

How does race influence judgments about parenting?

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Disproportionately more black families than white families are reported and investigated for child abuse and neglect. And reports are more often substantiated for black children, who account for about a quarter of all substantiated victims of child maltreatment, and only 15 percent of the population of U.S. children.

The reasons for this disparity in maltreatment rates are much debated. Are rates driven by differences in poverty rates among racial and ethnic groups? Black families are much more likely to be poor, and poverty is highly correlated with child maltreatment. Do parenting behaviors differ according to race and culture? Or is there racial bias within state and local child protective services? Are black parents, that is, more likely to be charged with, and substantiated for, child abuse or neglect than white parents who act in the same way?

Despite discussion and speculation, there has so far been relatively little empirical investigation of racial bias in child maltreatment reporting. To be sure, empirical investigation is complicated by the heterogeneous nature of such reporting. Child protective service (CPS) systems rely on an army of volunteers—doctors, social workers, teachers, neighbors, relatives, and strangers—to report maltreatment. In 1999, only 55 percent of referrals came from professionals who had experience working with families and children. No studies have examined whether individuals without expertise, who comprise nearly half of all reporters, make racially biased judgments.

Those questions—how individuals form judgments about the parenting behavior of others, and whether these judgments are influenced by race—form the subject of the research summarized here.¹ Using data from a study of parents with young children, we explored if, and how, race enters into parents' self-reports and interviewers' assessments of parenting practices. We investigated the extent to which the race of the interviewer, in itself, and

in combination with the race of the parent, affects interviewers' judgments about the parenting behaviors they observe. What we found provides evidence of racial bias in assessments of some, though not all, measures of parenting behaviors.

Defining racial bias in investigations of child maltreatment

Substantiating child maltreatment is a complex process. First, a family must come into contact with someone who will potentially report an alleged incident of abuse or neglect to CPS. Second, that person must decide whether or not to file a report. Third, if a report is made and investigated, CPS must decide whether to substantiate the allegation of maltreatment. At that point, family court judges and caseworkers decide how the case should be resolved. Bias may come into play at any of these stages.

Race and class bias in child maltreatment are conventionally defined according to the points at which they occur. "Exposure bias" occurs when contact with potential reporters varies systematically according to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. For example, a higher proportion of black children may be more likely to come into contact with mandated reporters because of their greater rates of involvement with the welfare system and other government programs that serve the poor. "Reporting bias" describes whether members of some racial, ethnic, or income groups are more likely to be reported than members of other groups, even if their actions are no different. "Substantiation bias" carries this second form of bias through to the investigation phase—bias occurs if allegations are more likely to be substantiated for members of some groups than others, even if the information uncovered by the investigation is identical. Bias may likewise creep in when courts and officials decide whether to remove a child from the home, and for how long.

The sources of racial bias in child welfare cases

To help us understand the roots of racially biased decisions, theories of statistical discrimination offer a useful framework. These theories start from the premise that observers who have incomplete information about what has actually happened to a child in a particular situation

may rely on their assumptions about how parents of a particular group “typically” behave to infer whether or not a child has been maltreated. For example, a potential reporter may encounter a child with an injury that might have resulted either from an accident or from maltreatment. Reporters who believe, correctly or not, that black families are more likely to use physical discipline may be more likely to infer that the child has been maltreated if the child is black.

Reporters’ beliefs about typical behaviors may, in fact, be based on the true distribution of those behaviors in the population. If so, then reporters observing others of the same race would be no less likely to display racial bias than reporters of another race. But even reporters who do not hold stereotypical views of other racial groups may be ill-equipped to interpret cultural cues or to understand the meaning of behaviors they observe in families of a different background. If so, bias may be most common when families are being judged by observers of another race.

These perceptions suggest two important implications for racial bias in reporters’ judgments. The first is that judgments concerning an ambiguous situation are more likely to be racially biased than judgments in a clear-cut situation. The second is that the amount of racial bias will depend on the race of the observer *relative to the race of the observed*, because observers hold varying stereotypes about people of other races or groups. So we can learn quite a lot about the degree of bias in judgments by comparing white and black observers’ ratings of black and white families.

Testing for racial bias in judgments

Two distinct approaches have previously been used to examine the extent to which race enters into reporters’ judgments about family behavior. In one method, individuals such as medical professionals, teachers, or social workers are given a set of vignettes and asked to indicate whether a particular scene constitutes maltreatment. To test for racial bias, the researcher changes the race of the child, without altering any other element in the vignette, and examines whether this alters judgments about whether the vignette describes maltreatment. In the second method, the researcher reviews actual case decisions made by professionals who come into contact with children and families, to investigate whether children with similar situations but of different racial or ethnic backgrounds are treated differently.

The vignette method allows for better control over all elements of a scenario, but case reviews are likely to provide better information about actual behavior.² In general, vignette studies of hypothetical cases have found little evidence of racial bias in judgments, whereas evidence from case review studies has found evidence of bias. For example, one case review study found that mi-

nority toddlers with skull or long-bone fractures are more likely to be reported to CPS than white toddlers with the same type of injury.³ Similarly, black and low-income infants are more likely to be tested at birth for drug exposure than are infants from white or more affluent families, even though rates of prenatal substance use among racial and economic groups are similar.⁴

The empirical analyses we report here follow in the tradition of case review studies by examining actual judgments made by interviewers about the parenting behaviors they observed. The data were drawn from telephone surveys and in-home assessments conducted as part of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study. This longitudinal study began in 1998 with a baseline sample of about 4,800 births in 20 U.S. cities. The sample is racially diverse: 47 percent of the mothers in the original sample identified themselves as non-Hispanic black, 27 percent as Hispanic. For this study, we restricted our attention to non-Hispanic black and white families. Because the project oversampled nonmarital births, children in the sample are more likely to be poor, to have absent fathers, and to have mothers with low levels of education than children in a nationally representative sample. Children with these characteristics are more likely than others to be reported to CPS agencies.

These data have several advantages for our analyses. First, the data contain parents’ reports on their own behaviors; racial differences in these measures cannot easily be attributed to racial bias on the part of the interviewer. Second, they contain information on a large sample of black and white interviewers, most of whom interviewed both black and white parents. We can thus examine whether the judgments of individual interviewers vary depending whether a family is of their own or a different race.

The in-home assessment was conducted approximately three years after the child’s birth, and used both a questionnaire and a set of interviewers’ observations to assess many aspects of parenting, the child’s home environment, and mother-child interactions. There was no attempt to match black and white respondents with same-race interviewers; thus these matches were essentially random.⁵ Our analyses were based on a subsample of interviews involving 1,417 children (1,080 black and 337 white) for whom we know the race of the interviewer. Of these interviewers, 42 percent were black and 58 were white. From the in-home data we drew ten measures. Three of them were parents’ reports of the discipline strategies they used with their children; two reflected interviewers’ assessments of mothers’ interactions with their children. The other five measures comprised interviewers’ assessments of the characteristics and behaviors of mothers and children.

Because racial differences in parenting behaviors may be due to racial differences in income, education, family structure, maternal characteristics, and the like, our

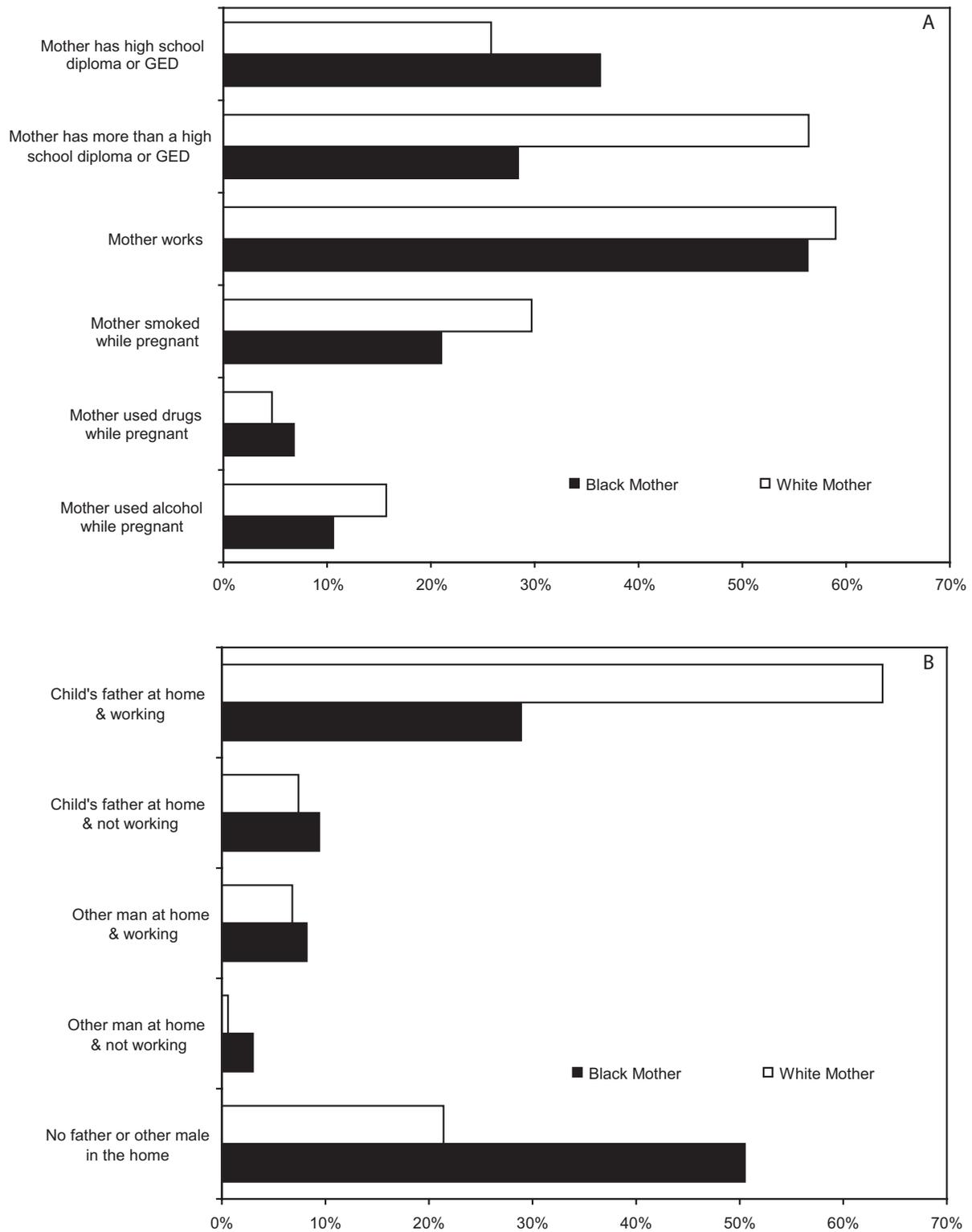


Figure 1. Some characteristics of Fragile Families survey participants, three years after child's birth. A. Mothers; B. Fathers.

analyses controlled for measures of family socioeconomic status and maternal characteristics: adjusted family income, numbers of children and adults in the household, mother's education and employment, and information regarding maternal depression and risky behaviors during pregnancy (Figure 1A). We included information on whether or not the mother lived alone, was

married, or cohabiting; and whether the father or other adult male living in the household was employed (Figure 1B).

In general, there were large differences in household and maternal characteristics between black and white households. Black families had more children (an average of

Table 1
The Effects of Maternal Race on Assessments of Parenting

OLS Models	Mother's Report of Lack of Nonviolent Discipline Strategies		Interviewer's Assessment of Maternal Harshness	
	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile
Model 1: Mother is Black	0.139**	0.052*	0.078**	0.068**
Model 2: Add sociodemographic characteristics to (1)	0.093**	0.019	0.021	0.023
Model 3: Add maternal depression and risky behaviors to (2)	0.085**	0.013	0.023	0.022

Note: Each cell shows the coefficient for “mother is Black” from a single OLS regression. *p<0.05; **p<0.01. City of residence is included in each model.

2.43 versus 1.96 in white households) and fewer adults (1.84 versus 1.99). They had considerably lower incomes than white families (mean household income of \$22,658 versus \$54,912), although just over half of mothers in each group were working. White mothers were better educated; twice as many white as black mothers had more than a high school education. Black mothers had higher mean depression scores; they were less likely than white mothers to smoke and drink and a little more likely to use drugs during pregnancy. Black mothers were also far more likely to be neither married nor living with a man.

How large a role does race play in assessments of parenting?

Are racial differences in outcomes explained by sociodemographic factors and maternal characteristics?

Using a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, we examined whether there were racial differences in the outcome measures that mothers and interviewers reported (see the box on p. 29 for a brief outline of these measures). We then asked whether such differences could, in part, be explained by characteristics other than race. When we took only the mother's race into account, ignoring sociodemographic and personal characteristics, we found that blacks were more likely than whites to have problematic scores on most parenting measures. This was true for both mothers' own reports and interviewers' assessments. For example, as shown in Table 1 (Model 1), black mothers were significantly more likely than white mothers to be at the high end of the scale (that is, to fall into the 75th or the 90th percentile) on both lack of nonviolent discipline strategies (mother-reported) and maternal harshness (interviewer assessed). However, when parents' socioeconomic circumstances were taken into account (Model 2), statistically significant racial differences largely disappeared. As might be expected, these sociodemographic characteristics did a better job of explaining the racial differences in the interviewer-assessed

measures than in the mothers' own reports. In contrast, maternal characteristics (Model 3), such as depression and risky behavior during pregnancy, explained very little of these racial differences. We found similar patterns across most of the other measures (not shown on table). For example, black mothers were more likely to be assessed as having lower verbal and social skills and less understanding of the interviewers' questions, but these effects were largely explained by sociodemographic characteristics.

Does the race of the interviewer affect assessments?

We used a similar set of ordinary least squares regression models to explore whether the race of the interviewer affected the assessments. Our analyses indicate that the race of the interviewer did indeed matter, although more for interviewer-assessed measures than for measures based on mothers' own reports. For example, the interviewer's race was associated with only one self-reported parenting measure (lack of nonviolent discipline at the 90th percentile) but with all of the interviewer-assessed measures of parenting, such that black interviewers were significantly less likely to rate mothers in the problematic range for both harshness and lack of warmth. The same pattern held when we examined interviewers' assessments of maternal and child characteristics: for nine of the ten measures, black interviewers rated parents or children as having significantly lower—that is, less problematic—scores than did white interviewers. The effects of the interviewer's race were generally large and were often greater than the effects of the mother's own race.

This finding does not confirm the presence of racial bias, but it does have implications for racial differences in reporting of child maltreatment: if families are more likely to come into contact with reporters of the same race, which may be the case for reports by “nonprofessionals,” black families may be judged less harshly, on average, than white families. Furthermore, research estimates of racial differences in outcomes may be quite different, depending on whether interviewers and interviewees were matched on race in a particular survey.

Table 2
The Effects of Interactions between Interviewer Race and Maternal Race on Assessments of Parenting

OLS Models	Mother's Report of Lack of Nonviolent Discipline Strategies		Interviewer's Assessment of Maternal Harshness	
	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile
Mother is Black, interviewer is white	0.084 (0.039)	0.000 (0.026)	0.057 (0.033)	0.058 (0.027)
Mother is Black, interviewer is black	0.107 (0.047)	0.073 (0.031)	-0.058 (0.039)	-0.013 (0.032)
Mother is white, interviewer is Black	0.021 (0.057)	0.044 (0.038)	-0.035 (0.048)	0.017 (0.039)
Test for bias (p-value)	0.966	0.439	0.096	0.023

Note: For each column, rows 1 through 3 present coefficients from a single OLS regression in which the reference group is “mother is white, interviewer is white.” Row 4 presents the p-value for a test of the null hypothesis that: $(\beta[\text{respondent is Black, interviewer is white}] - \beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is white}]) = (\beta[\text{respondent is Black, interviewer is Black}] - \beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is Black}])$; where $\beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is white}]$ has been normalized to zero. Sociodemographic characteristics, maternal characteristics, and city of residence are included in each model.

Does the race of the interviewer, relative to the race of the mother, affect assessments?

Racial interactions did not appear to influence how mothers responded to interviewers' questions about their parenting strategies. In other words, black mothers gave similar responses regardless of whether they were interviewed by black or white interviewers; the same was true of white mothers. But the interviewers' assessments of parenting showed strong racial influences. Consider, for example, the results for lack of nonviolent discipline strategies and maternal harshness, presented in Table 2. For the measures assessing nonviolent discipline strategies, differences between black and white mothers' self-reports to black and white interviewers were not statistically significant (as indicated by the p-value for the “test for bias”). For the interviewer-assessed measure of maternal harshness, however, we found that black mothers interviewed by white interviewers were viewed more critically than black mothers interviewed by black interviewers; they were 11.5 percentage points more likely to score above the 75th percentile and 7.1 percentage points more likely to score above the 90th percentile on this measure. This is not merely because white interviewers viewed all mothers, black or white, more critically than black interviewers did. White mothers interviewed by white interviewers were only 3.5 percentage points more likely to fall above the 75th percentile and were 1.7 percentage points *less* likely to fall above the 90th percentile than were white mothers interviewed by black interviewers. The hypothesis of no racial bias was thus rejected at the 9.6 percent level for the 75th percentile measure of harshness and at the 2.3 percent level for the 90th percentile measure.

The evidence of bias was less clear in interviewers' assessments of maternal and child characteristics. True, black mothers were somewhat more likely to receive

problematic scores on their maternal and social skills when interviewed by white interviewers. And according to the interviewers, black children displayed more behavioral problems with white interviewers than with their black counterparts (the race of the interviewer made no difference for white children). But white interviewers were more likely to note problems with the appearance of white children than black children, and black interviewers were slightly more likely to note problems with the appearance of black children. These differing responses may give us some clue to the complex interactions of race and judgment when it comes to parenting.

One possibility is that black and white interviewers may judge parents and children with similar behaviors in different ways. Or, if the differences in children's behavior are real, black parents may have had reason to display more punitive behavior during interviews conducted by whites.⁶ In either case, a racial dynamic is present in, and is influencing, assessments. Consistently, black mothers interviewed by whites were less likely to receive positive ratings than white mothers interviewed by whites; black mothers interviewed by blacks were rated similarly to white mothers interviewed by blacks.

We noted earlier in this article that racial stereotyping may be more likely to come into play when circumstances call for greater personal judgment on the part of the interviewer. We found some support for this (results not shown) when we investigated the possibility of bias regarding the individual items that made up our measure of harshness (see the box on p. 29 for a list of items). Consider two of the “harshness” items, for example: whether a mother slapped or spanked her child during the interview and whether she expressed annoyance toward the child during the interview. An interviewer reporting whether a mother slapped her child has little room for subjective judgment. But an interviewer reporting

Parenting and Maternal and Child Characteristics Measures

Parenting Measures

Self-reported: (1) use of nonviolent discipline strategies; (2) use of psychological aggression; (3) use of physical assault. These measures are drawn from the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale. See M. Strauss, S. Hamby, D. Finkelhor, D. Moore, and D. Runyan, "Identification of Child Maltreatment with the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales: Development and Psychometric Data for a National Sample of American Parents," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22, no. 4 (1998): 249–70.

Interviewer-assessed: (1) harshness (e.g., mother shouts at, slaps, criticizes, restricts child excessively); (2) lack of warmth (e.g., whether mother spontaneously talks to child, responds to child's words, introduces the child to a person or object, praises or hugs the child). These measures are drawn from the HOME scale. See B. Caldwell and R. Bradley, *Administration Manual: HOME Observation for Measurement of the Home Environment* (rev. ed. Little Rock: University of Arkansas, 1984).

Maternal and Child Characteristics Measures

Interviewer-assessed: (1) mother lacks verbal and social skills; (2) mother does not pay attention and lacks understanding; (3) mother is hostile and suspicious; (4) problems with child's appearance (e.g., condition of clothing and cleanliness); (5) problems with child's behavior (e.g., persistence, cooperation, and displays of emotion).

Because none of these scales has a standard threshold, to denote problematic behavior we constructed two discrete indicators for each scale: whether a family scored in the 75th or 90th percentile on each parenting measure.

whether the mother expressed annoyance toward the child will necessarily make such judgments. Our statistical tests revealed evidence of racial bias in the items assessing parental annoyance, hostility, scolding, and criticism. But no such bias was found for more objective items—whether the mother shouted, slapped, spanked, interfered with, or restricted the child.

Conclusions

The families in this study were not the subject of CPS investigations, nor were the interviewers asked to look for evidence of maltreatment. Our findings nevertheless provide insight into possible sources of reporting bias within the child welfare system, and into the workings of racial dynamics in assessments of parenting behaviors.

First, it is clear that there are racial differences in many measures of parenting. A large portion of these differences, however, is explained by measures of socioeconomic status that are correlated with race. This finding suggests that reporting bias may be driven in part by statistical discrimination. Race may become a proxy for socioeconomic status because it is more likely to be visible to observers than family income, maternal education, and the like. Potential reporters who lack information about other characteristics of families may therefore focus on race as an explanation of what they see, and may attribute poor behavior to blacks, in general, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Second, race matters when people are assessing the parenting behavior of others. There are systematic racial differences in how black and white interviewers rate parenting techniques, mothers' characteristics, and the behavior and appearance of children. These differences call into serious question the idea that reports of child maltreatment are colorblind.

Third, although the results of this study indicate that race influences judgments, we cannot take them as evidence that higher rates of maltreatment reports among black children are simply due to racial bias. We also found racial differences in mothers' reports of their own parenting practices, suggesting that higher rates of reporting for blacks may, in part, reflect genuine differences in parenting behaviors. Nevertheless, we stress that none of the parenting measures we examined are extreme enough to warrant a CPS report, and it is possible that there are no racial differences in measures of actual maltreatment. It is also unclear how racial bias may affect the judgments of potential reporters confronted with behavior that is extremely inconsistent with "parenting norms."

Finally, for researchers, these findings underscore the importance of considering the race of the interviewer, and the relationship between the races of interviewer and respondent, when studying the determinants of parenting. This does not argue for race matching in surveys; to the contrary, the finding that black and white interviewers assess families and children differently implies that race matching might yield misleading results. Rather, it is an

argument for examining whether the conclusions of a study are sensitive to the assignment of interviewers to respondents.

¹L. Berger, M. McDaniel, and C. Paxson, "Assessing Parenting Behaviors across Racial Groups: Implications for the Child Welfare System," *Social Service Review* 79, no. 4 (December 2005): 653–88.

²Examples of vignette studies include G. Zellman, "The Impact of Case Characteristics on Child Abuse Reporting Decisions," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16, no. 1 (1992): 57–74; C. Egu and D. Weiss, "The Role of Race and Severity of Abuse in Teachers' Recognition or Reporting of Child Abuse," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 12, no. 4 (2003): 465–74. Case review studies include R. Hampton and E. Newberger, "Child Abuse Incidence and Reporting by Hospitals: Significance of Severity, Class, and Race," *American Journal of Public Health* 75, no. 1 (1985): 56–60; W. Lane, D. Rubin, R. Monteith, and C. Christian, "Racial Differences in the Evaluation of Pediatric Fractures for Physical Abuse," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 288, no. 13 (2002): 1603–09.

³Lane and others, "Racial Differences."

⁴I. Chasnoff, H. Landress, and M. Barrett, "The Prevalence of Illicit-Drug or Alcohol Use During Pregnancy and Discrepancies in Mandatory Reporting in Pinellas County, Florida," *New England Journal of Medicine* 322, no. 17 (1990): 1202–06; I. Sagatun-Edwards and C. Saylor, "Drug Exposed Infant Cases in Juvenile Court: Risk Factors and Outcomes," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24, no. 7 (2000): 925–37.

⁵In all there were 91 interviewers for our sample, 42 percent black and the remainder white; 79 percent of black and 66 percent of white interviewers interviewed both black and white mothers. Our analyses indicated that racial differences in the assignment of interviewers to mothers were completely accounted for by the racial composition of the cities studied. For this reason, a set of city indicators was included in our models. Because Hispanic respondents, for language reasons, were often purposely matched with Hispanic interviewers, they were excluded from the analysis.

⁶The idea that individuals may behave differently when being assessed by interviewers from different racial groups is supported by evidence in H. Kim, N. Baydar, and A. Greek, "Testing Conditions Influence the Race Gap in Cognition and Achievement Estimated by Household Survey Data," *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23, no. 5 (2002): 567–82. This paper shows that black children perform more poorly on cognitive tests that are administered by whites.