

White Privilege in Child Welfare: What Racism Looks Like

“As a white person, you were born into a racialized hierarchy, the forces of which had been operating in your life before you even took that first breath and every breath since.”

—[Robin DeAngelo](#), author of [White Fragility](#)

From the moment of their conception, every African American person begins a personal timeline of racism, for their mother experiences racism in that moment—our babies understand and feel in the womb. Our babies also die in the womb. [U.S. News](#) reported that babies born to Black women are more than three times as likely as babies born to White women to die of preterm birth-related issues.

For Black and Brown people, racism is a daily experience; it is not episodic. There is no beginning or ending. There is only intensity. There are times when it is a more subtle microaggression, such as the glance a Black person receives when walking into a store. Then there are times when it is overt or, as was the case for Mr. George Floyd, violent.

More than 25 years ago, a point on my personal timeline of racism presented itself. At the height of the crack epidemic, when the criminal justice system was breaking apart Black families, it created a pipeline to the child welfare system. The racism fueling incarceration for drug use was severe and unrelenting in all Black and Brown communities and had rippling effects. For example, in the late '80s and early '90s, [the number of children of color coming into foster care more than doubled](#).

As a young Black woman, I watched media portrayals of the crack epidemic in Black communities ... in my community. Images of crime, violence and despair were disseminated to White audiences, for racism only generates pity and blame rather than empathy. As a nation, we pitied and blamed our Black and Brown communities.

Decades later, the racism I witnessed was further confirmed as I watched and read news stories about the opioid crisis. Illicit drug use and overdose by Whites was met with empathy, compassion and therapy. Even the words changed: “We fear an epidemic; we address a crisis.” Public response and the resulting policy decisions favored White privilege. I lived through the criminalization of Black and Brown communities while the media championed decriminalization of White neighborhoods in the suburbs and rural areas amid challenges associated with opioid addiction.

The notion that Black children need White protection from their own families was established in the 1800s. Structural racism was built into the system to exclude Black children from the nation’s emerging orphanage system, intentionally separating them. The Black community

was not included in planning, and staffing was predominately White. We should not be shocked that a separate system for Black children has survived into 2020.

In 1979, the Supreme Court ruled that states cannot deny foster care benefits to relatives caring for their kin (Miller, et al. vs. Youakim). Yet, into the late 1980s, Black families were still enslaved in a separate system with no financial or social support. At that time, legal action forced Western Pennsylvania's Allegheny County to address this racist culture and system. In 1994, I founded A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI), as a response to both the current situation of disproportionality and disparity and the child welfare racism established nearly 200 years prior.

African American families were not provided the opportunity to become licensed in the child welfare system, and it is only through this licensing process that financial and social supports are provided to caregivers. In 1994, it was revolutionary to license kin, as the old guard wanted to maintain that separation. The Black community were now the planners and provided the staff. Today, ASCI licenses over 96% of its kinship caregivers in less than 60 days.

This was not the first time the racism of child welfare expressed itself on my timeline. I had been a child in the same system, and had it not been for the kinship care provided by my paternal grandmother, I could have ended up like many other Black children—with strangers or diverted with no way home. Diversion is a racist practice, and ASCI addressed it. To dismantle racism, we must not only protest, but also provide our own solutions to the systems that disenfranchise our families. When the solutions are not our own, there is still racism.

White supremacy exists in child welfare. The evidence is in the disproportionality and disparity of Black and Brown children in care, and in the many Black and Brown families denied the opportunity to secure necessary financial and social support because they are diverted from the system through an either-or proposition: Take in your grandchildren, or they will end up in foster care with strangers.

In law, we look at the relevance of evidence as a criterion for admission and use. If child welfare was on trial for the charge of systemic racism, decades of demonstrative, real, testimonial and documentary evidence could be used against it. Still, the trajectory of the culture that has created the racist policies and practices in child welfare continues, and in many cases has gained momentum.

Today, with all our data and cultural competency training, [Black families are more likely to be reported](#) to the child abuse hotline and investigated for child abuse and neglect. Before child welfare is even involved, the Black family is suspect. In the foster care system, White saviorism still influences child welfare practice. In 2018, writing on the death of Devonte Hart, [Stacey Patton](#) wrote, "It seems that America cannot see or hear black children's tears unless they are framed in the context of white redemption or white saviorism."

All families, regardless of race, interact with systems throughout their lifetimes. Consider your interactions with systems in health, housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. While each system operates independently, they are realistically interconnected. There are those in our nation who believe that there exists non-racial systems. For example, law

enforcement and education should not be attached to race, yet we know they are. We have racialized systems across the board.

We must remain rebellious in our rejection of constructs that have only been transfigured—not demolished—since the first slave ships reached American shores in 1619. Where reconstruction occurred in our past, there must be deconstruction now as we move forward.

In providing kinship care for more than 25 years, and being a child welfare professional for more than 35 years, I never sought to change the system White bureaucracies created for Black and Brown families—I have sought deconstruction. And because it is a system they created, I have made sure these White bureaucracies participate in deconstructing it.

This is how we will deconstruct child welfare:

1. Delegitimize all adversarial Child Protective Services (CPS) policies and practices that bring African American families into the child welfare system.
2. Refute the practices that regulate and punish Black and Brown families. This includes other White bureaucracies, such as education, that contribute to more children of color being removed from their homes than their White counterparts.
3. Disallow any system that monitors African American families unjustly. African American women are confronted in family court and held to a higher parental standard than their White counterparts.
4. Remove any barriers that disable African American families from mobilizing their own family response. We must see the evidence that demonstrates family conferences occur, all members of the family are invited and that plans are family-driven.
5. We must eradicate anything that disempowers a Black or Brown family in the system. In cases of kinship care, family members with prior CPS history or inconsequential criminal records are often dismissed as a family resource.
6. Engage African American scholars to examine the child welfare system from a Critical Race Theory perspective, in order to highlight how child welfare policies, practices and behaviors are rooted in norms that support a White-supremacy legal construct.

It is time to alter the questions and change the answers in child welfare. We owe it to our children to remove any indication of racism from their lives. Protesting is fundamental to our democracy, and Black families and their allies must use the power of protest to change the racism timeline in the United States.

This protest must also explicitly name the changes we want—changes on which we will not compromise. At this time, our responsibility to our children is not to use protest to change the agenda or begin debate.

That time has ended. There should be no more debate on racism, for we have exceedingly met the burden of proof.