



ALLEGATIONS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project
INFORMATION SHEET #5 | 2025

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Black children are represented in child welfare investigations in Ontario at disproportionate and disparate rates (compared to white children). Previous work has suggested that physical abuse allegations, including those initiated by schools and educators, may contribute to these differences. The proportion of investigations related to allegations of physical abuse is higher for Black children (27% vs. 17% for white children) as is the proportion of investigations initiated by schools (43% vs. 28%, see [Bonnie et al., 2022](#)). Given these differences, further exploration of the context, experience, decision-making of child welfare workers responding to physical abuse allegations involving Black families was needed.

WHAT WE DID

We explored how child welfare workers experienced their practice and decision-making when working with with Black families who were reported, investigated, and served by the system for physical abuse allegations. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 79 participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the experiences of participants who work or have worked in child welfare, as well as those who influence policy and practice decisions affecting Black families involved in the child welfare system.



WHAT WE FOUND

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. 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. From these responses, we identified four major themes, which are described in greater detail in our full report (*Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project: Findings Related to Physical Abuse Allegations*), as well as two academic manuscripts (please contact the research team for access).

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS



Understand the context of physical discipline among Black families and the potential impact of zero-tolerance policies.



Leverage and invest in community-based prevention and early intervention services.



Revise the CYFSA to clearly define a “duty to support.”



Provide training to educators and other referrers to reduce the over-reporting of Black families.



Identify and support schools with high referral rates.



Seek opportunities to interrupt or resist anti-Black racism.

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