

SDM[®] NEWS

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DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN CHILD WELFARE

***B**ias: A term used to describe a tendency or preference toward a particular perspective, ideology, or result, especially when the tendency interferes with the ability to be impartial, unprejudiced, or objective. —Wikipedia*

From time to time, questions arise about whether the use of actuarial risk assessment (i.e., the Structured Decision Making[®] [SDM] risk assessment) is racially biased, thereby contributing to or causing disproportionate representation of minority children in the foster care system.

While disproportionality is evident at all points of the foster care system, particularly in the number of African American children in the foster care system, there is a great deal of evidence demonstrating that objective, research-based risk assessment models 1) improve equity in decision making by establishing consistent assessment criteria based on observed and valid characteristics reflective of the population, and 2) illustrate that African American children are NOT at greater risk of subsequent maltreatment than White children. As Tables 1 and 2 (on page 2) show, White children are actually at greater risk of continued maltreatment. The Children's Research Center (CRC) has determined this to be consistent throughout the nation.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that it is the safety assessment, not the SDM[®] risk assessment, that informs the decision to remove a child from his or her

home. Thus, claims that use of the SDM risk assessment results in a disproportionate number of African American children in foster care are misguided.

The SDM safety assessment contains a core set of factors that should be assessed for all families in every investigation, and which represent situations that, if present, suggest an immediate danger of serious harm to a child that needs to be addressed. Each of these core factors has definitions that aim to bring greater objectivity to potentially subjective constructs of child safety. The definitions serve to increase equity in the assessment process. Additionally, the SDM safety assessment contains a set of interventions that must be considered when threats to child safety are identified.

Workers must determine whether the listed interventions are available and appropriate to mitigate danger in the form of a safety plan to prevent removal. When this is not possible, the result is a recommendation to remove a child.

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Table 1: Georgia: Percentage of Families at Each Risk Level

Risk Level	White (N = 3,441)	African American (N = 3,985)
Low	26.7%	31.7%
Moderate	60.7%	59.1%
High	12.6%	9.1%

Table 2: Michigan: Percentage of Families at Each Risk Level

Risk Level	White (N = 6,651)	African American (N = 5,296)
Low	10.5%	11.3%
Moderate	30.7%	30.0%
High	45.1%	46.0%
Very High	13.7%	12.7%

Source for Tables 1 and 2: Baird, C. (2005). The Effects of Risk Assessments and Their Relationship to Maltreatment Recurrence Rates Across Races. In D. Derezotes, J. Poertner, and M. Testa (Eds.), *Race Matters in Child Welfare: The Overrepresentation of African American Children in the System*, pp. 131–146. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press.

The factors on the SDM safety assessment that describe immediate threats to child safety do not vary by racial or ethnic differences; that is to say, there are not different standards for child safety based on race. The tool itself does not cause racial disparity. However, it may be that differences in individual worker experience/personal bias, lack of cultural competency, and/or insufficient services/resources impact how the tool is implemented and the extent to which child protective services (CPS) workers can effectively develop safety plans.

How to Start Looking at Racial Disproportionality

There are some simple ways that SDM sites can use safety assessment findings to examine disproportionality issues at the removal decision.

Step 1. Use SDM safety assessment decision data to first determine whether there is cause for concern.

The example in Table 3 (page 3) shows data for a large, urban jurisdiction using the SDM safety assessment and displays the distribution of “safe” (no immediate threats to child safety identified), “conditionally safe” (at least one immediate threat to child safety identified and addressed through an in-home safety plan), and “unsafe” (at least one immediate threat to child safety identified and removal required) decisions for substantiated investigations during the selected time period.^{1,2}

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¹ The SDM safety assessment completion rate for this jurisdiction during the selected timeframe was 98.1%.

² The substantiation rate for White families was 20.4%; for African American families, 23.9%; and for Hispanic families, 24.0%.

DMR IN CHILD WELFARE, CONTINUED

These data suggest that removals from African American families occurred at a much higher rate (41.2%) than from White (27.7%) or Hispanic (27.8%) families.³

Interestingly, White, African American, and Hispanic families had fairly similar rates of “safe” decisions, but there is a notable difference in the number of investigations in which in-home safety plans were developed: 48.4% of investigations of White families, 45.3% of investigations of Hispanic families, and 35.4% of investigations of African American families. This suggests that the higher removal rate for African

case review should examine whether the SDM safety assessments were completed accurately and supported by case record documentation, whether consideration of in-home safety interventions was adequately explored, and whether there are differences by race in terms of the extent to which investigation narrative supports the need for removal.

- Examine whether there are differences in disproportionate removal rates across individual units. This may suggest a need for additional training on culturally competent assessment and engagement.
- Examining the same data by office can help identify whether there are for any geographical trends. If a pattern emerges that suggests most removals are

occurring in certain offices/ areas of the jurisdiction, this may reveal a geographical resource availability/access issue that can be addressed at the community level.

These are just some examples of how you can use data to identify,

Table 3: SDM® Safety Decision for Substantiated Referrals

Referral Ethnicity	Safe		Conditionally Safe		Unsafe		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
White	37	23.9%	75	48.4%	43	27.7%	155	100.0%
African American	60	23.3%	91	35.4%	106	41.2%	257	100.0%
Hispanic	217	26.9%	365	45.3%	224	27.8%	806	100.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	16	27.6%	35	60.3%	7	12.1%	58	100.0%
Other	1	25.0%	2	50.0%	1	25.0%	4	100.0%
Not Reported	12	42.9%	12	42.9%	4	14.3%	28	100.0%
Total	343	26.2%	580	44.3%	385	29.4%	1,308	100.0%

Source: SafeMeasures®, unnamed urban California county; SDM Measures; safety decision; September 2008, cross-tab by referral ethnicity; filter for substantiated only.

American families may indicate a lack of adequate social support and/or community resources that CPS workers can access when attempting to develop in-home safety plans to prevent removal.

Step 2. Engage in critical review and analysis to determine what may be contributing to higher rates of removals among African American families.

Some potential places to start include the following:

- Drill down to generate a case list of families with “unsafe” safety decisions by ethnicity and randomly select cases for critical supervisory case review. The

³ White families represented 19.6% of total investigations; African American families, 19.6%; and Hispanic families, 61.6%.

define, and address the issue of disproportionate minority representation in your child welfare agency in small scale but meaningful ways.

CRC promotes data-driven decision making throughout all levels of a child welfare agency. SDM assessment data provide a wealth of information to assist in this important work. Program administrators and managers are encouraged to use aggregate case data to support critical examination of disproportionate minority representation at all points in the child welfare system.

If you would like technical assistance and/or data analysis and reporting services from CRC to examine this issue in your jurisdiction, contact Kathy Park at kpark@mw.nccd-crc.org or (608) 831-1180.

SDM® CONFERENCE NEWS

Aware that the current economic climate has made it necessary to limit travel in many jurisdictions, CRC has decided to hold its popular SDM conference in a virtual format in 2010. This unique conference will include a series of monthly web meetings throughout the year on topics ranging from the SDM system and domestic violence to talking with families about assessments. CRC's ninth onsite SDM conference will be held October 18–20, 2011, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Registration will begin in March 2011.

Virtual conference workshop topics will be announced soon.

ADVANCED SDM® TRAINING CURRICULUM FEEDBACK

In the last issue of *SDM® News*, we provided information about the advanced SDM training curriculum modules designed to help workers and supervisors bridge the conceptual gap from “how to complete SDM assessment forms” to “how to integrate SDM assessments into our work with families.” In March 2009, the Department of Communities, Child Safety Services, in Queensland, Australia, contracted with CRC to train trainers on three of the half-day advanced SDM training modules. Then, in April and May, over 150 team leaders across the state participated in one of seven two-day forums on the curriculum. The topics included safety assessment, safety planning, and interviewing for the family strengths and needs assessment (FSNA).

Feedback from team leaders has been extremely positive. Comments on the training include the following:

- “The workshops balance SDM and professional judgment...”
- “It changed my thinking about the usefulness/purpose of the strengths and needs assessments.”
- It provided me with a “more meaningful use of the SDM tools...they are not just a form.”

- [I realized] “the need to spend more time on the PSNA and CSNA [parental and child strengths and needs assessments] to gain the individual’s understanding of his/her needs, and to reflect these in the case plan.”
- “It was great to be able to revisit how these tools are being applied, to work at a higher level of competency in the use of the tools.”
- “It was great. I will be taking away lots of information that will be useful to my new CSOs [Child Safety Officers].”
- “I thought that the information was well prepared and delivered.”
- “Very thought-provoking.”

The Department is now beginning the safety workshops for CSOs at the front end of service delivery. However, Sue Smith, Project Coordinator, Child Safety Services Division, reports that “Our team leaders want all CSOs to attend the workshops; they can really see the value in the concepts and resources CRC developed, as well as how they promote the importance of engaging families in the process of safety planning and case planning.”

For more information on the advanced SDM training curriculum, contact Raelene Freitag at rfreitag@mw.nccd-crc.org.

WHY COPYRIGHT?

Trademarks (like Jello® brand gelatin) and copyrights (a published book) are typically associated with for-profit enterprises where the concern is that others will duplicate the product, resulting in decreased value to the original developer or author. CRC is sometimes asked why the SDM system is trademarked and copyrighted even though CRC and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) are a nonprofit organization.

NCCD and CRC staff partner with state and local social services agencies to develop effective SDM systems that support valid and reliable decision making

PROJECT UPDATES

New South Wales, Australia

In the wake of a Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales (the Wood Commission, 2008), the New South Wales (NSW) government, including the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) is undertaking massive systemic reform. In the first phase of this reform, detailed in *Keep Them Safe: A Shared Approach to Child Wellbeing*, processes related to reporting and screening child protection concerns will be addressed. DoCS' central intake system (DoCS Helpline) is preparing to field-test SDM screening and response priority assessments in August 2009. Results of the field test will be used to refine these assessments, which have been developed through a workgroup process that began in early 2009. Trial implementation is slated to begin in February 2010.

NSW is also preparing to be the first jurisdiction to develop and trial a structured approach to mandatory reporter guidance. A key finding of the Wood report was that there needs to be greater integration of efforts among government and non-government community agencies that serve families, and that the role of statutory CPS needs to be reserved for instances of significant harm or risk of significant harm. Legislation was amended to reflect this shift, which is expected to have major ramifications throughout government and non-government services. Developing a mandatory reporter guidance system will help introduce the new legislative standard, and is expected to increase consistency in judgments about which families are appropriate for a report that may trigger statutory intervention.

In an unprecedented collaborative effort, workgroups comprised of staff from key government and non-government organizations that represent approximately 70% of NSW mandatory reporters are working with CRC to build decision trees (and corresponding definitions) that will guide a reporter toward a decision of whether to report or take alternative action. The challenge of building such a guidance system is immense. It must meet the needs of a wide

at critical points in the life of a family's or individual's involvement in a particular system. As you may know, SDM systems have been developed in various jurisdictions for CPS, juvenile justice, adult protective services, and economic assistance programs. The process of developing SDM systems requires an understanding of the laws and regulations that each agency is required to follow as well as the local policy and practice framework. This understanding forms the foundation for SDM system adaptation to ensure the best possible integration of SDM assessments for each agency. Also critical to achieving implementation fidelity is the provision of appropriate training for staff on the research basis of the model, on the SDM assessments, and on how to use assessments effectively in practice.

For these reasons, NCCD/CRC felt it prudent to trademark the SDM system and to assert copyrights to protect the integrity of the model and each of its components. Over the years, well-intentioned agencies have picked up pieces of the SDM system from other agencies and implemented them on their own without consultation and training. In some cases, agencies have modified research-based components of the SDM model without realizing that doing so invalidates the tool and compromises the outcomes they expect to achieve through implementing in the first place. Therefore, NCCD/CRC's interest in protecting the intellectual property rights of the SDM system arises from the need to maintain the reliability and validity of each piece of the system, because the SDM system is developed, adapted, and applied for a particular agency in a particular jurisdiction. Copyrighting the SDM system also protects agencies from expecting outcomes that may not be achieved in the absence of a thorough and thoughtful development, training, and implementation process.

--Kathy Park, Assistant Director, and Sue Gramling,
Senior Program Specialist, CRC



range of professional and lay mandatory reporters; it must reasonably process a nearly infinite range of initial concerns; and it must reach a reasonable conclusion within a handful of key questions, supported by definitions that are clear, concise, and easily understood.

Drafts of mandatory reporter guidance are being reviewed this summer by senior officers from key agencies, and will be reviewed again by the workgroup. Additional refinement and inter-rater reliability testing will take place in the second half of 2009, and trial implementation is expected to begin in early 2010. For more information on DoCS, contact Linda Mallett (linda.mallett@community.nsw.gov.au) or Helen Freeland (helen.freeland@community.nsw.gov.au). For more information on the reforms to the child protection system in NSW, visit www.community.nsw.gov.au.

Vermont

Vermont recently introduced major legislative change that enables differential response in child protection. All reports that are screened in as requiring an in-person response will be assigned to either an investigation or assessment track. Both tracks will feature emphasis on family engagement, and both will use SDM safety and risk assessments. The key difference will be that the investigation track will require a determination of substantiated or unsubstantiated, and a determination of substantiated will result in the alleged offender's being listed on the state's central registry. The assessment track will require permission of parents prior to interviewing children. It is expected that most reports will be managed through the assessment track.

To roll out differential response, a workgroup of Vermont staff worked with CRC to update their assessments of safety, risk, and risk reassessment. It had been seven years since the SDM system was first introduced in Vermont. As practice evolves, as statutes change, and as knowledge of key areas impacting child protection grows, it is valuable to occasionally review assessment tools and update them through a careful review process. Key changes Vermont focused on in their SDM redesign included incorporating protective capacities in the safety assessment; collecting protective capacity risk items in advance of a prospective study; requiring risk assessment completion for all

investigations/assessments (versus only substantiated ones); and modifying case opening policy so that risk level, rather than substantiation, guides the decision.

Training all staff, including supervisors and managers, on the new process occurred over two weeks in June 2009. Training featured introduction to the revised assessments, and also greater emphasis on family engagement and ways to conduct assessments *with* families.

For more information on Vermont's SDM system and new differential response elements, contact Cindy Walcott (cynthia.walcott@ahs.state.vt.us) or Karen Shea (karen.shea@ahs.state.vt.us).

Mark Your Calendars!

SDM[®]
Virtual Conference
Dates throughout 2010

Ninth Annual SDM[®]
Conference
October 18–20, 2011
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

FROM THE FIELD

FACT-TO-ELEMENT DOCUMENTATION

Last week I received a phone call from a district attorney letting me know she is prosecuting a case for which I conducted the forensic interview. In itself, this is a routine event for any social worker in child protection. What makes this a bit unusual is that the interview occurred about 16 years ago. Since I often forget what I had for lunch, my first thought was, “I hope I wrote a good note.” Documentation inevitably feels like dreaded, useless paperwork, one of those activities that we feel keeps us from our REAL work of being with families—at least it feels like that until we need it.

Rather than viewing documentation as a distraction from real work, we need to recognize it as a vital element of social work. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) standards of practice for child welfare (2005) state the following (adapted from the original):

Social workers shall do the following:

- Keep records and gather the statistics necessary to manage and plan service delivery and agency programs;
- Ensure that client information contained in case records is accurate, thorough, and entered in a timely manner;
- [For high risk cases,] ensure documentation is completed as soon as possible and is current;
- Include only the information necessary for the provision of services.

A useful strategy for meeting documentation standards efficiently is to use SDM assessments as outlines for key information. DarAnn Dearing, a supervisor who happens to be a licensed attorney, told me recently how attorneys are trained to write things up. It is called “fact-to-element” documentation. Think of each SDM

assessment item as an “element.” Your documentation should consist of the relevant facts you relied on to mark each item (or element) the way you marked it. This helps ensure that your documentation is thorough and contains all necessary information. It also keeps out facts you may have learned that are NOT relevant for the provision of services. That protects family privacy and reduces the volume of your written documentation. Using fact-to-element documentation places the emphasis where it belongs: on the facts of the family situation, not on the language of the assessment tool.

For example, a worker employing fact-to-element documentation to describe his/her assessment of risk would write something like, “The family has a history of more than three prior investigations of neglect in addition to the current neglect investigation. Mother has been diagnosed as chemically dependent by Dr. Jones. The youngest child, who is under the age of 2, was born exposed to methamphetamine, according to hospital records. This combination of concerns places this family at high risk for future neglect. I recommend services to prevent future harm.”

Give fact-to-element documentation a try. Be sure to include any additional documentation required by your local agency, but for the basis of your assessment and recommendation, fact-to-element reporting may be an effective approach.

Raelene Freitag, Director, CRC

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON CRIME AND DELINQUENCY CHILDREN’S RESEARCH CENTER



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