

# Editorial

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## Introduction

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Advisor committed to publishing a special issue focused on confronting systemic racism and bias as they impact disproportionality and injustice experienced by African American families in child welfare. As two Black women scholars who are committed to divesting from and dismantling systems that target and oppress Black families, it is an honor to serve as guest editors. It was our paramount goal to contribute to the growing knowledge base regarding policies, practices, and paradigm shifts that can promote life-affirming approaches centered on the needs, dignity, and value of Black families.

## Disproportionality and Disparity in Context

The overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system is well documented and has been a persistent issue for several decades. Anti-Black racism and systemic oppression of Black families have been defining characteristics of U.S. social and economic institutions since this country's inception. We are overdue in accounting for and meaningfully addressing the interconnection between these two insidious legacies and how their consequences manifest through inequitable outcomes for Black families observed across systems today. This is especially true in regard to the child welfare experiences and outcomes of Black families.

Current national data indicate that Black children represent 23% of children in foster care, though

they represent only 14% of children in the general population (KIDS Count, 2020). Recent studies that examine the cumulative prevalence of CPS intervention shed light on the expansive reach of the system's surveillance of all children, but especially of those in Black and Native American families. Nearly half of Black children in this country are the subjects of investigated child maltreatment reports by their 18th birthday (Kim et al., 2017; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021). African American children are 2.4 times more likely than White children to experience the termination of parental rights (Wildeman et al., 2020).

Have we become apathetic to the statistics and data points that numerically quantify disparities experienced by Black families? Do we try to justify them or explain them away, ignoring the undeniable historical evidence of discriminatory laws, practices, and policies that are at the root of the present racial inequities we see? When will child welfare leaders, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers engage in an earnest reckoning of how the problem of anti-Black racism routinely manifests in child welfare system practices, policies, and procedures? In recent years, major current events in the United States created an unprecedented sociopolitical context in which systemic racism became a subject of mainstream public discourse. There seemed to be a global awakening toward racial justice, and together these events provided a "new" lens through which to view the experiences of Black families in contact with child welfare. It seemed that a light was shed on the urgent need for child welfare leaders to



place new investment in the pursuit of equity for historically marginalized communities. It appeared that the appetite for change and political will to pull meaningful child welfare policy levers in pursuit of racial equity was as strong as it had ever been.

Yet, where are we now? Has the window closed for radical innovation, evidence building, and redress that will fortify the ability of Black families to thrive in a society where they are truly respected and cherished? We emphatically declare that the answer is NO! The choice is ours and the time is now. In the present moment, where the threat of apathy looms and the backlash from those invested in maintaining the status quo is real, to what course of action will the child welfare field commit? Doing what we have always done will produce the same results. The articles in this special issue confront many of the questions we raise head-on. Collectively, they represent empirical and conceptual windows into potential paths forward.

## Featured Articles

This special issue includes a critical exploration of the child welfare system's historical and contemporary impact on Black children and their families. We are pleased to feature the following six articles: 1) *Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities*, 2) *Income, Ethnicity, and Equality: Assessing Racial Disparities in Foster Care Using a Self-Sufficiency Range*, 3) *Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research*, 4) *African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System*, 5) *The Multi-ethnic Placement Act: Preventing Discrimination or Promoting Colorblindness?* 6) *Anti-Black Racism within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future*.

### ***Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities***

The first article examined racial disproportionality and disparity in one community. The researchers utilized an anti-oppressive and anti-racist framework while conducting an Institutional Analysis on this community's disparate outcomes. The authors present six guiding principles that facilitate an equity-centered and justice-oriented approach to their work. There are many implications for this work moving forward. First, this framework could be very useful for researchers as they are highly encouraged to include the lived expertise of community members within their work. Additionally, this work compels researchers to think differently about unintentional harm and to be diligent in their efforts to co-create research methods with those who have firsthand experience of systemic harm.

### ***Income, Ethnicity, and Equality: Assessing Racial Disparities in Foster Care Using a Self-Sufficiency Range***

The second article explored a self-sufficiency range (SSR) in order to examine racial disparities in income for foster youth. The authors present a depiction of the very common reality of families who are living on a low income and often in poverty. They sought to examine economic disadvantages of youth who were in care in order to determine the impact on outcomes. The authors also presented the stunning reality of the many systemic and economic barriers to kinship care in our country. The sample was taken from Washington State, and you will see through this article the estimates of what income families need in that region of our country in comparison to what families actually have. In order to impact significant shifts in family support and decreasing barriers to kinship placement, it is imperative that we continue to highlight the economic realities for families, particularly the Black families who are targeted and harmed by the child welfare system.

Sharing Our Story in a Safe Space: Using Community Cafés to Empower African American Voices in Child Welfare Intervention Research

The third article highlighted the importance of creating safe spaces for African American families to share their experiences and also to offer their recommendations for systemic change. The authors present more evidence of the importance of community participatory research methods that encourage collaboration with community members. Specifically, this study examined the utility of Community Cafes, which were held over the course of 4 days with 101 participants. The ongoing and important discussion about incorporating the voices of our community members with lived expertise is elevated through this work. It compels researchers and child welfare professionals to prioritize creating safe spaces for this sort of partnership. We are hopeful that this article ignites more interest in utilizing the model of community cafes in child welfare advocacy and research.

### ***African, Caribbean, Black Family-Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC): A Culturally Responsive Program to Support ACB Children and Families Involved with the Ontario Child Welfare System***

The fourth article highlights the disparate involvement and experiences of Black families who encounter the Ontario child welfare system. The authors detail the development of the African, Caribbean, Black Family Group Conferencing Project (ACB-FGC), a restorative, culturally responsive innovation to support Black families at risk of, or in current contact with, the child welfare system in the Greater Toronto Area. In this conceptual article, the authors describe the community-based research that led to the development of the ACB-FGC model and implications of this model for local approaches to addressing anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and among partner institutions. This article provides a prime demonstration of how to harness existing empirical evidence, effectively engage diverse stakeholders and those with lived

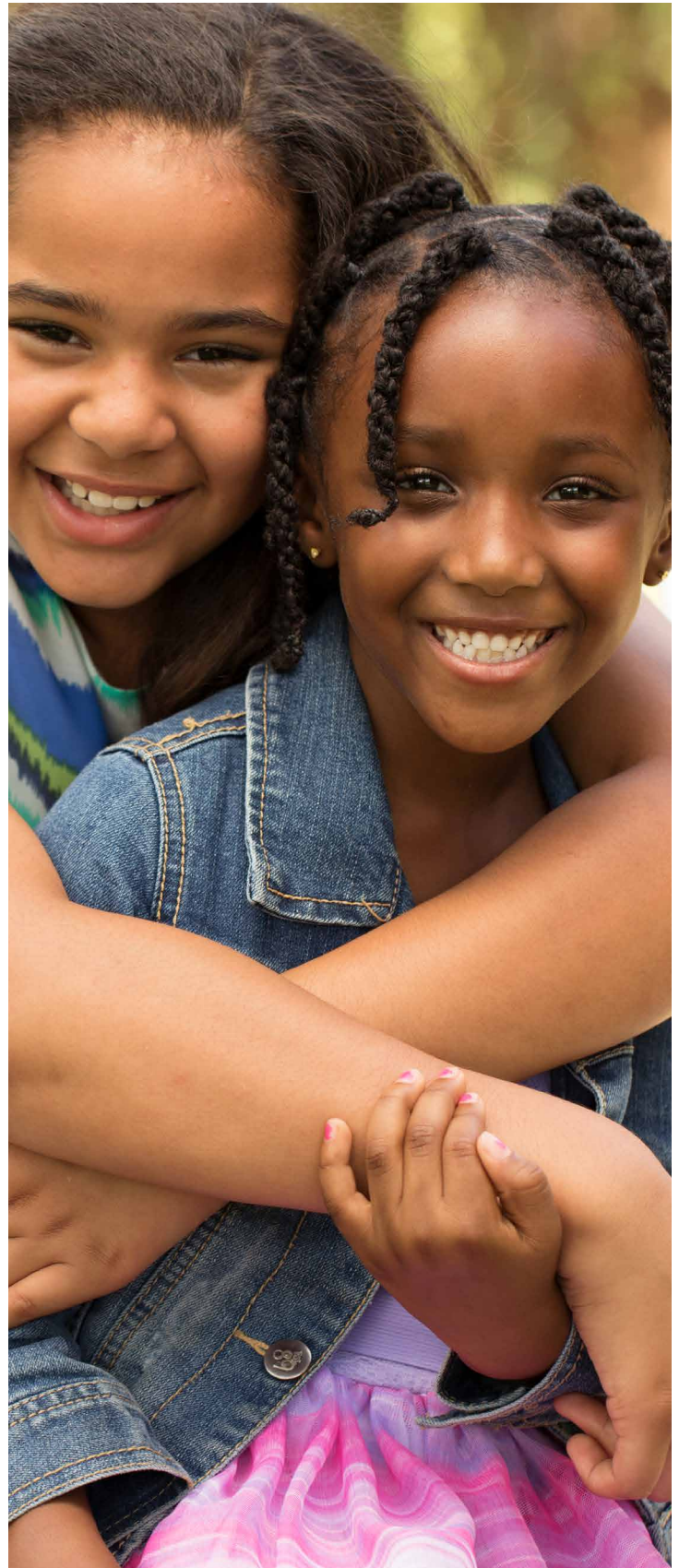
experience in the system, act with responsiveness to local needs, and execute community-centered efforts that move beyond surface-level modifications to current practices. In describing challenges confronting the ACB-FGC, this article also draws important attention to the need to eliminate policy barriers at the local level that can compromise the fidelity of interventions explicitly designed to address disparities and stifle access to resources for such efforts.

### ***The Multi-ethnic Placement Act: Preventing Discrimination or Promoting Colorblindness?***

The fifth article presents a bold argument for the repeal of MEPA-IEP based on the needed to remove the colorblind features of the policy. The authors explain the concept of colorblind racial ideology, engage in a critical analysis of MEPA-IEP, and engage in an analysis to hold the policy accountable to its stated goal of eliminating discrimination in foster and adoptive placements. The authors discuss the value of cultural continuity for children of color, offer nine redesign efforts that prioritize cultural continuity, and make the case for potential replacement legislation would contrast directly with current policy by encouraging workers to use race as a criterion. This work invites us to aptly focus on policy-level contributions to patterns of disproportionality and disparity. It provides a strong analytical template for directly calling in to question prior frames that fail to center race by applying faulty “colorblind” logic through performative race equity strategies.

### ***Anti-Black Racism within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future***

The final article acknowledges that many families, especially families of color, experience contact with the child welfare system as invasive, punitive, and traumatic. The authors provide a deep dive into the history of racial discriminatory practices and policies within the child welfare system, including a history of how it has evolved within a larger system



of structural racism within the United States. In acknowledging emergent discourse on the need for transformative change, the authors describe both grassroots movements to abolish the child welfare system and discuss efforts to enact child welfare reform. The authors present considerations for moving forward by acting on areas of overlap between the abolition and reform perspectives. We anticipate that this article will meet its stated aims of engaging diverse perspectives and generating important dialogue regarding potential direction of the field in light of widespread commitments to anti-racist practice.

### Conclusion

Together, these articles have implications for the ongoing and ever-evolving discussion about the reality of systemic harm of the child welfare system and the necessity for significant change. These articles have the potential to facilitate the integration of systemic change efforts around the country. This special issue's prominent goal was centering the experience and disparate outcomes for Black children and their families, as well as how to recognize and build on the inherent strength of the Black community. It is therefore our hope and aim that this special issue renders important insights and perspectives and that those who encounter these articles will do so with a posture of cultural responsiveness, humility, and justice.

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