

Trapped in the Web of Family Policing: The Harms of Mandated Reporting and the Need for Parent-Led Approaches to Safe, Thriving Families

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*The article reflects the input of Rise staff and contributors and our broader community of parents and allies. It draws heavily on our collaboratively developed, parent-led reports, *Someone to Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care* and *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*. The Rise staff includes Naashia B., Teresa Bachiller, Jeanette Vega Brown, Ashanti Bryant, Keyna Franklin, Noshin Hoque, Shamara Kelly, Teresa Marrero, Shakira Paige, Zoraida Ramirez, Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker, Tracy Serdjenian, Bianca Shaw, Halimah Washington, Robbyne Wiley and Imani Worthy.*

Introduction

A family's contact with the family policing system¹ often begins with a call to the child abuse and maltreatment "hotline" made by a mandated reporter. About two-thirds of reports to New York's Statewide Central Register (SCR) are made by mandated reporters—"certain professionals mandated by New York State law to report suspected child abuse and neglect."² While some states require *any person* who suspects abuse or neglect to report, this article focuses on mandated reporting by professionals working in roles that are meant to support families and that states commonly designate as mandated reporters, including social workers, teachers/school personnel, childcare providers, and health/mental health care providers.³

Mandated reporting is an extension of the racist, classist, ableist family policing system—making the system unavoidable in Black and brown low-income communities. Mandatory reporting laws provide a channel through which the surveillance and threat of the family policing system saturate intersecting systems where families should be able to access care, support, resources, and education (e.g., schools/daycares, hospitals, mental health services, shelters). Mandated reporting laws and practices especially harm Black, Latinx, and Native families and communities.

Rise is a parent-led organization advocating to abolish the family policing system, including ending mandated reporting—which is increasingly being called for by parents, advocates, and social workers. Rise supports parents' leadership to dismantle the family policing system by eliminating cycles of harm, surveillance, and punishment and creating communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing, and support. This article is grounded in Rise's 16-year history working with impacted parents and learning from our community, programs, research, and interviews.

¹ Rise uses the term "family policing system" instead of "child welfare system" because our team believes that it most accurately and directly describes the system's purpose and impact. Learn more: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/05/why-were-using-the-term-family-policing-system/>

In our participatory action research survey, we used the term "child welfare" because it is more widely known, and we believed it would be clearer to parents completing the survey.

² Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*. <https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AnUnavoidableSystem.pdf>

³ Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/manda.pdf>



Rise Peer Vision Team (left to right): Keyna Franklin, Shakira Paige, Norahsee Ortiz, Imani Worthy, Teresa Marrero, Tenisha Sanders and Jeanette Vega (center)

Like the broader movement to defund policing, Rise calls for divesting from family policing and investing in families and communities. Mandated reporting is a symptom of and an ineffective response to families' lack of access to resources and support. We need to address societal inequities rather than perpetuate them through family and community surveillance and punishment. This article provides an overview of Rise's peer care model as an abolitionist approach to supporting safe, strong families without system involvement. It also outlines immediate steps to reduce hotline calls by mandated reporters.

A Harmful System

Mandated reporting feeds families into a harmful system that was built upon a history of slavery and genocide.⁴ Despite its historic and ongoing harm, "child welfare" is widely accepted as a system that protects children. Mandated reporters who have not personally experienced family policing may view the system as a source of help and resources. However, family policing systems were not designed to provide care or address root causes of family stress, such as poverty, and should not be looked to for these purposes.

Rise's parent-led participatory action research (PAR) report documents parents' experiences with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), New York City's family policing system. Findings include:

- ACS fails to help parents. Economic supports, financial and employment assistance, were the least common services included in parents' ACS service plans, despite surveyed parents' very low incomes.⁵ Even when connections to services were helpful to families, they came at the cost of negative experiences with the system.
- ACS intervention inflicts lasting and layered trauma, including harming children physically and emotionally and actively harming families instead of helping them.
- ACS does not respect parents' cultural practices and values and violates norms of privacy and autonomy for parents and children.
- ACS involvement damages relationships that parents and families need to thrive.

- Parents lose their jobs, identities, and live in fear.⁶

The family policing system is deeply connected to broader systems of policing and punishment, both in ideology and in practice.⁷ This connection is apparent in stories by Rise parents who describe being arrested as part of the report and investigation process.⁸ Like policing and incarceration by the criminal legal system, surveillance and family separation by the family policing system impact predominantly Black and brown, low-income families living in communities marked by societal neglect. Involvement with family policing often lasts for years and for generations and impacts families long after cases are closed.⁹ Many parents at Rise were impacted by the foster system as children, and some are impacted as grandparents. Parents are placed on child abuse registries that create employment barriers, limit parents' involvement in their children's schools, prevent accumulation of generational wealth, and impact mental health.

Racism and Poverty

For the vast majority of families, system involvement is tied to economic stress, racism,

⁴ *Teaching Justice by Keeping Families Together*, a video series by CLEA, the Clinical Legal Education Association. (2020, Jan. 4). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dzdt31cAlC8&t=1901s>

⁵ 53 percent of those surveyed reported an annual household income under \$25,000, including 28 percent with an income under \$10,000. Finding from: Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.

⁶ Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.

⁷ Franklin, K. (2020, Oct. 20). *'Abolition is the Only Answer': A Conversation with Dorothy Roberts*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2020/10/conversation-with-dorothy-roberts/>

⁸ See for example: Farmer, C. (2020, Jan. 7). *We Just Needed Support: Instead, ACS tore us apart*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2020/01/we-just-needed-support/>; Anonymous. (2019, Oct. 16). *My Broken Life: My kids were never taken, but child protective services hurt my son and me so much*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2019/10/my-broken-life/>

⁹ Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2020, Dec. 11). *Clearing Your Name After an Investigation: How to Seal and Amend Your Record*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2020/12/clearing-your-name-after-an-investigation/>

and community conditions that make it difficult to find support and resolve problems. Mandatory reporting laws are discriminatory by design and in practice, due to definitions of maltreatment that conflate poverty with neglect, pervasive systemic racism and classism, individual racism and prejudice based on stereotypes, and structural inequities.

Mandated reporting laws and broad definitions of neglect punish parents for societal conditions that leave families without necessities. In the eyes of the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), New York State's family policing agency, being unable to provide food, clothing, and shelter are signs of neglect.¹⁰ This broad category of neglect accounts for 76 percent of all "child maltreatment" allegations made to ACS.^{11,12} Researcher Frank Edwards explained,

"The child welfare system reflects how the U.S. treats poor people across the board. We blame individual people for problems our society creates. We treat widespread child poverty as if it's a problem with parents rather than a problem with our social safety net, economy, housing, and other factors that lead to families being in poverty and crisis."¹³

The system's racism is evident in data and parents' experiences. In NYC, 44 percent of Black children and 43 percent of Latinx children get investigated before their 18th birthday—more than double the investigation rate of white children (19 percent).¹⁴ In Minnesota, about 75 percent of Native children experience an investigation.¹⁵ Black and brown parents are penalized for not adhering to standards dictated by white supremacist institutions—standards they may not know about, share, or be in a position to follow. In Rise's PAR survey, 74 percent of parents said that their cultural practices and values were not respected during their involvement with child welfare.¹⁶ The family policing system's punishment of cultural differences and enforcement of criteria for suitable homes are forms of institutionalized racism and classism. Imani Worthy, Rise public speaking coordinator and a Black mother impacted by family policing, wrote about racist stereotypes

and the assertion of white, middle-class norms as parenting standards, "We are labeled ghetto, uncouth, angry, villains, uneducated. If you are poor and a minority, you are viewed as a threat to society or your family in some shape or form. Systems enforce a standard of conduct. If you don't meet what they view as 'right' (a.k.a white), you are punished."

Parents describe professionals' assumptions about and suspicion of parents of color. Jeanette Vega Brown, co-director of Rise and a Puerto Rican mother impacted by family policing, wrote,

"Racism and classism come in where white parents don't get the same questions, judgments, and punishments as Black, Latinx, and Native families. If you're a parent who looks like me and you go to the hospital, you will be questioned and assigned a social worker you didn't request. Our children are interrogated because doctors and social workers don't believe parents' reasons for bringing their children to the hospital."

Structural inequities, including lack of access to quality housing, schools, childcare, parks, legal representation, and health/mental health care, put families at risk of family policing

¹⁰ Marcenko, M. O., Lyons, S. J., & Courtney, M. (2011). *Mothers' experiences, resources and needs: The context for reunification*. Children and Youth Services Review, 33(3), 431-438. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.06.020>

¹¹ Joyce, K. (2019, Feb. 25). *The Crime of Parenting While Poor*. The New Republic. Retrieved from: <https://newrepublic.com/article/153062/crime-parenting-poor-new-york-city-child-welfare-agency-reform>

¹² NYC Administration of Children's Services. (2020). *Child Welfare Indicators Annual Report 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2020/CityCouncilReportCY2020.pdf>

¹³ Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2021, Nov. 3). 'A Call to Action': *New Research Finds Extremely High Rates of Investigations of Black, Brown and Native Families*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/11/a-call-to-action-research/>

¹⁴ Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2021, Nov. 3). 'A Call to Action'.

¹⁵ Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2021, Nov. 3). 'A Call to Action'.

¹⁶ Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.



Rise staff (2021) — Back row (left to right): Naashia B., Shamara Kelly, Ashanti Bryant, Jeanette Vega, Teresa Marrero, Genevieve Saavedra Dalton Parker, and Tracy Serdjenian. Front Row (left to right): Halimah Washington, Imani Worthy, Robbyne Wiley, Keyna Franklin, Bianca Shaw, Noshin Hoque, Shakira Paige and Teresa Bachiller

system involvement, as does police presence in communities, criminal legal system involvement, and exposure to public services such as shelters and hospitals. Hospitals drug test pregnant people and newborns without patients’ consent—disproportionately targeting Black women, who do not have higher positive-result rates.¹⁷ A positive test can lead to a report and family separation, despite evidence that separation harms infants.^{18,19} As researcher Kelley Fong stated, “When we think about which schools have policies to call CPS [child protective services] after a certain number of absences versus calling and checking in with families about absences, or which organizations think about alternatives to CPS rather than immediately ... [calling] the hotline, these patterns are not race neutral.”²⁰

Fear and Coercion

Mandated reporting creates a culture of fear that prevents parents from accessing resources

¹⁷ Brico, E. (2021, Dec. 1). *Doctors Drug Test Black and Poor Families at Higher Rates, Risking Family Separation*. Talk Poverty. Retrieved from: <https://talkpoverty.org/2021/12/01/doctors-can-drug-test-new-parents-without-consent-pick-depends-race-class/>

¹⁸ Brico, E. (2021, Dec. 1). *Doctors Drug Test Black and Poor Families at Higher Rates, Risking Family Separation*.

¹⁹ Movement for Family Power. ReImagine Support. Retrieved from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5be5ed0fd274cb7c8a5d0cba/t/60adc181f9d1cb4ef8cc53f9/1622000002581/Community-One-Pager-5-25-21.pdf>

²⁰ Farmer, C.; Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2020, Nov. 19). *The Problems with “The Tool We Have.”* Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2020/11/the-problems-with-the-tool-we-have/>

and support that contribute to family safety and well-being.²¹ This culture of fear also prevents parents from talking openly with providers, such as doctors, school personnel, and therapists, about challenges. A Rise parent contributor wrote, “Being scared of the child welfare system [impacts] almost everything I do. Every move I make has to be given careful thought—what doctors I go to and what I tell a doctor or therapist. ... Because I have mental health issues, my son could be taken back by CPS at any time, for any reason.”²²

Jeanette confronted this dynamic at her son’s school:

“In my Parent Teacher Association (PTA), parents wouldn’t share their challenges. I told the school staff, “Because you are mandated reporters, parents are fearful of saying anything real to you, as you will report us.” A few parents agreed and said, “There’s no such thing as a safe space with mandated reporters. You just never know what they think is something to report.””

Power dynamics make parents vulnerable in interactions with mandated reporters. Professionals automatically are deemed more credible. Imani wrote, “It’s always their word over mine. That power struggle needs to change. If someone doesn’t like me, and my life and child’s life is ultimately in that person’s hands, how should I act?” Parents may feel angry, afraid, frustrated, or overwhelmed. These are natural feelings when surviving and coping with poverty, racism, toxic stress, trauma, and oppressive systems; however, any expression of those feelings by Black and brown parents may be used against them (e.g., as evidence that they need anger management or mental health services).

Additionally, the threat of a report is sometimes used coercively by mandated reporters to push parents to do what the provider thinks is best. Based on her research with mandated reporters, Kelley Fong explained,

“There is another side to what mandated reporters want, which is not just optional assistance offered to parents, but rehabilitation. They

want CPS to tell parents, “This is what we think you need to do better for your children.” Or “This is not the way to behave with the school.” ... Some reporters are using CPS as a way to pressure families to behave in certain ways and regulate families.²⁴

This culture of fear, punishment, and policing also shapes decision making by mandated reporters. Parents hear directly from service providers that they make reports because of the threat of losing their licenses for not reporting. No one wants to be in the news, lose their job, go to jail,²⁵ or be held responsible for a child being harmed. However, making a report does not necessarily protect a child, as the system does not effectively prevent harm—and most reports aren’t made out of fear that a child is in danger.²⁶ Kelley Fong explained, “By and large, mandated reporters are seeing families facing adversity and in need of an intervention they can’t provide, whether because they don’t have the knowledge, skills, resources, or time. Sometimes, schools say they don’t know what kind of therapeutic resources are out there and so they turn to CPS.”²⁷ These motivations align with the fact that the majority of investigations are not indicated, meaning they do not find evidence of abuse or neglect. In 2020, about 64 percent of investigations in NYC were not indicated,²⁸ even though, at that time, the

²¹ Farmer, C. & Franklin, K. (2020, Jan. 22). *New Research: How Fear of CPS Harms Families*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2020/01/how-fear-of-cps-harms-families/>

²² Anonymous. (2021, Jun. 2). ‘Fear of CPS Impacts Every Move I Make.’ Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/06/fear-of-cps-impacts-every-move-i-make/>

²³ Vega, J. (2017, May 1). *Applying a Toxic Stress Lens to Frontline Practice with Parents*. <https://www.risemagazine.org/2017/05/cofcca-speech-2017/>

²⁴ Farmer, C.; Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2020, Nov. 19). *The Problems with “The Tool We Have.”*

²⁵ Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Penalties for Failure to Report and False Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect*. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/report.pdf>

²⁶ Farmer, C.; Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2020, Nov. 19). *The Problems with “The Tool We Have.”*

²⁷ Farmer, C.; Franklin, K. & Werner, S. (2020, Nov. 19). *The Problems with “The Tool We Have.”*

²⁸ NYC Administration for Children and Families. *Abuse/Neglect Investigations by Community District, 2015–2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/abuseneglectreport15to20.pdf>

State's legal standard was incredibly low, requiring merely "some credible evidence" for cases to be indicated.²⁹

Parents have been reported and investigated when they've rinsed their children's clothes in a tub without detergent, left younger children in the care of an older child, run late for picking their child up from school, or sought medical care for an infant with health challenges. Professionals may not consider the harm of a report—and may never hear from a family about its impact, as a family is unlikely to return to a doctor, therapist, or organization that reported them. Reports break trust, disrupting relationships between families and service providers.

Safety Without the System

Frequently, abolitionists are asked how children can be kept safe without the system, and by extension, without mandated reporting. The question overlooks how mandated reporting makes families less likely to access support and disregards the state violence reports initiated. Kelley Fong explained, "It is easy for mandated reporters to say, better safe than sorry, no harm no foul. What I heard from mothers was that this often wasn't the case. There was real harm caused even with cases that were not substantiated."³⁰ During the investigation process, investigators with the power to remove your children search your home, examine your children's bodies, and interview your neighbors and children's teachers. This is a stressful, terrifying, and intrusive experience for families. System involvement is also experienced by parents as shameful and disrupts romantic, familial, and platonic relationships.³¹ This can increase isolation rather than strengthening connections and care networks crucial to navigating family challenges.

Additionally, the question is based on the assumption that the system keeps children safe—but some children are physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused, even murdered, in the system's "care."³² Research suggests that children "on the margin of placement" in the foster system tend to have better outcomes when they remain at home.³³ Scholar and activist Rita S. Fierro stated,

"There is no proof that children who are removed from their families sort out better. Actually, we have plenty of data that show that children who age out of foster care have a horrible time. Only 50 percent of them graduate high school, 30 percent of them end up homeless, and they have trauma rates higher than Vietnam veterans. So, the state is not a better parent than even parents who are having a hard time. But we don't hold states accountable for what happens to children after they are removed."³⁴

Our society must invest in destigmatized, compassionate ways of preventing and responding to harm that do not themselves inflict harm. B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Co-Founder Ashley Ellis discussed the value of building trust through restorative and transformative justice approaches,

"How do we . . . build what needs to be in place, that will allow me to show up and say, . . . I don't have what I need. I'm not at my best. Can you watch my kids while I get myself together?" You don't judge me and hold it over my head. There is no punishment. Imagine that — if people are so connected and community is able to show up.

²⁹ Although new legislation recently raised the legal standard in New York State to require a "fair preponderance" of evidence in family court, this is still a lower standard than that used in the criminal legal system. Franklin, K. & Paige, S. (2021, Jan. 18). *New SCR Legislation Took Effect Jan. 1st: What it Means for Parents*. Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2022/01/what-new-scr-legislation-means-for-parents/>

³⁰ Farmer, C.; Franklin, K. (2020, Jan. 22). *New Research: How Fear of CPS Harms Families*.

³¹ Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.

³² See for example: Hawaii News Now. *Court documents reveal horrific allegations against adoptive parents charged with murdering girl*. (Nov. 12, 2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2021/11/12/adoptive-parents-isabella-ariel-kalua-make-first-court-appearance-girls-murder/>

³³ Doyle Jr., J.J. (Dec. 2017). *Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care*. *American Economic Review*, Vol. 97(5), pp. 1583–1610. Retrieved from: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.97.5.1583>

³⁴ Fierro, Rita S. (2021, Oct. 27). *Rise Annual Fundraiser*. <https://vimeo.com/639995386>

Folks need proof that if they show up in their weakest moment, you're not going to turn them in, manage them, or shame them. Their story won't be weaponized against them and used as a reason to call the system, causing further harm and disconnection. When people experience that and see that harm will not happen, they're most likely to show up and ask for what they need. That helps to deepen trust and allows people to let their guard down."³⁵

Invest in Families and Communities

Abolishing the system—and ending mandated reporting—requires divesting from family policing and disentangling family support from family policing, so parents do not have to be involved with oppressive systems to access resources. Funding shifted away from family policing can be invested in community-led approaches to family and community safety and wellness. We must invest in community-led innovation to explore, adapt, and expand existing and promising healing, restorative, and transformative justice approaches to safety and accountability.³⁶

When we invest in families and communities, service providers will be less likely to encounter families experiencing crises due to a lack of resources such as housing, food, and childcare. Research has demonstrated that increasing the minimum wage can substantially reduce neglect reports;³⁷ resources such as cash and food can reduce domestic violence; and housing and childcare can increase safety.³⁸ Additionally, when families want resources or support, there will be more community-based resources and services to connect them to without turning to the system. We need to make resources available without qualifications, strings attached, or resource gatekeeping by family policing systems.

Rise's PAR project found that some parents were connected to a helpful resource or service through ACS—but support came at the cost of significant harm at the hands of the system.³⁹ Imani wrote,

“Most cases are due to lack of resources—resources that many

parents, including me, tried to obtain without the system and were denied. Then, those resources magically became available during one of the most emotionally and spiritually draining times of my life. Clothes, diapers, cradles and childcare are just a few examples of resources parents can access through the system. Why do we have to go through traumatic system involvement to receive resources that should be accessible without being reported?”

Participants in our PAR project, like parents involved in Rise more broadly, were clear that they do not trust the child welfare system and want support and resources to come from people and organizations outside of it.⁴⁰ Dorothy Roberts, researcher, scholar, and activist, described what we need to build as we end family policing,

“Ending the system doesn't mean leaving people to fend for themselves in a society that is structured unequally. We are talking about transforming society, including making structural changes at a societal level and changes in our communities. Ending structural racism is a tall order, but we need to work toward that. We need to care for families by providing housing and food [and] universal, equal, and free

³⁵ Paige, S. (2021, Jul. 6). *Building Safety in Community Through Restorative Justice*. <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/07/building-safety-in-community-through-rj/>

³⁶ In Rise's glossary, we share our understanding of the terms healing justice, restorative justice and transformative justice drawing from a variety of sources: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/09/glossary-of-terms/>

³⁷ Baldari, C. & Mathur, R. (2017, Aug. 31). *Increasing the Minimum Wage is Good for Child Well-Being*. First Focus. Retrieved from: <https://firstfocus.org/blog/increasing-the-minimum-wage-is-good-for-child-well-being>

³⁸ Gruber, A. (2020, Jul. 7). *How Police Became the Go-To Response to Domestic Violence*. Slate. Retrieved from: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/07/policing-domestic-violence-history.html>

³⁹ Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.

⁴⁰ Rise & TakeRoot Justice. (Fall 2021). *An Unavoidable System: The Harms of Family Policing and Parents' Vision for Investing in Community Care*.

health care and education. At a community level, we need to care for each other without relying on violent systems like police, prisons, and child removal. It involves mutual aid and figuring out how to deal with families' problems and needs and the conflict and violence that occurs in families, in ways that are not punitive, inhumane, violent, and terroristic."⁴¹

Increasingly, community groups are proving that safety isn't about policing. Research on peer models and community-led efforts to provide resources shows that investing in peer support and in families and communities can prevent and reduce system involvement and strengthen well-being.⁴² Community groups are demonstrating ways to prevent and respond to physical and sexual abuse and domestic and community violence, and to provide support around mental health, substance use, grief, and healing—without policing systems.⁴³ Many communities have never felt safe engaging with police and have developed strategies for responding to crises without police involvement. While strategies and resources exist for responding to family crises without involving family police, we need to adapt and develop more—and make them widely available. It is important that resources are voluntary and unaffiliated with family policing systems and that programs addressing harm are not required to make reports.

Examples of community investments called for in Rise's PAR report include:

- Community-based supports for trauma recovery, especially healing from sexual and intimate partner violence, that recognize the historical and current vulnerability of Black and brown women.
- Peer and survivor-led services and approaches to intimate partner violence and mental health support.
- Culturally appropriate services and supports for individuals and families for healing from trauma, addressing grief and working through family conflict, including age-appropriate services for children.

- Holistic community centers, family mediation programs using restorative justice approaches, and programs to support LGBTQ children/youth and their families.
- Community-based care and harm-reduction approaches to substance use by parents, including voluntary in-home treatment programs for parents with children at home.

Build Peer Support Networks

Nationwide, school staff reports more allegations than any other category of reporters, yet reports made by schools are least likely to be substantiated or lead to family interventions. In NYC, approximately two-thirds of reports from school personnel do not lead to evidence of abuse or neglect.⁴⁴ One way of investing in community-led support and reducing reports and system involvement is described in Rise's proposed peer and community care model. This model was developed by parents impacted by family policing based on their lived experience and interviews with groups providing peer support, mutual aid, and credible messenger

⁴¹ Franklin, K. (2020, Oct. 20). *'Abolition is the Only Answer': A Conversation with Dorothy Roberts.*

⁴² Rise. (2021). *Insights. Someone To Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care.* Retrieved from: https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Rise_PeerCareInsights2021_Final.pdf

⁴³ See for example: BEAM: <https://www.beam.community/>; Hidden Water: <https://hiddenwatercircle.org/>; Project Hajra: <https://alliedmedia.org/projects/project-hajra>; One Million Experiments: <https://millionexperiments.com/>; Hightower, J. & Rubinowitz, E. (2020, Nov. 7). *Amid Worries Of Higher Stress, A National Project Is Training Chicago Barbers To Be Mental Health Advocates.* WBEZ Chicago. Retrieved from: <https://www.wbez.org/stories/amid-worries-of-higher-stress-a-national-project-is-training-chicago-barbers-to-be-mental-health-advocates/442f917f-7a18-4ab6-bf9e4aae6f6973e6>; Franklin, K. & Paige, S. (2021, May 25). *'When You Have Lived Experience, You Come with a Different Angle.'* Retrieved from: <https://www.risemagazine.org/2021/05/when-you-have-lived-experience/>

⁴⁴ Lehrer-Small, A. (Jan. 27, 2022). *NYC Schools Reported Over 9,600 Students to Child Protective Services Since Aug. 2020. Is It the 'Wrong Tool' for Families Traumatized by COVID? T74.* Retrieved from: <https://www.the74million.org/article/nyc-schools-reported-over-9600-students-to-child-protective-services-since-aug-2020-is-it-the-wrong-tool-for-families-traumatized-by-covid/>

mentoring.⁴⁵ Rise plans to launch the model in schools with high report rates and measure its impact on the number of reports made by those schools over time. This data will be used to garner support for funding and scaling the program citywide.

Just as credible messengers and violence interrupters create safety without police presence,⁴⁶ parent peer care and advocacy can support family safety and well-being. Rise believes that training parents in impacted communities to build relationships with neighbors, offer emotional support, make connections to community resources, and advocate to expand community resources can reduce family stress before it builds and lead to healthier, thriving families. Our vision is that trained networks of peers with credible life experience will: increase the likelihood that parents in emerging crises safely get support without state intervention; and increase the flourishing of relationships that reduce stress, trauma, and isolation and strengthen healing, care, connectedness, and joy.

This approach is not a “replacement” for system intervention—it serves an entirely different purpose, rooted in relationships and values of trust, care, respect, and shared power. Relationship building that values and supports families without blame, coercion, and fear can better foster safety and help buffer the chronic stress families experience because of racism and poverty. In trusting relationships, people are more likely to be open about making mistakes or causing harm. People may feel more comfortable naming harms they’ve experienced or fears about harms that could occur. This creates opportunities for conversations about safety, accountability, and healing—including engaging in safety planning and using restorative justice circles to explore options for addressing conflicts and concerns.

We envision two roles—Peer Supporters and Community Supporters, who will not be mandated reporters and will be trained and equipped with knowledge, tools, and resources to provide information and support that families need quickly. Volunteer Peer Supporters will provide a listening ear and connections to resources, services, and

opportunities. Community Supporters will be hired part-time or full-time and embedded in schools and community-based organizations and provide a higher level of support. They will guide and support families through challenges and take referrals from Peer Supporters and from professionals working as mandated reporters. Peer and Community Supporters can connect parents to legal representation so parents can access support and discuss challenges without fear that their words will be used against them. Additionally, they can help parents prepare to navigate conversations with mandated reporters.

Support, Don’t Report

Individuals and organizations can take immediate action to avoid reports and advocate for change. Professionals can join growing calls to end mandated reporting and speak out about its harm to families and negative impact on service provision and therapeutic relationships. Organizations can build connections with mutual aid and community groups that respond to immediate resource needs. Additionally, organizations can prepare all staff or a point person to connect families to trusted community resources, supports, and services.

Jeanette’s experience with her son’s school provides one example of how an organization can create support structures to reduce reports. When Jeanette raised parents’ fear of reports, school staff said they wanted parents to feel comfortable reaching out for support, initiating a dialogue about what could change. Jeanette suggested the school implement a simple 1–2–3 process: (1) Inform parents of the issue; (2) Provide support to address it, co-creating a plan with clear steps and timelines.

⁴⁵ Rise. (2021). *Insights. Someone To Turn To: A Vision for Creating Networks of Parent Peer Care*. Retrieved from: https://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Rise_PeerCareInsights2021_Final.pdf

⁴⁶ See for example: Cure Violence Global. *The Evidence of Effectiveness*. (2021, Aug.). Retrieved from: <https://cvg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Cure-Violence-Evidence-Summary.pdf>; Lynch, M.; Astone, N.M.; Collazos, J.; Lipman, M. & Esthappen, S. (2018, Feb. 20). *Arches Transformative Mentoring Program: An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/arches-transformative-mentoring-program>

This could involve providing resources directly or connecting a family to community resources or legal representation. Follow up and partner to address barriers; (3) Be transparent. Share mandated reporting requirements, if relevant. The idea is to avoid reports, but if a report is made, parents should be informed of the possibility beforehand, told why the call will be made and what will be shared, asked to be present when the call is made, and connected to legal representation.

Now, when the school has concerns, staff inform the PTA and Parent Coordinator. A peer informs the parent of the concern, offers resources, and averts a report. Jeanette shared, “A mother told us she lost her job and wasn’t sending her child to school because they were out of food. She was afraid that if her child said he was hungry, the school would call ACS. The team brought food to the family’s home without judging the parent, asking questions, or going into her home.”

Diana Autin, Executive Director of SPAN–NJ, discussed how their organization has nearly eliminated reports by having a point person assess whether a situation meets reporting criteria,

“Some people think if a child is living in an apartment with water running down the walls, they should report that family. No, what they should do is report the landlord—not the family. We have a point person who’s very well versed in what child abuse is and isn’t and knows that a lot of bad things happen from reporting—and also that the vast majority of reports are not found to be actionable. By putting that in place, we’ve been able to limit, to a great degree, misunderstanding of what child abuse is and thus inappropriate and unnecessary reporting.”⁴⁷

Organizations that have effective practices to meet family support and advocacy needs and de-escalate crises without involving policing systems should document and share what works. While small-scale actions do not remedy societal inequities, they make a difference for families and show that non-

punitive approaches can be effective—and should be invested in and implemented widely.

Address Training and Protocols

Improving mandated reporter training and protocols is not the solution—however, training and protocols contribute to the current high volume of reports. As steppingstones toward abolition, it is essential to immediately shrink the number of families funneled into the system. This could start with narrowing mandated reporting requirements to physical or sexual abuse, not neglect.

State systems should update all mandated reporter training and protocols immediately to distinguish poverty-related needs from child endangerment and abuse and to address support needs directly. Parents and youth impacted by the system should be engaged as partners in the development of training content. Rise recommends that systems:

- Train mandated reporters to know that a report is not a resource referral and should not be misused for that purpose. Mandated reporter training should identify potential consequences of reporting and the harm of investigations and family separation.
- Provide clear standards for recognizing the difference between poverty and neglect and resources for responding to poverty-related needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing) by connecting families to resources and support, including peer support.
- Set clear limits for when mandated reporters can be held liable for not reporting.
- Require organizations that employ mandated reporters to develop processes to assess concerns, identify options, and determine whether a report is required. Protocols should emphasize the importance of engaging directly with parents/families and connecting parents/caregivers to legal representation if a report will be made.

⁴⁷ Rise interview with Diana Autin, Executive Director of SPAN–NJ, on December 10, 2020, by Shakira Paige, Rise contributor, to inform Rise peer and community care model. (Unpublished).

Conclusion

Mandated reporting laws and practices feed families into the family policing system rather than addressing root issues, including racism, poverty, structural inequity, and lack of investment in Black and brown, low-income communities. Most reports aren't made because children are in danger—reports are often made because requirements conflate poverty with neglect. The system doesn't keep families or children safe and in fact, inflicts trauma, so it is important to invest in community-led approaches to preventing and responding to harm and violence.

Ending mandated reporting is key to supporting child and family well-being. Dorothy Roberts stated, "It doesn't make sense to keep an oppressive⁴⁸ system because we are unwilling to imagine something better. Let's imagine

something better, work toward it and get rid of what we know is oppressive." Parents impacted by family policing are imagining and creating something better. Imani summarized, "Abolition involves divesting from systems that create harm and investing those funds into community. The beauty of the peer support model is there is no system involvement. Our goal is to support families and communities to become powerful on their own and to support themselves—where community members have the resources they need." Rise's vision is that all families have the knowledge, resources and support they need to thrive without system involvement. We believe that when surveillance, separation, and loss of control over their family lives is not a threat, parents will reach out for support earlier on.

⁴⁸ Franklin, K. (2020, Oct. 20). 'Abolition is the Only Answer': A Conversation with Dorothy Roberts.

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