

A Call to Abolish the US Child Welfare System



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Further reading: In a conversation with NPO, [Dettlaff elaborates on why he wrote the book; why he and his coauthors advocate for an abolitionist stance toward the US child welfare system; and what being an abolitionist means within the context of ensuring American children's wellbeing.](#)

For many, the Trump-era immigration policy of family separation marked one of the darkest points for US policies in recent decades.

Between 2017 and 2018, US immigration officials separated as many as 5,000 children from parents accused of crossing the border illegally. The practice was decried by human rights advocates across the country and around the world—and was deemed so brutal as to constitute a form of torture by the group Physicians for Human Rights.

The end of that policy was widely hailed as a victory for civil and human rights. For many, it remains an example of a policy that transgressed basic human morality and the purported values of the United States as a country—comparable to episodes like the internment of Japanese Americans in WWII or even to some of the brutalities of slavery.

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And yet, notes author Alan Dettlaff, professor of social work at University of Houston and former social worker, we hear far less outcry over the roughly 200,000 US children who are forcibly removed from their families by the state and placed in foster care by the state *every year*.

The figure is staggering by itself; but within it are more troubling numbers, especially the starkly disproportionate rate at which Black families are subject to this forced removal. Today, Dettlaff writes, more than *one-half* of all Black children are investigated by child welfare authorities; and they are removed from their families at a rate more than double that of White children—in some states, more than triple.

In his new book, *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System*, Dettlaff makes the bold, unapologetic case that the US child welfare system and its routine practice of family separation is no less barbaric than that the much-reviled Trump-era policy was; that it is inextricably tied, from the era of slavery to the present day, to racism and racist ideology; that the modern practice of child removal is not only counterproductive but cruel; and that it should be abolished.

Dettlaff writes:

It is within the context of the need to protect White supremacy that the origins of the modern child welfare system emerged. Since its earliest origins, the child welfare system has been designed to maintain the superiority of White Americans while maintaining the oppression of Black Americans.

While the history of separating Black families in the United States began during chattel slavery as a means of maintaining their oppression, the oppression of Black families is now maintained by a vast government system of social control that knowingly inflicts harm on Black families through the same act of forcible family separation—an intervention the state refers to in language devoid of trauma as “removal.” While the system purports these separations are based on the need for protection, the outcome is the same—the subjugation of Black families at the hands of the state for the purpose of maintaining White power (4).

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As a former social worker, Dettlaff counted himself among the “reformers” he now critiques as working to keep patching together a fundamentally broken and immoral system. Today, he is a cofounder of the [upEND Movement](#), working to abolish

the current child welfare system, or the “family policing system” as he and many other opponents of the system term it.

In collaboration with other academics—every chapter is co-written with several other writers—and building on a deep corpus of academic research, Dettlaff describes the US child welfare system as rooted in unambiguous historic racism and as fundamentally broken, punishing families for being poor and, especially, for being Black. Fewer than one-fifth of children removed from parents, Dettlaff argues, are even alleged to have experienced any form of physical or sexual harm; rather, they are removed on flimsy pretexts largely related to “racialized poverty” under the guise of child protection.

What distinguishes the family separations of today from those that occurred during chattel slavery is that today’s separations occur under a guise of benevolence. Despite the well-documented harms that result to Black children and families through child welfare intervention, the system has largely avoided scrutiny due to a highly coordinated and successful campaign to frame child welfare intervention as not only helpful for families in need, but also a fundamentally indispensable intervention for children who are being harmed. Although this myth is widely held among the public, it is far from the reality of how and with whom the system intervenes (6).

Dettlaff is hardly alone in his broader criticisms of the US child welfare system. The American Civil Liberties Union is just one among many voices that have [called](#) for a sweeping overhaul of the child welfare system.

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In some ways, those criticisms have been at least grudgingly acknowledged by those who uphold the system through various reform measures introduced over the years meant to alleviate concerns over the system’s stark and starkly persistent racial disparities.

But where Dettlaff and his collaborators pave new ground here is in their radical call for abolition.

The system, Dettlaff argues, is not simply in need of repairs—it is fundamentally racist, immoral, and cruel; it must be abandoned and replaced by a [system of care that puts families and communities first](#).