

SURVEILLANCE OF MOTHERS LIVING IN POVERTY:
EFFECTS ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND
COMMUNITIES

INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON POVERTY
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HISTORY OF FAMILY SEPARATION



SELLING A MOTHER FROM HER CHILD.

“ ‘Do you often buy the wife without the husband?’ ‘Yes, very often ; and frequently, too, they sell me the mother while they keep her children. I have often known them take away the infant from its mother’s breast, and keep it, while they sold her.’ ”—*Prof. Andrews, late of the University*

SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

Racist Policies

- Slavery
- Mass incarceration
- Jim Crow & Segregation
- Orphan Trains
- Mother's Pension
- Social Security Administration – 1935
- Redlining
- CAPTA

Generational Oppression

- Dispossession of land
- Family separation
- Mass incarceration
- Intergenerational poverty & inequitable mobility

HARMS OF SEPARATION

I thought when child welfare comes, you lose your kids. Once they get involved...I just gave up because to me, you're going to lose your kids... the slave days when they put us on a block and separated us and changed our name...child welfare is the same thing...separating families... just like slavery days, same thing, same outcomes



**A Visual History-
Black Families in
America**



HARMS OF SEPARATION

You can't even tell your kids why they can't go with you. "No, mommy. I want to go with you. No mommy...I want to go with you mommy...one is on the ankle, one is on the arm... then here come these people...to rip your kids off of you, screaming as we did on the slave trade block...same experience at the visit.

Mom 4



**Black Mom
Parenting**



POVERTY-RELATED CHILD NEGLECT

NEGLECT CANNOT BE DISENTANGLED FROM RACE OR POVERTY

Neglect cannot be disentangled from race and poverty.

Abuse and neglect are different in all ways including race, caste and class.

The term 'minimally adequate care' refers to economic conditions.

CPS was not designed to address poverty, rather address harm from physical abuse, which has been totally conflated with neglect.

Racialized Poverty

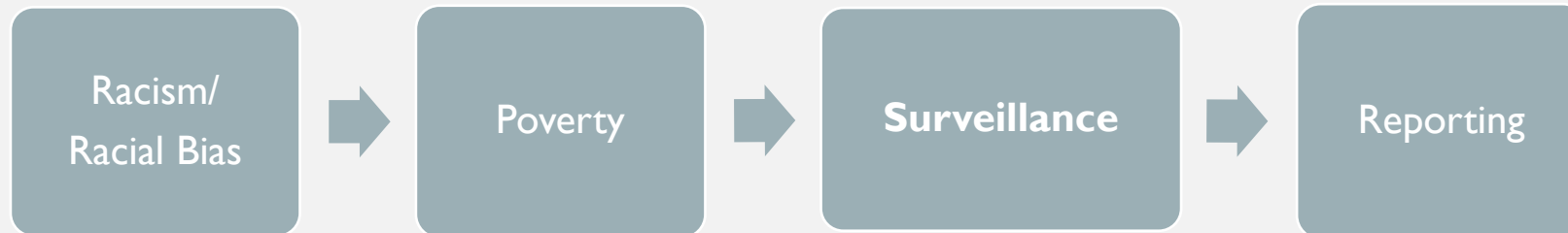
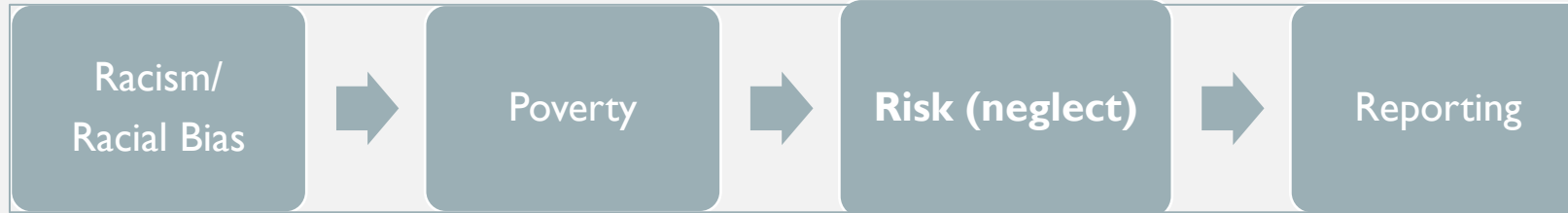
Intersection of **populations of color and those with low socio-economic status results in systems' over-surveillance and biased** judgments regarding child maltreatment risk.

Understood as *racialized poverty* in the U.S. and associated with Black/African-American families involuntarily living in poverty and suffering systemic oppression based on the skin they live in.

Experiences with poverty are intensified by structural racism in policy and practice (e.g., mandating reporting).

Racialized poverty shapes negative perceptions of historically disenfranchised and marginalized communities.

RACISM IS THE MECHANISM



Racism as the driver of concentrated poverty (racialized poverty) - racial disproportionality

WHAT IS THE CPS, ANYWAY?

CPS = CHILD POVERTY SURVEILLANCE

The mission:

- CAPTA (Child Abuse Prevention & Treatment Act, 1974) – punitive response to family’s needs without consideration of context and structural discrimination.
- ASFA (Adoption and Safe Family Act, 1997) - Safety, permanency, well being
- Save children from harm (the harm of poverty?)
- Do service mechanisms align between program goals and well being outcomes - safety from intentional abuse or unintentional poverty?

CPS = CHILD POVERTY SURVEILLANCE

- oversight is traumatic, stigmatizing, and punitive by nature
- not intended to mitigate the impact of poverty
- processes are by design oppressive
- driving service component is to judge

Take home message:

'family surveillance is needed because you are a poor minority'

MANDATED REPORTING LAWS

- CPS impacts bleeds into other systems' exposure and oversight experiences
 - over-surveillance across all domains where mandated reporters are urged to 'protect' children from the unavoidable conditions of their parents
- Referrals from mandated reporters in schools, communities, medical fields, or other settings where youth interact with adults outside of their homes
- Parents interact with the world through fear and needing to be hyper-vigilant about reporting systems (e.g., medical, education), as well as in community-level settings (e.g., public housing)
 - cautious with others in their communities, because it's not uncommon for anonymous, malicious, false reports to be made, thus weaponizing CPS.

SURVEILLANCE

I know what it means to have case workers coming to your house and everybody's looking over everything and living under a microscope.

Mom 2

Well, you can't avoid it because we're over surveillance, right? And we are in too many mandatory reporter's eyes, right? What we need to do is change the way parents, family are responded in crisis....We've got to change the response from punitive responses to responses that actually work towards healing and keeping families together and....mitigating their crisis. The response normally is penalizing families for even having their crisis.

**BLACK MOTHERS
NAVIGATE THE WORLD
DIFFERENTLY**

It's just you being watched. I mean I hate to say it like that...but you have to move differently...accordingly because there's always someone watching you...if I make one wrong move, like that's it...and I'm stuck in this situation...I think money definitely has a lot to do with it...one of the first things she said to me was I see that you used to receive food stamps... So, I'm already on your radar. I know how it works... you're looking to people that are already poor or qualify for government assistance.

Thank You

Thoughts/Comments?

My utmost respect and appreciation to the moms that look like me and entrusted me with their stories of trauma and resilience.

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Surveillance of Mothers Living in Poverty: Effects on Children, Families, and Communities

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A knock at the door...

Car make, model, and license plate number?

Criminal justice and child welfare history?

Names of and contact information for close relatives/friends?

Substance use and treatment history?

Children's daycare and school?

Domestic violence history?

Address and contact information?

Names and dates of birth of all household members?

Family medical providers and medical conditions?

Mental health diagnoses and treatment?

Discipline methods?

Name of and contact information for nonresidential parent?

Income?
Employment?
Benefits?

Childhood experiences of abuse or neglect?

Relationship and marital status?

"... we literally ask everything"

Car make, model, and license plate number?

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1 in 3

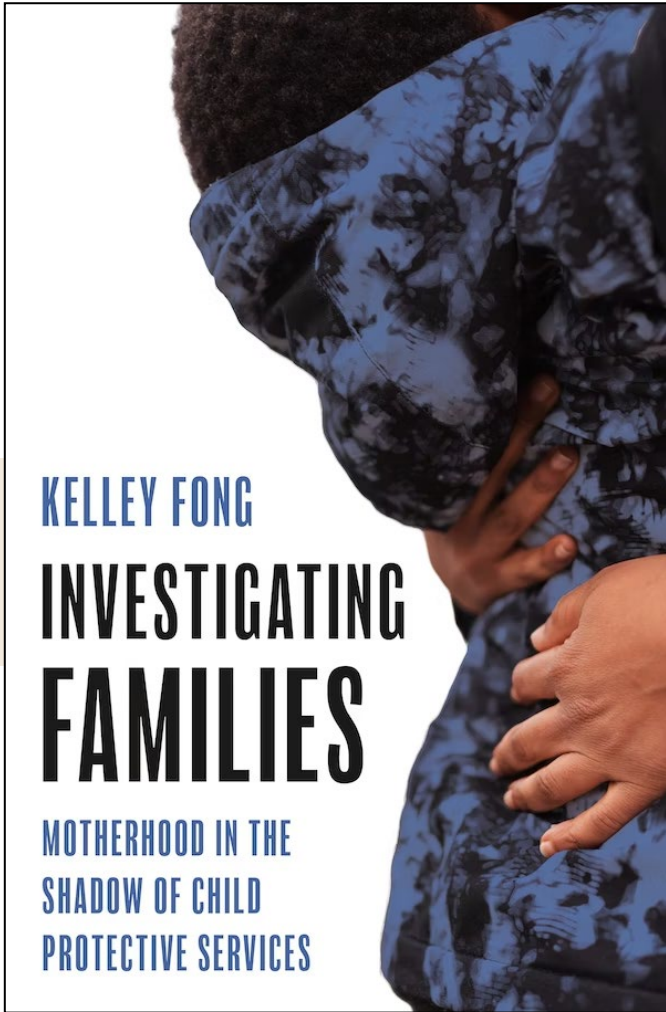
U.S. children will experience a Child Protective Services investigation during childhood

- 1 in 2 Black children
- Of children subject to investigation:
 - 22% are Black (vs. 15% nationwide)
 - 28% are Hispanic (vs. 22% nationwide)
- Of primary caregivers subject to investigation:
 - 85% are <200% of poverty line
 - 91% are women



(Dolan et al. 2011; Kim et al. 2017)

Photo by Phoebe Shuman-Goodier



Princeton University Press, 2023

parental mental
health needs

extreme
poverty

chronic school
absenteeism

family/system
conflicts

domestic
violence

FAMILY ADVERSITY

parental
substance
misuse

housing instability,
homelessness

parental
incarceration

children's
behavioral and
mental health
needs

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Apprehension: What are they looking at? What will they do with the information?

Tell me about what it was like when [CPS] came and you had no idea.

My heart fell in my stomach, 'cause I was like—I knew that there was nothing wrong with my house, but it's just—I don't know. It's like being with the cops. I don't have no record, but when there's a cop behind me, I'm like, "Oh God. That's a cop behind me. Oh my God, he's behind me." ... I was nervous as hell and I knew my room was clean, but it's just the fact that you have to defend your motherhood... It was just an emotional rollercoaster, because now I'm scared to have my room dirty at any point.

(Paulina, RI)

Apprehension: What are they looking at? What will they do with the information?

They go in people's past and—my son is 16. Do you know what my son say? He said, "Ma, he gotta know that I'm on probation and all of this." You don't need to know all that... They just do too much...

The case closed – what is it about it that makes you not want to go through it again?

Just having them in your life. Just having somebody else in your life that's not supposed to be here, you get what I'm saying? Asking all these questions and want to know all this stuff that they don't need to be knowing. No. I would never want to go through that again, and I would never advise nobody to go through that.

(Nikki, CT)

Apprehension: What are they looking at? What will they do with the information?

They told me, even though I don't know if it's entirely true, that they have nothing to do with immigration, they are not here to write a report on who I am, but they are focused directly on children... I want to believe it's true and, at the same time, I doubt it. Everything that has to do with law makes me doubt, because of my status here.

(Gaby, CT, translated from Spanish)

Mothers in poverty also experience a much more diffuse surveillance that extends well beyond CPS

Social service providers, teachers, doctors, police officers, therapists—all are “mandated reporters”



This state and social services surveillance is concentrated on poor families, especially poor families of color

Exposure to service providers and police; unequal information-gathering practices

Sometimes it looks like they're trying to see how you live to see if your kid is well with you, you know what I'm saying, to make it a [CPS] situation if it's not okay. Like I say, they would go visit a house that had roaches crawling all over the wall and mice running through their feet or something, that's not sanitary. Right away they have to report it to [CPS] or to any social services to try to get these kids safe. They will... It's not that they try to find something wrong. It's that if they do, they are required to say it.

(Roxanne, RI)

This state and social services surveillance is concentrated on poor families, especially poor families of color

Individual and systemic bias

Case of Amaryllis, an elementary school administrator, reporting a mother named Graciela in CT

I think differently, I guess, as a parent. I would leave and come get my kid... I understand you're working. I work too.

This state and social services surveillance is concentrated on poor families, especially poor families of color

Individual and systemic bias

I have a buddy, white as can be, living in North Haven, the same thing happened. That [calling CPS] wasn't even discussed. It seems to be more of a cultural thing with the police department.

(CPS investigator, CT)

Mothers' wariness about the risks of surveillance shapes institutional and community engagement

Strategic precautions—even proactive precautions, before any CPS report is made—impede full participation in social services and social life

You definitely gotta be careful with what you say to some people... Some people, you say something to them, they'll take it out of context. They'll call [CPS] on you... You don't wanna tell people you can't afford to buy your kids food or something like that, or clothes, or anything, 'cause they could take that too and say you can't provide for them.

(Colleen, RI)

Mothers' wariness about the risks of surveillance shapes institutional and community engagement

Strategic precautions—even proactive precautions, before any CPS report is made—impede full participation in social services and social life

I feel like if let's say I tell welfare, "Hey, this mess is going on, and I can barely afford to keep my kids." "You can't afford to keep your kids? You know we're gonna have to call the city on you. We're gonna have to call [CPS]." ... I don't eat so that my kids can eat, but I'm scared to ask for any help these days, because I'm scared that it's gonna work against me.

(Desiree, RI)

THANK YOU!

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Photo by Phoebe Shuman-Goodier