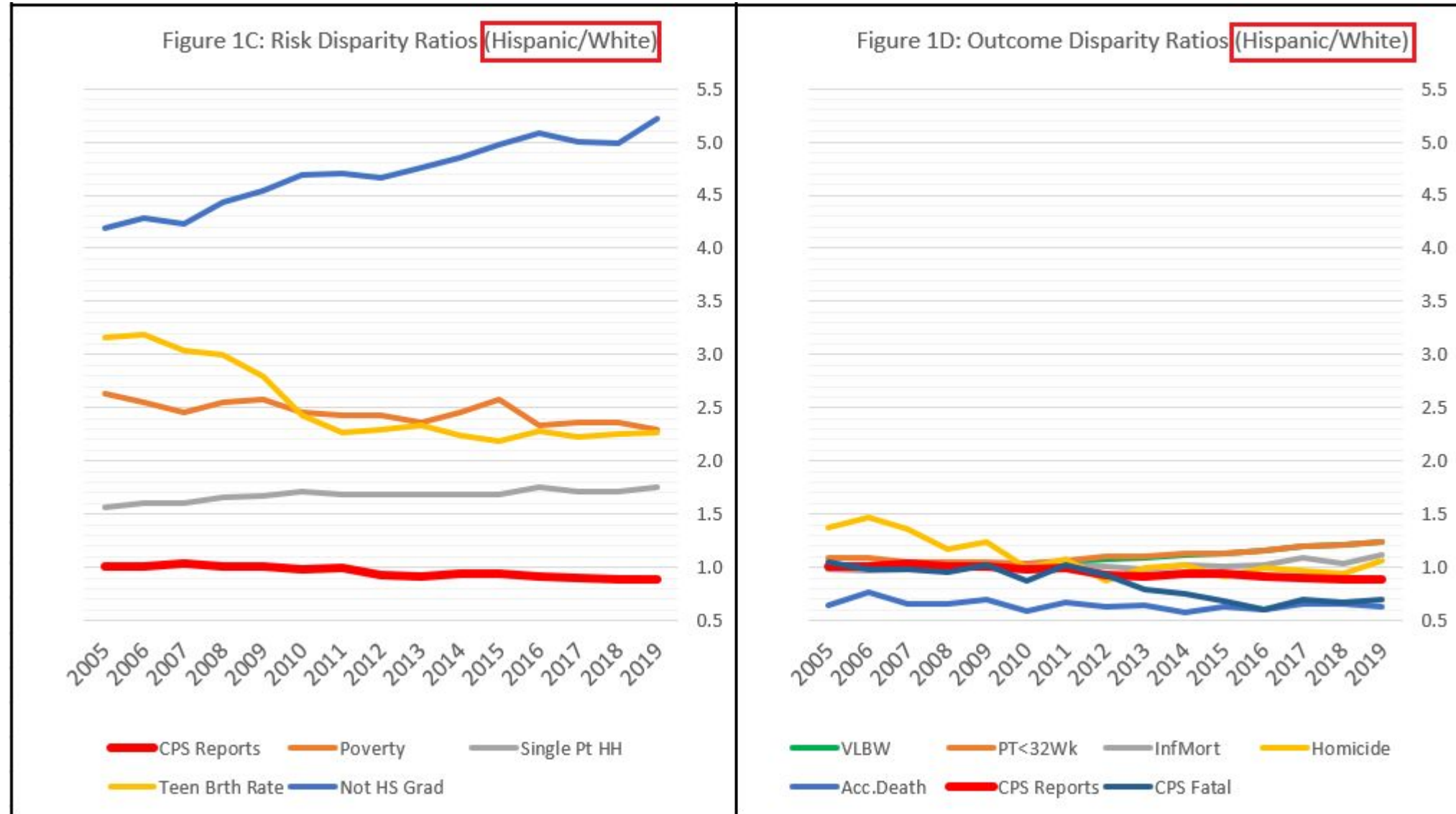
Thanks, Naomi!!!!!!



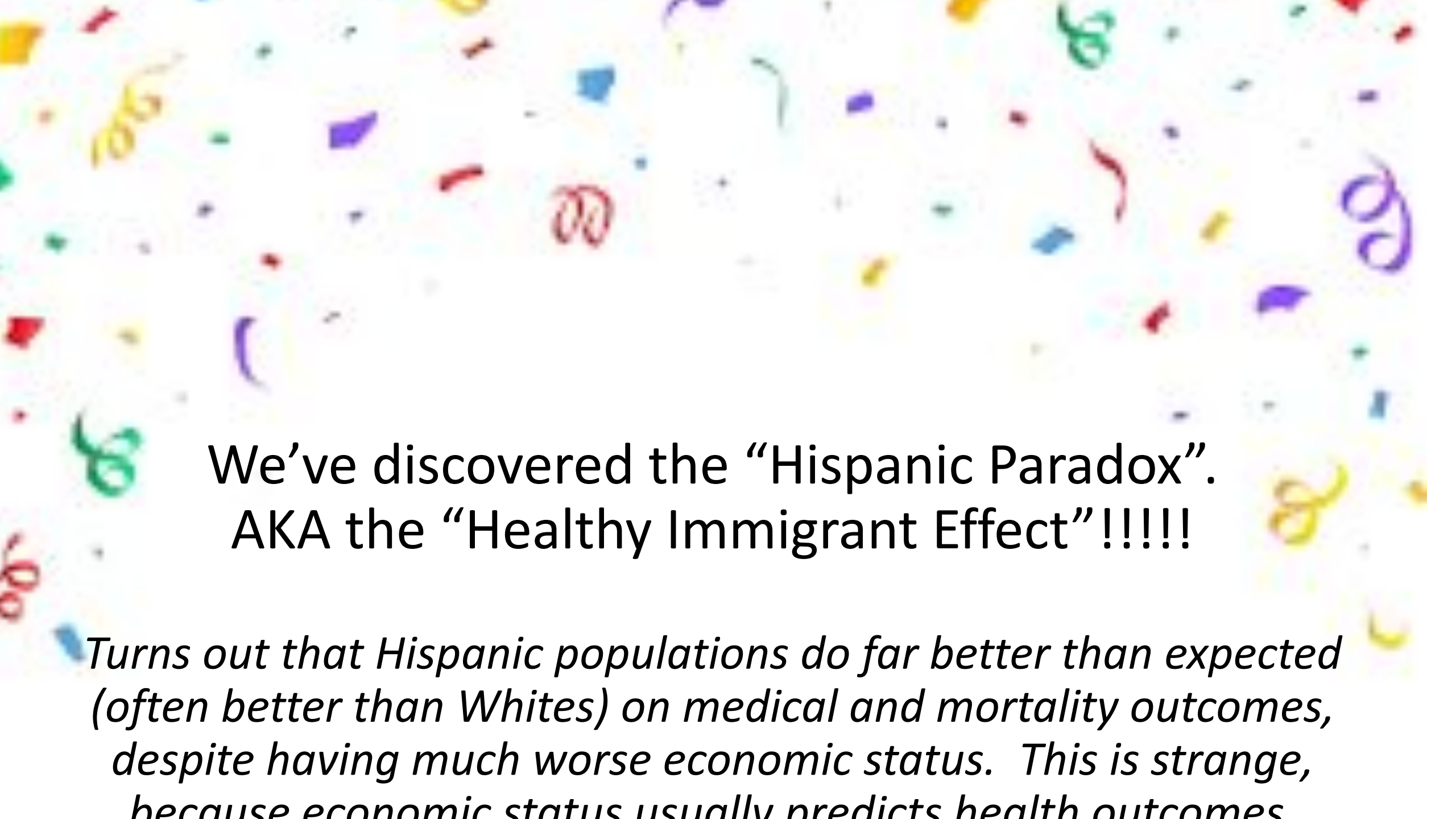
"That's all Folks!"

But I think we forgot someone....

Hispanic Disparity Ratios

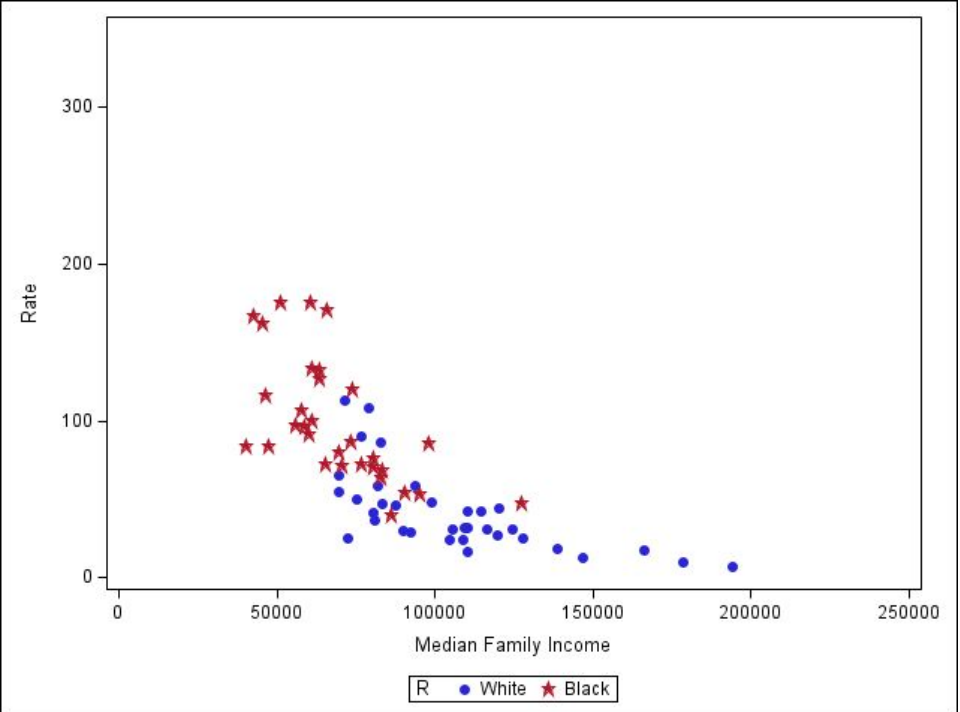


Hispanic kids face **much higher RISKS** than White kids, but have **somewhat similar OUTCOMES** as White Kids. One of those fairly similar outcomes is the rate at which they are reported to CPS.

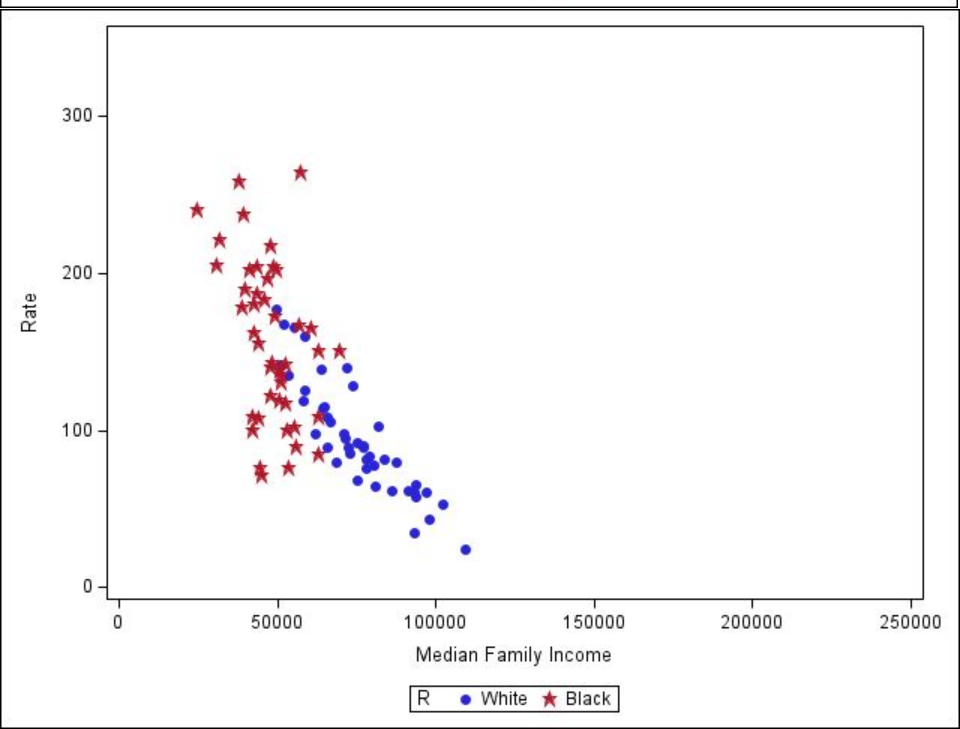
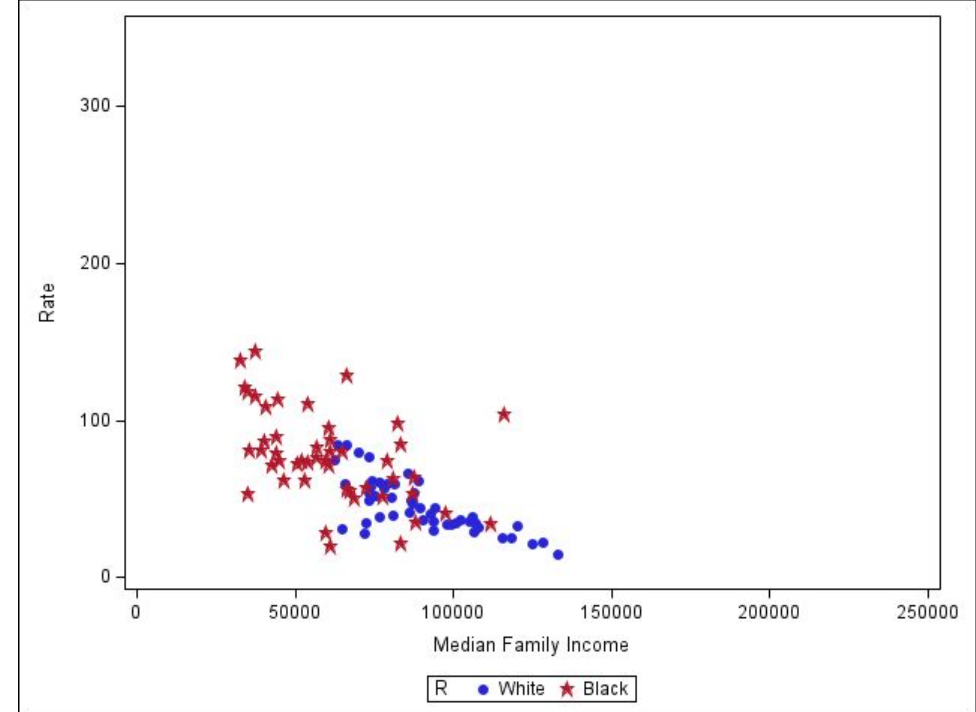
The background of the slide is a white surface covered with a dense distribution of small, colorful confetti pieces. The confetti includes various shapes and sizes of paper scraps in colors such as red, yellow, green, blue, and purple, creating a festive and celebratory atmosphere.

We've discovered the "Hispanic Paradox".
AKA the "Healthy Immigrant Effect"!!!!

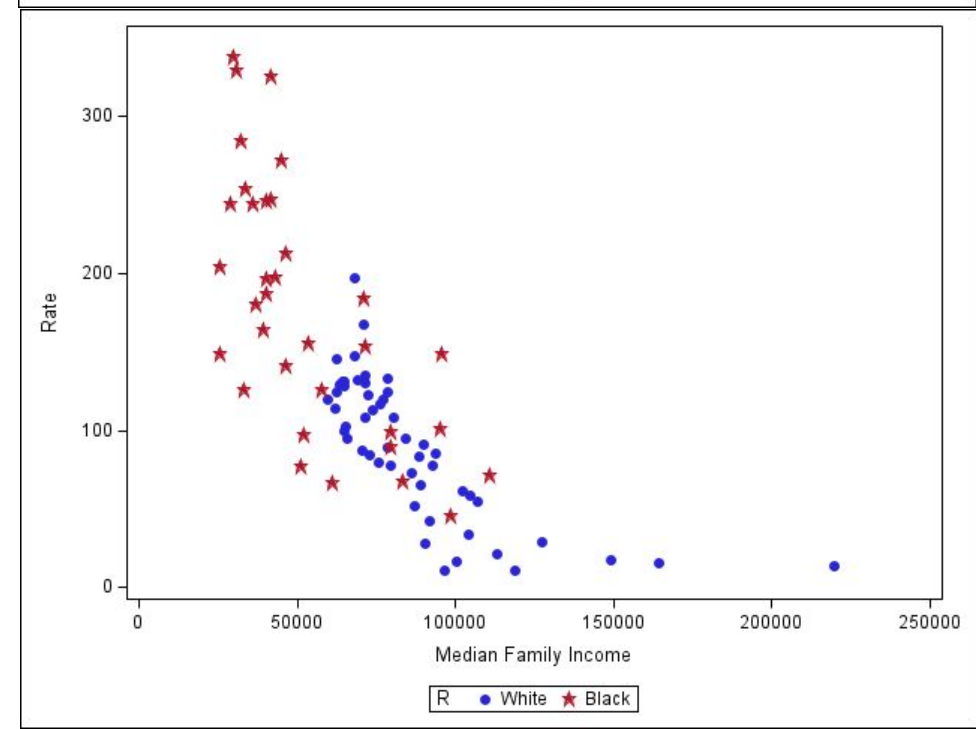
Turns out that Hispanic populations do far better than expected (often better than Whites) on medical and mortality outcomes, despite having much worse economic status. This is strange, because economic status usually predicts health outcomes

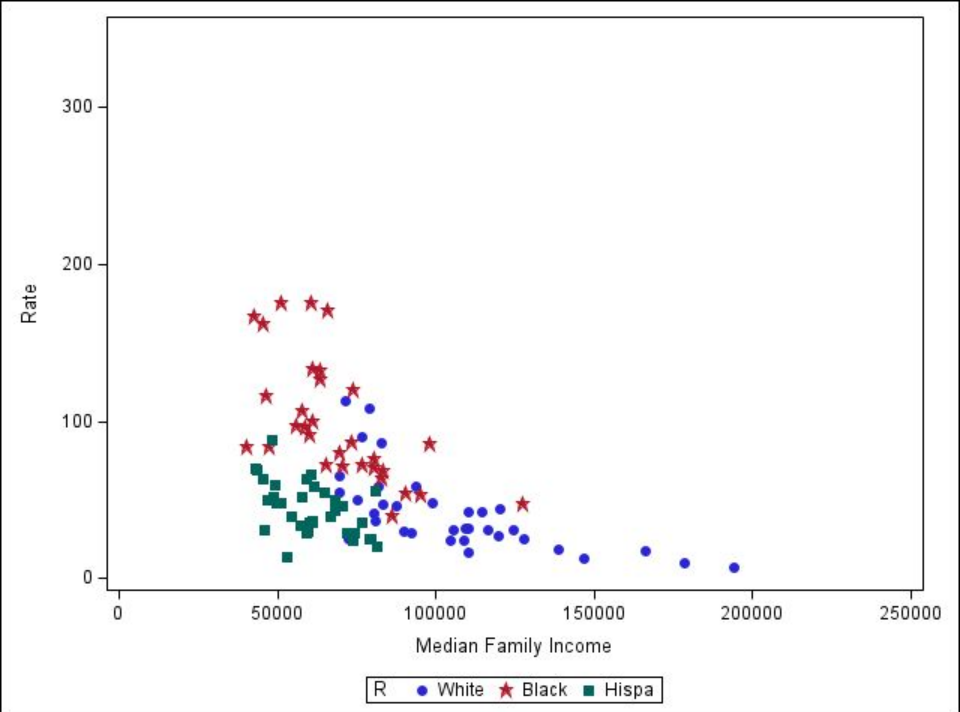


← California
Texas →

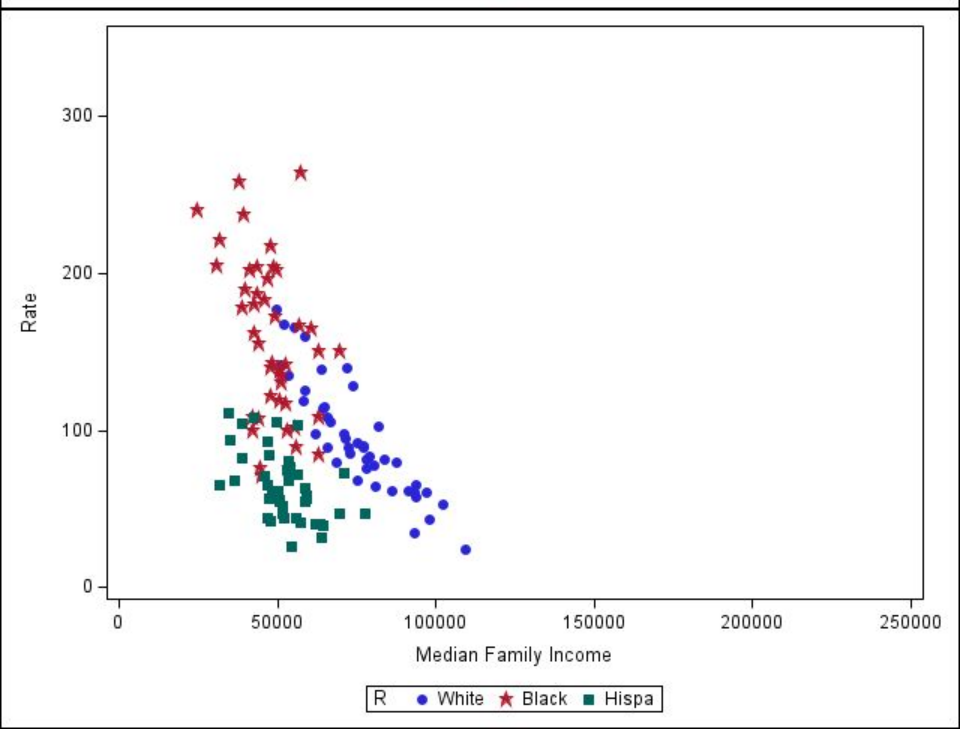
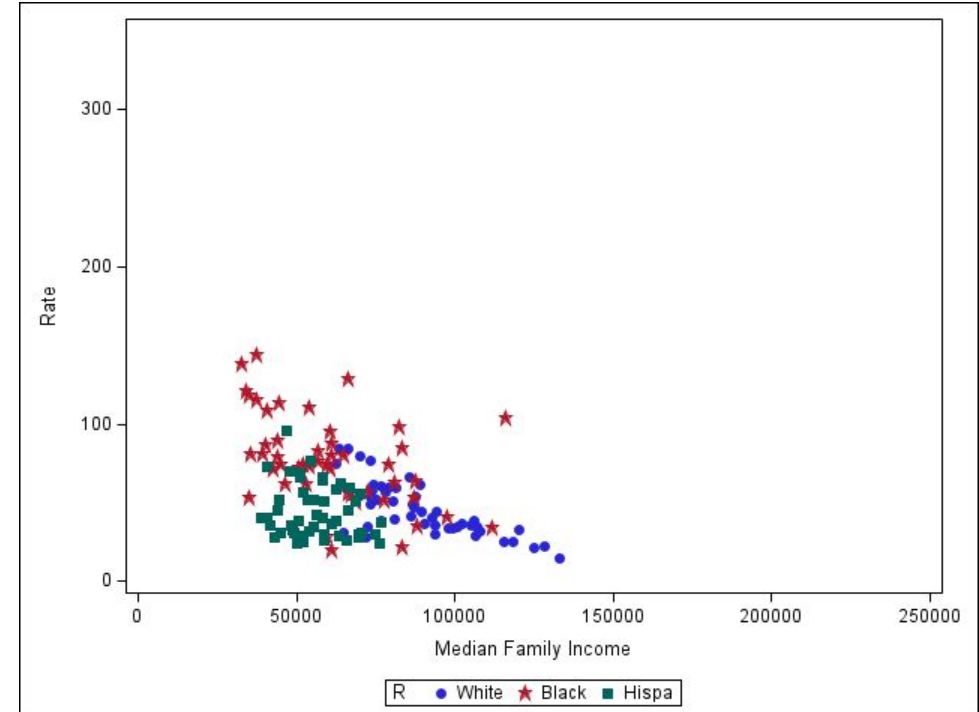


← Florida
New York →

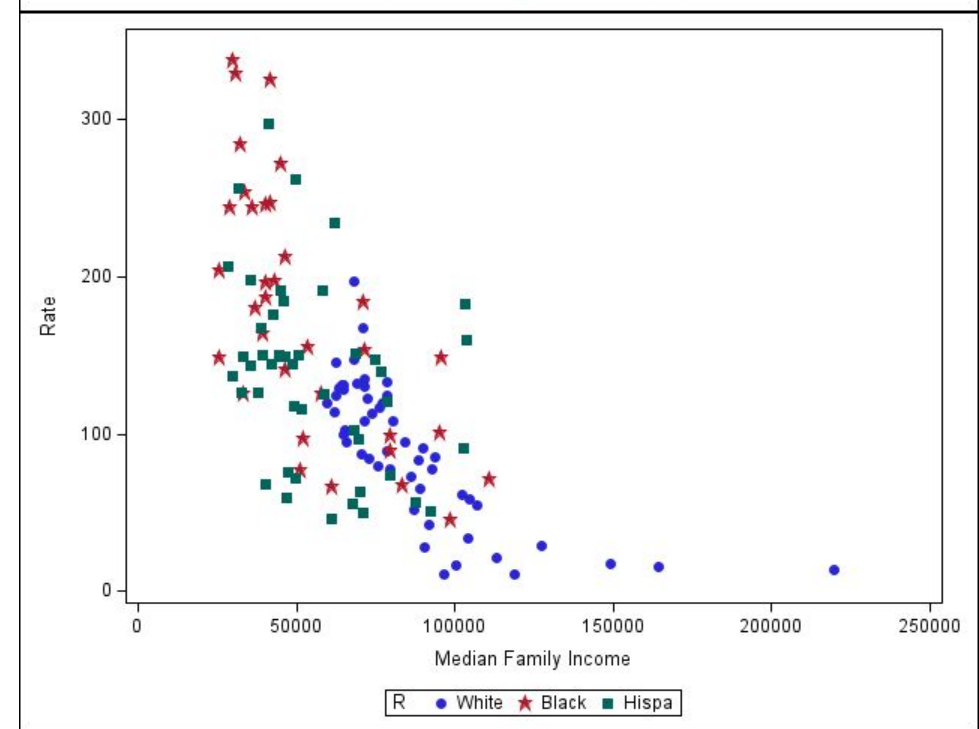




← California
Texas →



← Florida
New York →



In bunches and bunches of medical and social science studies, Hispanic kids face **much higher RISKS** than White kids, but very often have **somewhat similar OUTCOMES**. One of those fairly similar outcomes is the rate at which they are reported to CPS.

That's why these green squares are all down here and not higher up.

