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Brooklyn Defenders join fight against

racial bias in NYC family policing system

September 7, 2023 Rob Abruzzese



Nila Natarajan, associate director of policy and family defense at Brooklyn Defender Services, an advocate for the rights of Black families in the family policing system.

Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Defender Services via Twitter

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In a move to shed light on the institutional racism entrenched within the family policing system, Brooklyn Defender Services united with fellow New York City family defense organizations to submit joint testimony last month to the New York Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

The federal commission is currently investigating the “New York Child Welfare System and its Impact on Black Children and Families.”

The testimony is a collaborative effort involving the Bronx Defenders, the Center for Family Representation and the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem. Together, they condemn the stark racial disparities and inequities that permeate New York’s family policing system, historically labeled as the “child welfare” or “child protection” system.

These organizations, who have represented more than 43,000 parents since 2007, primarily from Black and Latino backgrounds, have been at the forefront of advocating for families caught in what they call the family policing system. They assert that this system has its origins in exploitation, surveillance and control rather than genuine family welfare.

“Just as our modern police systems descend from slave patrols, the family policing system is rooted in our country’s history of using family separation as a tool to control, punish, and plunder Indigenous, Black, immigrant and low-income families and communities,” the Defenders’ statement said.


The testimony also drew attention to the system’s deep roots in historical events such as the exploitation of Indigenous and Black communities, which they said manifest today as structural racism posing as social betterment.

Nila Natarajan, the associate director of policy and family defense at Brooklyn Defender Services, co-signed a statement that emphasized that the current family policing system disproportionately targets Black and brown parents, leading to a cycle of family separations. The consensus among the defenders is that the system perpetuates structural poverty, anti-Black racism and a lack of essential services.

“Family separation has been and continues to be a political choice, one that allows all of us to look away from the anti-Black racism, structural inequality that keeps marginalized families — Black, Indigenous, poor— on the margins,” the statement continued.

Further, the testimony references multiple research sources, including an internal racial equity audit from New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS). This audit described the agency as “a predatory system that specifically targets Black and brown parents.”

The collaborative defense organizations are pushing for a complete overhaul of the family policing system. They advocate for it to be replaced with one that is rooted in genuine care, welfare and support for the families, especially those in marginalized communities. Their vision is to divest from the current harmful structure and redirect resources to address the root issues that thrust families into the system.



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