Anti-Black Racism Within Child Welfare Services: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

Longstanding criticism of the child welfare system (CWS) as being overly punitive and invasive has recently gained new momentum with a grassroots movement to defund, abolish, or otherwise radically transform CWS. This movement contends that CWS in the United States is inherently and irreparably biased against families of color and requires radical transformation. The aim of this article is to further a dialogue with those calling for radical transformations of CWS. First, we aim to consider historical and contemporary factors that have contributed to the present racial disproportionalities in child maltreatment and child welfare involvement. We argue that our current crisis-oriented, rather than prevention-oriented, framework leads to an overly punitive response toward families from marginalized racial groups, and that reforms to CWS are indicated. We then provide an overview of grassroots movements calling for the abolition of CWS. Finally, we present considerations for moving forward by acting on areas of overlap between the abolition and reform perspectives, including taking an anti-racist stance in child welfare and the importance of tackling racial and economic inequalities as prerequisites to equity in child protection.

Keywords: child welfare system, racism, child maltreatment

Introduction

The child welfare system (CWS) in the United States consists of interconnected public and private services that enact policies regarding child maltreatment. In its stated mission to promote the well-being of children, it is empowered to intervene with families, whether that be investigating alleged maltreatment incidents, providing voluntary or mandatory services, or placing children in state custody out of the home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Despite efforts in some jurisdictions to approach families with support (e.g., differential response systems), CWS intervention generally targets problems at the family level without sufficient attention to structural and social determinants of child maltreatment risk such as racism and poverty. Further, CWS itself has been constructed within the context of structural racism within the United States, reflected in the disproportionate rate of intervention for families of color. Many families, especially families of color, experience contact with CWS as invasive, punitive, and traumatic (Merritt, 2021). In response, interdisciplinary scholars from psychology, public health, sociology, social work, and history have highlighted flaws with the crisis-oriented response of child welfare and the disproportionate impact of CWS policies on Black children and families. Additionally, parents, professionals, and communities concerned about CWS have created a grassroots movement to abolish CWS (Dettlaff et al., 2021; Movement for Family Power, 2020). Here we present a brief overview of the sociocultural context of CWS, including a history of how it has evolved within a larger system of structural racism within the United States. We then describe grassroots movements to abolish CWS, discuss the potential to combine elements of the abolition and reform movements, and consider anti-racist policies to transform CWS.

Structural Racism and the Child Welfare System

Ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between individual, family, community, and societal and structural factors that not only play a role in increasing risk for child maltreatment, but also lay the groundwork for the development of and challenges within CWS (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). CWS consists of individual actors who interact with children and families, as well as interconnected public and private institutions influenced by layers of federal and state legislation passed over the past century or more, implicating all levels of the ecological system. A robust body of research has examined individual and family (i.e., microsystem) and some community level (i.e., exosystem) factors that influence child maltreatment and interaction with CWS (Stith et al., 2009). Poverty has been widely connected with both child maltreatment and interaction with CWS (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017)2017. Relatively less research has focused on the macrosystem (i.e., laws, customs, and cultural values) and chronosystem (i.e., changes over time, including intergenerational processes and historical context). Specifically, structural racism has been widely overlooked beyond examining the disproportional rates of Black children and families involved in CWS (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

Structural racism describes the ways in which social, political, economic, and cultural societal structures limit access to capital, power, and resources for certain racial groups and gives privilege, power, and resources to other racial groups, continually producing racial discrimination and racial inequity (Omi & Winant, 2014; Powell, 2008). Structural racism can take the form of policies, laws, and practices designed to discriminate against people of color, such as banking practices that actively push Black individuals toward higher interest loans and mortgages (Bonilla-Silva, 2018)"language":"en-us","publisher":"Rowman & Littlefield Publishers","source":"rowman.com","title":"Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America (5th ed.. Often, policies, practices, and laws within and across institutions appear "race neutral" but result in racial inequity and discrimination; for example, zero tolerance policies regarding misbehavior within schools have resulted in Black students being disproportionately punished, suspended, and expelled (Castillo, 2014; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Importantly, structural racism occurs whether or not agents within a system are racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018)"language":"en-us","publisher":"Rowman & Littlefield Publishers","source":"rowman.com","title":"Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America (5th ed.. That is, individuals embedded within a system (e.g., educators, CWS staff) may endorse egalitarian views and personally strive to behave equitably but nonetheless perpetuate racism simply by enacting the policies and procedures of the system that have been shaped by structural racism.

Racial Capitalism

Racism within U.S. systems and structures can be explained by racial capitalism (Leong, 2013; Robinson, 2000). Racial capitalism is defined as "the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (Leong, 2013, p. 1). Specifically, capitalism can only accumulate capital because of "producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). In other words, certain human beings need to be othered and devalued for capitalism to work. White Europeans who saw Indigenous peoples and Africans as inferior beings used this racialization to justify the seizure of natural resources from Indigenous peoples and the capture, enslavement, and brutal exploitation of Africans for labor (Robinson, 2000). This was the basis for the social construction of race in the United States and a template for future devaluation of those not categorized as White (Omi & Winant, 2014). Relevant to the present discussion of CWS, enslavement involved the routine forced separation of parents and children. The abolition of slavery

led to the rise of sharecropping in the South, which once again exploited Black labor. These historical examples demonstrate how the racialization of Black people (and other groups) is at the root of capitalism in the United States. To control resources and capital and ensure existence of exploitable labor, racialization was built into all U.S. structures and institutions, resulting in structural racism (Desmond, 2019).

As a U.S. institution, CWS contributes to marginalizing Black families and supporting capitalism. Historically and currently, CWS efforts have included monitoring poor families and families of color for abuse with the assistance of agencies and civilians (i.e., mandated reporters), blaming and stigmatizing those families, and severing family ties instead of providing all the resources these families need (Roberts, 2021). These approaches serve to keep families experiencing oppression and discrimination marginalized, which contributes to racial inequities. Furthermore, the oppression and racism present in CWS works in tandem with other systems (e.g., juvenile justice, federal financial assistance), exacerbating racial inequities.

A Brief History of Discrimination Within CWS in the US

There is well documented evidence of not only the long history of discrimination against Black children in CWS but also the lack of support for Black families within social policies in the United States. (Berkman, 2011; Cancian et al., 2017; Daro, 2019; Goetz, 2020). The history of racism and its effects on the family unit begins with slavery; for a review of the historical linkage between slavery and CWS, readers may refer to other sources (Curtis & Denby, 2011; Roberts, 2022). In the 1700s and 1800s, Black dependent children who were not sold as slaves were either placed in institutional care known for providing deficient care (i.e., almshouses) or treated harshly in the indenture system, where children had to work for years to obtain freedom (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; McGowan, 2014). In the first half of the 1800s, private faith-based organizations established orphanages, but "placing out," in which children were removed from orphanages or from poor families and placed with "good Protestant" families in the West, became the preferred practice in the latter part of the 1800s (McGowan, 2014). Both practices, orphanage placement and placing out, excluded children of color (Hogan & Siu, 1988); as a result, some communities of color developed their own supports for children and families. For example, within the African American community, child welfare services such as orphanages were developed within a broad spectrum of Black social services supported by Black churches, schools, and philanthropic organizations (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972).

The mid-to-late 19th century saw a shift away from private, faith-based child protective services (CPS) to public state intervention (McGowan, 2014). In the 1880s, the U.S. government began removing Indigenous children from their families and sending them to residential schools (Lash, 2017). In 1925, 60,889 Indigenous children were placed in residential schools, accounting for 83% of all school-aged Indigenous children, many of whom died (Adams, 1995; Lash, 2017). In 1912, the Children's Bureau was developed and given the broad mandate to investigate and report on the welfare of children (McGowan, 2014). Over the next few decades, CPS, foster boarding homes, adoption procedures, and childcare institutions for dependent children continued to expand. The emergence of psychoanalytic theory and individual talk therapy treatment led to the goal of providing individualized services to children to address their emotional needs. Unfortunately, this movement resulted in an emphasis on individual psychopathology rather than social and contextual influences and factors.

The huge migration of Black people to cities during World War I, advocacy by organizations seeking equality for Black people (e.g., the National Urban League), and a significant expansion of public agencies eventually resulted in CWS starting to serve Black children during the 1920s and 1930s (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). This resulted in

benefits as well as several unfortunate consequences, including the halt of the Black child welfare system, limitations in the possibility of Black Americans assuming leadership roles in agencies caring for Black children, and allowance of some subtler but ongoing forms of discriminatory treatment of Black children and families (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002. In 1935, the Social Security Act established Title V to protect and care for children who are homeless, neglected, and in danger of entering the juvenile justice system, whether living with their families or in substitute care, by enabling the Children's Bureau to work with state public welfare agencies (McGowan, 2014). Title V also established the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which gave states the power to deny aid if families were determined to be immoral and/or their homes unsuitable (e.g., illegitimacy, presence of men other than biological fathers in home). States used this program to discriminate against and deny benefits to Black families (Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

After World War II, wealth disparity increased among White families and non-White families. Resulting in part from the association between poverty and maltreatment, CWS started serving more Black children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). In 1960, there was public outcry when Louisiana suddenly expelled 23,000 children from the AFDC rolls after expanding home suitability requirements; the majority were Black (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). In response, the federal government established the Flemming Rule, which mandated that if states determined that a home was unsuitable for children, then they were obligated to either improve the home and continue AFDC payments or remove the child from the home (Lawrence-Webb, 1997; McGowan, 2014). This policy, which became part of the 1962 Service Amendments, resulted in states providing substandard and culturally insensitive services to families and removing children from homes to "correct" neglectful conditions instead of supporting families. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of Black children inappropriately removed from their homes (Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

In the 1970s, support grew for mandated reporting (i.e., professionals such as teachers, nurses, psychologists, and social workers are required to file reports with CPS for any "reasonable suspicion" of child maltreatment) following publication of research in the 1960-70s regarding "battered child syndrome" (Kempe et al., 1962). The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 required states to pass child abuse and neglect laws including mandated reporting to qualify for federal funding (McGowan, 2014). However, the law did not specify how child abuse and/or neglect should be defined or operationalized. As a result, every state defined child maltreatment differently. Furthermore, CAPTA placed the primary focus on intervention instead of prevention and promoted a medical model of child abuse, focusing specifically on individual or parental factors (Roberts, 2002). Discrimination against Black children in CWS started to draw attention in the 1960s and 1970s (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002). As the number of Black children served increased, CWS spent more funds on out-of-home care and less on in-home services while increasing their punitive responses to families (Roberts, 2002).

The intractable problem of racial disproportionality in CWS can be traced back to events like the war on drugs (Lash, 2017). In the mid-1980s, due to a belief that crack cocaine was destroying inner-city communities by increasing violent crime and child neglect cases, Congress implemented the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, imposing lengthy mandatory minimum prison terms and harsh sentencing guidelines for those using or selling drugs (Levy-Pounds, 2010). Despite not being more likely to violate drug laws compared to other racial groups, Black adults were overrepresented amongst those convicted and incarcerated, leading to many Black children being placed in the foster care system when their parents were incarcerated (Levy-Pounds, 2010).

Furthermore, Black parents were disproportionately likely to have their parental rights severed (Lash, 2017). The 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act prohibited child welfare agencies from delaying or

denying foster or adoptive placements because of race, with the goal of expediting permanency by allowing transracial adoption (e.g., White families adopting Black children; Reynolds et al., 2010). Although the policy was informed in part by findings that transracial adoption is generally not harmful (Silverman, 1993), a consequence was that courts sought expedited adoption for many Black children separated from their caregivers rather than pursuing parental reunification (McRoy, 2004). The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 gave states the authority to terminate parental rights after a designated period of time if the parent had not completed their reunification requirements (Nicholson, 2006). Compounded by mandatory minimum sentencing introduced by the war on drugs, many parents permanently lost their children to the foster care system, particularly Black parents (Lash, 2017; Levy-Pounds, 2010). Higher rates of incarceration, in tandem with cuts to public assistance, led to a doubling of the number of children in out-of-home placements between 1985 and 1999 (Swann & Sylvester, 2006). Efforts to keep children connected to their families can be seen in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, which required states to notify all adult relatives when a child is placed in out-of-home care and provided financial assistance to children in kinship guardianship (i.e., living with grandparents and other relatives; McGowan, 2014).

Racial Disproportionalities and Disparities Within CWS

Black children and families today continue to be overrepresented in CWS (Lanier et al., 2014; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021). In 2020, Black children were overrepresented in foster care at a rate 1.65 times their rate in the general population in the United States (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Despite not being more likely to abuse or neglect their children after controlling for the influence of poverty (Font et al., 2012; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), Black parents are more likely to be investigated and receive fewer services

(National Association of Black Social Workers, 2003). Compared to White and Asian children, Black and multiracial children are more likely to be removed from the home, spend longer in foster care, and are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their families before aging out of care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Pinderhughes et al., 2019; The Annie E. Casey Foundation et al., 2006). The ongoing racial disparities in CWS can be traced to the legacy of racism and structural disadvantage that have led to higher prevalence of social determinants of maltreatment—especially poverty— among Black families (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Despite a recent review of over 50 empirical studies that suggests that outcomes of CWS involvement are not strongly negative on the whole (Barth et al., 2020), the fact remains that many children and families do experience trauma and harm as a result of their involvement in CWS, particularly Black families (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2022). A recent qualitative study of Black and Latinx parents who have had contact with CPS found that participants felt disrespected, judged about their parenting due to their race, and overburdened by CWS surveillance and intrusion into their family life (Merritt, 2021). In another study in which young African American men reflected on their involvement in child welfare, participants recalled not being told why they were separated from their parents and siblings, nor when or how they could be reunited, contributing to a lack of confidence in the professionals serving them (Miller et al., 2012). Such experiences can engender distrust of CWS, limiting collaboration to promote the safety of children.

Across the decades, many voices from various disciplines have called for a more preventive approach to child maltreatment (Nagi, 1977; Slack & Berger, 2020). Since the 1970s, keeping children with their families of origin has grown to be an increasingly significant priority in CWS, leading to legislation that prioritized family preservation over out-of-home placement (e.g., the Family Preservation and Family Support Act of 1993; Berry, 1997). Efforts to expand and implement family

preservation services and limit children's entry into out-of-home care have continued with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), passed in 2018 (Williams-Mbengue, 2019). Given major financial and capacity barriers to implementation of FFPSA, the Family First Transition Act was passed at the end of 2019 to provide additional financial support for state CWS systems to build infrastructure for prevention-oriented services (Jordan & McKlindon, 2020). Despite these positive efforts to maintain children in their homes, family separation continues, along with its deleterious consequences for many children and families. The frustrations of many families directly affected by CWS and the concerns of professionals who see a system in a continual state of crisis have led to grassroots movements to abolish CWS.

Grassroots Abolition Movements

Interdisciplinary critiques of CWS have developed in tandem with increasingly vocal concerns from caregivers and communities. Longstanding social justice advocacy efforts (e.g., Rise, founded in 2005; Movement for Family Power, founded in 2018; JMacforFamilies, founded in 2019; and upEND and California Families Rise, founded in 2020) have been led by community activists and professionals alike who are trying to reexamine and redefine child protection and family support. Although they began much earlier, grassroots advocacy efforts received increased attention during the spring and summer of 2020 when the United States experienced a groundswell of outrage over racial discrimination in law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Shumaker & Wallis, 2020). Although the national discourse focused on efforts to radically transform police departments, it expanded to address other institutions that ostensibly aim to serve and protect citizens but ultimately result in disproportionate harm to communities of color. Calls to divert funds from law enforcement to social service agencies, including the CWS, were met with concern. Critics see CWS as another arm of policing, dubbed the "family policing system," that disproportionately monitors, penalizes, and harms racial/ethnic minority

families (Rise, 2020; upEND, 2022b). CWS has become a focus of racial justice advocacy, with calls to abolish CPS. Parents in New York City protested racism in the state CWS in 2020 (Fitzgerald, 2020) and an "Abolish ACF" rally was held on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of 2021 (Conn, 2021). Further, parents and community activists have built organizations including upEND and Movement for Family Power (MFP) to work toward ending family separation.

upEND, founded in 2020, is a collaboration between the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work with the mission of "ending the current child welfare system and creating in its place new, anti-racist structures and practices to keep children safe and protected in their homes" (upEND, 2022a). This organization contends that CWS is a source of ongoing oppression for Black families due to the intrusive and harmful nature of CWS involvement, particularly separating children from their families (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Although upEND recognizes the need for intervention for families struggling to provide safe and supportive environments, upEND calls for supportive interventions that address families' needs rather than punitive, harmful removal of children from homes. Though foster care can have a positive impact for some children and families, upEND argues that abolition is required because, "any perceived or actual benefit of foster care comes at a tremendous cost" (Dettlaff et al., 2020, p. 504). upEND advocates for several major goals, including ending involuntary separation of children and parents, reuniting children currently in care with their families and communities, and repealing state and federal mandatory reporting laws. Further, they advocate for the decriminalization of drug use and sex work and ending the practice of punishing caregivers experiencing intimate partner violence (Dettlaff et al., 2021).

Another organization, MFP, also works toward "divestment from the foster system and investment in community." Founded in New York City by two lawyers, MFP actively engages caregivers of

children who have been impacted by CWS. MFP sees CWS as an extension of oppressive social control systems, including as the new "ground zero for the U.S. drug war" (MFP, 2020). A significant aim of MFP is to raise awareness about harmful consequences of CWS involvement, especially in cases involving parental substance use. Notably, MFP states it is "not the architect of an alternative to child protective services," but rather they seek to provide support in the form of networking, grant writing support, and research support for people and groups working to limit the size and scope of CWS (MFP, 2019). Given their viewpoint that substance use does not necessarily undermine safe and effective parenting, they also call for modifying substance use treatment programs to be more flexible and supportive, eliminating the practice of "test and report" (routinely administering toxicology screens to newborns and filing CWS reports for positive results), and adopting a less punitive approach to "people who parent while using drugs" (MFP, 2020, p. 109). They call for a repeal of ASFA, elimination of time limits on family reunification, and an end to termination of parental rights (MFP, 2020).

The passion and dedicated work of community organizers has led to recent legislative victories. For example, a bill passed in New York State in April 2020 (but subsequently vetoed by the governor), led in part by the Parent Legislative Action Network, aims to raise the standards of proof to list parents in the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment and limit the length of time they can be listed (S.B. S6427A, 2019). A bill proposed in February 2021 would end the common practice of "test and report" blamed for many cases of family separation (Prohibiting Drug Testing of Pregnant People, 2021). The Minnesota African American Family Preservation Act, introduced in February of 2021 but currently stalled, aims to address racial disparities in the child protection system. Among the bill's provisions are requiring the state child

welfare authority to set a higher standard for efforts to preserve and reunite families and to consider African American families' social and cultural values when creating case plans (African American Family Preservation Act, 2021) Although these reforms fall short of abolition, they mark progress toward a less punitive CWS. Beyond their policy advocacy efforts, the abolition movement also raises public awareness about the dysfunction of CWS as a moral issue. They spread the message that families are often harmed by CWS and that many would be better served by expansion of the social safety net. Further, various groups provide social support and educational resources for parents attempting to navigate the system (e.g., JMacForFamilies, 2022). In Rise's 2021 report, "Someone to Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care," they propose a model of parent-to-parent support as a replacement for CWS involvement (2021).

Groups advocating for the abolition of CWS and other major changes to our society's approach to child protection have identified significant, enduring problems that negatively impact Black families. Despite changes to CWS over the years, there are enduring echoes of its foundation of structural racism—for instance, the perspective that although parents have the right to choose how they parent their children, they also are individually responsible for childrearing challenges that arise due to societal inequities. These criticisms of CWS have led many to conclude that dismantling our current system and abolishing CWS is the only viable way to end subjugation and separation of Black families. Another perspective is that reform is needed to CWS policies and procedures while maintaining its core structure. Although abolition and reform appear to be divergent positions, they contain numerous areas of overlap. A combined approach could entail both "fixing what exists now (evolutionary change)" and "building a new way of work (revolutionary change)" (Pryce, 2020), focusing on policies that are aligned with both the abolition and reform perspectives.

Considerations for Moving Forward

Disentangling Poverty, Racism, and Neglect

Implementation of child welfare policies has been problematic. CWS has a long and storied history of racial discrimination resulting in longstanding disproportionalities and disparities. The ongoing challenges of CWS are due in part to the fact that the United States struggles to balance children's rights to protection against parental rights to control the upbringing of their children. A balance can be struck by expanding parents' access to social and economic support that allows them to be supportive caregivers. Unfortunately, CWS intervention is perceived as—and often is—intrusive and coercive rather than supportive. Viewing childhood maltreatment as an individual- or family-level problem perpetuates a crisis orientation within CWS.

Perhaps no subtype of childhood maltreatment better exemplifies our failure to consider social determinants in CWS than neglect. There is a longstanding assumption within child welfare research that maltreatment is a unitary construct—that is, that neglect and abuse in their many disparate forms comprise the same entity. Although we have historically defined maltreatment as including acts of commission (abuse) and acts of omission (neglect) (Giovannoni, 1971), definitions of what constitutes neglect are vague, subjective, and all too often overlap with poverty. Many families, due in part to structurally maintained racial inequalities, lack the support needed for safe, nurturing, supportive childrearing. As a result, there is an alarmingly high concordance between poverty and neglect (Drake et al., 2022). Material hardship predicts CPS reports of neglect (Slack et al., 2004), and rates of certain forms of neglect are higher among low-income compared to middle-or high-income families (Vanderminden et al., 2019). Due to inequities associated with structural racism, there are higher rates of poverty among families of color (Creamer, 2020). Black and White children tend to experience poverty differently in their communities due to housing segregation (Drake & Rank, 2009).

Johnson-Reid and colleagues found that allegations of neglect due to basic needs not being met have been found to be more common among Black children compared to White children (11.0% vs. 4.3%; Jonson-Reid et al., 2013). Despite the connection between poverty, racism, and neglect, we tend to approach instances of neglect as being parents' responsibility to fix rather than a result of holes in the social safety net. The substance use and mental health challenges seen at higher rates among people living below the federal poverty level further challenge parents' ability to care for their children.

As has been called for repeatedly (e.g., Milner & Kelly, 2020), the field of child maltreatment research must reconsider the utility of the traditional definition of maltreatment—that is, disentangling true neglect from the consequences of poverty—in the interest of providing appropriate services to children and, conversely, avoiding inappropriate and coercive family intervention. It has long been suggested that child maltreatment should include behaviors that are "judged by a mixture of community values and professional expertise to be inappropriate and damaging" (Garbarino & Gilliam, 1988, as cited in National Research Council, 1993, p. 64). However, parent voices from the abolish CPS movement indicate that public opinion differs from professional opinion. Thus, community-engaged mixed-methods research is needed to better understand community concerns about CWS and recommendations for its reformation. Conversations must include parents who have experienced harm through CWS and who are actively calling for abolition. In addition, given qualitative research that many individuals have positive experiences with CWS (Barth et al., 2020), it is important to consider their perspectives about both the benefits of CWS and its challenges.

Addressing poverty-related cases through other avenues besides CWS (e.g., meeting families' basic needs, expanding access to voluntary community-based services) could both shrink the size and scope of the system while also freeing up resources that allow the system to protect children experiencing

severe abuse and neglect. To better identify and track cases of severe abuse and neglect, solutions should be geared at "making the haystack smaller, not bigger, so the needles are easier to spot" (National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, 2021, p. 2). However, whereas the abolition movement focuses mainly on issues of parental substance use, domestic violence exposure, physical punishment, and neglect among families who wanted and tried to improve conditions for their children, this does not characterize all incidents of child maltreatment. In many cases, children experience serious harm and endangerment at the hands of their caregivers that may not desist without formal, and sometimes mandatory, intervention. Neglect is not synonymous with poverty (Barth et al., 2021), and is associated with a host of deleterious outcomes distinct from the effects of poverty (Proctor & Dubowitz, 2014). Efforts to significantly reduce the number of children removed from the home should proceed in tandem with efforts to improve foster care for those rare situations in which it is the only viable way to ensure a child's safety.

Societal Transformation

Both abolitionists and those who advocate for CWS reform call for broad efforts to correct the maltreatment-related risk factors that disproportionately affect families of color. Organizations calling for abolition of CWS have proposed anti-racist, poverty-reducing policy initiatives that could be implemented in tandem with efforts to radically reform the existing CWS such as fair housing, affordable childcare, and paid family medical and sick leave policies. These policy initiatives are in line with research identifying macro-level risk factors for family violence and recommendations to reduce child poverty (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). For example, upEND and MFP call for creating and expanding social safety net programs such as requiring paid family and medical leave and implementing a universal child allowance. Other policies to increase families' financial stability include increasing the minimum wage and

establishing refundable state earned income tax credits (EITC), both of which have been associated with decreased maltreatment rates, especially neglect (Kovski et al., 2021; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). The revised Child Tax Credit in the American Rescue Plan increased the amount of money disbursed to families with children and resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of families receiving monthly assistance (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). President Biden's Build Back Better plan would have continued the expanded child tax credits, subsidized universal preschool and lower childcare costs, and expanded Medicaid coverage, among other proposed initiatives. Unfortunately, the bill's progress stalled (Fram, 2022), and although many elements of the plan were incorporated into the Inflation Reduction Act (2022), social safety net proposals originally included in Build Back Better were not included (Bhatia et al., 2022).
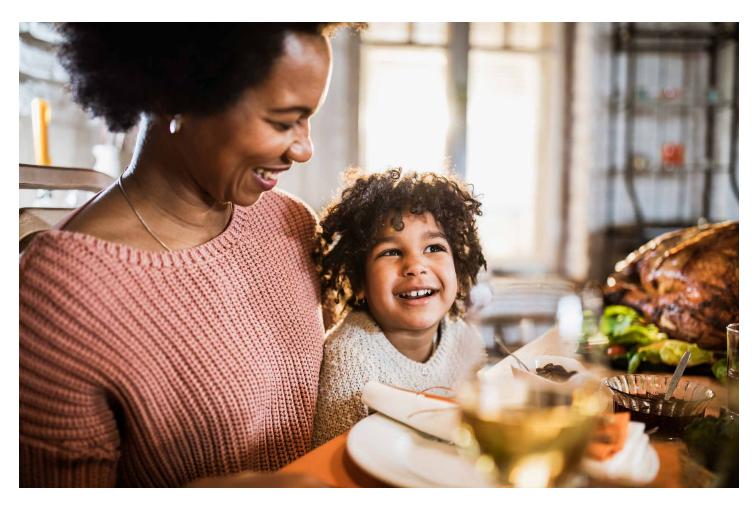
Existing efforts to increase all families' financial security must continue and grow, but additional measures are needed to address the staggering racial income and wealth gap due to structural racism. In 2021, Black households have the lowest median income ($48,297) when compared to Asian ($101,418), White ($77,999), and Latino ($57,981) families (Semega & Kollar, 2022); this racial inequity in income has existed for decades (Ha et al., 2022). Black families represent 23% of the people living poverty despite being only 13% of the U.S. population (Creamer et al., 2022). The typical net worth of a White family is nearly ten times that of a typical Black family (McIntosh, 2020). Eradicating this racial income and wealth gap can ensure that all families have financial security and decrease the stressors associated with maltreatment risk (Ha et al., 2022).

In addition to enhancing families' financial stability, it is also critical to increase the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health and substance use treatment. Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) is an evidence-based treatment for individuals with opioid use disorder and has been found to be effective in increasing likelihood

of reunification for CWS-involved families (Hall et al., 2016). Another type of intervention with considerable potential to improve family well-being and prevent need for CWS involvement is nurse home visiting programs. A universal nurse home visiting program, in which services are offered to all new parents regardless of sociodemographic risk factors, has been found to increase community connections, reduce postpartum mental health symptoms, reduce emergency medical care usage, and decrease child maltreatment rates by 39% through 5 years of age (Dodge et al., 2019; Goodman et al., 2021). These are examples of a preventive public health approach that is needed to transform CWS from a punitive, crisis-oriented system to one that addresses families' needs proactively.

However, research on universal nurse home visiting indicated that benefits were less robust for minority families compared to nonminority families (Goodman et al., 2021). Further, although FFPSA now allows states to use federal funds for MAT and other evidence-based substance use disorder treatments (2020), research suggests that Black patients tend to have less access to MAT compared to White patients (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). To address the common finding that interventions are often less effective for or less accessible to populations of color, culturally responsive interventions must be developed, evaluated, and implemented. Barriers to treatment access such as income, insurance status, transportation, and stigma must be addressed. Few existing evidence-based interventions specifically address the social and cultural context of Black children and families, including the effects of interpersonal and systemic racism on parenting

practices and family well-being. Cultural assets, such as racial socialization to support positive identity development, and culturally relevant coping strategies, such as communalism and spirituality, should be integrated into intervention programs for Black families (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2021).

In the immediate future, work must proceed toward societal improvement that would reduce the need for CWS, consistent with abolitionist goals. However, it is also imperative to continue efforts to improve how CWS functions. American children and families cannot wait for the elimination of poverty, establishment of housing as a human right, and other critical goals to come to fruition before the problems specific to CWS are addressed. Accordingly, the abolition movement argues that efforts to clarify and formalize what radical transformation of CWS will actually look like should proceed in tandem with "reform efforts on an interim basis that shrink the scope and size of the child welfare system" (Dettlaff et al., 2020, p. 510). This represents the "non-reformist reform" approach proposed by André Gorz (1987), in which modifications to the system are intended to ultimately end in its dissolution. According to Gorz, non-reformist reform stands in contrast to reformist reform, whereby reforms do not meaningfully alter the framework of a given system. Abolitionists and reformists disagree as to whether the ultimate goal should be to eliminate CWS, retain it in its present form with minor modifications, or substantially shrink its size and scope while maintaining an apparatus that allows for state intervention when voluntarily accessed supports alone are insufficient to protect children. Despite disagreements about the long-term goal for CWS, it can generally be agreed upon that considerable societal transformation is in order, as is CWS reform.

Child Welfare Reform

In addition to massive social policy initiatives, specific changes to CWS must happen in the short term to address its harmful consequences that are felt especially by Black children and families. Efforts to reform CWS are not new; federal and state governing bodies have introduced numerous modifications to the system over the past several decades. For instance, reformists have worked to replace family separation with family preservation, divert more funds to kinship care, improve training and retention of frontline workers, and better support foster families. However, the concept of "reform" is in and of itself value-neutral; that is, it simply means to change the existing policies and practices, without specifically indicating anti-racist change. Indeed, the traditional advocacy approach has at times resulted in worse treatment of Black families within CWS, rather than better (e.g., Adoption and Safe Families Act). Although some reform advocates have called for cultural competency and implicit bias trainings to address individual racism among CWS actors, such trainings will not be sufficient to address the problems described above (Font et al., 2012). Racism is embedded within CWS and can operate regardless of the best intentions of individual agents. In addition, reforms that result in the expansion of CWS or the undermining of family rights will fail to address the problem of systemic racism within CWS.

Moving forward, it is critical for reform to proceed from an "oppression framework," with specific attention paid to the role of racism in shaping the experience of Black Americans at home and within CWS (Curtis & Denby, 2011). At the cutting edge of the CWS reform movement is a partnership among The Children's Bureau at the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Prevent Child Abuse America called "Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-being." Now in Round Two

of a three-tiered initiative, Thriving Families has allocated funding provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to build a more equitable, safe, and supportive CWS (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2022).

One potential target of change that has received recent attention is mandated reporting. Although practitioners generally agree that state intervention should occur only when "necessary to protect the child from harm that would be greater than that inevitably caused by the state's own intervention" (Coleman et al., 2010, p. 111), mandated reports often initiate a course of state intervention that results in irreparable harm to children and families that exceeds the damage that could result from lack of intervention (Goemans et al., 2016). Recent years have seen increasing calls to end or reduce mandated reporting due to concerns that it disproportionately affects families of color (e.g., MFP, 2019). The vague mandate for mandated reporters to file reports to CWS when there is "reasonable suspicion" of child abuse or neglect is open to a range of interpretations, leading to different responses across agencies and providers, which creates an "environment where racial bias thrives" (Inguanta & Sciolla, 2021, p. 123). Further, there is an imbalance between the massive number of reports and investigations relative to services provided for children and families. Although mandated reporting is thought to enable early intervention when children are at risk of harm, empirical evidence suggests that more reporting is not necessarily better for children (Ho et al., 2017). Further, most allegations of abuse and neglect are ultimately found to be unsubstantiated; in 2019, only 16.7% of children reported to CWS were found to be victims of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Recently, Levi (2017) and Raz (2020) have advocated for efforts to reduce unnecessary mandated reporting to free up resources for cases that warrant intervention and to reduce unnecessary and harmful family separation. An issue brief prepared by Safe & Sound, a children's advocacy organization in San Francisco, CA, proposes a shift "from mandated reporting

to community supporting" (Safe & Sound, 2022, p. 13). Recommended actions include mandating reporters to contact CPS "when there is a substantial or imminent risk of harm" rather than "reasonable suspicion," requiring that evidence of risk within the home be weighed against the risks of family separation when considering out-of-home placement, and narrowing the category of "mandated reporters" to include only individuals with some degree of expertise in child maltreatment.

Although mandated reporters are legally required to convey to CPS information about any suspected abuse or neglect, definitions of neglect are often vague and subjective, allowing for confusion with the unfortunate consequences of poverty. Mandated reporters including school personnel, childcare providers, physicians, and mental health practitioners should educate themselves about local community resources to which they can link families (Thomas & Halbert, 2021). When mandated reporting is indicated, reporters can consider ways to mitigate the harm to families. For instance, reporters can offer to involve the family in the reporting process to increase transparency, convey family-level protective factors to CPS when filing a report, and inform parents about their rights when interacting with CPS (e.g., the right to refuse entry to their home without a warrant and to be informed of allegations) (Gormley et al., 2020).

Community Ownership

Reform of CWS will entail a societal shift toward viewing child well-being as the responsibility of not only parents, but also extended families, communities, and society at large. This sense of "community ownership" empowers individuals to have the power and responsibility to protect vulnerable children. Adopting community-based maltreatment prevention programs presents a promising opportunity to implement many of the proposals of critics of CWS while retaining its beneficial aspects (Daro, 2019). Community-based maltreatment prevention programs are

consistent with Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model accounting for the dynamic, transactional relationships between an individual and their environment (1992). This shift toward community ownership would enhance appreciation for the importance of supporting and nurturing the family unit. Family systems theory proposes that, in clinical work with children and parents, individual members of a family are inextricably interconnected. The family comprises a unit that is greater than the sum of its parts, and intervention targets the family itself as a distinct entity (Hanna, 2018). Within the realm of child welfare, we ought to consider not only the rights of the child and the parent but also the rights of the family. Operating from the assumption that the family unit has a right to exist supports efforts to enhance services that enable adequate caregiving.

Initial findings from efforts to implement community-based maltreatment prevention programs were promising, suggesting improvements in parental well-being and increased collaboration between child welfare and family support agencies (Daro & Dodge, 2009). However, results also indicated high up-front costs and inconsistent or transient outcomes regarding prevention of CWS involvement. More work is needed to improve the quality, cultural relevance, and implementation of community prevention programs. As we continue toward the goal of supporting families by increasing community support capacity and decreasing punitive, crisis-oriented responses, it is important to capitalize on our existing resources. We can "weave together today's fragmented public and private, voluntary and mandatory resources into a comprehensive system of care" (Daro, 2019, pp. 32-33). Ultimately, the abolition and reform movements can work toward shared goals of both protecting children and supporting families through confronting and countering systemic racism within CWS, shifting from viewing maltreatment as an individual problem to a consequence of racial and economic inequality, and implementing preventive community services to better support families.

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Author Note

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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