

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME III, PART II

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The chapters in this volume address many of the urgent challenges impacting our society that often lead to the harmful and disruptive involvement of the child welfare system in the lives of children and families, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children and families. These include the harm and destruction that result from incarcerating parents of young children (Ruprecht & Tomlin, 2023; Smith et al., 2023), specifically the disproportionate incarceration of Black mothers (Dworsky et al., 2023); the harms that result to youth with multisystem involvement, including adverse educational, health, and economic outcomes (Quinn et al., 2023); the lack of meaningful and accessible community-led services available to children and families (Belanger et al., 2023; Hebert et al., 2023; Wallace & Lee, 2023); the harms that result from the practice of adoption, including trauma and loss (Pasztor et al., 2023); the consistent failures of the legal system to address the needs of children and families (Cleveland & Mihalec-Adkins, 2023; Green et al., 2023); and the persistent problem of racism, both within child welfare systems and in broader society, that leads to the racist inequities that have existed in the child welfare system for more than 60 years (Belanger et al., 2023; Cleveland & Mihalec-Adkins, 2023; Dworsky et al., 2023; Green et al., 2023; Hebert et al., 2023; Pasztor et al., 2023; Quinn et al., 2023; Ruprecht & Tomlin, 2023; Smith et al., 2023; Wallace & Lee, 2023). Each of these challenges unjustly impedes families' abilities to care for their children, which may then lead to further harm through the form of child welfare intervention.

While many of these challenges are interrelated and share common underlying factors, what is perhaps most striking about the chapters in this volume is the consistent presence of poverty and the depth to which poverty drives not only the initial involvement of the child welfare system in the lives of children and families but also the challenges resulting from poverty that continue to impact families throughout their involvement in the system. While this may not be surprising to some readers, what is consistently more difficult to comprehend is the complete inability and

incapacity of the child welfare system to do anything about this. Rather than providing families with the assistance they need due to poverty and the stressors that poverty brings, these chapters demonstrate that the system primarily responds with increasingly punitive strategies, blaming parents for their poverty and their inability to correct the conditions that result—which the system refers to as “risks”—and ultimately separating children from their parents as a means of “protection”—despite the fact that no services or aid were provided to address these conditions. This is demonstrated in the case studies offered throughout these chapters. In these case studies, we read of parents desperately struggling to meet the needs of their children and facing barrier after barrier in their attempts to meet those needs (Cleveland & Mihalek-Adkins, 2023; Quinn et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023), we read of parents facing horrible choices between earning money to feed and house their children or leaving their children unattended in order to earn that money (Green et al., 2023), and in what is most striking, in multiple case studies, we read of children forcibly separated from their parents in the absence of any demonstration of imminent harm (Cleveland & Mihalek-Adkins, 2023; Green et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). After reading these chapters, if readers previously held the view that the purpose of the child welfare system was to protect children from horrific abuse at the hands of their parents, those readers should walk away from these chapters with that myth firmly shattered. In fact, readers should walk away from these chapters asking themselves, “If poverty is so clearly the challenge these families face, why is the child welfare system doing nothing to address those issues of poverty? How does separating children from their parents aid those parents in getting out of poverty? What is this system actually designed to do?” These are essential questions that each of the chapters in this volume implicitly ask, questions that have been asked before, yet questions the child welfare system has been unable to answer.

The inability of the system to answer these questions also begs us to ask, “Are we asking the right questions?” Yet the questions we ask have been shaped for decades by how we understand this system, or more specifically, by how the system has shaped how we understand it. Since its earliest iterations, the child welfare system has been informed by a carceral logic that shapes all aspects of its practice and its means of responding to children and families. At its core, this carceral logic maintains that families who are experiencing poverty are individually responsible for their poverty and need to be “treated” through punitive interventions designed to “correct” their behaviors (Fuchs, 2022; Lash, 2017; Weber, 2022; Williams, 2022). This individualization of blame distracts from the broader societal problems that allow poverty to continue. This individualization of blame also rationalizes the use of individualized interventions as a means of “treating the problem.”

Thus, with the “problem” largely situated at the micro level of the parents, we have been conditioned to ask questions and look for solutions that are situated at this level. Yet to truly develop solutions for these problems, we need to reframe our understanding of where these

problems lie and begin to ask different questions. For example, looking to “alternatives to incarceration, such as community-based programs, for mothers or pregnant women who are convicted of low-level offenses” and “parenting programs, which help mothers maintain relationships with their children...” (Dworsky et al.) is a start, but we should also look at these low-level offenses and develop strategies that work toward their decriminalization. Similarly, can we go beyond developing early care and educational strategies to improve outcomes for children with incarcerated parents, as proposed by Ruprecht and Tomlin, to developing strategies to decarcerate those parents and work towards the decriminalization of the issues that commonly separate children from their parents, primarily substance use and possession? Yet asking these questions and proposing these solutions requires a shift in our thinking. Rather than looking to the parent as the source of the problem by “breaking the law,” even if we consider some of the broader structural factors that likely contributed to this, we must shift our blame to the criminal legal system itself and question why certain acts have been designated as “crimes” and whether these acts were designated as “crimes” for the explicit purpose of regulating and punishing poor Black, Indigenous, and Latinx parents.

As we move toward more structural approaches to responding to families in poverty, we also need to begin to question how and why we choose, as a society and as a government, to intervene with children and families, and when and to whom the allocation of resources should be employed. For example, in their article proposing strategies to improve parental engagement in court proceedings, in recognition of the barriers that poverty creates to engagement, Cleveland & Mihalec-Adkins propose:

...adopting federal legislation requiring that parents receive a timely, holistic, and non-punitive assessment of their pressing material needs that may pose barriers to engagement or participation in interventions. These needs may include those related to transportation, housing, technology (e.g., computer, phone, email access), childcare, clothing, food, and health care (mental and physical). Once parents’ needs are identified, state courts and agencies overseeing interventions would then be required to adequately address those basic needs as a component of reasonable efforts. (p. XX)

What if we adopted federal legislation requiring this type of assessment and an expectation that the government meets these needs for every family upon the birth of a child? Why do we allow children and families to reach a point where they are drowning in poverty, unable to meet their basic needs, before we will consider the government stepping in to provide some form of aid?

Our resistance to this type of universal government aid results largely from the carceral logic the child welfare system, and other systems, have employed to shape our understanding of poverty. By individualizing the blame for poverty, carceral logic impacts not only how the child welfare

system responds to families living in poverty, but it also shifts the broader societal understanding about why poverty exists and what should be done to address it. With carceral logic firmly establishing poverty as the failure of “bad” parents, we allow poverty to continue, while being distracted from the reality that poverty is a societal problem with societal solutions. Ultimately, poverty is a policy choice that we allow the government to make because of our misdirected belief that individuals are responsible for their poverty due to their own deficiencies.

Yet, as I write about the strategies presented in this introduction, I recognize that they still suffer from a limitation—a limitation that prevents us from imagining what is possible due largely to the socialization we have each experienced in the United States. Because of this limitation, when faced with a problem, we tend to think of solutions that exist within the realm of what we know to be possible, even if those solutions may seem radical to some. For example, when we consider the problem of poverty, we are able to think of what some would consider radical solutions to address this—universal basic income, living wages, guaranteed child allowances, etc. In other words, if the problem we face is that people do not have enough money, we can imagine solutions that provide money. Yet we do not ask ourselves why we live in a society where people are required to have money in order to survive.

This is the limitation we must break free of. The problem is not that people do not have enough money to survive—the problem is that money exists as a means of deciding who gets to survive and who does not. The problem we are ultimately faced with as a society is not how to provide people with more money, but rather how to end a system of racial capitalism that allows money and poverty to exist.

At its core, racial capitalism is the social order upon which the United States was founded that is built on the idea of capitalist accumulation—accumulation that requires the maintenance and subjugation of an exploitable labor class that is confined to poverty for the purpose of enabling their exploitation.¹ This labor class exists to maintain a system whereby those with wealth continue to gain wealth, and those who produce wealth through their work remain in poverty. Since the earliest origins of the United States, this condition has been maintained through violence—violence that is inflicted directly and violence that is inflicted through policy—as a means of maintaining the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people, upon which the system and the White elite depend. Thus, racial capitalism is both the root cause and the social order that creates poverty, as well as the need for a child welfare system, as this system (along with other carceral systems) exists for the purpose of maintaining the poverty upon which racial capitalism depends.

If we are truly a society that cares for children and families, a society that aspires for all children to live safely and securely in their families and communities—in other words, a society that wishes to end poverty—we must abolish the system of racial capitalism that allows poverty to exist. Similarly, if we are truly a society that seeks freedom and equality for all, we must end the system

of racial capitalism that allows inequality to exist. A society based on racial capitalism will always require the subjugation of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people, and racial capitalism will always maintain the systems that bring about this subjugation, including the child welfare system.

Thus, this introduction serves as a challenge—a challenge to broaden our collective understanding of the real problems we face. These problems do not lie among the children and families ensnared in the child welfare system. In fact, it is the child welfare system that exacerbates the problems children and families face. The real problems we face lie in our systems and our structures—systems and structures that over centuries have been designed to create the oppression and inequality we experience today. The real problems we face lie in a government that for centuries has been designed to support these systems and structures for the purpose of maintaining the oppression and inequality they create. Bringing about the society we wish to see first requires an understanding of the real problems we face. It is only when we understand the true sources of our oppression that we can begin to develop the strategies to take action against them.

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¹ For further readings on racial capitalism, see the works of Cedric J. Robinson, many of which are compiled in H. L. T. Quan, ed., *Cedric J. Robinson on Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).