

## Documenting experiences and interactions with Child Protective Services

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### TAKEAWAYS

Parents' lived experiences of CPS involvement are under-reported yet vital in making efforts to decrease stigmatizing service delivery for those referred for child maltreatment, particularly neglect.

Parenting choices are directly related to differences in resource-rich or resource-poor settings, both inside and out of the home.

Scholars have rarely considered the links between families' lived experiences of child welfare system oversight and associated parental behaviors and decision-making.

Every child and parent impacted by CPS involvement is subject to varying levels of stress and trauma related to the system's inherently intrusive nature.



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### Few accounts of the child welfare system document direct

perspectives of family impact. Child Protective Services (CPS) is the “front-end” of the child welfare system, where reports of abuse and neglect are processed, maltreatment investigations occur, and decisions about opening cases are made. As designed, CPS is an inherently coercive system. Family participation is usually compulsory or, at best, strongly encouraged through the explicit or implicit threat of negative consequences, including a child’s removal from the home. Given the high stakes for CPS-impacted families, researchers and practitioners alike must understand family experiences with CPS through the specific ways in which these families view system involvement as harmful, helpful, or mixed. However, very little research explores how families view their CPS-related experiences and how interactions with CPS affect the breadth of family dynamics, well-being, and senses of parental autonomy and empowerment.

An estimated 37% of U.S. children (up to age 18) experience a CPS investigation, yet proportions are unequal across racial lines—overall rates among African American children climb to 53%<sup>1</sup>—while the cumulative risk of a CPS investigation among Black children in New York County, the geographic region of this study, is approximately 56%.<sup>2</sup> CPS investigation rates are important to consider because most investigations are focused on possible neglect, and racialized poverty is specifically associated with African American families. Families don’t intend to live in poverty, nor should their experiences with poverty be exacerbated by structural racism in practice.

A nuanced approach to understanding the experiences of CPS-involved families considers parental intentions and perspectives. Such nuance in acknowledging parental best intentions in the context of structural oppression is crucial in many ways, and particularly so when seeking to understand persistently high rates of child neglect.<sup>3</sup> The results of a pilot study, discussed below, explore parental perspectives regarding CPS involvement.<sup>4</sup> These results are vital for validating and supporting the lived experiences of families by adding their voices to scholarship that has often been exclusionary.

### Contexts of interactions with CPS

The United States has a well-documented history of racial and socioeconomic discrimination. Despite good intentions to protect children from harm, the child welfare system is not exempt as a perpetrator of systemic oppression.<sup>5</sup> Most parents, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, consider their family life private and immune from oversight and intrusive judgment. CPS services, however, are based on protocols designed by those in positions of power and privilege. These system architects have not likely been subject to authoritative and intrusive involvement in their own families and may not have considered the impacts of CPS on traditionally marginalized populations, including those who have repeatedly suffered from economic disenfranchisement, overt racism, and other forms of systemic oppression.

Black families and other families of color in the United States have long been subject to well-documented histories of discriminatory oversight across multiple social welfare and human service systems. In the child welfare system, stark racial disparities occur at every decision point,<sup>6</sup> including abuse and neglect reporting,<sup>7</sup> investigation and maltreatment substantiation,<sup>8</sup> and foster care placement decisions and case closures.<sup>9</sup> Racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is defined as the overrepresentation of children or families from a particular racial group relative to their representation in the general population.<sup>10</sup> Scholars, however, have rarely considered the links between families' lived experiences of child welfare system oversight<sup>11</sup> and associated parental behaviors and decision-making.

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Parental choices occurring in the context of CPS involvement are inextricably linked to deeply rooted (i.e., generational) perspectives about the judgments inherent in system oversight and compounded by the threat of potentially devastating consequences, including child removal. I argue that child welfare researchers and practitioners must consider a family's past experiences, often including racism and other forms of discrimination, in engagements with families where child safety may be a concern. Every child and parent impacted by CPS involvement is subject to varying levels of stress and trauma related to the system's inherently intrusive nature. The impact of CPS is exacerbated if children are removed from their families of origin and placed in care. While some families feel overburdened and negatively affected by system oversight, others may feel supported in their efforts to improve their parenting when the child welfare system intersects with their lives; still others have mixed experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Socioeconomic contexts are also very relevant to CPS involvement in family dynamics. Research must acknowledge ways in which parental behaviors and decision-making are impacted by parents' relative economic position in society. Families with higher levels of educational attainment, more expansive employment opportunities, and greater earning power are better positioned to make choices that significantly reduce or even eliminate child maltreatment risk or reduce their risk of surveillance by and adverse interactions with authorities. Parents with sufficient resources are also typically able to secure suitable housing and benefit from better-resourced schools, higher-quality childcare options, and safer neighborhoods. On the other hand, families typically involved with CPS are socially and economically disadvantaged and have far fewer high-quality options across each of these domains.<sup>13</sup>

### **Lived Experiences and Parents' Concerns about CPS Oversight—A Pilot Study**

It is important to assess the etiology, or root causes, of specific types of child maltreatment and neglect by considering cultural, community, and socioeconomic contexts. I posit that parenting behaviors are often a response to underlying fears and threats to survival, based on cultural and community characteristics, and experiences of societal inequities. In an effort to understand the lived experiences of families impacted by CPS involvement,

I conducted a pilot study to assess parents' perceptions of system oversight based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.<sup>14</sup> This study specifically aimed to (1) understand contextual fears and perceptions among marginalized women related to CPS oversight and parenting roles, (2) identify parent-driven remedies to address fears associated with child-rearing practices to enhance child welfare service delivery, and (3) assess thematic parental fears as predictors of specific types of child maltreatment.

Child-rearing practices vary greatly based on parents' fears and concerns. Such fears may stem from challenging circumstances in the home, neighborhood, and wider social contexts; lack of access to resources; and deeply rooted, unjust social stratification norms. Community characteristics also shape parents' expectations of children in their attempts to instill the necessary skills for survival in potentially high-risk environments. Efforts to decrease the prevalence of child maltreatment and neglect must consider the challenges placed on parents in impoverished communities, accompanying parental fears, and experiences with systemically oppressive oversight systems.

This summary presents new knowledge about the relationships between child-rearing practices and parents' experiences with child welfare agency oversight, primarily among Black and Latinx parents receiving prevention services focused on child maltreatment and neglect. An underlying goal of this inquiry was to identify links and pathways between parenting intentions and parents' decision-making in context. I gathered information on the perceived impact of parental fears on child-rearing decisions according to socioeconomic status and child welfare service variation to identify thematic parental fears as predictors of specific types of child maltreatment.

## Emergent Data

Four subthemes emerged from the structured interviews: (1) agency treatment, (2) judgment based on race/ ethnicity, (3) perceptions of parenting well/parenting intent, and (4) financial disparities (see Table 1). A primary theme revolved around how parents felt about CPS involvement. Overall, parents felt mistreated and unfairly judged by child welfare agency workers based on their race/ ethnicity. Parents often expressed trauma resulting from ongoing CPS oversight and negative effects on the child/parent relationship; parents also noted feeling stigmatized and shamed within their communities for having an open child welfare case. Additionally, parents discussed feeling challenged and perceived as not capable of providing the optimal experiences they felt their children deserved due to racial stereotypes and based on financial challenges. Parents shared perceptions and feelings of judgment, blame, intimidation, being overwhelmed, afraid (of family disruption), and a loss of control. Some parents expressed satisfaction with the support from private child welfare workers or a combination of feeling supported and feeling intruded upon because of the oversight.

## Data and methods









This study focused on the lived experiences with, and parental perceptions of, CPS oversight related to parenting decisions and child-rearing practices. Seventeen in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with primarily Black and Latina, New York City-based mothers.

Interview questions covered parenting practices related to fears that might result in unwanted experiences with systems (e.g., lack of childcare, nutritional sustenance, dangerous neighborhoods, threats of child removal). Topics included:

- Parents' fears and nuanced experiences with both public and private child welfare agency oversight and,
- Remedies to reduce or eliminate fears related to parenting behavior.

Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. Participants provided prior informed consent and received a \$30 bank card for their participation. Employing a systematic grounded theory analysis, information garnered from the interviews were open and group coded, allowing for salient themes to emerge.

Table 1: Question prompts and emergent themes generated through parent interviews.

| Question Prompts  |  | Emergent Themes   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
|  | Do you feel you've been treated fairly while involved with child welfare agencies? |  | Agency treatment: ACS oversight and lack of support/fair treatment |
|  | Do they (caseworkers) treat all people the same regardless of their background?    |  | Judgement based on race/ethnicity                                  |
|  | What do you think it means to be a good parent?                                    |  | Perceptions of parenting well/parental intent                      |
|  | Do you make parenting decisions or discipline your kids based on your income?      |  | Financial disparities: Financial barriers / socioeconomic status   |

One example of a mixed opinion regarding CPS involvement was shared by Sally, age 32:

“I really don’t like people coming in and out of my house. It’s just like I feel like it’s an invasion of privacy. But they, you know, everyone has been very nice. They’ve helped out in every way possible. Then they’ve helped me out with resources, so I guess it’s—I guess one bad experience I guess, I don’t know. Something good came out of it or is coming out of it. Just have to wait and see.”

A similar view was shared by a few other study respondents. Whereas most respondents lamented CPS requirements of adhering to parenting and family management mandates, at times these parents shared appreciation for certain components of the services. Below, I highlight four emergent subthemes and, using pseudonyms to uphold confidentiality, include representative comments from parents to help characterize these themes.

### Agency treatment

As an example of how parents experienced agency treatment and in response to the question, “Do [caseworkers] treat all people the same regardless of their background?” the following quote illustrates a mother’s perception of predetermined judgment, rather than empathy and support. She expresses feeling wrongly judged based on past case notes and distrusting the motives of the caseworker:

“You know, they definitely don’t make it easy. They don’t . . . their perception of whatever they read or whatever case notes they have. They come in with, you know, like treating you a certain type of way. It’s like, relax. You don’t need to . . . you know, I know I’ve done wrong. I admitted it and I’m making changes to fix it. They’re very judgmental and very like. . . . It’s not a support. . . . They make it seem like they’re here for support and they want to help but I’ve questioned it sometimes. They dictate what needs to be done and it’s just been, it’s been a tough road.” (Bianca, 28 years old, Latina [Hispanic], one child [male, 10 years old])

### Judgment based on race/ethnicity

To assess how parents felt about being judged based on their identified race and ethnicity, I asked, “Do caseworkers treat all people the same regardless of their background?” Bianca further shares concern that she was judged based on a stereotype that parents of color are bad. The stigma of CPS involvement was palpable and perceived as negative. Participants also pointed to a link between being viewed as minority stereotypes and how that played out in CPS involvement.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I just think if you’re a minority and you have an ACS case, they have a certain perception of you. It’s like a stereotype. . . . If you already have an ACS case, they think in their mind, y’all are the worst type of parent.”

Olivia, a 35-year-old, African American woman with six children (ages 9 to 27 years old; the older children being biological children of Olivia’s husband, who is older than she is), expressed a similar perception:

“Nope. They don’t give a damn. . . . Skin means a whole lot. If I was light enough, if I was white enough, bright enough. . . . They’d be a little nicer to me . . . because I’m dark. The word was said [that I] look aggressive. This is how I talk. . . . I can calm this is how I talk. . . . But this comes across as aggressive. If he ain’t Black in America, it’s a not a good thing to talk this way, but I’m not going to stop being me.”

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Many of the mothers expressed a desire to make sure their children felt an unconditional love that can be depended upon and demonstrated in all ways, including financially providing for their needs and ensuring that they grow up in safe environments and attend good schools.

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### Financial disparities

A large proportion of families interfacing with CPS face persistent financial hardship, which affects one’s ability to parent effectively, especially since most children who come to the attention of CPS are categorized as neglected of sustenance, other basic necessities, or suitable childcare settings. Stable and adequate financial resources are essential to sufficient parenting—to provide opportunities for family dynamics to grow beyond simply surviving to higher-order thriving or flourishing. Responding to the question, “Do you make parenting decisions or discipline your kids based on your income?” Carla, a 33-year-old, African American mother with a young daughter (age seven), shared her worry about providing basic necessities: “I don’t worry about being a parent, like my biggest worry if I did worry it would be like just to be able to provide basically. Just providing for them, giving them what they deserve.”

The need to provide basic sustenance was challenging to participants. Again, Carla shared the perils of living in an under-resourced community and her worry about ensuring that the children in her neighborhood were able to access needed resources and things they would like to have beyond necessities:

“Like because I live in like in a low-income neighborhood where I feel like all the children, I mean I’m not singling out one child, but I just feel like the children have issues because they don’t have the necessities or sometimes they don’t have the things that they need or maybe want. . . .”

“I just feel like if I had given myself the chance to further my education then I think that I could probably provide more or do more for them, definitely, but in the sense as far as emotional like emotionally or physically I don’t think. . . . I am who I am so I don’t think that would change but as far as just like being able to provide. . . .”

## Perceptions of parenting well/parenting intent

To assess how parents felt about their personal perspectives of parenting well, and what they intended to convey and achieve in their parenting behaviors, I asked parents what they “think it means to be a good parent?” Nala, a 28-year-old multiracial mom caring for her sister, the CPS target child, whom she has guardianship over (female, age 18, male to female transition) shared: “To not overstep and to have like a good understanding with your kids and to have a love like not a love like oh I love you, I love you. Like a love that they can feel and they see— like they see it through your actions and what you do when like, how you speak to them.”

Carla indicated a concern about ensuring the safety of her child and providing for her ultimate happiness:

“Making sure your girls or your children are safe, secure, they have a roof over their head. They have clothing on their back, shoes on their feet. They are happy, they are entertained, and they are going to sports and having different recreational activities. They are reading, do you understand? I just want to raise productive citizens, that’s all.”  
(Carla, 33 years old, African American, one child [female, age 7])

Many of the mothers expressed a desire to make sure their children felt an unconditional love that can be depended upon and demonstrated in all ways, including financially providing for their needs and ensuring that they grow up in safe environments and attend good schools.

These examples are just a few among many from this study that suggest parents have felt mistreated and unfairly judged by child welfare agency workers based on the parents identifying as Black or brown. To my knowledge, there are no studies documenting white CPS-involved families experiencing stigma based on race. One might expect, nevertheless, that white families also experience stigma based on their socioeconomic status and suffer trauma stemming from system involvement. Parents expressed feeling challenged and perceived as not good enough to provide for their children based on racial stereotypes and financial challenges, while also sharing their earnest attempts to provide for their children, often even more than resources allowed. Parents also discussed stigma from within their communities as a means of further shaming them for receiving CPS supervision. Child welfare workers are noticeable when they go into communities and public housing comprising primarily people of color. Neighbors are acutely aware of which families are monitored by CPS. To provide the most supportive settings for children and their parents, practitioners and policymakers must consider and incorporate the perspectives of those parents who endure child welfare system oversight.

Some families come to rely on CPS workers for both tangible supports and help with parenting, yet some experience such oversight as an intrusive burden that hinders their attempts to parent to the best of their ability. Asking parents about their experiences with such oversight and placing preferred safe parenting practices in appropriate contexts is crucial if we are to encourage these parents’ autonomous self-determination. Contextually safe parenting practices refer to ways in which parents keep their children safe according to specific contexts, such as neighborhood composition, safety level, and quality (e.g., availability and access to services, healthy food resources, child- and family-specific community resources).

## Conclusions and future work

Results from this study give voice to parents impacted by a child welfare system plagued by systemic racial discrimination and deeply rooted biases based on socioeconomic status. The anecdotes and insights gained from the pilot study described above highlight how CPS oversight impacts parents' choices when these parents, despite acknowledged mistakes of the past, are striving to move beyond basic survival to circumstances of familial flourishing through the ability to make sound decisions for themselves and their children. This process often takes place within community contexts fraught with multiple overlapping forms of systemic oppression.

A social justice approach—acknowledging systemic racism and structural disenfranchisement within several intersecting child welfare systems—would mandate the inclusion of system-impacted parents' perspectives. Including the perspectives of CPS-impacted parents is not only a strategy for system improvement, but also acts as a means of parental empowerment. I propose a shift in the narratives around these issues and how such narratives are put into practice. Policymakers and practitioners must acknowledge the privilege of those who develop and implement policy and practice as well as the structural oppression repeatedly encountered by marginalized families as they interact with social welfare and human service systems.

One area of further research needed is to distinguish intentional neglect from unintentional neglect associated with limited resources and barriers stemming from systemic oppression and living in poverty. If child welfare system protocols and policies incorporated concerted efforts to assess parents' intentions as a function of their available resources and histories with structural discrimination within relevant community contexts, perhaps there would be far fewer children designated as neglected whose families are, in turn, subjected to stigmatizing CPS oversight. Such a shift in narrative and practice would allow for addressing parents' needs with less intrusive and less stigmatizing service options, including facilitating access to financial and social supports centered on familial flourishing.

Holistic and strength-based approaches are necessary to provide services from a trauma-informed lens and one that incorporates parental perceptions. A strength-based approach is one in which individuals and families are assessed based on their strengths and positive aspects related to their coping abilities, rather than from a deficit lens, which primarily critiques deficiencies and problems related to resiliency efforts. Racial bias training for educators and other mandated reporters is also needed. Practitioners should partner with parents to provide social support leading to strength-based help, trauma-informed considerations of parent/child well-being, and a child-centered approach to family engagement.

Parenting choices are directly related to differences in resource-rich or resource-poor settings, both inside and out of the home. Parenting choices also result in differential power dynamics between CPS workers and parents or guardians. There could be significant benefits if societal

## Research to Watch

According to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, three quarters of children experiencing maltreatment also experience neglect. This equates to over 500,000 children annually. Darcey Merritt of NYU's Silver School of Social Work is completing an in-depth research project funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to reframe and more clearly define child neglect.

Merritt is studying how mothers report the parenting choices and decision-making processes that led to a determination of supervisory and physical neglect. The first stage of research will be a qualitative analysis of interview data, from approximately 35 mothers who are clients of a New York City-based prevention agency, in addition to information garnered from 12 clinicians.

In the second stage, Merritt and co-investigator James Jaccard, also of NYU's Silver School, will survey 150 primarily African American mothers about their decision-making processes drawn from working memories in instances that resulted in charges of neglect, as well as their perceptions of what does and does not constitute neglect given particular socio-economic contexts.

The aim of this project is to better understand the contexts in which Black mothers function under the surveillance of child welfare systems, and how those contexts influence childrearing decision-making. By applying frameworks from decision theory, the researchers also hope to identify childrearing behaviors that can be enhanced or improved upon once they are better understood by caseworkers and other system actors.

Dr. Merritt hopes that better and more appropriate policy can be developed by listening directly to systems-impacted parents, with the end goal of understanding child neglect in these contexts as unintentional functions of systemic disenfranchisement. The study is expected to run through 2022.

and community-level contexts, including the power dynamics inherent in coercive systems, are considered in parenting assessments; mandated reporters, practitioners, and service providers may be less likely to place blame on well-intentioned parents and more likely to note positive efforts and strive to reduce challenges to desirable parenting.

Parents' lived experiences of CPS involvement have been under-assessed and under-appreciated and have not been considered in efforts to decrease the prevalence of child maltreatment, particularly neglect. Parental intent is given little consideration in nuanced socioeconomic contexts. An understanding of parental decision-making is required to improve growth-positive support services focused on healthy child and family dynamics. A renewed effort to support and empower parents and decrease punitive oversight, along with acknowledging the structural oppression inherent in CPS systems and service efforts, would amplify other collective efforts to protect children and foster childhood flourishing. ■

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