

# How Do Families Experience and Interact with CPS?

By  
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The lived experiences of child protective services (CPS)-involved parents is rarely considered from a social justice perspective. Parents and children endure the oversight of the child welfare system in myriad ways, and these experiences usually vary based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This article explores how CPS interactions affect family dynamics and well-being and how family members view their experiences with CPS, including their sense of autonomy and empowerment. I focus on the inherent power dynamics between CPS workers and parents, race and ethnicity, and family. I highlight the perspectives of parents and their intended (rather than unintentional) parental behaviors (e.g., providing healthy food choices) to understand ways in which their socioecological contexts impact the well-being of their children. I report results of a pilot study designed to enhance the voices of parents in the literature and provide recommendations for policy and practice that inform innovative solutions to better support CPS-involved families.

*Keywords:* child welfare system; parents' perspectives; child protective services processes; minority child; welfare families; low-income child

Research has documented few accounts of the child welfare system from the perspectives of families involved in the system. 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 an ongoing case are made. CPS is inherently coercive, as family participation is usually compulsory or, at best, strongly encouraged, with the

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explicit or implicit threat of significant consequences, including removal of one's child from the home. Given the high stakes for CPS-involved families, we must understand their experiences with this system and the ways in which they view it as helpful or harmful. Yet very little in the literature has explored how families view their CPS experiences and how their interactions with CPS impact their family dynamics, well-being, and sense of autonomy and empowerment.

This article highlights the experiences of families and discusses the ways in which schools work with the child welfare system to initiate families' involvement with CPS, sometimes in ways that can be detrimental to family well-being. I describe and discuss the process of interacting with CPS, with attention to the inherent power dynamics between CPS workers and parents, race and ethnicity, and family context. Family context has great variation, a sampling of which includes family composition (e.g., number of children, parents), family member relationships, safe home environments, resource rich learning materials in the home, pervasive food insecurities, substance use, and emotional/mental health challenges or strengths.

I present a nuanced approach to understanding the experiences of these families, an approach that considers parental intentions and perspectives. I present results of a pilot study specifically designed to assess parental perspectives regarding CPS involvement to bolster their lived experiences and add their voices to the literature. Finally, I discuss future steps and recommendations for policy and practice in an effort to move the conversation forward and adopt innovative solutions that better support CPS-involved families, considering their often-challenging circumstances.

## The Impact of CPS

The United States has a storied history of discrimination, which continues to manifest in structurally oppressive systems, including in many of our social and human service agencies. Despite good intentions to protect children from harm, the child welfare system is not an exception (Kriz and Skivenes 2011; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017). Most parents consider their families to be sacredly private and immune from oversight and intrusive judgment. But CPS services are based on protocols designed by those in positions of power and privilege who have not likely been subjected to authoritative involvement in their families and may not have considered the impact of CPS on traditionally vulnerable populations, such as those who have repeatedly suffered from disenfranchisement, racism, and other forms of oppression. CPS services are inherently accusatorial, as they are primarily initiated as a result of judgments about parenting efforts and practices, made by authorities outside of family systems, such as educational personnel (21 percent) and law professionals (19 percent) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS] 2020). Child welfare professionals have the power to deem parenting appropriate or inappropriate, guided by state statutes and system policies, but such judgements come with implicit biases at all

levels of service design and delivery (Kriz and Skivenes 2011; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017; Roberts 2014; Wells, Merritt, and Briggs 2009).

Black families and other families of color have long histories of oppressive and discriminatory oversight across multiple social welfare and human service systems (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Rothstein 2017; Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol 2016; Wise 2010). In the child welfare system, racial disparities occur at every decision point (Miller et al. 2013; Roberts 2014): abuse and neglect reporting (Ards et al. 2003), investigation and maltreatment substantiation (Rolock and Testa 2005), and foster care placement decisions and case closures (Miller et al. 2013). Research has documented racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, defined as the overrepresentation of children or families from a particular racial group relative to their representation in the general population (Boyd 2014; Cooper 2013; Dettlaff and Rycraft 2008; Dettlaff et al. 2011; Drake and Jonson-Reid 2011; Font, Berger, and Slack 2012; George and Lee 2005; R. Hill 2005; Fluke et al. 2011; Roberts 2014; Kokaliari, Roy, and Taylor 2019; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017). I discuss theories of the root causes of this disproportionality later in this article, and Dettlaff and Boyd (this volume) discuss them as well. Scholars have rarely considered the child welfare system from a social justice perspective (Brooks and Roberts 2002; Edwards 2016; Roberts 2014), which has resulted in a general inattention to the stigmatizing impact on marginalized families and communities that comes with disproportionate system oversight. Further, scholars have rarely considered the link between families' lived experiences of child welfare system oversight (Fong 2019) and associated parental behaviors and decisions.

I posit that parental choices that occur in the context of child welfare system involvement are inextricably linked to deeply rooted feelings related to the judgment inherent in system oversight, and compounded by the threat of potentially devastating consequences, including child removal. I argue that we must consider a family's past experiences of oppression, often stemming from racism and discrimination, in our approach to engaging with families where child safety may be a concern. Every child and parent who becomes involved with CPS is subjected to varying levels of stress and trauma stemming from the inherently intrusive nature of the system. The impact of CPS is exacerbated if children have to be removed from their families of origin and placed in care. CPS has put in place various services for families in attempts to protect children from harm. Some families feel overburdened and negatively affected by system oversight, while others feel supported in their efforts to improve their parenting when the child welfare system enters their lives; others have both experiences (Merritt and Ludeke 2020).

We must also consider the impact of CPS involvement in terms of families' socioeconomic contexts. Research must acknowledge ways in which parental behaviors are impacted by their positionality in society. Those with higher levels of educational attainment, better employment opportunities, and greater earning power are also 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

typically able to secure suitable housing and benefit from better-resourced school districts, higher-quality childcare options, and safer neighborhoods. Families that are typically involved with CPS are socially and economically disadvantaged and have far fewer high-quality options across each of these domains (Chaudry and Wimer 2016; Fong 2019; Kang et al. 2019; Landers, Carrese, and Spath 2019).

Both endogenous and exogenous barriers influence parenting quality. Some examples of endogenous challenges to parenting quality are personal characteristics, such as age, marital status, gender identification, and mental health issues. Examples of exogenous challenges in this context refer to poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, underemployment and unemployment, and so on. We must understand the emotional impact of navigating the child welfare system in the face of these barriers, which differ across families, and the varying strategies that parents employ to exercise resilience. The pilot study highlighted in this article seeks to understand the lived experiences of families as they interface with CPS. While provision of child welfare supports and services could be seen as a positive manner of intervening in families to protect children, there are dynamics at play in many families, based on historical experiences with oppressive systems, that, in turn, impact parental perceptions of the system and its ability to support their autonomy and empowerment.

## Schools Weaponizing CPS

Child maltreatment practitioners, policy-makers, and scholars need to be mindful of the overlapping impact of the child welfare system and the education system in terms of outcomes for children and in the context of the power dynamics in both systems that are particularly problematic for historically disenfranchised families and communities. Families lacking socioeconomic privilege and resources and those less empowered and socialized to self-advocate for autonomy are also often the ones subjected to outside surveillance from multiple systems. As I discuss, families are first brought to the attention of child welfare agencies when parenting is identified as questionable, neglectful, or abusive by someone external to this system. Most children over the age of three spend the majority of their waking hours during the school year in childcare and school settings where they are under the direct supervision of teachers, nurses, and counselors. Child behaviors in schools typically manifest from normative to troubling, the latter often perceived as flags that can prompt queries into the home environment. However, as I describe, the child welfare and educational systems often work in concert to perpetuate the stigma experienced by economically disadvantaged and marginalized families.

To understand the impact of CPS oversight on families, we must consider the role of educational system oversight and system collaboration practices with child welfare (Garstka et al. 2014). The education system is a key source of reports of child maltreatment. Teachers and other education professionals are mandated reporters from which 20.5 percent of all reports originate (not including 0.6

percent among child daycare providers) (USDHHS 2020), but compared to many other types of professionals, they have the most consistent access to children, placing them in a particularly unique position of power. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of such oversight is the propensity for school systems to unintentionally, or sometimes even intentionally, weaponize CPS against families, given that teachers risk both moral and professional negative consequences if they fail to exercise extreme caution in their assessments of potential child maltreatment among their students. Further, teachers are not infallible to racial bias.

Mandated child maltreatment referral protocols can also be affected by aspects of the education system that overlap with the medical system, sometimes stemming from system pressures on parents, rather than autonomous parental choice. Examples of such pressurized decisions include health issues (Jackson, Cheater, and Reid 2008), medication compliance (Naylor et al. 2007), and adherence to special education designations (Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan 2010), often-times in response to challenging classroom behaviors. Oversight by child welfare workers and accompanying educator/counselor assessments often result in children being deemed in need of medication to mitigate the presenting problematic behaviors displayed in school settings. Parents in families that have experienced various forms of oppression, trauma, and economic stress may feel coerced by the high stakes of family disruption if they are noncompliant with service plans imposed by the education system, including medication interventions. As a result, some parents may reluctantly agree to medicate their children, which may, in turn, contribute to the disproportional use of psychiatric medication with CPS-involved children (Alavi and Calleja 2012; Barnett et al. 2016; McKay 2007; Walsh and Mattingly 2012).

Special education designations (K. Hill 2013), which are often based on a deficit-focus approach to assessment, can also play a role in further stigmatizing and marginalizing parents and children already dealing with other familial and environmental stressors. Teachers may identify a child with disturbing classroom behaviors, inattention, and an inability to focus as needing special education services, yet the child's distressed household environment and familial socioeconomic position may be the catalyst for disruptive classroom behaviors (e.g., a lack of nutritional meals at home, a distressed environment due to domestic violence), and not a reflection of her academic skills or abilities.

To the extent that the child welfare system and oversight by CPS workers creates additional stress and even trauma for a family, family management roles in the context of the parent/child dyad may be adversely affected. Education system mandates that challenge the relationships between parents and their child's teachers may similarly affect family dynamics. Parents may fear scrutiny from their children's teachers when they send their children to school with meager lunches, tattered clothing, or scrapes and bruises that were not the result of intentional abuse. These daily concerns may play out in stress levels and everyday interactions between children and their parents. There is a salient fear of judgment from educational authorities as parents raise their children in the context of persistent experiences of oppression and marginalization. In addition to concerns about potential erroneous allegations of physical abuse and neglect, parents

may also experience a sense of diminished control over educational decisions for their children, particularly when caseworkers and/or teachers make recommendations that a parent feels pressured to implement (e.g., adhering to individualized education plans or IEPs). Essentially, when interacting with CPS, aspects of parental choice and control are scrutinized and can be diminished by both the child welfare and education systems. There are justifiable cases when children are truly in danger of harm, warranting a CPS report from schools, followed by an investigation. However, among some marginalized families, schools can be weaponized to carry out family surveillance directly leading to child welfare system oversight and ongoing involvement.

## The CPS Process

The typical pathway to CPS involvement begins with a report alleging one or more types of child abuse and neglect (see, also, Berger and Slack, this volume for additional discussion of the CPS process). These reports can originate from a number of sources. Most reports originate from school professionals and legal authorities, followed by social services (10.7 percent) and medical professionals (10.5 percent) (USDHSS 2020). However, neighbors and family members can also make reports to CPS, and individuals can report to CPS anonymously. Mandated reporters or people who are required by law to report instances of suspected child maltreatment to CPS trigger an investigation by a CPS worker who visits the family and makes a determination about the presenting factors involved with the allegation. Depending on whether cases are “screened out” or “screened in,” the CPS worker makes a designation to indicate or substantiate child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013, 2019), and potentially open a case for ongoing services.

There are a host of adjudications that a caseworker can make, based on their perceived level of risk for continued or future harm to a child (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019). Some children may be placed in temporary foster or kinship care while parents adhere to particular interventions (e.g., family therapy, substance use treatment, and behavioral management programs). Families screened out following a maltreatment report or whose report does not result in an open case are sometimes referred to community-based programs (e.g., after-school programs, parent support groups, youth diversion programs). Other dispositions include placement of a family case in an alternative or differential response track, which allows for a less intrusive level of involvement with families whose children have been deemed to be at low or moderate risk for future harm (Fluke et al. 2019; Hughes et al. 2013). In these cases, next steps typically include voluntary acceptance of CPS services contracted to community agencies, based on specific familial needs. Slack and Berger (this volume) present a more detailed discussion of the adoption of such alternative responses by child welfare systems, which are intended to mitigate the risk of children entering the child welfare system or being removed from their families.



Once a family has an ongoing case opened within the child welfare system, CPS develops a case plan that incorporates child, parent, and family goals. A family-specific menu of services is then put into place with regular system oversight to assess progress. County-level child welfare agencies provide direct services to families or may contract with private child welfare agencies to provide intensive and frequent service delivery. Examples of services, inclusive of community-based resources, include home visiting, agency provided parent-child therapy, and other family support services (e.g., nutrition classes, family management techniques). Caseworkers visit families as often as needed according to the case plan (i.e., weekly, monthly). After a designated period of time, families are assessed to determine if there is an ongoing level of risk for harm that warrants continued, or sometimes elevated, involvement in CPS services.

## Power Dynamics

Considerable power dynamics are inherent in the experiences of CPS-involved families, stemming from the imbalance between those in positions of judgment and parents under scrutiny (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, and Hardiman 2008). Families with histories of diminished control over their lives and family management choices are particularly susceptible to the added trauma of CPS oversight, which may exacerbate tensions in stressed familial circumstances. Such histories are directly related to prior CPS involvement, in addition to experiences with other systems characterized by oversight and surveillance, such as the criminal justice and welfare systems (Chamberlain et al. 2019; McLoyd 1990; Merritt and Ludeke 2020). Such oversight may result in strained parent-child relationships, in part due to the enormous stakes of threatened family disruption. Living under conditions where one experiences a diminished locus of control and lack of power not only affects the emotional well-being and functioning of parents, but it can also transfer distress intergenerationally to children, even affecting children's coping mechanisms. Children may feel uncertain about the primary role of their parents when other authority figures seem to be guiding the family system. Parents have an acute awareness of negative assumptions imposed upon them based on their positionality in society, which is further bolstered by ongoing and increasingly salient outward racism and discrimination experienced during their CPS involvement (Franklin, Boyd-Franklyn, and Kelly 2008). Families endure the institutional racism inherent in CPS in varied ways, but CPS involvement perpetuates trauma because these families cannot escape the discriminatory protocols that those with power and authority execute. An example of these processes relates to the likelihood of CPS involvement for Black children despite their white counterparts exhibiting similar issues (Franklin, Boyd-Franklyn, and Kelly 2008). Such experiences can have an extremely negative impact on family cohesion and perceptions of safety in the home while interfacing with CPS (Wells, Merritt, and Briggs 2009).

We must strengthen the relationships between parents and caseworkers in the context of these unbalanced power dynamics and histories of oppressive systems

involvement (Cheng and Lo 2020). Child welfare workers should consider their efforts as partnering with parents in a helping capacity, rather than mandating compliance in the face of threats and without acknowledging the diverse contexts (including socioeconomics) in which families live. This kind of approach would allow for a shared power dynamic, rather than embracing the notion that practitioners have power over parents and subsequent family management (Dumbrill 2006; Smith 2008). Services are too often designed and implemented from a deficit lens rather than from a strength-based perspective (Kemp et al. 2014; Walsh and Canavan 2014). For instance, a service plan may require that a parent enhance the learning environment at home, but the assessment of a substandard learning environment is based on more privileged perceptions of what an adequate learning environment looks like, perhaps overlooking the innovative opportunities that families with fewer resources create to help their children learn. Service plans in tandem with educational childcare settings should encourage parental engagement in home learning environments and strive toward helping parents with resources, such as books and educational activities, and with creating a calm environment suitable for learning.

## Family Characteristics and Lived Experiences of CPS Involvement

### *People of color*

Those among the lower socioeconomic strata of society and people of color suffer a host of inequities inherent in systemic and structural oppression as they navigate human services organizations and medical and educational settings. These experiences are directly related to their histories of diminished access to knowledge, power, and optimal resources. Families involved with CPS are under near-constant inspection, and parental behaviors and decisions are regularly questioned. Such judgment and behavioral mandates from authorities can negatively impact the dynamics of family functioning (Berger and Font 2015; Merritt and Ludeke 2020; Roberts 2002; Roberts 2014).

CPS-involved families are already vulnerable in large part due to their demographic characteristics and disadvantaged status in both power and socioeconomics. This population disproportionately comprises families of color (Fluke et al. 2010, 2003; R. Hill 2006; Kim, Chenot, and Ji 2011; Lanier et al. 2014; Putnam-Hornstein et al. 2013; Stoltzfus 2005; Wulczyn and Lery 2007; Klein and Merritt 2014); are typically less educated; and lack financial resources and optimal, safe, and healthy living environments (Berger 2004; Berger and Slack, this volume; Fong 2017; Kang et al. 2019; Nam, Meezan, and Danziger 2006). Recent accounts of CPS-involved families indicate that Blacks are substantially overrepresented (20.6 percent), whites are underrepresented (44.5 percent), and Hispanic children (22.6 percent) make up almost the same percentage of maltreatment victims as Hispanic children in the general population (Blacks, 13.7 percent; whites, 50.3 percent; Hispanic, 13.7 percent) (USDHHS 2020). The fundamental causes of



racial/ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system has been widely debated (Boyd 2014; Fluke et al. 2003; Font, Berger, and Slack 2012; Sedlak and Schultz 2005; also see, in particular, Detlaff and Boyd, this volume).

Research has theorized two prominent perspectives—the “Bias Model” and the “Risk Model.” These models present competing explanations for racial disproportionality in CPS involvement (Drake et al. 2011). The Bias Model suggests that racial bias manifests from those who report and investigate maltreatment and results in the overrepresentation of Blacks and other minorities in the child welfare system. Thus, overrepresentation is not an indication that minorities mistreat their children more often and not to the extent noted by their disproportionate involvement with child protection services (Klein and Merritt 2014). Conversely, the Risk Model suggests that Blacks and other minority groups do in fact maltreat their children at higher rates than others due to a number of personal and community-level risk factors. Pervasive challenges, such as unemployment and poverty, are associated with inadequate supports and resources and diminished service access, which would otherwise mitigate the impact of parenting stress and reduce maltreatment risk. Both models have evidentiary support; however, research has acknowledged the Risk Model more often as the explanation for this overrepresentation in CPS (see Detlaff and Boyd, this volume; Drake et al. 2011). I posit that both models are at play for those involved in CPS and vary widely according to nuanced circumstances. As noted, the child welfare system is one of a number of oppressive systems rooted in structural discrimination and, as such, racial bias plays a role in the ways in which CPS makes and executes programmatic decisions (Wells, Merritt, and Briggs 2009). This structurally supported bias poses the real risk of maltreatment for our most vulnerable populations.

CPS-involved families and children endure judgment from mandated referring authorities and caseworkers charged with investigating maltreatment allegations. According to the Bias Model, a salient outcome of this excessive scrutiny is that professionals and community members may pathologize and label parenting behaviors by minority parents as abusive and neglectful, and these actions may reflect explicit or implicit racial biases in their decision-making (Klein and Merritt 2014). That parents experience oversight in such a context, dispensed by authorities with the power to disrupt families, is both disturbing and consequential for autonomous parental decision-making (Merritt and Snyder 2015). Enduring constant surveillance while raising a family under suboptimal societal conditions is unsettling for these parents and exacerbates the challenges they already experience while trying to properly care for children.

### *Ecological contexts*

CPS-involved families should always be understood in the ecological contexts in which they live and function (see Freisthler, Merritt, and LaScala 2006). These families typically live in environments that mirror historically oppressive structural systems associated with membership in minority populations and those living in impoverished conditions (Coulton et al. 2007). A host of studies have highlighted the association with and impact of neighborhood characteristics on

CPS-involved families across different races/ethnicities (Freisthler, Merritt, and LaScala 2006; Klein and Merritt 2014; Freisthler, Bruce, and Needell 2007; Kohl, Jonson-Reid, and Drake 2009; Korbin et al. 1998; Merritt 2009). Neighborhood structure plays a significant role in parenting and family functioning (Abner 2014; Coulton et al. 2007; Merritt 2009). Communities experience varying levels of social service oversight and police presence, which have been linked to increased maltreatment referrals and actual rates of maltreatment (Klein and Merritt 2014). One of the more relied-upon neighborhood-level explanations for racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is social disorganization theory (Sampson 2001; Shaw and McKay 1969; Wilson 1987, 1996), which suggests that structural changes in the United States since the 1970s have contributed to urban neighborhood organization and precipitated a clustering of social problems, including child maltreatment (Klein and Merritt 2014). Essentially, the theory suggests that community (dis)organization results in fewer social controls, and shared goals and norms, such as a commitment to child safety.

Characteristics of impoverished communities—those considered socially disorganized—have a differential impact on racial groups, such that the idea of racial heterogeneity is nuanced according to the neighborhood makeup. For instance, research on the impact of neighborhood poverty and racial composition has identified a “differential sensitivity” concerning the risk of being referred to CPS for child maltreatment, noting that living in poor communities was a larger risk for white children and living in more affluent communities was a risk factor for Black children (being “out of place”) (Drake and Pandey 2006; Klein and Merritt 2014; Wulcyn et al. 2013), yet some have deemed this a minor contributing factor to being reported to CPS (Drake, Lee, and Jonson-Reid 2009).

### *Poverty and child maltreatment types*

The lived experiences of CPS-involved families cannot be disentangled from poverty. Family functioning and dynamics are strained for myriad reasons related to financial stressors (Levine and Chase-Lansdale 2000; Liu and Merritt 2018; Taylor et al. 2017; Neppel, Senia, and Donnellan 2016). These circumstances are highly influential on parental behaviors and result in deleterious outcomes, such as failing to properly care for children due to a dearth of needed resources, persistent psychological distress, and strained family dynamics. Families in poverty are likely more vulnerable to injustices related to system oversight. They suffer a host of inequities inherent in systemic and structural oppression as they navigate all types of human services organizations (Abner 2014). Both children and parents in these families have been subjected to varying levels of chronic trauma based on their socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences with oversight systems. Poverty, particularly extreme poverty, can be conceptualized as a form of trauma (Garó, Allen-Handy, and Lewis 2018; Hudson 2016), which can lead to poor functioning and suboptimal behavioral choices. Poverty impacts working memory, cognitive appraisal, and decision-making (Blair and Raver 2016; Mani et al. 2013; Noble et al. 2012; Toth et al. 2011), yet the design and implementation of CPS are not grounded in this science.

It is also important to note the differences between child abuse and child neglect as they relate to poverty. These two forms of maltreatment, particularly neglect, can be difficult to disentangle from poverty in the decision-making processes that take place within the child welfare system. Of note, many state-level definitions of neglect do not consider its etiology to be directly related to poverty, despite that many of the indicators of neglect are linked to a lack of financial resources (e.g., inadequate nutrition, shelter, clothing, and supervision). Rebbe (2018) conducted a complex cluster analysis to highlight variation in definitions of neglect across states juxtaposed with the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) (Sedlak, McPherson, and Das 2010) categories and determined that a majority of the states relied on the most inclusive category of neglect, which considers many indicators. These ongoing definitional inconsistencies may make an assessment grounded in socioeconomic status challenging for CPS workers to operationalize in practice. In the following discussion, I highlight child neglect because it is the most prevalent maltreatment type and most strongly correlated with low socioeconomic status (USDHHS 2020; Drake and Jonson-Reid 2018; Proctor and Dubowitz 2014; Sedlak, McPherson, and Das 2010). Poverty is conflated with child neglect in that parental neglect is more often than not directly related to a dearth of financial resources and opportunities for children to flourish developmentally. If this relationship is unacknowledged, the resulting CPS-driven approaches are inappropriate to address the etiology of the neglect and fall short in serving children and parents in tangible and meaningful ways. Disturbingly, the onus of responsibility for poor parenting is placed on parents, when a sizable portion of neglect cases are likely inextricably linked to the lived experiences of poverty and unintentional negative parenting behaviors that accompany poverty.

### *Parental intentions*

The CDC, consistent with most child maltreatment statutes, has excluded the notion of *parental intentionality* in defining neglectful behavior, out of caution and to maintain a focus on poor child outcomes and direct harm to children (Erickson, Labella, and Egeland 2017). This approach, however, ignores economic challenges that parents often face and that are misaligned with behavioral intent. Some time ago, Zuravin (2001) began to discuss the concept of *parental intention* or the *locus of responsibility* in the context of neglect; however, practice or policy has not incorporated such a focus. Intentionality of child maltreatment should be considered in both practice and policy because parenting intentions are complicated by socioeconomic and minority status. Our country's history of structural oppression, inherent in our social welfare and human service systems, conditions us to characterize poor parenting as intentional, with limited consideration of the contexts that constrict parenting choices. Policy and practice must pay attention to mitigating the impact of macro/systems-level threats on healthy parenting, particularly as these threats relate to lower socioeconomic and minority status. I offer a rationale for considering "intent" in parenting behaviors in the context of societal threats and systemic inequities.

## Parental Perspectives

Perspectives of CPS-involved families have been historically understudied, resulting in limited information about clients' lived experiences with CPS oversight. In fact, the voices of children and parents have been largely omitted from the design of child maltreatment prevention and intervention efforts. Festinger's seminal work *No One Ever Asked Us* (1983) was the first effort to query people previously in care as children. Her work identified the retrospective perspectives of adults who were previously placed in foster care settings as children. Her research focused on longer-term outcomes and showed that the adults she studied did not differ much on life goal completion and opportunities; in other words, this sample showed little difference in terms of achieving their desired goals later in life.

Beyond understanding the lived experiences of child welfare involvement among children and youth, acknowledging parental voices in child welfare system research is crucial for understanding how to alter the experiences of families adversely impacted by system oversight. Because we have failed to adequately consider the historical impact of system involvement, particularly for families of color, we may overlook the repeated trauma that comes from systems oversight. This constant oversight can generate feelings of powerlessness and lack of control over one's own family. The reality in these circumstances is that child welfare authorities have enormous power to pass judgment on parenting efforts and make decisions about child-rearing and family management. Assessing the perceptions of families interacting with CPS requires a phenomenological approach that honors the lived experiences of parents involved in the child welfare system. The pilot study highlighted here presents a first step in understanding the perspectives of parents as they navigate CPS. The families often viewed CPS as oppressive. The pilot results discussed here provide the foundation for a study currently under way that aims to unpack parents' experiences of systems oversight as it relates to parents' neglectful behavior. Voices in context matter, yet the accounts I present here have been often overlooked, stripping parents of their right to explain or justify their parenting behaviors within context. Future reforms to services and interventions that the child welfare system implements should look to these parental perceptions and voices to understand the challenges to parenting that parents face from barriers outside of their control.

### The Pilot Study: Lived Experiences and Parents' Concerns about CPS Oversight

It is important to assess the etiology of specific types of child maltreatment with consideration for cultural, community, and socioeconomic differences. 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

involved with CPS, I conducted a pilot study to assess parents' perceptions of system oversight based on one's race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.<sup>1</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. These fears stem from challenging environmental circumstances; lack of access to resources; and deeply rooted, unjust social stratification norms. Moreover, community characteristics shape parents' expectations of children in their attempts to instill the necessary skills for survival in those environments. Efforts to decrease the prevalence of child maltreatment must consider the challenges placed on parenting in impoverished communities, accompanying parental fears, and experiences with systemically oppressive oversight systems.

This study presents new knowledge about the relationship between child-rearing practices and parents' experiences with child welfare agency oversight, primarily among Black and Latinx parents receiving child maltreatment preventive services. An underlying goal of this inquiry was to identify links and pathways between parenting intentions and parents' decision-making in context. Relying on the theoretical underpinnings of the Family Stress Model (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010), minority stress theory, the Amplified Disadvantage Model (Roche and Leventhal 2009), and critical race theory (Crenshaw et al. 1996), 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.

Utilizing an exploratory phenomenological approach, the study focused on the lived experiences with and parental perceptions of CPS oversight as related to parenting decisions and child-rearing practices. A New York-based agency contracted by the Administration of Children's Services (ACS) to provide services to families at risk for child maltreatment granted approval to access families participating in general preventive services. The criteria for inclusion were that respondents needed to be actively receiving in-home services from the agency. I selected sample participants through purposive, nonprobability sampling techniques and recruited them through agency outreach. I conducted seventeen in-depth, face-to-face, semistructured interviews with primarily Black and Latinx, New York City-based agency mothers lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I obtained informed consent from participants and provided them with a \$30 bank card for participation.

The in-depth interview guide covered perceptions regarding (1) parents' fears and nuanced experiences with both public and private (contracted preventive services) child welfare agency oversight and (2) remedies to reduce or eliminate fears related to parenting behavior. The interview guide allowed for an understanding of how parents' fears in context impact child-rearing practices as families interface with oversight systems. Employing a systematic grounded theory analysis, information garnered from the interviews were open and group coded,

allowing for the identification of themes related to parents' fears and concerns based on child welfare oversight.

I queried seventeen respondents, of whom sixteen identified as cis-gender females. The average age of the participants was 33, with the bulk of the sample identifying as Black or African American (64 percent) and 30 percent identifying as Latinx. The mean education level among this group was a GED/high school diploma or less ( $M = 2.18$ , range 0–5). Only slightly over a third were working full time (35 percent), with nearly half reporting unemployment (47 percent), and most indicating a need for financial help a fair amount of the time (in between sometimes and most of the time) as opposed to barely making ends meet and able to meet all financial needs ( $M = 1.47$ , range 0–3).

The interview domains centered on attributions for child-rearing practices based on parents' fears. A series of questions included 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). Employing a systematic grounded theory analysis, I identified and assessed for nuanced commonalities final themes.

Four subthemes emerged: (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 salient theme that emerged from the qualitative accounts was how parents felt about CPS involvement. Overall, parents felt mistreated and unfairly judged by child welfare agency workers based on their race/ethnicity. They expressed trauma resulting from continued CPS oversight that negatively impacted the child/parent relationship. Parents often noted feeling stigmatized and shamed within their communities for having an open child welfare case. Additionally, parents expressed feeling challenged and perceived as not capable of providing the experiences they felt their children deserved due to racial stereotypes and based on financial challenges. Overall, parents expressed perceptions and feelings of judgment, blame, intimidation, being overwhelmed, afraid (of family disruption), and a loss of control. Some expressed satisfaction with the support from private child welfare workers or a combination of feeling supported and feeling intruded upon because of the oversight.

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. (Sally, 32)

This quote serves as an example of a mixed and nuanced opinion about CPS involvement. This view was shared by a few of the study respondents. Whereas the bulk of the respondents lamented the requirement of adhering to CPS parenting and family management mandates, at times, they shared appreciation for certain components of the services. Below, I highlight some comments from parents that characterize the four subthemes that I identified when analyzing the data.



TABLE 1  
Interview Question Prompts and Emerging Themes

Question Prompts	Themes
Do you feel you've been treated fairly while involved with child welfare agencies?	Agency treatment: <i>ACS oversight and lack of support/fair treatment</i>
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: <i>Financial barriers/ socioeconomic status</i>

*Agency treatment*

As an exemplar of how parents experienced agency treatment and in response to the question, “Do they (caseworkers) treat all people the same regardless of their background?” the quote below indicates 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 worker.

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 with six children (ages 9 to 27 years old; the older children are the 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.

### *Financial disparities*

As I have noted, a large proportion of those interfacing with CPS have a low socioeconomic status, which plays a significant role in these parents' ability to parent effectively, especially given that the majority of children who come to the attention of CPS are deemed to be neglected of sustenance, other basic necessities provisions, and suitable childcare settings. Financial supports and resources are essential to sufficient parenting. 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 my participants. Again, Carla shared the perils of living in a low-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 findings are just a few among many examples from this study that suggest parents felt mistreated and unfairly judged by child welfare agency workers based on their identifying as Black or brown. To my knowledge, there are no studies documenting white CPS-involved families experiencing stigma based on their race. One might expect, nevertheless, that white families also experience stigma based on their socioeconomic status and suffer trauma stemming from their 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 as a means of further shaming them for receiving CPS supervision in their communities. 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 under supervision of CPS. Practitioners and policy-makers must consider the perspectives of these parents who are enduring child welfare system oversight as we strive toward providing the most supportive environments for children and their parents.

Some families come to rely on CPS workers for both tangible supports and help with parenting, yet some experience the oversight as a burden that hinders their attempts to parent to the best of their ability, and feel the attention is an intrusion. Asking parents about their experience with such oversight and their preferred contextually safe parenting practices is critical if we are to encourage these parents' 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). Results from this study highlight how CPS oversight impacts parents' choices.

### Future Steps (Research, Policy, and Practice)

A social justice approach that acknowledges the inherent systemic racism and structural disenfranchisement within the institution of the child welfare system should mandate the inclusion of system-involved parents' perspectives not only as a strategy for system improvement, but also as a means to empower parents. I propose a shift in the narrative, such that we acknowledge the privilege of those

who develop and implement policy and practice as well as the structural oppression repeatedly encountered by vulnerable families as they interact with social welfare and human service systems. Research efforts to distinguish intentional neglect from unintentional neglect associated with limited resources and barriers stemming from oppression are critically needed. 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 and environmental contexts, perhaps there would be far fewer children designated as neglected whose families are, in turn, subjected to stigmatizing CPS oversight. Such a shift would allow for parents' needs to be addressed with less intrusive service options, including facilitating access to financial and concrete supports. Tangible remedies are essential—we must increase financial resources and educational opportunities and relieve childcare demands for families at risk.

Practitioners need to confront white dominance in their critique of parenting behaviors. Further, scholars should apply a phenomenological approach that honors the lived experience of parents in the context of child welfare oversight. The current statutes regarding parental behaviors need to be revisited, such that all behaviors related to poverty are not deemed to be maltreatment. Parents need to be provided with the necessary supports and resources to proactively mitigate circumstances that lead to deprivation of basic sustenance and safety for their children.

Future interventions would be enhanced by acknowledging racial and ethnic disparities of parents involved in the child welfare system, and the histories of systemic oppression they have experienced, by creating a paradigm shift in how we support Black and Latinx parents. Further, we must acknowledge how parents perceive disparities in system oversight and that child-rearing choices are related to socioeconomic disparities and accompanying parenting challenges. Finally, research needs to give attention to parenting choices and child-rearing practices that occur based on parents' perceptions of systems involvement.

Policy revisions that mandate a nonjudgmental approach to supporting families (strategies/implications) are also warranted. For instance, if we arrive at a refined and universal definition of neglect and one that acknowledges the unintentionality of experiencing poverty, then our assessments about parenting will be based on compassion and empathy and will be, thus, less accusatory (see Feely et al., this volume). Our mandated reporting laws date back to the 1960s. A missing underlying link is the difference between intentional and unintentional maltreatment. As I have noted, the CDC does not consider intentionality because the goal is to protect children from the most egregious forms of harm, such as child death, and thus it focuses on potential worst-case scenario outcomes rather than parental intent.

Finally, 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 needed. Practitioners should partner with parents to provide social capital underpinned by strength-based help, trauma-informed consideration of parent/child well-being, and a child-centered approach to family engagement.

## Conclusion

Parenting choices are directly related to differences in resource-rich or resource-poor settings, both inside and out of the home, and the choices also result in differential power dynamics between CPS workers and parents. CPS interjects a microscope into all aspects of parenting. If societal and environmental contexts, inclusive of 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 underassessed and underappreciated 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 service provision. A renewed effort to support and empower parents and decrease punitive oversight, along with acknowledging the structural oppression inherent in all systems and service efforts, would go a long way in our collective efforts to protect children. We need to understand the context of and history of systemic inequities that certain populations have endured and pay attention to parental choices and child-rearing practices based on this history and these parents' perceptions of systems involvement.

## Note

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