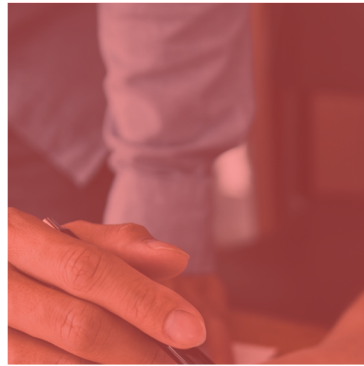


MAPPING DISPARITIES FOR BLACK FAMILIES PROJECT

# TECHNICAL REPORT DESCRIBING BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND METHODS





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## Background & Purpose

Black-White racial disparities in child welfare involvement and decision-making have been well-documented in the United States (Fluke et al., 2010; Kim & Drake, 2018; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021), and debate about both the drivers and the remedies for those disparities continues (Barth et al., 2020, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Evangelist et al., 2023). In Ontario, there is increasing concern about over-representation of Black children and families in child welfare (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2016; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018) and a small, but growing body of research that is documenting the magnitude and dynamics of disparities in child welfare involvement (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020, 2021; Bonnie et al., 2022; King et al., 2017). These studies have demonstrated that much of the disproportional and disparate representation of Black families can be explained by reporting practices driven by structural contexts, systemic anti-Black racism, and child welfare policies and standards (Mohamud et al., 2021).

Several studies have articulated how child welfare workers and workers in community-based organizations understand the context for and perception of Black families who come to the attention of the system and identified potential drivers of their overrepresentation (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2022; Cénat et al., 2021). Researchers have also documented the ways in which the experiences of Black youth, Black mothers, and Black child welfare workers in Ontario are characterized by racial targeting, surveillance, and disparities in treatment and outcomes (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Edwards et al., 2022, 2023; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Hasford, 2015). These studies reflect a persistent belief that anti-Black racism is at the root of these disparities, and yet few studies have identified how it operates and how it maps on to critical decision-making that can impact those differences.

Given that the organization of child welfare services in Ontario, where children's aid societies (CASs) are ministry-funded but independently run, much of the response to Black over-representation has been specific to the local context. There are benefits to this approach, especially where it allows for the meaningful development of partnerships between child welfare agencies and community-based organizations (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2021); however, the drawback has been a collection of decentralized regional services that have not been able to tackle the larger policy contexts that generate and sustain disparities in involvement, experience, and outcomes for Black children, youth, and families.

The purpose of the Mapping Disparities for Black Families (MDBF) Study is to address these gaps in knowledge and to identify inflection points in generating, maintaining, and exacerbating disproportionality and disparities for Black families in Ontario. More specifically this project explores how workers make decisions for and about Black families, how practice and policy guidelines or requirements influence those decisions, and the specific dynamics of decision-making at each juncture of the continuum (i.e., screening, investigation, ongoing services, placement, reunification).

## Methods

The goal of the MDBF study was to map the dynamics of decision-making and disparities as understood through front line practice. We sought to explore how professionals working within the child welfare system in Ontario understood their practice with Black children, youth, and families; to better understand the context of their decisions across the child welfare continuum; and to identify the ways in which both anti-Black racism and white supremacy operate in policy, practice, and decision-making. This qualitative study examines perspectives from child protection workers and supervisors, agency leaders, lawyers, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) specialists who participate in decision-making and focused specifically on their experiences with Black families involved in the system. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze individual interviews and focus groups with 79 professionals working across Ontario.

Phenomenology began as a philosophical investigation that concentrated on the nature of experiences from the perspective of the individual living the phenomenon (Connelly, 2010; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Phenomenological researchers investigate the characteristics and aspects of an experience utilizing interviews, stories, or observations with participants who are living the experience that aligns with the investigator's interest (Connelly, 2010). Utilizing IPA, researchers engage deeply in a process where participants are making sense of their reality, and the researcher is attempting to understand how the participant is making sense of their reality (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Tuffour, 2007). Below we describe the study procedures which are consistent with this approach. The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Review Board at the University of Toronto (RIS: 33090).

## **Recruitment**

The research team used two sampling methods to recruit participants for the study. First, a purposeful sampling method relied on the established networks of the research team and One Vision One Voice (OVOV). Potential participants were identified based on their experience and expertise working within child welfare system in Ontario. Members of the research team attended several community, research, and sector-wide events to support study engagement, recruitment efforts, and future dissemination activities. Study flyers were also circulated via professional social services associations and on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Second, a snowball sample relied on the networks and referrals of study participants (Emerson, 2015). Several participants shared that they believed participation in the study could support reforms to the current system, while other participants reported concerns about the current shifts in practice and wanted to make sure that diverse voices were represented in the study. As such, participants were willing to share the study flyer and project details with their colleagues. The intention of the recruitment strategy was to engage with child welfare professionals across the child welfare continuum, but we found that far more participants were interested in the study than had been anticipated.

## **Data Collection and Procedures**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on previous research studies that explored issues of racial disparities for Black families and towards the goal of generating an in-depth understanding of the experience of child welfare practitioners as they navigate working with Black families. Questions (see Table 1) were theoretically grounded in IPA and supported the exploration of workers' experiences with respect to: 1) their observations and patterns working with Black families; 2) how policy and protection standards shape decision-making; 3) how their understanding of culture influences practice and decision-making; 4) the impact of supervisors and agency context; and 5) how anti-Black racism, anti-oppression, and/or EDI trainings shifted their perspective on practice with Black families. We tailored these questions to each major decision point, particularly when conducting interviews with workers from a designated area of practice (e.g., investigations, ongoing services). Tailored questions would focus on the decisions workers are required to make in that area. For example, we asked ongoing workers how they made decisions about whether to do an announced visit or remove a child to a place of safety.

**Table 1: General Interview Guide**

QUESTION	PROMPTS	FOLLOW-UPS OR NOTES
Let's start by talking about your experiences in your role or previous roles before this.	<i>Prompts: Has your experience been generally positive or negative? What do you appreciate about your work?</i>	
What prompted your interest in this study?	<i>Prompt: Why did you decide to participate?</i>	
Describe your experiences working with Black families.	<i>Prompt: What are some positives? Challenges?</i>	
What patterns are you noticing in your work with Black families?	<i>Follow up question: Is it different from other families? If yes, then how?</i>	
What are you observing about decision-making for Black families? How are you making decisions about whether to (key decision point in this role)?	<i>Prompts if needed: what are factors that influence your decision? What are you considering? What are some tensions for you as you make your decisions?</i>	<i>Refer to the continuum table for description of key decision points in the participant's role.</i>
What role do Protection Standards (eligibility spectrum, safety and risk assessments) play in your practice and/or decision-making?		<i>Refer to the continuum table for key policies associated with the participant's role.</i>
How do compliance standards and timelines impact your practice and/or decision-making with Black families at (the participants' role in the child welfare service continuum)?		<i>Refer to the continuum table for key policies associated with the participant's role.</i>
Does culture influence your practice and/or decision-making with Black families?	<i>Prompt: If so, how? If not, how? Prompt: What are some examples of when you've integrated cultural factors?</i>	<i>Follow up question/discussion of which culture: how does your culture/the culture of the family/Black culture (acknowledge diversity in that)/culture of the agency/team influence decision-making?</i>
Has anti-Black racism/anti-oppressive/equity, diversity, and inclusion training impacted practice and/or decision-making for you in your role working with Black families?	<i>Prompt: If so, then how? If not, then why? Describe the common themes of those training approaches to help them cite examples.</i>	<i>Follow up: Do you think it is important/necessary to integrate an anti-Black racism/anti-oppressive/equity, diversity, and inclusion lens? If so, how are you supported in that effort? If not, how does the requirement that you do so impact your practice?</i>
How have supervisors/managers/agency policies impacted practice and/or decision-making for you in your role with Black families?		
Given our discussion thus far, how do you navigate all of these dynamics?	<i>Prompts: Examples of dynamics – interpersonal, policies, timelines, workload, agency culture, structure, etc.</i>	

Before interviews were scheduled, prospective participants' interest and eligibility were assessed at the beginning of a larger survey. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be employed by an Ontario CAS for at least one year from 2017 onwards or work in a role which informs or dictates child welfare decisions (e.g., lawyer, advisory) within the same period. Given that the Child and Youth Family Services Act was last amended in 2017 (the legislation which guides child welfare practice) and that it is seen as a potential driver of racial disparities for Black families, we only included participants with more recent knowledge and practice.

Eligible participants were asked to provide informed consent and then completed a survey to collect demographic, agency, and job function information. In addition, participants provided contact information to be scheduled for an interview. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. At the beginning of the interview or focus group, which were all held via Zoom, the consent form was verbally reviewed, and we again received verbal informed consent. Interviews and focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants had the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms or were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. After the interview or focus group was completed, participants received a \$25 visa gift card and OVOV-themed gifts.

## **Participants**

Between April 2022 and January 2023, trained researchers conducted 61 in-depth semi-structured interviews and four focus groups that lasted approximately 90 minutes each. In total, there were 79 participants. Table 2 provides demographic and role-related information about the participants. The average age of participants was 43.5. The majority of participants identified as female, and two-thirds identified as Black. Just under half of participants were born outside of Canada. Over half reported having a graduate degree (Master's) and the majority were trained as social workers (at either the Bachelor's or the Master's level). In terms of their experience within the child welfare system, the average number of years working with or in the system was just over 14 and the vast majority were currently working at a CAS. Most participants worked on the front lines as workers or supervisors, with more in ongoing services and out-of-home care than screening or investigations. The rest worked in roles related to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) or in leadership or specialized roles within and adjacent to the system.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Participants**


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<b>Demographic</b>	
Age	43.5 (range: 25, 72)
Gender	
Female	87%
Male	13%
Race/Ethnicity (not mutually exclusive)	
Black	67%
White	27%
First Nations, Métis, Inuit	5%
Latin American	5%
Asian	5%
Country of Birth	
Canada	54%
Caribbean country	23%
African country	10%
Other country	13%
Education	
Bachelors	34%
Masters	54%
Other	11%
Discipline	
Social Work	70%
Other discipline (e.g., law, child and youth care)	30%
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<b>Practice Experience</b>	
Number of years in CW work	14.3 (range: 2, 40)
Currently working in CAS	90%
Primary practice area	
Screening/intake	8%
Investigations	14%
Ongoing services	28%
Out-of-home care	14%
Equity, Diversity, Inclusion	20%
Leadership/specialized	16%

## **Analysis**

All interviews were digitally recorded using Zoom, transcribed verbatim using a transcription service, and checked for accuracy by the research team. Filler words such as 'uh', typographical errors, identifying names, and locations were all excluded for coherence and to protect the confidentiality of participants. Dedoose software was used to manage the data and support the analysis.

Consistent with IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2007), three members of the research team began the coding process by completing in-depth reviews of eight randomly selected interviews. This process involved reading the transcript several times, and then conducting a more in-depth review where researchers annotated passages that were particularly interesting or significant. In a second review, those notes were transformed into more concise emergent themes. A chronological list of emergent themes was ultimately "reduced" into clustered themes. The three members then met to discuss their process and generate a cohesive codebook based on the clustered themes in their in-depth reviews, which was refined further as coding and analysis proceeded.

Data were coded and organized into high-level themes that were largely organized around the questions listed in Table 1 and the clustered themes identified during the coding process. This has resulted in an incredibly rich dataset that speaks to the complexity of the issue of disparate involvement, treatment, and outcomes for Black children, youth, and families involved in the Ontario child welfare system. The data will be able to identify inflection points and key decisions across the child welfare continuum and the ways in which anti-Black racism (ABR) and white supremacy are operationalized in child welfare policy and practice.

## **Analyzing and Mobilizing the Findings**

The intersection of practice and policy concerns, leadership challenges, workforce issues, and systemic and structural issues outside of the child welfare system demands a multi-pronged approach to understanding these dynamics and generating solutions. The MDBF study data offer the opportunity to bring in-depth knowledge and experience to critical questions about how decisions are made for and about Black families. In July 2023, the research team and OVOV collectively reviewed high-level themes from the preliminary findings report and prioritized four key areas or themes for deeper analysis and consultations with the

field beginning in Fall 2023. Given the extent of the data and potential changes in the priorities of the field, the MDBF project team will identify additional priorities for a similar process in subsequent years. In 2023-2024, the four areas were:

1. The impact of the Eligibility Spectrum on decision-making
2. Investigations focused on physical harm, abuse, and/or discipline
3. The role of supervision in decision-making
4. The impact of poverty and socioeconomic status on child welfare involvement and decision-making

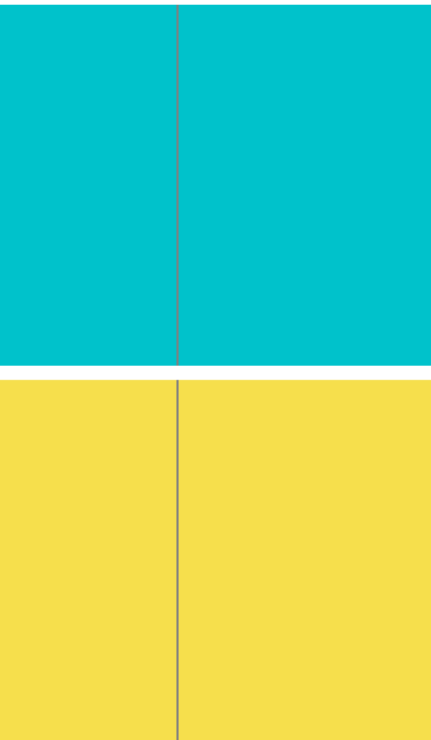
For each area, the research team analyzed all related codes and themes and developed a preliminary findings presentation. Then the MDBF team invited key community-based representatives and participants in the study to participate in a consultation process. The process improved the validity of the data and the analysis (a process called member-checking), but importantly, the goal of the consultations was to refine the analyses and the interpretation of findings, as well as generate potential implications of the findings and recommendations for addressing the identified concerns. The finalized analysis and recommendations will be compiled and disseminated to the sector in the form of public reports and information sheets released by OVOV and further presentations as requested.



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