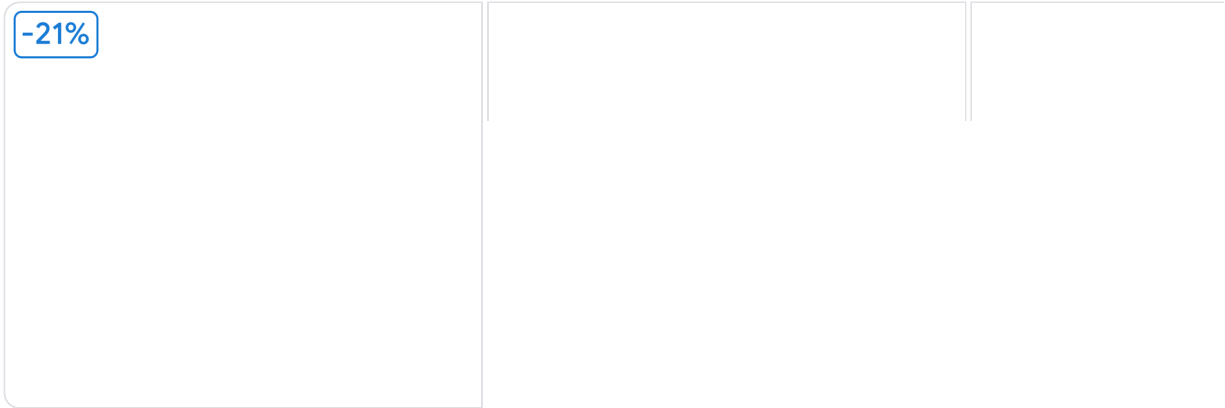


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Reform the child welfare system to protect vulnerable children

BY LENETTE AZZI-LESSING, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 02/03/21 3:15 PM ET

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The child welfare system — like other powerful institutions, including law enforcement and the incarceration system — is under attack.

The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic along with a reckoning with systemic racism and inequality over the past year are shining a harsh spotlight on child protective services (CPS), the nation's system for protecting children from abuse and neglect. Similar to the movement to defund the police, long-standing concerns about racism and other gross inequities in CPS have erupted into calls to abolish this system.

This outcry is useful in pointing out the destructive consequences of a taxpayer-funded system having strayed over time from its original mission. But keeping the CPS system intact is necessary due to its critical mandate to protect endangered children who have nowhere else to turn.

This system needs significant reform, however, to ensure that it fulfills its mandate without harming many of the children and families it encounters.

More than 670,000 children are involved in the CPS system, which receives funding and limited oversight from both state and federal governments. It's hard to argue with the virtue and critical nature of CPS' mission, which is to protect children whose parents cannot care for them or are causing them serious harm. However, instead of providing struggling families with resources and support to safely care for their children, CPS needlessly separates tens of thousands of children from their families every year. This occurs when it

Less than 20 percent of the nearly 424,000 children currently in foster care were separated from their families because their parents physically or sexually abused them. A much larger portion were removed due to neglect. Much of what is classified as child neglect, lacking adequate food, housing or other essentials, is symptomatic of family poverty.

Although separating children from their parents is necessary in the relatively small number of situations where parents pose a genuine threat to the safety of their children, it traumatizes already vulnerable children, who, in many cases, don't know where they are going and when they will see their families again.

Once CPS removes children, it too often fails at providing them with nurturing, stable care in foster homes until they can be safely returned to their parents or placed for adoption in a timely manner. Instead, many children languish in foster care for unacceptably long periods of time. The average length of stay is about 20 months and nearly 27 percent of children in foster care remain there for more than two years. Many of these children experience ruptured relationships as they bounce between different homes and institutions, including shelters; damaging their mental health and capacity for forming healthy relationships.

Significantly, Black children are nearly twice as likely than white children to be involved in CPS and placed into foster care. Some argue that this overrepresentation is caused by higher rates of poverty among Black families, but differences in family income fail to fully account for the extent of these disparities and studies show that CPS officials tend to view Black families and communities as less safe than those that are white. Moreover, high rates of poverty among Black families are themselves caused by systemic racism in the form of discrimination in housing, employment and other factors.

It's easy to understand the drive to abolish CPS and to replace it with a more just and constructive response to child maltreatment. However, the chances of succeeding at this are slim because each state has considerable control over how its CPS system operates. Abolition would require navigating state employee union contracts and the considerable power courts have in deciding the fate of CPS-involved children. And what would happen to the highly vulnerable children in CPS custody who truly need state oversight: those with severe disabilities and/or medical needs and children whose parents really do pose a danger to them, while a new system is being built?

Fortunately, there are ways to make dramatic improvements to the existing CPS system. Substantially reducing the number of children in poverty would have the greatest impact. The U.S. has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty among similarly developed

employment programs and income supports, including expanded tax credits. Another Biden priority, the passage of the [Raise the Federal Minimum Wage Act](#), would enable working-poor parents to better meet the needs of their children.

Supplementing these measures with improved access to physical and behavioral health services and affordable child care would help families nurture their children and would likely reduce the number of children placed in foster care. So would equipping community-based organizations with adequate funding to help impoverished families obtain adequate housing, transportation and other basics necessary to avoid family separations.

Addressing the [tendency of the CPS system to over-surveil Black families](#) would also reduce unnecessary separations among these families.

The federal government should hold states accountable for the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care. Improving and expanding resources in disadvantaged communities, along with tying the provision of federal funds to progress towards racial equity, are among the strategies that could make this system fairer and curtail the infliction of [additional risks for poor outcomes](#) upon children already disadvantaged by growing up in a society riddled with racial injustice.

Adequately funding the CPS system so that it can hire more workers and provide them with better training would also [improve services to troubled families](#) and make fewer separations necessary. Sufficient staffing would also help ensure that when families must be separated, children are placed in the most appropriate setting and promptly returned to their parents once their families stabilize, or are provided with an adoptive family. Substantially reducing the number of children entering foster care, as well as shortening stays, could free up the resources necessary to recruit and support more high-quality foster families to provide the special care and stability that children whose safety really does depend on out-of-home care desperately need.

These realistic and sustainable measures would enable a smaller, well-functioning system to better protect imperiled children and to strengthen rather than increase the vulnerability of struggling families.

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