

MAPPING DISPARITIES FOR BLACK FAMILIES PROJECT

FINDINGS RELATED TO ALLEGATIONS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE





Authors

Travonne Edwards
 Bryn King
 Gloria Ukwu
 Teresa Gallina
 Lakeisha Bennett
 Andre Laylor
 Keishia Facey
 Vania Patrick-Drakes

Organizational Support

- One Vision One Voice
- Youth Wellness Lab
- Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work

Suggested Citation: Edwards, T., King, B., Ukwu, G., Gallina, T., Bennett, L., Laylor, A., Facey, K. & Patrick-Drakes, V. (2025). *Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project: Findings related to allegations of physical abuse*. One Vision One Voice: Toronto, ON.

Purpose of the Project

The overall purpose of the Mapping Disparities for Black Families (MDBF) Project is to understand how anti-Black racism manifests within the child welfare system and to identify key areas where disparities emerge, are maintained, and can be meaningfully addressed with substantive policy, organizational, or practice change. This work is done through a partnership between One Vision One Voice (OVOV) and researchers at the Youth Wellness Lab, which is housed at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

Methods

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 79 participants working within the Ontario child welfare system, focusing on decision-making across the continuum of child welfare involvement. Participants had generally been working in child welfare for many years (the average was just over 14 years of service) and 70% were social workers. Their roles fell into six major categories: intake/screening (8%), investigations (14%), ongoing services (28%), out of home care (14%), equity, diversity, and inclusion (20%), and leadership or other specialized roles (16%). Most identified as cis-gendered female (87%), and 67% identified as Black, followed by another 27% who identified as white. Just over half had been born in Canada (54%), with another 33% reporting that they immigrated to Canada from African or Caribbean countries.

The research team used Interpretive Phenomenology to understand how participants experienced working with Black families and what influenced their decision-making (Smith & Eatough, 2007). More specifically, we asked about participants about their overall experience in their work; their specific experiences and observed patterns working with Black families; decision-making for Black families based on their role in the continuum; and the impacts of policies, protection and compliance standards, supervision, training, agency culture, and family/community culture on decision-making. The major themes that were identified in the preliminary analysis loosely aligned with the structure of the interviews, but future analyses will continue to deepen these themes to identify key mechanisms that contribute to disparities for Black families.



The research team and OVOV prioritized several areas for further analysis and consultation with community-based representatives and experts in the field. 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. As previously described, the goal of this work was to both map the areas of practice and decision-making that create, sustain, or exacerbate disparities and to identify potential opportunities to interrupt these patterns and contribute to safety and well-being for Black children, youth, and families.

For more details about the study design and methods, please see the MDBF Technical Report (King et al., 2025).

Why Allegations of Physical Abuse?

Physical abuse allegations are a documented driver of Black families being reported and served by the Ontario child welfare system and a major contributor to their overrepresentation within the system (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021; Bonnie et al., 2022; Cénat et al., 2021; King et al., 2017). Despite making up only 7% of the child population in Ontario, the Ontario Incidence Study conducted in 2018 (OIS-2018) found that Black children represented 14% of all child welfare investigations (Bonnie et al., 2022). Further, 27% of investigations involving Black children had a primary concern about physical abuse, compared to 17% of those involving white children, yet investigations involving Black children were no more likely to have documented instances of physical harm related to the investigated allegation than those involving white children (Bonnie et al., 2022). This study also found that schools were a referral source for 43% of child maltreatment investigations involving Black children while being only 28% for those involving white children. In an earlier study using OIS-2013 data, physical abuse investigations initiated by schools were less likely to result in a transfer to ongoing child welfare services compared to other investigation reasons, and this difference was more pronounced for investigations involving Black children vs. white (King et al., 2017).



One potential explanation for these disparities is the introduction of a risk of harm standard to the definition of a child in need of protection. After key changes to the Children and Families Services Act (CFSA) and the implementation of the Ontario Risk Assessment Model (ORAM), which included the Eligibility Spectrum (ES), the rate at which Black families were investigated quadrupled (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020). The ES operationalized the risk of physical harm standard to potentially include physical discipline that may cause injury and threats of physical harm (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2024). Eligibility for a child welfare investigation for concerns about physical discipline as outlined in the ES is a threshold that differs from federal policy. Section 43 of Canada's Criminal Code permits "reasonable" physical force provided that the behaviour falls within a determined set of parameters (Criminal Law and Managing Children's Behaviour, 2021). Research has documented that Ontario has investigated and substantiated families for physical abuse based on behaviour that falls within these limits (Durrant et al., 2017), reinforcing the conflicting expectations between these statutes.

Physical discipline and physical abuse can be found along a continuum of behaviours that are physically aggressive (Gershoff, 2002). The use of physical discipline has been a controversial parenting strategy and has been documented to pose significant risk to children according to research, resulting in increased aggression, psychological issues, and anti-social behavior (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Smith & Mosby, 2003). Despite both physical abuse and physical discipline involving intentional use of force, abuse has the deliberate outcome of injury whereas discipline's ultimate outcome is to correct a behaviour (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; United Nations Committee of the Rights of the Child, 2007). Scholars have argued that anti-Black racism contributes to the misinterpretation of Black parents' use of physical discipline or verbal threats as abuse, leading to disproportionate referrals to child welfare agencies (Antwi-Boasiako, 2020). Given the dynamics of school reports of physical abuse involving Black children, the role of bias may be particularly pronounced for school personnel charged with a duty to report.



What did we find?

Participants in the study responded to questions about their experiences working with Black families and observed patterns in practice and decision-making for Black families in the child welfare system. There were consistent responses related to how and why Black families were reported and investigated for concerns about physical abuse, physical harm, and physical discipline, and much of these responses focused on the idea that many Black families are experiencing contact and prolonged involvement with the child welfare system because of their actual and potential use of physical discipline. These responses coalesced into four major themes: 1) the Social, Historical, and Cultural Context of Parenting and Physical Discipline Among Black Families; 2) Navigating Contradictions in Federal Law and Provincial Child Welfare Policy; 3) Educators Over-reporting Black Families for Threats of Physical Harm; and 4) Reimagining Child Welfare Intervention through the Duty to Support and Community Links. More comprehensive analyses of these findings and their implications are available by request to the research team.

Theme 1: The Social, Historical, and Cultural Context of Parenting and Physical Discipline Among Black Families

Participants emphasized that culture and immigration influenced disciplinary practices for some Black families, considering that many other countries have not prohibited the use of physical discipline, however, they also highlighted the risks of upholding cultural beliefs surrounding physical discipline. It was noted that many newcomer Black families were aware of the pervasive issues of anti-Black racism in Western societies and child welfare, which influenced their resistance and skepticism of recommendations or expectations of workers. Many participants also expressed that some Black families encountered challenges in raising and disciplining their children in a society where children's rights were prioritized over parental authority.



[There may not be the] intent to harm the child, there's just a difference in how I [correct] my child. Once you understand culture, I think you can have better grounds to start your conversation, compare cultures, or speak about what are the rules here in Canada [pertaining to] corporal punishment.

Carin, Investigations, white

In addition, child protection professionals shared that the child welfare system often intervenes quickly, harshly, and intrusively in response to allegations of physical abuse. Many interventions lacked cultural sensitivity, ignored cultural differences, and failed to empathize with Black immigrant parents who may not be aware of Canadian laws and child welfare's positions on physical abuse. Workers described how interventions evoked fear in Black parents because they were punished for raising their children in ways they understood to be caring and true to their culture.

"There are three sets of parents. You have [parents] that don't care what you do. Sometimes it's a deeply held cultural belief — they'll never change and challenge you to the bitter end. You have parents who are very apologetic and they're willing to work and improve the situation. You have [parents] who are very suspicious of the society based on the institutional discrimination and racism. We are not going to be able to rebuild that confidence and they're very skeptical about working with us. We'll say, don't use physical discipline, and then they'll come back and say, "Okay, I physically disciplined my kids yesterday, and [they're] still not going to school, still not listening, and still arguing at home." We have those three different personalities at work [but we have to] meet them midway, find out what works for them, and build from it."

Preeyah, Out-of-home Care, Black

A related concern raised by participants was the need for child welfare workers to develop a conscious understanding of colonialism, anti-Black racism, immigration, and intergenerational parenting practices. Participants shared that Black parents believed they were using physical discipline out of love and a desire to protect their children from a society entrenched in anti-Black racism. Workers described a continuum of physical discipline and abuse, and they underscored the importance of recognizing that some children are “beaten” (abused) while others are “spanked” (disciplined). Furthermore, child protection professionals voiced concerns that the child welfare system’s zero-tolerance policy for physical discipline appears to be selectively enforced, primarily targeting Black families.

“There’s zero-tolerance for [physical discipline] but what’s interesting is that it’s not for everybody. It would have to be very severe for them to remove white children for physical discipline. There’s this understanding that a spanking and the course correction from white parents is normal versus when it comes from a Black parent, it’s seen as lethal. The line of negotiation is not there.”

Julius, Leadership/Specialized, Black

It was also emphasized that there must be an international perspective regarding immigration, culture, and the uses of physical discipline. Child welfare professionals asserted that workers often fail to understand that for many Black families, physical discipline is being employed as a means of demonstrating love and care by correcting problematic and potentially high-risk behaviour.

“I think there’s a white approach to the idea that if you physically discipline your child, you can’t love your child. There might be these children that are having a difficult time in school and then they say that the child’s worried about being physically disciplined. Like, can they wrap their mind around the idea of a parent trying to get this child in line through physical discipline? There’s love there, and I see this as a protective factor.”

Malachi, Intake/Screening, Black

Theme 2: Navigating Contradictions in Federal Law and Provincial Child Welfare Policy

Participants highlighted the contradictions and “loopholes” in navigating Canada’s Criminal Code, which allows for reasonable force by parents and caregivers under specific parameters under Section 43, and provincial child welfare law and policy, which hold that physical discipline that presents a risk of physical harm requires a child protection investigation. Participants described their awareness of Section 43’s definition of reasonable use of force and how to differentiate it from potentially serious physical abuse allegations. They often emphasized that even when they agreed that physical discipline had the potential to cause harm and there was a need for more effective disciplinary alternatives, they were concerned about the ways that the zero-tolerance policy was communicated to Black families.

“It’s hypocritical that we’re giving the strong message without telling families that they have these rights. Most experienced workers know [about Section 43]. I think that we’ve just been conditioned within child welfare to operate from this place of superiority where irrespective of what the Criminal Code says, this is the message that we’re giving. We operate from a very risk-averse position. We check off that we told them that we don’t condone physical discipline, put it in our note and [they’re] safe. I never agreed with that. The reason being is whether you have a philosophy that you believe in physically disciplining kids or not — that’s a personal choice; but when you’re talking about child welfare intervention and us having the right and authority to intervene in people’s life, the Criminal Code allows for some use of physical discipline. There are parameters around that. What we’re telling families is contrary to the [law].”

Melissa, Ongoing Services, Black

Furthermore, participants reported that while many child welfare professionals would withhold information regarding Section 43 due to the zero-tolerance policy, some would warn Black parents about the consequences of using physical discipline, including and especially potential police involvement and criminal charges. They also emphasized that supporting and advocating for the family becomes challenging once the police are involved in a case where the risk of disproportionate and disparate punishment can increase.

“They’ll say in my country my parents use to do the same thing to me. I explain it’s not effective. The message they’re sending is that if physical force was going to solve the problem yesterday, the child would not be doing the same thing today. We explain to [Black parents] whether you use a belt, fist, or pen — the police don’t care. It’s still an object and they’re charging you for assault with a weapon. We talk about the consequences that they’re risking being charged with the police. It’s [not] worth it.”

Preeyah, Out-of-home Care, Black

Other participants believed that it was their responsibility to educate Black families about the distinctions between the definition of reasonable force under Section 43 and Children’s Aid Societies’ (CAS) zero-tolerance policy for physical discipline, as well as the potential risks of police involvement. Ultimately, many believed that CAS’s zero-tolerance approach to physical discipline was enforced more often and more punitively with Black families than white families, resulting in higher rates of more intrusive involvement and legal responses.

“There are laws for physical discipline that allow parents to be charged the minute that they use an object, but how we perceive Black families in comparison to white families is different. People coming from whatever country they’re not necessarily aware of the laws and the consequences. And I always like to say, white Canadians do use physical discipline as well. It’s not that only Jamaicans and only Trinidadians and only Nigerians use physical discipline. Not like people have these horrible tempers and they have to beat their children — that’s not what we’re seeing. People are trying to engage in corrective practices with their children to keep them on the straight and narrow to prevent them from being further susceptible to anti-Blackness as they continue to grow in our society. Then through our work we have zero-tolerance for that. We’re not doing proper advocacy, and then parents are getting charged. What happens when you get charged? Automatic no-contact orders, so what do we end up doing? Apprehending, which is now talked about bringing the child to safety, a place of safety, right?”

Malika, EDI, Black

Theme 3: Educators Over-reporting Black Families for Threats of Physical Harm

Participants highlighted how the low threshold for reporting risk of physical harm was a potential cause of disproportionate reports for physical abuse allegations by educators. They described how educators commonly misinterpret the claims of Black children and youth, reporting them as allegations of physical abuse and emphasized the importance of distinguishing between an occurrence of physical abuse and the potential for physical discipline. It is important to note that though discipline might be on the horizon, it may not actually involve physical discipline.

"I find more than half of the calls that are coming in are more of, I'm going to be physically disciplined. There's not a concrete incident. It's more of, oh, I got in trouble. Somebody telling the teacher I'm going to get beat or whatever. Then when we flesh it out, it's very different."

Simi, Investigations, Black

They argued that this practice could lead to unnecessary involvement for some Black families, especially when physical discipline is not a parenting strategy and there is no risk of physical harm. Some participants expressed the need to filter these allegations through a cultural lens and understand that these threats of physical discipline are often strategies to correct the behaviour of the child without actually spanking them.



“There are some cases that come into our purview that really should not be. That’s always a frustrating piece because then I have to work with families that have absolutely no need to be working with us. This is coupled with some of the language that kids will be like, ‘Oh, yes, my dad said that they were going to beat me, or whatever.’ It’s a bad translation sometimes. It’s just like, ‘I’m going to get the beats,’ when that’s not actually the case. A parent might have never ever laid their hand on their child, but that’s just part of the vernacular of their culture. It’s just being able to take that into account. I do understand that they’re super cautious a lot of time when kids say that because [educators] don’t want to be sending their kids home to get harmed. It’s a really fine balance.”

Kaitlyn, Investigations, Latin American

They believed that referrers, particularly educators, needed more information to help them identify the circumstances when a report for a concern about physical abuse or physical harm was required. They also emphasized the importance of educators gathering more context and communicating more with the child and the family to better understand if this was merely a threat or if this is a situation where physical discipline has been used.

“‘My mom said if you call home, she’s going to beat me.’ You say to the teacher, ‘What does that mean?’ [The teacher says,] ‘I don’t know. That’s what the kid said.’ [Worker says,] ‘Didn’t you ask them what they mean? You can ask them open-ended questions.’ Sometimes, we’ll say to the teacher, ‘Have a further conversation with the child. Don’t ask direct questions, but you can ask what does beaten look like? What does the child mean?’ When they ended up speaking to the parent, a child said that he told them that because he didn’t want the teacher to call his mom, not because he was going to get beat. How many times has that happened?”

Chanty, EDI, Black

Workers underscored the significance of educators using their relationships to have conversations with Black children and families about their concerns regarding maltreatment before deciding to report to CAS. They acknowledged that educators were particularly hesitant to talk to Black families about potential allegations for several reasons, including concerns about liability, fear of Black parents, and worries about disrupting positive relationships, but they highlighted that Black parents would likely prefer to have these conversations about their child with a teacher rather than a CAS worker.

The child might be fearful that there's a threat of harm, but when you break it down, the last time the child might have been physically disciplined was two years ago or never. Some of the teachers say they're happy at home, they're not reporting any other concerns, we have a good relationship with the parents and the family. They're always at school. Then why are you calling us? Call the family and have this conversation with them. You're the school system, so how about you use some of your resources to figure out what's going on?

Jerika, Investigations, Black

Theme 4: Reimagining Child Welfare Intervention through the Duty to Support and Community Links

The final theme focuses on the ways that child welfare agencies and workers are responding to physical abuse allegations related to the threat and use of physical discipline. In these individual and agency-level responses, participants were reimagining the approach to child protection and child well-being, which includes understanding the context of why and how Black families use or threaten to use physical discipline and the structural conditions (access to resources, socio-economic status, recent migration to Canada, anti-Black racism in other institutional settings, etc.) that increase the likelihood of child welfare involvement. Two approaches were highlighted in response to these issues: the "Duty to Support" in responding to reports from educators and leveraging community-based resources in lieu of an investigation using community links.

Given the high liability for not reporting concerns about physical harm or threats of physical harm, schools were historically instructed to immediately report all child maltreatment concerns to CAS. However, some participants argued that this pressure contributed to the trend in over-reporting Black families to the child welfare system. CASs have been challenged by the flow of disparate referrals for Black families, especially as there has been a sector-wide acknowledgement that over-representation is an urgent concern. Some agencies are committing to “pushing back” with respect to physical abuse allegations from schools, including being more conservative in the decision to investigate reports focused solely on the threat of physical discipline.

I've been at my agency for 15 years. When I started here, there were very few Black families, then there was an influx because of new developments. We saw the referrals from different schools spike exponentially. As a small child protection agency, we could see which schools were overreporting Black families. There were conversations about it, but then what do you do? Who checks that when it's a different system? We're much better at pushing back right now and asking some good front-end questions. That becomes a challenge too; really knowing how to ask those questions so you're not doing the thing where this is a Black family, so we don't investigate physical discipline because I do believe that's wrong. We're not going to that extreme, but we're also not opening everything because a Black child comes and says, 'I'm going to be in trouble.'"

Carin, Out-of-home Care, white

Participants highlighted that they are trying to empower teachers to build trusting relationships with Black families and acquire more context regarding the allegation before making a decision to report it. These efforts are done in hopes of circumventing child welfare involvement and mitigating disparities in referral rates for Black families, particularly with respect to concerns about physical discipline. Many workers referred to this as the “duty to support,” drawing from the legislative mandate known as the “duty to report” (CYSFSA, 2017). There has been receptiveness to this cultural shift by some educators, while others have been resistant.

“Historically, we’ve told schools, ‘Don’t ask, just take the information.’ Now we’re shifting it to we don’t want you to interrogate the kid, but just ask questions like, ‘Oh, you say mom hit you. Well, when did that happen? Why did she do that?’ Just to get a better idea of what’s happening. The duty to report is a huge thing for teachers. They’re like, ‘I have a duty to report.’ We’ve been doing a lot of work and going out to schools and the police stations and talking to people about the duty to report and support [emphasis added]. We’re not saying teachers have to go out and talk to their parents about, ‘Why are you hitting your kids,’ but instead being a support to the family as opposed to just calling right away when hearing a child’s got hit. I’m like, ‘You didn’t ask if they were okay or what happened? No, I just called you right away.’ I was like, ‘That’s not helpful because these children are trusting you. They’re sharing this information with you. You should use the natural flow of conversation. If somebody tells you something, ask ‘what happened? Why did this happen? Are you hurt?’ I don’t think the teachers realize that’s a trust thing. The child is saying, ‘Hey, this is happening to me. I trust you. I’m sharing this with you.’ We think there should be more of a build-a-relationship as opposed to just taking the information and running to give us a call. Some referrers are like, ‘Oh, my God, I didn’t know I could ask questions.’ Where there’s others that are very like, ‘No, I called you. I’ve done my part. It’s in your hand[s] now.’”

Mary, Intake/Screening, Black

Participants also expressed that they felt conflicted about how to effectively support Black families referred for allegations of physical abuse, given the contradictions between Section 43 and the zero-tolerance position of the system as well as over-reporting for threats of physical discipline. The need to support families from a cultural lens was emphasized, especially since participants believed that because they were afraid of being reported to a CAS, Black families didn’t know where to turn for help to address the issues that may give rise to the use of physical discipline or to develop alternative parenting strategies. Participants argued that new or non-severe allegations should result in a community link, which is a connection to an external community agency providing these critical social, cultural, and resource needs, in lieu of a child protection

investigation. They argued that the least intrusive response should guide decision-making as early in the process as possible. Several workers expressed that there has been a significant increase in Black-led organizations in their region doing work on physical discipline over the past years, which they find to be helpful for Black families.

"In these past couple of years, our resources for our Black families in this region has grown so much, which is great because it's mirroring the work that we're trying to do here at CAS. [I believe the interventions] are successful because one, we don't see them come back to our door...My former community links sometimes will call me back and say, 'You know what, thank you so much for hooking me up with this person,' or when I make another referral to that community agency, they'll say, 'You know what, the first person that you referred me to, they're doing great.' That's an indication of success for me."

Asheeka, Out-of-home Care, Black

Moreover, participants described a need for specialized education tailored to families who have recently immigrated to Canada, so parents understand the expectations and risks of using physical discipline and they can learn effective strategies to support their parenting. Workers noted the effectiveness of community organizations and leaders in conveying relevant messages about physical discipline, in addition to the importance of partnering with community agencies to provide preventative interventions and programming tailored to new Black immigrant families.

"I've asked for [support from] some community leaders so I can help my community without them being involved with the CAS, because once [Black families] get involved we have a mandate [to follow] and I can't help them as much as I need to —I'm confined with the hours that I'm given. If I can identify a [community agency] to support this mom who was struggling with discipline, I can go in there before things get escalated."

Chipo, Ongoing Services, Black



What are the Solutions?

In November 2023, the MDBF team held two consultations with community-based representatives about preliminary findings related to the physical abuse allegations involving Black families. The goal of these sessions was to discuss the findings in more detail, collectively contextualize those findings for further dissemination, and integrate participants' perspectives and recommendations for potential policy and practice solutions. Consultants in these sessions had substantial interest and experience as workers, supervisors, managers, and/or ABR and EDI leads. Their responses validated the data and our analysis, as well as highlighting aspects of the themes that were present in the data but hadn't been emphasized in our original presentation. Their critical feedback has been integrated into the findings presented above.

Community-based members also raised concerns and additional ideas that weren't present in the data, and several of those are integrated into the implications and recommendations from this analysis. In the context of the discussion on the findings and from specific questions to consultants about potential solutions to the issues raised by the findings, recommendations about practice, policy, and future research emerged.

Recommendation 1: Understand the Context of Physical Discipline among Black Families and the Potential Impact of Zero-Tolerance Policies

Consultants and participants emphasized the need for front-line workers who are supporting Black families to understand the cultural, social, and historical experiences that shape their parenting ideologies and practices, including the use of the physical discipline. They also argued that the use of physical discipline is not unique to Black families, but the zero-tolerance policy may be disproportionately enforced by CAS when there are allegations involving Black families. They expressed that CAS should not be distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable parenting behaviours without acknowledging relevant social, cultural, or traditional context and implications.

There is a need for provincial and agency policy to clearly articulate how the zero-tolerance approach to physical discipline may be in conflict with Section 43, which should then be explained to Black families. These dialogues with Black families should clearly describe the potential harms of physical discipline to children and youth, the risk of being charged by police if things go too far, and how police/court intervention may limit child welfare professionals' ability to support them. When discouraging the use of physical discipline, consultants and participants also believed there should be an emphasis on education, connection to community resources, and a supportive approach to working with Black families investigated for concerns about physical discipline.



Recommendation 2: Leverage and Invest in Community-Based Prevention and Early Intervention Services

Relatedly, community-based representatives recommended that Black families should be receiving culturally relevant, community-based services focused on alternative behavioural management and parenting strategies that present less risk to the child and the family. As much as possible, these services should be distinguished from CAS and child protection work, should be Black-led and community-based, and should be sources of support and education that are utilized before a referral is necessary or in lieu of initiating a child protection investigation (e.g., more universal prevention services, targeted education initiatives, community links). Many participants and consultants highlighted that these services are underfunded. As a result, public and agency investment in community-based services is necessary to ensure that child welfare workers have knowledge of and access to such supports and that agencies can meaningfully partner in the development and sustainability of these resources.

Recommendation 3: Revise the CYFSA to Clearly Define a “Duty to Support”

Participants and consultants underscored the importance of current efforts to “push back” on unnecessary or “trite” referrals, to empower educators to explore the context of potential disclosures related to physical discipline, and to collaborate with educators and community resources to address these parenting concerns instead of a more intrusive child protection investigation. Many consultants argued that the duty to report must emphasize that if you are going to report, you must also support. This ensures that referrers understand their responsibility to support the child’s best interests when making a report. They noted that the current mandate for professionals lacks accountability beyond the act of reporting, even when the report itself could present risk or harm a child and their family. Consultants pointed out that the threshold for reporting is low, requiring only a suspicion of a risk of harm to make a call, while the consequences of failing to report are high. This inconsistency between these thresholds, combined with the perception of CAS as experts who will investigate and determine whether abuse or maltreatment has occurred in any situation, may lead referrers to contact CAS unnecessarily. Defining a “duty to support” for both child welfare workers and potential referral sources within the legislation, they argued, could ensure a greater focus on assessing whether a potential report is necessary, protective, and beneficial to the child and the family.

Recommendation 4: Provide Training to Educators and Other Referrers to Reduce the Over-Reporting of Black Families

Consultants recommended that CAS workers collaborate with educators to discuss the documented history of anti-Black racism within Ontario's child welfare system, to understand the contradictions between federal law and the province's zero-tolerance policy, and to consider opportunities to engage with Black children, families, and communities in more supportive and less punitive ways. Moreover, consultants, along with participants, highlighted that in-service support, racial bias training, third party consultants/anti-Black racism leads, and professional development in schools and school boards could educate referrers on how to manage concerns about physical abuse, physical harm, and physical discipline more effectively.

Recommendation 5: Identify and Support Schools with High Referral Rates

Some consultants described differences in reporting rates by school and that certain schools are "repeat callers" (frequently making referrals), while others rarely do. They noted that schools with lower referral rates are actively working with parents, providing support through equity initiatives, and connecting them with community resources. Since there are potentially successful approaches to supporting Black families differently in schools, community-based representatives emphasized the importance of understanding these differences and why other schools have higher referral rates. They suggested that the schools with higher referral rates might need to focus more on equity, receive additional training in anti-Black racism, and be better supported in fulfilling their duty to report while also ensuring their accountability to the children, families, and communities they serve. They also highlighted potential avenues for public accountability, including utilizing existing mechanisms (i.e., professional colleges) or introducing new intermediaries to intervene when teachers or schools repeatedly engage in unnecessary reporting.

Recommendation 6: Seek Opportunities to Interrupt or Resist Anti-Black Racism

Consultants highlighted that front-line workers have power in how they respond to concerns about physical discipline, presenting them with the opportunity to interrupt anti-Black racism occurring across the child welfare continuum, but particularly at the intake and investigation stages. They highlighted where and how workers can exercise choice in how they work with Black families, and they emphasized the ways that advocacy, transparent communication, listening to families and respecting their parenting beliefs and their efforts to keep their children safe can all be considered acts of resistance. In order to make these opportunities to shift practice and responses to Black families more apparent and accessible, child welfare professionals at every level should seek out and utilize the resources already in place, including EDI and ABR consults, additional training, and equity-focused practice frameworks.



Conclusion

The findings from this analysis highlight the challenges of responding to disproportionate referrals of Black families for allegations of physical abuse. Participants believed that reports and investigations initiated by schools for concerns about the use of physical discipline and the threat of physical discipline were a key factor in the overrepresentation of Black children, youth, and families. They also identified the difficulty in navigating the discrepancy between a zero-tolerance provincial child welfare policy and the federal criminal law that allows for the use of physical discipline under specific parameters. In a current and historical context characterized by anti-Black racism and the cultural values that can influence parenting practices, participants and consultants identified recommended innovations to practice, policy changes, community-based partnerships, and trainings that could reduce over-reporting, increase transparency, engage community, and support Black parents in identifying and using parenting strategies that reduce risk to their children and families.

Acknowledgements

The authors and the MDBF team would like to express their gratitude for the generosity of our participants, who so openly shared their experience of their practice and decision-making in what is a very challenging work environment. We also want to thank the community-based representatives in our consultations, whose wisdom and critical eye helped us refine our analysis and develop potential solutions. Across all our interviews and consultations, it was clear that the people who dedicate themselves to working in child welfare are deeply committed to the safety and protection of children and youth, as well as their families and communities. Despite the concerns raised about the scope of child welfare intervention and the critique of policies and procedures that define practice, we honour their service.



Works Cited

- Antwi-Boasiako, K. (2020). *Disproportionality and disparity of Black children in the child welfare system of Ontario, Canada*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto (Canada)).
- Antwi-Boasiako, K., Fallon, B., King, B., Trocmé, N., & Fluke, J. (2021). Examining decision-making tools and child welfare involvement among Black families in Ontario, Canada. *Children and Youth Services Review, 126*, 106048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106048>
- Antwi-Boasiako, K., King, B., Fallon, B., Trocmé, N., Fluke, J., Chabot, M., & Esposito, T. (2020). Differences and disparities over time: Black and White families investigated by Ontario's child welfare system. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 107*, 104618. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104618>
- Bonnie, N., Facey, K., King, B., Fallon, B., Nicolette, J.C., Edwards, T., Kagan-Cassidy, M., Black, T., William, K., Patrick-Drakes, V., & Anucha, C. (2022). *Understanding the over-representation of Black children in Ontario child welfare services*.
- Cénat, J. M., Noorishad, P.-G., Czechowski, K., Mukunzi, J. N., Hajizadeh, S., McIntee, S.-E., & Dalexis, R. D. (2021). The seven reasons why Black children are overrepresented in the child welfare system in Ontario (Canada): A qualitative study from the perspectives of caseworkers and community facilitators. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00793-6>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Preventing child abuse and neglect. 2*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html>
- Criminal Law and Managing Children's Behaviour, (2021). <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/fv-vf/mcb-cce/index.html>
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199793358.003.0010>
- Durrant, J.E., Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., and Allan, K. Defining reasonable force: Does it advance child protection?. *Child Abuse & Neglect 71* (2017): 32-43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.02.018>
- Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 128*(4), 539-579. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.4.539>
- Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology, 30*(4), 453-469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>
- Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2005). Corporal punishment and the growth trajectory of children's antisocial behavior. *Child maltreatment, 10*(3), 283-292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559505277803>
- King, B., Edwards, T., Laylor, A., Chowdhury, R., Smith, C., Facey, K., & Patrick-Drakes, V. (2025). *Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project: Technical report describing background, purpose, and methods*. One Vision One Voice.

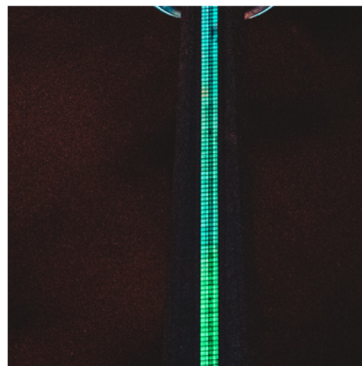
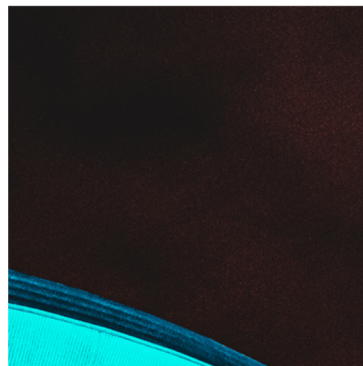
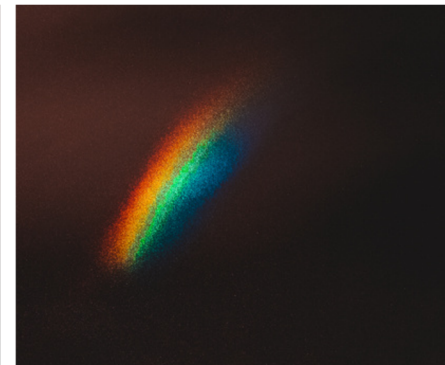
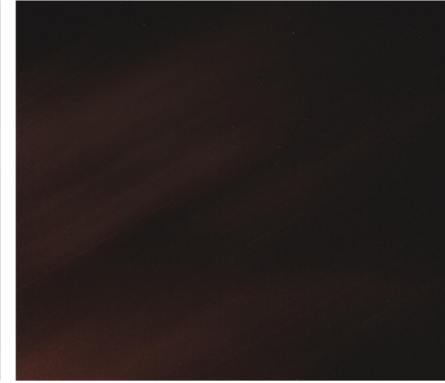
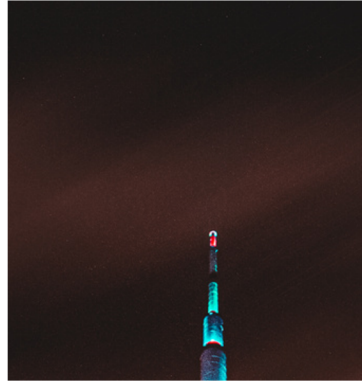
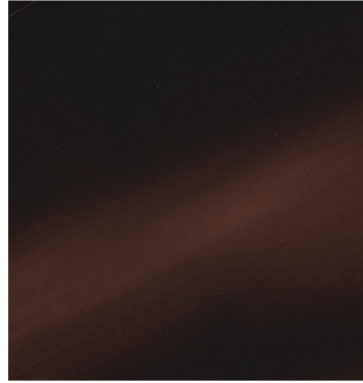
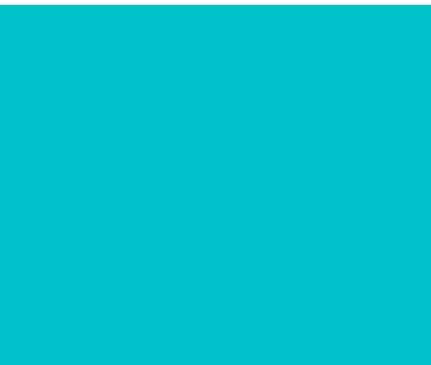
King, B., Fallon, B., Boyd, R., Black, T., Antwi-Boasiako, K., & O'Connor, C. (2017). Factors associated with racial differences in child welfare investigative decision-making in Ontario, Canada. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 73, 89–105. 13h.

Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. (2024). *Ontario child welfare Eligibility Spectrum*. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. <http://www.oacas.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Report-Eligibility-Spectrum-2024-FINAL-1.pdf>

Smith, J. A., & Eatough, V. (2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446207536>

Smith, D., & Mosby, G. (2003). Jamaican child-rearing practices: *The role of corporal punishment*. 38(150).

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2007). *The Right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (Arts. 19; 28, Para. 2; and 37, inter alia)*. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc7772.html>



Contact Us

For more information about this report or the MDBF project, please contact these project leads using the methods below.



Bryn King (Youth Wellness Lab/University of Toronto)

bryn.king@utoronto.ca

Vania Patrick-Drakes (One Vision One Voice)

vpatrikdrakes@oacas.org

