

Commentary: Black Parents Love Their Children Too - Addressing Anti-Black Racism in the American Child Welfare System

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“They send our men to jail, then they come for our children.”

Black parents know the pain of legally sanctioned and socially accepted separation from their children in a profound way. For centuries, their bodies were viewed as profit machines, units of labor and reproduction, their parental rights stripped to sustain America’s institution of chattel slavery ([Dunaway, 2003](#)). Black parents love their children. They loved them during the weeping years of enslavement when wealthy White people stole their rights to raise their children, and they love them now. Some experts have justified the high levels of CW separation and regulation by asserting that Black people harm their children more than any other racial/ethnic group and, as a result, their children are removed commensurately and are perhaps underrepresented in CW ([Bartholet, 2009](#)). Others have countered Bartholet’s argument and proposed that race and racism perpetuate this disproportionate representation ([Dettlaff et al., 2011](#)). In 2020, Black children were more likely to have screening calls placed and accepted, and reports made, investigated, and indicated than White children ([Harris & Hackett, 2008](#); [Maloney et al., 2017](#)). When

Black children enter foster care, they stay in the system longer and are less likely to be reunified with their parents ([Shipe et al., 2017](#)). It is important to note that these higher rates of CW involvement have been found with similar allegations of abuse as White families. When I began my research at the Child Welfare Organizing Project in East Harlem, New York City, in 2012, parents told me in plain language, “They send our men to jail, then they come for our children.”

This centuries-long practice of the intentional destruction of Black families resonates in the ongoing fight Black parents have against stereotypes that delegitimize their right and dignity to raise their own children. Once a family is reported to CW authorities, [Widom et al. \(2015\)](#) found a higher likelihood that the family would remain CW-involved across generations. This raises serious concerns about the system’s effectiveness at addressing the reasons families come to their attention in the first place. Contrary to a system that supports families, resulting in stronger, more re-silient units, CW has been criticized for its regulatory role in the lives of Black families, earning the unenviable moniker of America’s ongoing apartheid system ([Roberts, 2003](#)).

The alarm raised by CW experts sends the message that Black parents are more violent with their children and will fail at one of the most essential tasks in life—parenting. Those sounding the alarm seem unconcerned about children in White middle- and upper-class neighborhoods ([Mulzer & Urs, 2016](#)), which gives the impression that these more privileged parents do not struggle with mental health issues, substance use, or domestic violence—three reasons often cited for CW involvement ([Harris & Hackett, 2008](#)). The numbers of child removals in those demographic groups simply do not reflect any concern on the part of CW professionals. Ironically, while sheltering in place during the pandemic, social media posts by White mothers publicly crediting copious, daily amounts of alcohol for their survival received thousands of likes, supportive comments, and laughing emojis. Circulating on platforms like Facebook and Instagram were memes of White mothers tying up their children and taping their mouths shut so they could work in peace. These mothers felt entitled to share their parenting frustrations and received a validating outpouring of support and understanding. They screamed to the world that it is hard to be at home with your children for months on end, doing everything for them, from cooking to educating. It is also hard for Black parents, but they do not have the privilege of being allowed to be perceived as less than perfect without facing the risk of child removal.

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Emergency removal courts have reopened in New York City, while formal reunification procedures had stopped for some time (Bronx Family Court Reunification Month Event, personal communication, June 23, 2020). Families on track for reunification were forced to wait for final adjudication of their cases until availability of vaccinations made any semblance of returning to “normalcy” possible. A lucky few received de facto reunifications in 2020 because their foster care agencies were proactive and allowed families weeks away from reunification and only awaiting a judge’s signature to be reunified. CW visitation, an essential component of sustaining the parent-child attachment that is required for healthy family functioning, moved to the virtual realm with varying and sporadic effectiveness. Ironically, CW has rallied with urgent calls to develop Mandated Reporter Trainings for virtual spaces.

Social workers have tremendous influence in the CW field and must address the systemic racism that is being perpetuated. Unfortunately, while streets across the United States filled with protestors demanding a racial reckoning after the public and violent murders of unarmed Black people by police in the spring of 2020, SW professionals within CW remained silent on how racism was tearing at CW-affected families. This not seeing or speaking of race by social workers in CW is reflected at the profession’s highest level. The statement from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) regarding the profession’s stance on the need for CW-involvement within families uses color-blind, strengths-based language to describe CW-affected parents. No mention is made of systemic racism. Instead, the statement depicts these parents as wanting to do their best for their children but being unable to and provides validation for instances where social workers must intervene to prevent harm to children ([NASW, n.d.](#)). It appears that well-meaning social workers are making these decisions about Black families in a vacuum, though our professional values and ethics stress the importance of always considering context.

Though social workers do not constitute the bulk of the CW workforce, our influence is felt in the schools, mental health clinics, and hospitals from which initial calls to central registries originate. We provide the reports that are used in court hearings to justify reunifications or the termination of parental rights. We serve as supervisors in group homes and other CW foster care and preventive agencies, which often cannot

justify their reliance on paraprofessional workers without the oversight and signature of a trained and licensed clinical social worker. We have power to effect change.

As a profession we have not questioned why CW service provision, historically based on private, in-home supportive models, changed rapidly after the passing of the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974](#), around the same time Black people, formerly barred because of segregation, gained access to these services ([Roberts, 2003](#)). We have written the policies and provided the services that came along with the increasingly punitive models that incentivized out-of-home placements in CW. Specifically, foster care placement dollars continue to vastly outpace monies provided for supportive in-home care ([HHS, 2019b](#)), and not surprisingly, where the dollars go, so do the children. An example of change that helps to root out disadvantage in CW can be seen in the American Bar Association's reporting on the Children's Bureau's January 2019 decision to allow Title IV-E funds to be used for private parent legal representation in family court ([Hardin, 2019](#)). This decision came after decades of the bureau funding legal representation for all other CW actors but not parents, leaving parents ill-prepared to face a well-funded family court system.

Social workers must seek out and advocate for similarly transformative solutions that root out disadvantage for Black families affected by the CW system. For example, SW educational institutions should create mandated supporter trainings (a term coined by parent advocates in the New York City grass-roots advocacy movement) that prepare new social workers to assess for the impact of racism on families. A mandated supporter training would include questions about challenges families face in securing sustainable housing and employment, foundational supports needed for family security that are often denied to Black people in America. A mandated supporter would explore what a parent needs and attempt to connect them to resources before a report is ever made. All SW institutions should strongly consider the potential for racial bias among practitioners who are currently serving as mandated reporters. They should be prepared to act ethically as gatekeepers when social workers demonstrate a track record of racial bias that is resistant to intervention and that should bar them from working with Black families.

Social workers should lead on models which first identify and then seek to redress the ways in which racism has undermined the viability of some Black families. SW has played an ignoble role in the CW system, one that has left our professional title

synonymous with baby snatchers in some communities. Our complicit surveillance had resulted in earned distrust among Black families who both want and need support, but who often go to great lengths to avoid interactions with us as they fear the removal of their children. Our profession's micro-level, laser focus on the struggles of families, to the near occlusion of the racism they face, has resulted in an untenable state of CW service provision in this country. It is time for social workers to begin tackling the institutional racism that makes it harder for Black families to thrive. Black parents love their children too and have a right to their families without system regulation.

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