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Dismantling the Carceral Ecosystem: Investigating the Role of “Child Protection” and Family
Policing in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Social Welfare

by

Victoria Copeland

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dismantling the Carceral Ecosystem:
Investigating the Role of “Child Protection” and Family Policing in Los Angeles

by

Victoria Copeland

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Todd M. Franke, Chair

The National Association of Social Workers “Code of Ethics” states that social workers have a duty to ensure that families are treated with dignity, respect, and a right to self-determination. However, social workers often find themselves working in institutions that contradict these principles, one of which includes the “child welfare” system. In Los Angeles the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) markets themselves as the “largest child protection agency” in the United States and is responsible for ensuring the safety of over 2 million children. To “protect” children the system relies on the use of investigations, surveillance, and family separation processes. These processes have had significant generational impact on communities who are poor and Black, Latinx, or Indigenous. Due to this, several “child welfare” researchers are currently debating if the system should continue to exist in its

current state, undergo drastic reformation, or cease to exist in its entirety. The current study attempts to add to this debate by seeking to better understand the context in which the system operates and its relation to the carceral state as described by system stakeholders and individuals impacted by the “child welfare” system in Los Angeles County. Using a Carceral Ecosystem framework the study begins to interrogate the discourse around “child protection” and how it has been used as justification for the involvement of families within the system, the proliferation of surveillance and surveillance technologies, and subsequent family separation. In further extending the Carceral Ecosystem framework, the study situates abolitionist praxis as perturbation event that encapsulates both imaginative possibility and realistic strategy towards a post-“Child Welfare” future.

This dissertation of Victoria Copeland is approved.

Safiya U. Noble

Amy Elizabeth Ritterbusch

Dorothy Roberts

Todd M. Franke, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandma's Violeta Fajardo and Minnie Copeland, and my grandpa Bonifacio Fajardo. It is dedicated to all the youth in North Las Vegas who were told they weren't going to amount to anything, and to all the mothers who have been relentlessly organizing against state violence. To those who have passed, who have died too young because of systemic racism— this work is in deep reverence for you.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

- 2022 **PhD Candidate**, Social Welfare, University of California, Los Angeles, CA
- 2019 **MSW**, Social Welfare, University of California, Los Angeles, CA
Concentration: *Child & Family Well-Being*
- 2016 **B.A.**, Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV
Minor: *Neuroscience*

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- Copeland, V. A.** (2021). “It’s the Only System We’ve Got”: Exploring Emergency Response Decision-Making in Child Welfare. *Columbia Journal of Race and Law*, 11(3), 43–74.
<https://doi.org/10.52214/cjrl.v11i3.8740>
- Copeland, V.** (2021). Centering Unacknowledged Histories: Revisiting NABSW Demands to Repeal ASFA. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*.
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- Copeland, V.** & Pendleton, M. (2021, Dec) The Surveillance of Black Families in the Family Policing System. UpEND.
<https://upendmovement.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/12/upENDSurveillance2021.pdf>

SELECTED TALKS & PRESENTATIONS

Invited Talks

- Copeland, V.,** Dixon, E., Perez-Darby, S. (2022, April). *Mandatory Reporting, Abolition, Trans and Disability Justice*. Transgender Law Center. Virtual.
Facilitated by: Paris Chapman.
- Copeland, V.,** Ufot, N., Roberts, A., Roberts, T.W., Hansford, J. (2022, Jan.). *Abolition and Community*. UCLA Law Review Symposium. Virtual.
- Copeland, V.,** Boyd, R., Kim, M. (2021, Dec). *Eliminate Racism Series: Build Healthy Relationships to End Violence & Ensure Healthy Development for All Youth*. Grand Challenges for Social Work, Virtual.
- Copeland, V.,** Gormley, E., Harvey, B., McMillan, J, Pendleton, M. (2021, Nov). *UpEnd Convening: Mandatory Reporting Laws and Surveillance*. University of Houston-Texas, Virtual.

Peer-Reviewed Presentations

Whitman, K., Papias, M. **Copeland, V.** (2022, Jan.). *Navigating Carceral Environments: Experiences of Foster Youth of Color*. University of California Student of Color Conference. Virtual.

Copeland V., Edwards, F., Fong, K., Raz, M., Dettlaff, A., (2022, Feb). *Administrative Burdens in Child Welfare*. Russell Sage Foundation Conference: Administrative Burdens as a Mechanism of Inequality in Policy Implementation. New York City, NY.

Copeland, V., Abdurahman, J.K., Baughman, C., Ismail, T. (2021, June). *Family Surveillance*. Panel presentation at the Strengthened Bonds: Abolishing the Child Welfare System and Re-Envisioning Child Well-Being Columbia Law School Volume 11 Symposium, Virtual

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL & PRACTICE EXPERIENCE

2022- **Senior Policy Analyst**, Upturn: Toward Justice in Technology, Washington DC.

2018 **Community Organizer and South Central Youth Empowered thru Action (SCYEA) Wellness Intern**, Community Coalition, Los Angeles CA.

2016 – 2017 **Juvenile Justice Advocate**, Youth Advocate Programs, Las Vegas NV.

SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, & AWARDS

2021 William T. Grant Foundation, Theories of Blackness, Indigeneity, and Racialization in Research to Reduce Inequality in the Lives of Young People Writing Fellowship (\$2,000)

2021 UpTurn: Toward Justice in Technology, Washington DC. Summer Fellowship (\$10,200)

2021 Black in Artificial Intelligence Grant Program, Black in AI, (\$1,500)

2021 Alisa Bierria Graduate Fellowship in Black Feminist Research, UCLA Center for the Study of Women, Black Feminist Initiative (\$1,000)

2021 Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. Social Justice Awards

2019 UCLA MSW Thesis Award for Outstanding Research

2017 UCLA Senior Fellows. *Mentor*: Judge Nash, Office of Child Protect

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Whenever anyone says that, how this group or that group is special and needs protecting, that only means that they own you. That only means that you’re property. When they’re free, animals don’t need the SPCA. Check it out. In a capitalist world order every national government is supposed to protect its citizens, men are supposed to protect women, and adults are supposed to protect children. But nowhere in the world is this true. The supposed need to “protect” is really the ideological justification for keeping you powerless so you can be abused and exploited”

– Lee & Rover (1993)

The public “child welfare” system is often touted as a benevolent system predicated on promoting and ensuring child protection. Los Angeles County currently houses the nation's largest public “child welfare” agency, the Department of Child & Family Services (DCFS) which functions as one of several systems within an extensive network that includes educational systems, the medical and health industry, courts and the judicial system, and law enforcement agencies. These systems partner together in efforts to prevent and address allegations of child abuse and neglect. Over the last 20 years there has been increasing calls within child welfare to expand these multi-system collaborations and data-sharing partnerships. These calls have become more urgent and expedited due to a proliferation of new technological advances and an increase in available data.

Several researchers have called for an increase in multi-system information sharing partnerships and claim that the collection of more descriptive data can be utilized to prevent children more efficiently from being harmed by their parents (Casey Family Programs, 2019, Leeb & Fluke, 2015; Parton, 2008; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2011). Researchers explain that this form of surveillance is necessary to get an adequate picture of safety risks within certain communities and families. Conversely, another body of literature has voiced that the proliferation of data collection and data sharing through multi-system partnerships has increased the surveillance, regulation, and subsequent punishment of certain families (Copeland, 2021;

Fong, 2020; Michalsen, 2019; Roberts, 2014; Saba et al., 2016). Due to this I have referred to the “child welfare” system as the “family policing” system which may be used throughout this paper (Rickford, 1995). Although there is literature explaining both the benefits and harms of expansive data-sharing and data-collection processes, there is little research that provides an in-depth analysis about the ideological foundations and discourses that underscore and justify these processes.

The current study builds from within this gap in the literature, expanding on the insights of Wrennall (2010) who explains that surveillance, policing, and the increase of data-sharing has been able to gain traction within the child welfare system due to discourses around “child protection.” This narrative of “child protection” is frequently used by caseworkers and policy makers and has often obscured and exacerbated the destructive nature of family and community separation (Roberts, 2006 & Roberts as cited in Cloud, Oyama, & Teichner, 2017). Under the guise of “child protection,” the family policing system has been able to tie its services to surveillance, and shuffle kids between subjective caseworker decision-making processes and “neutral” technology assisted decision-making systems. Further, through child protection practices, such as court monitoring and separation, power continues to be exerted on Black families which has sustained the power hierarchies in which Black individuals partially lose their autonomy to the courts without due process (Lee, 2016). The ideologies and discourses behind the use of data and surveillance is thus tied to the impact that it has on communities and deserves ample research attention.

Research Problem

Despite continuous years of reform, the “child welfare” system in Los Angeles County has maintained its dependance on practices of surveillance and family separation to address harm

caused to children. Because of the impact of these practices on communities, it is important to center an analysis on the role of the societal context in which the system operates. “Child welfare” system practices are influenced by certain ideologies and societal norms that largely determine who is a threat and why. These ideologies and norms construct and utilize a “hegemonic domain of power” within a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990) that provides justification for system policies and practices, many of which continue to harm poor Black and Latinx families within Los Angeles.

With the advancement of technology, “child welfare” system policies and practices have begun to include automated assisted decision-making tools like artificial intelligence and predictive analytics, that require large scale data-collection and data-sharing processes. Yet, to date little research has been done to explore how the societal context or matrix of domination and its accompanying discourses around “child protection” construct the systems operations. Moreover, although there has been research conducted on youth who are dually impacted by the “child welfare” and juvenile justice systems (Flores et al., 2018; Irvine & Canfield, 2016; Kolivoski, Goodkind, & Shook, 2017), research that connects “child welfare” to punishment or carceral regimes through an analysis of these ideologies is similarly limited within the literature.

The dearth of research and analysis in child welfare literature regarding the ideological foundations of the “child welfare” system also includes a lack of research that considers the discourses and perceptions around anti-carceral care practices and child welfare abolition (Cloud, 2019 & Detlaff et al., 2020). The limited academic literature on child welfare abolition constrains academic researchers and policymakers from understanding a wide range of perceptions of the system, including those who wish to remove the system. This gap of research in the literature may contribute to the system's persistence in its current state, creating a lack of

research-informed policy that could potentially transform how the United States addresses child abuse and neglect. The following study begins to fill these gaps within the academic research by exploring child welfare workers and impacted families' perceptions of child protection, experiences and perceptions of surveillance through data-use and multi-system collaboration, and child welfare abolition. The conceptualization and metaphor of carceral ecosystem will be used to theorize and underscore the importance of considering the "child welfare" system as a potential core component of an ecosystem that works to uphold the carceral state.

Aims

The current study begins to understand the carceral ecosystem by examining the relationship between the child welfare system and the carceral state. More specifically, the study aimed to understand the resilience of the child welfare system as a carceral arm by 1) exploring the societal context in which the system operates, including ideologies and discourses 2) investigating the rationale and use of specific tactics within the system including the use of surveillance and surveillance technologies.

Significance

The social work code of ethics from the National Association of Black Social Workers and the National Association of Social Workers both state that social workers have a duty to ensure that families are treated with dignity and with a right to self-determination (NABSW, 2021 & NASW, 2021). Social workers' attention to individual autonomy, their dedication to social justice, and their ability to practice empathy can be built upon to uplift existing community organizations and forms of care that do not rely on carceral logics or institutions. The shift from punishment to accountability- from carceral systems to building relationships of care, may allow social workers to begin rectifying their place within historical practices of violence and policing.

By shifting from retributive justice practices, social work's role in addressing and preventing child abuse and neglect will look vastly different from the current punitive model. The social work profession has an opportunity to learn about and use anti-carceral and anti-retributive justice forms of addressing harm caused to children and families. These otherwise forms of caring for community move away from surveillance and mass data-collection processes that are used for AI and predictive risk modeling, and instead moved towards addressing root causes of poverty and violence. The current research is only a start to understanding why a transformation might be needed, what it would entail, and what we might envision the future to look like.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Building with various bodies of literature including ecology, Black feminist studies, and carceral studies, the conceptual framework and metaphor of carceral ecosystem aims to provide a theoretical bases for understanding 1) the relationship between the “child welfare” system and the broader carceral state 2) the role of underlying ideologies in contributing to the resiliency of a system 3) the significance of non-carceral modes of addressing harm. The conceptual framework is critical for understanding how certain “child welfare” system practices, such as surveillance, are influenced by the larger societal context. Further it provides a unique pathway to think about how the impact of child protection practice continue to reify the larger carceral state.

The carceral ecosystem refers to an interconnected network of symbiotic relational complex's that rely on and benefit from the use of carceral logics. Complexes refer to systems-within-systems, as well as the ideologies that undergird it. Although prior research on the “carceral” often refers to physical structures of prisons, Foucault's concepts of “carceral continuum” and “carceral archipelago” allow for an expanded definition of the carceral that also includes institutions, institutional relationships, policies, and practices. Foucault states,

“The frontiers between confinement, judicial punishment, and institutions of discipline, which were already blurred in the classical age, tended to disappear and to constitute a great carceral continuum that diffused penitentiary techniques into the most innocent disciplines” (Foucault, 1979, p.297).

This widespread use of “diffused penitentiary techniques’ have been adopted by several social service and “care” systems that social workers continue to occupy. Thus, physical imprisonment and punishment has overtime become more insidious and inclusive of less obvious forms of punitive or retributive justice processes. Foucault adds, “a subtle, graduated, carceral net with compact institutions, but also separate and diffused methods, assumed responsibility for the arbitrary, widespread, badly integrated confinement of the classical age.” (Foucault, 1979, p. 297).

The carceral ecosystem framework builds upon more commonly used concepts of “carceral continuum” or “carceral pipeline” that have been explored throughout the literature. Hamlin & Speer (2017) use the term carceral continuum to refer to a more fluid model of the carceral which allows for the inclusion of various sites and “intensities”, as not all spaces “are equally repressive” (Hamlin & Speer, 2017, p. 800). They add that violence, instead of intent, is a condition of the carceral (Hamlin & Speer, 2017). In addition to this nuanced explanation of the carceral continuum, other researchers have also described their use of the term “carceral pipeline”. Bergan & Abji (2020) define pipeline as a metaphor that exemplifies a process that “shows the constitutive relationship that exists between child protection, prisons, and the immigration system” (p.35). The metaphor of pipeline allows for a closer examination into the connections and processes within systems and a way to frame how children and families may transition through and between various carceral systems (Bergen & Abji 2020).

The carceral ecosystem's conceptualization works in conjunction with the previous knowledge that has emerged from research grounded in the “carceral continuum” and “carceral pipeline.” The current framework utilizes the metaphor of ecosystem because it assumes that system interactions are non-linear both spatially and temporally. It allows for complexity that both continuum and pipeline might symbolically limit. Rather than focusing on two-dimensional processes or chronological timelines, the ecosystem focuses on the diversity of organizations, resilience of relationality or connections, and the macro analysis of organizational relationships that impact families who become entrenched within carceral systems. It is less focused on how individuals enter and exit the system and instead focuses on the architecture of organizational ties and relationships that create a larger and persistent infrastructure. This infrastructure and the systems it encompass exert constant policing tactics through multi-system collaborations, data-sharing proliferation, and surveillance. This chapter will introduce concepts used for the framework within the ecosystem literature and introduce the idea of a carceral ecosystem as a way to analyze the relational impacts of the “child welfare” system. The chapter will conclude with an overview of current relevant literature, highlighting gaps within child welfare research.

Tansley’s Ecosystem and Ecosystem Resilience

Tansley’s seminal piece in 1935 formally defined the “ecosystem” as a state of interacting factors or complexes that consist of a range of organic, inorganic, and physical factors from the environment or external surroundings (Tansley, 1935). In his conceptualization of the ecosystem, Tansley centralized relationality, providing a discussion around the constant interchanges between factors within the system (1935). “The systems we isolate mentally are not only included as parts of larger ones, but they also overlap, interlock and interact with one another”, adding, “they all show organization which is the inevitable result of the interactions

and consequent mutual adjustment of their components" (Tansley, 1935. p.300). Tansley's focus on the relationality of interacting factors and systems within a larger landscape catalyzed the theorization of various concepts within the ecological literature including ecosystem resilience and diversity.

Ecosystem Resilience

The ability of ecosystems to withstand both random perturbations and consistent fluctuations is an ongoing question within ecological literature. The term perturbation has been used as a synonym for a disturbance to an ecosystem (Rykiel as cited in Borics, Varbiro, & Padisak, 2013). These perturbations, or disturbances, can encourage an ecosystem to shift into another "stability regime" or level of equilibrium (Walker et al., 2012). Stated differently, perturbations are disruptions to an otherwise equalized state. This was briefly addressed by Tansley (1935), who stated that "there is, in fact, a kind of natural selection of incipient systems, and those which can attain the most stable equilibrium survive the longest" (Tansley, 1935, p.300). To better understand ecosystem survival, resilience literature began to emerge in ecology. Hollings (1973) seminal piece within this body of literature conceptualized resilience as a key factor within ecological systems. Resilience is defined by Hollins (1973) as a probability of extinction, a "measure of persistence of systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables" (p.14). State variables are defined in different ways throughout the literature but can be considered the building blocks of modeling that describe the ecological systems state (Zorbitz et al., 2011).

Components of Resilience. Years after Holling's original conceptualization of resilience, Walker et al. (2004, p.2) extended the definition to include a system's "ability to

retain the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks.” This expanded definition included four components of resilience: latitude, resistance, precariousness, and panarchy (Walker et al., 2004). Latitude is referred to as “the maximum amount a system can be changed before losing its ability to recover.” Resistance is defined as the “ease or difficulty” of shifting this system (Walker et al., 2004, p.2). Moreover, Walker et al. (2004, p.3) define precariousness as the closeness an ecosystem state is to its limit or threshold. Lastly, panarchy is defined as systems-within-systems, nested adaptive cycles across spatiotemporal scales that exist within an ecosystem (Gunderson & Hollings, 2002). Panarchy suggests that systems are dependent on the resilience of different states and the dynamic scales above and below a specific focal point (Walker et al., 2004).

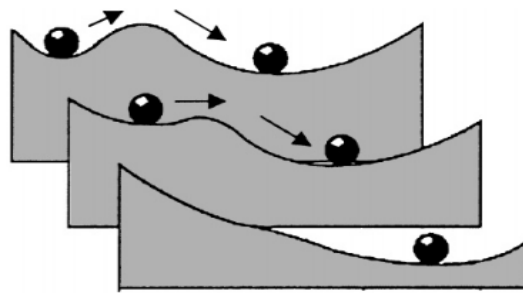
How Ecosystems Shift. Several researchers have created useful heuristics to assist in conceptualizing the shifts and stable states of ecosystems related to resilience. I will be utilizing the valley example, as explained by Gunderson (2000), to expand the concept of stable states expressed by Holling (1973) and Walker et al. (2004). Figure 1 shows the image of a ball moving across a landscape of valleys and hills, accompanied by arrows to signify directionality or movement. In this figure, the ball represents an ecological system or ecosystem. The valleys or basins represent a system's “stable state,” a point of equilibrium. Walker et al. (2004), building from Holling’s (1973) work, describes this as the basin or a region in which a state-space often remains. A state space is the space of all “possible combinations of the amounts of state variables” (Walker et al., 2004, p.3). For example, if state variables consist of grass, shrubs, and livestock, the state space is the possible combination of these variables (Walker et al., 2004). Beinser, Haydon & Cuddington (2003) add that variables may persist in several configurations at different equilibrium points in alternate stable states. This state is often defined as an “attractor.”

Still, it is widely held that systems are dynamic and often move around a valley, not always staying within direct proximity of an attractor.

Further, Walker et al. (2004) highlight that various valleys may exist with their various boundaries all within a “stability landscape” that can be changed by external or internal factors (p.4). In previous research, Holling’s described these valleys as Domain of Attraction or DOA, a place in which there is a stable equilibrium. The arrows in Figure 1 represent the perturbations or disturbances which shift the ecosystem from valleys/stable states into other valleys/stable states. This is significant as Holling’s concept of resilience explains that ecosystems cannot move from valley to valley without a disturbance or perturbation event large enough to shift it (1973).

Figure 1

A Heuristic for Stable States



Researchers have suggested two ways that ecosystems can move from one stable state to another. The first way refers to shifts caused by large perturbation events or disturbances directly applied to internal state variables, as suggested by Holling (1973). The second way refers to changes in the parameters that underlie state variables' behavior, consequently impacting state variable interactions (Beisner, Haydon & Cuddington, 2003). The first process requires multiple pre-existing stable equilibrium points or valleys at fixed locations in the state space (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003). The perturbation event must be strong enough to push the ball/ecosystem out of the current valley/stable state domain into another. The associated

dynamics of these stable states are different, and parameter changes may alter the equilibrium points' locations, allowing for the ecosystem to arrive at an alternative stable equilibrium point/valley that may not have existed prior (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003).

As suggested above, recent work has shown that these valleys or stable state domains are dynamic and variable. Changes to stable states can be a combination of internal and external forces. In the valley example, the shape of the valley or hill is subject to change. The sloped sides of the hill impact the return time of ecosystems to a stable state. The more shallow the slope, the slower the ball will roll back following each perturbation (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003). The width of the valley/stable state domain may also shift. If parameters change, resilience can be diminished due to diminishing slopes and valleys (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003). If the space between two valleys/stable state domains is low enough, a small perturbation to state variables could cause a shift into the new valley/stable state domain.

Similarly, sides of the valley/stable state domain can erode and disappear, shifting a new equilibrium point with a new valley/stable state domain (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003). This is important as detecting the gradual or abrupt erosion of resilience is critical in determining how vulnerable an ecosystem is. Moreover, if a new stable state that the ecosystem has moved into is stable, the end of a perturbation will not result in the ecosystem returning to its initial conditions. Though the perturbation event was too small or there are no alternative states on the global landscape, the ecosystem will return to previous conditions (Beisner, Haydon, & Cuddington, 2003).

The Carceral Ecosystem

Concepts of relationality and resilience within the ecosystem literature largely influence the carceral ecosystem framework. Building on Foucault's concept of carceral archipelago, the current study defines the carceral ecosystem as a network of complexes that form symbiotic relationships between one another. These symbiotic relationships are fueled by the use of carceral logics. The complexes that constitute the ecosystem include systems, organizations, technologies, ideologies, and discourses. The term symbiotic references the concept "symbiosis" which has been defined as a "close and often long-term interactions between organisms of different species" (Angeleard & Bever, 2013, p.1). Symbiosis can "originate from diverse interaction types" that are maintained through various mechanisms (Oliver & Russell, 2016). In mutualistic symbiosis, partners form mutually beneficial relations (Piel, 2010). These relations are not only reciprocal but provide goods or benefits to both "donor" and "recipient" (Denton & Krebs, 2016, p.3). In referring to the prison-industrial complex, Angela Davis utilizes the term symbiotic relationships to discuss the network of entities and individuals that contribute to the carceral state (Davis as cited in Meiners, 2015).

Instead of only benefitting one organization, the carceral ecosystem involves mutualistic relations between systems that simultaneously fuel and mutually benefit each other, both using and sharing collaborative carceral processes that are fueled by specific logics. Carceral logic specifically has been described as a punishment mindset (Sunkara, 2014) that is expansive and embedded within "the social fabric of the United States" (Martensen, 2019, p.1). As discussed in ecological ecosystem research, the complex relationships between connected systems are key in maintaining ecosystem integrity and resilience. The dense symbiotic relationships between

systems in addition to the various ideologies and tactics that strengthen these relations play a critical role in the carceral ecosystems survival (Ulanowicz et al., as cited in Equihua, 2020).

Components of Carceral Ecosystem Resilience

The carceral ecosystem, a network of symbiotic carceral systems, has been able to withstand multiple reforms due in part to its resilient nature. To reiterate Walker et al. (2004), resilience is comprised of four different components: resistance, latitude, precarity, and panarchy. Resistance is exemplified within the carceral ecosystem through its ability to maintain its punitive and violent functioning throughout multiple generations. This has been made abundantly clear through the overwhelming and continuous rates of mass incarceration, the persistence of structural and systemic racism, and the policing of marginalized communities globally despite years of attempted reforms. Regardless of calls to reform police or add social workers into more formal law enforcement spaces, the carceral ecosystem maintains its full functionality and structure. The carceral ecosystems resistance to change in function, structure, and identity allows for it to maintain latitude. Moreover, because of the inability for reforms to address the foundational ideological roots of the carceral ecosystem and its constitutive network of punitive systems, it remains difficult to understand how much the carceral ecosystem can withstand before losing its integrity. The system has not been precarious but has instead continued to be stable and expand. Without an analysis of the ideologies or carceral logics that fuel the ecosystems strong interconnected relational network, the ecosystem may continue to be stable if not increasingly resilient.

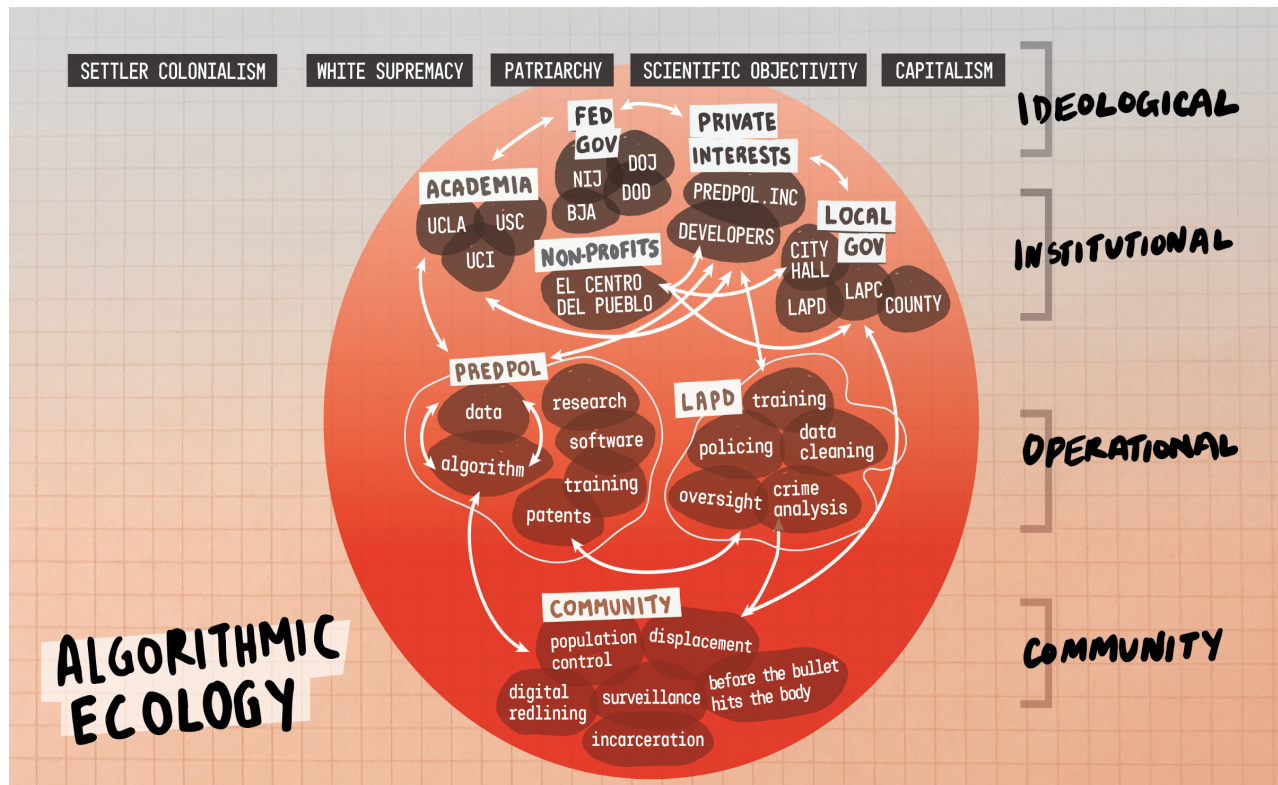
The addition of new organizations, agencies, and partnerships within the carceral ecosystem that utilize and benefit from carceral logics continues to strengthen the symbiotic relational network within the ecosystem. Thus, when reforms attempt to sever one arm of the

ecosystem, often another one grows back or is resupplied by an existing arm. The concept of panarchy embedded within ecosystem resilience thus suggests that the scales above and below the current focal point within an ecosystem determine its overall resilience. Stated differently, the resilience of these smaller scale systems within the carceral ecosystem, such as the prison-industrial complex and the “child welfare” system, determine the larger ecosystems broader resilience. These smaller scale systems must be considered within the context of their accompanying ideologies and discourses that fuel their practices. These ideologies and discourses create a continuous feedback chain of capital for the system to survive on, and in the context of the carceral ecosystem, contribute to the constant oppression and punishment of certain communities who have been marginalized.

Discourses and ideologies are slow variables within the carceral ecosystem that underlying the carceral ecosystem's structure and dictate fluctuations of other variables. Slow variables are typically understood as variables that determine the infrastructure of the ecosystem, controlling its configuration and thresholds (Biggs, Schluter, & School, 2015). The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition in collaboration with Free Radicals provides an example of the importance of including these ideological variables within an ecological model. More specifically, they configure a framework and tool that shows how algorithms are both impacted and shaped by various relational forces. In Figure 2, the bracket of the “ideological” consists of settler colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, scientific objectivity, and capitalism which are said to address the values that are underlying and upheld by Algorithmic Ecology (Stop LAPD Spying & Free Radicals, 2020).

Figure 2

Algorithmic Ecology



Similar to the “Algorithmic Ecology,” the carceral ecosystem is fueled by certain ideologies that allow for the continued existence of the hegemonic domain of power within the matrix of domination, such as carceral logics, white supremacy, neoliberalism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Collins, 1990 & Redden, Denckick, & Warne, 2020). A visual example of the carceral ecosystem is provided in Figure 3.

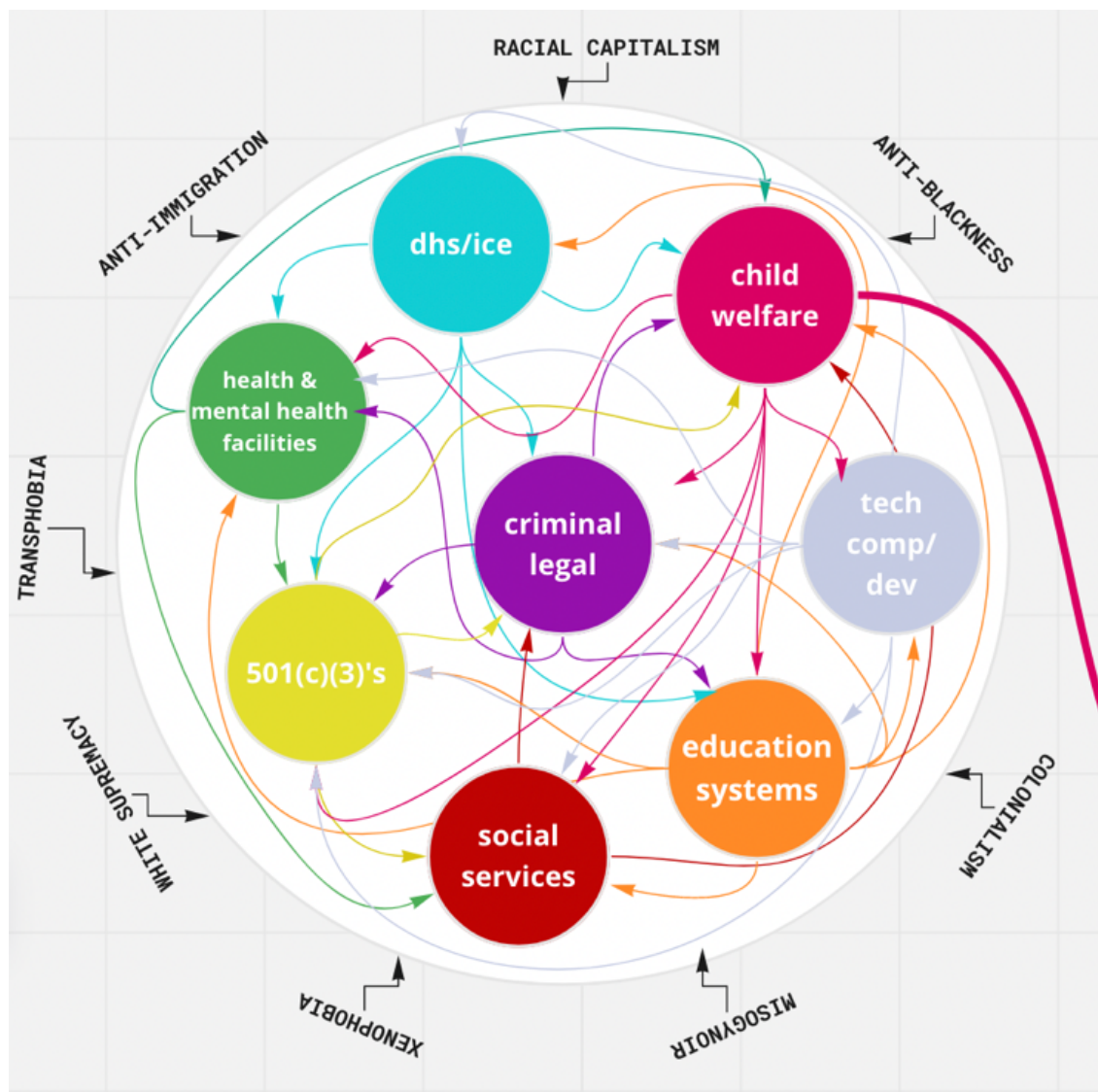
Public Child Welfare’s Role in Carceral Ecosystem Resilience

As suggested by Walker et al. (2004) & Besiner, Haydon, & Cuddington (2003), the more diverse that ecosystems are, the more complex and advantageous the ecosystem is. The continued addition of more organizations into the carceral ecosystem allows for the maintenance of its foundational structure and identity without having to rely on its original establishments, like the prison or penitentiary. A reason why calls to defund solely the police may not have an

immediate or large enough impact to shift the carceral ecosystem is due to the wide-stretching tentacles of policing and carcerality into various organizations. One such organization that has become entrenched within the carceral ecosystem is the “child welfare” system.

Figure 3

Carceral Ecosystem



Under the conceptual framework of the carceral ecosystem, the “child welfare” system becomes a site of inquiry that provides insight into how the carceral ecosystem maintains its overall resilience. Through its partnerships with other carceral systems and reliance on carceral

logics, the child welfare system is an immediate site for analysis. Yet, due to the “child welfare” systems ability to camouflage itself with other social services under the guise of “child protection”, the system has been able to largely conceal its use of non-consensual mandatory surveillance, data acquisition, and policing. The “child welfare” system for years has been able to accumulate capital through obtaining funding for new collaborative infrastructures that uphold and incentivize surveillance and family separation. Due to the guise of “child protection” and the “child welfare” system’s ability to masquerade as a social service agency, reforms to the system have failed to substantially reduce violent practices of family separation and hyper-surveillance. This is due in part to reforms attending to band-aid remedies such as cultural competency trainings, while failing to deeply encounter and address the underlying ideologies that fuel various tactics of power.

Amongst reforms, the child welfare system continues to operate with “discreet surveillance and insistent coercion” that Foucault describes when discussing the carceral in its many “diffuse and compact forms” (Foucault, 1979, p.299). Foucault suggests that the “social-worker-judge” becomes a critical role in judging normality, not only determining normative standards but also policing individuals' behaviors, achievements, and other gestures (1979). These ideas about normality are rampant within the “child welfare” systems as like other penal systems, even though it can be considered an “innocent discipline” (Foucault, 1979, p.297). Foucault adds that social work, like medicine, education, and public assistance, are part of the multiplication and growth of “disciplinary networks” that share power over both supervision and assessment of individuals within the penal apparatus (Foucault, 1979, p.306).

The strength of the “child welfare” system in its current role directly impacts the larger carceral ecosystem’s ability to remain resilient. Failed attempts to reform the “child welfare”

system without addressing its underlying ideological attachments and often violent forms of addressing harm deepen its role as an arm of the carceral state. Further, the “child welfare” systems ability to acquire new and more expansive partnerships with medical systems, education systems, and law enforcement agencies continues to bolster its resilience and thus the resilience of the carceral ecosystem. For society to move into a different stable state and away from the carceral ecosystem, direct changes to the current social order would need to occur, which includes critiquing and moving away from the current model of “child welfare” or child protection services.

Abolition as Perturbation Event and New “Stable” State

As explained by Hollings (1973), all systems within a larger ecosystem move dynamically through a four-phase cycle which includes an exploitative phase, conservation phase, creative destruction phase, and reorganization phase. These phases correspond with the level of capital a system has acquired, its threshold for growth, and its ability to fuel “rapid structural changes” (Gunderson, 2000, p.430). In this cycle Hollings describes that when a system reaches its threshold for growth it becomes brittle, and capital accumulated is ready to fuel “rapid structural changes” (Gunderson, 2000, p.430). The second phase or “conservation” phase is where material and energy are gained and stored, and can stabilize for a long period of time (Gunderson, 2000). Following this phase, a disturbance can occur and impact the current structure causing “creative destruction” and potentially shift the entire functioning of the ecosystem. After a system endures creative destruction, the system might enter a fourth phase of reorganization.

This phase is where a system may pass through and reenter the exploitative phase (Gunderson, 2000). During the reorganization phase, systems are the most vulnerable to

changes. Although there are resources available for growth in this phase, they are not connected to the processes which facilitate the growth (Gunderson, 2000, p.431). This state can then generate various trajectories, including their reassertion of a systematic pattern or complete system reorganization into a new structure (Gunderson, 2000). This new structure may look completely different than its previous iteration, and be comprised of different variables, relationships, and processes than once before.

Within the carceral ecosystem framework, abolition is posed as both a perturbation event that leads to “creative destruction”, as well as a “reorganization stable state” where the ecosystem reorganizes and drastically shifts into a unique equalized state. In disrupting points of temporality and definitiveness that is bound and restricted, abolition can be considered a point of “arriving” rather than a point of “arrival”. Thus, even though abolition within this carceral ecological context is considered a “stable” state to signify a new set of relations and relational networks, it is always dynamic. Abolition is both praxis and process of becoming (Rodriguez, 2019). Being that the carceral ecosystem and more specifically, the family policing system, are highly resilient and have been able to absorb disturbances such as reforms invoking only slow, gradual changes— I reiterate that abolition is a way to envision long-lasting change away from the current carceral stable state. Abolition of the carceral ecosystem calls for a radical reimaging of the relational network of systems we currently rely on including the organizations, ideologies, and tactics that are involved. It requires that we shift from individualistic victim-blaming and pathologizing behaviors and instead address the societal failings that enable poverty and poverty criminalization of Black communities. Abolition of the carceral ecosystem not only suggests the eradication of every system of policing and oppression, but it also necessitates it. In conceptualizing abolition as the primary way to permanently dismantle the carceral ecosystem,

the role of the “child welfare” systems becomes a primary site of critique. The “child welfare” system's role within the larger carceral ecosystem cannot remain unaddressed if the aim is to extirpate all forms of policing. Yet, it is a commonly held belief in research that reforms are an adequate means of shifting the violence and oppression consequent to its functionality.

The current paper begins to outline the ways in which the “child welfare” system functions as an arm within the carceral ecosystem, bringing perceptions of both workers and impacted individuals into a conversation. Additionally, it explores the perceptions of abolition and anti-carceral ways of addressing harm caused to children. Because these are vastly understudied topics within child welfare literature, this paper remains only a beginning toward the critical work that needs to be done in the future.

Literature Review

Generally, there is a lack of research investigating the role of the “child welfare” system within the larger carceral state, limiting the available research on the use of surveillance and exertion of violence through family policing tactics. Additionally, although “child protection” is often mentioned within “child welfare” literature, an investigation into the implications of its use as a discourse and ideology is lacking. Moreover, there is minimal literature that poses child welfare abolition and transformative justice practices as an alternative to addressing the current harms caused to children and families by the “child welfare” system.

Child Protection Discourse in Public “Child Welfare”

The “child welfare” system is highly impacted by various ideological attachments and discourses that influence its policies and practices. Generally, research has shown that the “child welfare” system bounces between two value systems: “Family Preservation” (Roberts, 2002) or “Family Support” (Verhallen, Hall, & Slembrouck, 2017) and “Child Protection.” When the system is leaning towards a stance of family preservation or “family support”, it shifts the blame

of child maltreatment away from the individual and towards the broader society. It reaffirms that poverty is largely the responsibility of societal failings and needs to be addressed structurally through increased funding and safety supports (Roberts, 2002). Because most reported child maltreatment cases in the United States are due to neglect, refocusing the priority of the system back to societal issues of poverty has been beneficial. Research and policy that utilizes grounded in family support or perseveration suggest that families should remain together, with family separation as a last resort. Recent efforts to move towards family preservation or support can be observed in policies such as the Family First Prevention Services Acts in the United States, which claims to focus on keeping children in their homes or in the most “family-like” setting available (Children's Defense Fund, 2018).

Conversely, research states that when the child welfare system is rooted in “child protection” it prioritizes child safety and thus tends to rely more heavily on family separation. Child protection discourse has allowed for the normalization of various harmful tactics of power that are justified by claims that they help protect children from the harm of their biological parents. Researchers suggests that the discourse of child protection stems from the attention to child safety in the media along with communities’ focus on risks and fear (Beck as cited in Schulz, 2017). When analyzing terms around child protection and abuse, one study found that discourses of fear and criminality are highly attached to child protection and child abuse (Schulz, 2017). Additionally, discourses of child protection tend to pathologize parent behavior, relying on blame and penalty (Carter 1974, as cited in Gillingham and Bromofield, 2008). The idea of penal posits that parents need to be punished for their crimes. It has shifted over the years to include under its umbrella the ideology of “fear factor” in child protection (Spratt and Houston 1999, as cited in Gillingham and Bromfield, 2008). These logics can be traced back to several

historical societal shifts, with one major milestone occurring in 1962 through Kempe's model of "The Battered-Child Syndrome" (Kempe et al., 1985). This more individualistic approach to "child protection" shaped the system's trajectory in focusing on and identifying children who are likely to be harmed or under threat. This has led to child abuse and neglect being considered "the product of pathological family interactions," creating a society that accepts mass mandatory reporting laws (Jack, 2004). Literature has suggested that the practice of blaming parents has been fueled by child protection laws that utilize the terminology of "rescuing" children from abusive parents instead of focusing on the welfare of families (Elliot 1998, as cited in Gillingham and Bromfield, 2008, p.22). Further, this individual blame has been suggested to be tied to "the risk society" or societal discourses around risk (Beck 1992, as cited in Gillingham and Bromfield, 2008). Not only has "child protection" often expedited justification for child removals without addressing foundational problems such as poverty, it has been suggested to operate as a Trojan Horse that bypasses the liberties and rights of families— exploiting them while expanding surveillance (Wexler as cited in Wrennall, 2010 & Wrennall, 2010, p.305).

Arguably, the child welfare system in Los Angeles no longer drastically shifts between these two value systems. Instead, the system rather utilizes a mixture of both "child protection" and family preservation efforts which increases the paradoxical nature of the system. The "child welfare" system in Los Angeles poses child removal as the "last resort" while also increasing or maintaining funding for surveillance and separation. The current model of child welfare that mixes both child protection and family preservation value systems continues to rely on the individualizing pathology logics of child maltreatment (Washington, 2022). Under the guise of child protection seated within a framing of family preservation, workers claim that child removal is the safest option for a child's wellbeing with the prevailing mission being to rescue children in

need (Verhallen, Hall, & Slembrouck, 2017). Even though there are claims of family support or preservation, the current model of DCFS continues to do little to acknowledge or substantially assist children who come into the system due to “neglect”, which remains the number one reason children are reported. Efforts to protect children continuously fail to focus on children who are “in need” and instead focuses on those who are “in need of protection” (Gibbons et al., as cited in Buckley, 2000).

Child Protection and Rationalizing Surveillance in the Child Welfare System

The insidious nature of child protection discourse, especially narratives and efforts that are masked by false narratives of family preservation, have allowed for fewer “checks and balances” within the system (Wrennall, 2010, p.307). Implications of this include the repeated traumatization of families, family destruction, and expansive pipelines into adoption and foster care. This control, regulation, and violence incited on families has allowed for power to permeate social work, which has been said to “represent a belief that the poor and the excluded can only be assisted and supported if such help is accompanied by surveillance and monitoring” (David and Leanord 2004, as cited in Wrennall, 2010). Building on Foucauldian scholarship as well as the work of Cohen and Orwell, The Trojan Horse Theory of Child Protection posits that the discourse of Child Protection is not being used for the wellbeing of children but is rather working through and for both political and economic agendas while restricting individual liberties and human rights through surveillance regimes (Wrennall, 2010). Despite cautionary research around the use of data, surveillance continues to be utilized in our society to watch, monitor, identify, mark, or locate individuals in efforts to categorize or distinguish them from others (Lyon, 2009). This sort of differentiation allows for the emergence or creation of classes to organize and utilize social relations and social power (Lyon, 2009). An example of this is the categorization of “at-

risk youth” who are primarily poor Black youth, or the labeling of “system families” referring to largely Native Hawaiian families in Hawai’i (Brown & Bloom, 2009).

Surveillance within the “child welfare” system is described in opposing ways throughout child welfare literature and continues to lack an analysis about the deeper ethical dilemmas underlying its use. Some researchers propose that surveillance through data accumulation is a necessary step for the “development of a national strategic approach to child abuse and neglect” (Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade: Phase II, et al., 2014, p.340), while others view it as a means of policing and criminalizing families (Capatosto, 2017, Fong, 2020; Roberts, 2014). The use of “child protection” as rationale for surveillance regimes within the child welfare system requires further analysis, as there continues to be limited insight into how these various ideologies and value systems directly impact families, specifically Black families. Further, there remains limited analysis of the different ways data and surveillance is explained and justified within the existing literature.

Arguments for the Utility of Surveillance

Researchers have described surveillance as “the ongoing collection, analysis, and interpretation of data for use in the planning, implementation, and interpretation of population health” (Thacker & Berkelman, 1988, as cited in Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013, p.65). One argument for an increase in surveillance, especially multi-system surveillance, is based on the understanding that more integrated systems will improve the protection of children who may fall in between cracks of multiple systems. Due to the lack of complete data that traces children’s maltreatment histories, the use of integrated data from multiple sources is a means to identify higher risks groups of individuals of child maltreatment (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). Researchers claim that the identification of risk could assist in directing where “scarce resource

can be more strategically targeted” (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013, p.67). For example, risk assessment tools and predictive analytics are currently being created and used for identifying more efficiently children who may have a likelihood of future maltreatment (Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2017).

For service providers, information-sharing systems are argued to reduce duplicate services, decrease the time for information gathering, disperse limited resources to more families, and increase understanding of the risks around a child (NCMHPYVP, 2013). Collection of data has also been argued to determine if program benchmarks are met, to learn about characteristics of populations receiving services, and understand the nature of the services being offered (Walker et al., 2012). Because child abuse and neglect are now recognized as a public health problem (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.), a public health approach is suggested to address issues of child maltreatment, with the first step being a good surveillance system (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2011 as cited in Committee on Child Welfare Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade: Phase II, et al., 2014). Casey Family Programs poses a framework for the “21st Century Child welfare System” that redefines safety, shifting from keeping children safe to preventing child maltreatment. This new framework would address the underlying causes of child maltreatment and acquire a resourced workforce that accurately works to “identify children at risk of being harmed” (Casey Family Programs, 2019b). The report suggests that predictive analytics, home visiting models, health equity zones, and family resource centers are all examples of efforts towards a 21st-century system (Casey Family Programs, 2019b).

Surveillance through Multi-System Information Sharing Networks. Surveillance in the child welfare system, specifically the use of data tracking and data acquisition or

information-sharing, has been more recently encouraged through multi-agency collaborations (Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade: Phase II, et al., 2014;). This current information-sharing model calls for multi-agency teams to gather surveillance and intelligence to share with one another and is fueled by the discourse of “Child Protection” (Wrennall, 2010). In the U.S., various organizations are feeding information into several databases attached to various funders and contracts (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention Education Development Center, INC [NCMHPYVP], 2013). These modes of mass information-sharing and hyper-surveillance are costly and yet continuously funded. As seen in the UK, electronic surveillance and information-sharing models within child welfare have exceeded 16 billion dollars for the sake of prevention and providing “effective care” (Van Ekey an Baum, 2002 as cited in Wrennall, 2010). Moreover, these multi-agency systems significantly impact those who have been perceived to be dangerous, largely indigenous, poor, and “minority ethnic groups” (Lonne et al., 2009, as cited in Wrennall, 2010). Although there is research on the use of surveillance in child welfare, many toolkits, and guides on data-use lack critical analysis of the ethics of sharing “child welfare” data across agencies, specifically, lacking are the voices of those impacted by the systems. This is significant as some researchers suggest that it may be unethical to *not* use data (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2018).

The Harms of Surveillance Régimes and Racializing Surveillance

Researchers who adhere to a public health and prevention framing around the use of tech assisted decision-making tools in child welfare often claim that they are a remedy to human decision-making bias. As opposed to these justifications, other researchers have found that the use of surveillance technology exacerbates biases, leading to subsequent harm to certain communities. Researchers have referred to surveillance and monitoring as “panoptic strategies”

that link both penal and welfare strategies into the carceral continuum through social worker use (Wrennall, 2010). These panoptic strategies include information-sharing and dataveillance—surveillance that occurs through “rapidly accumulating technologically-enabled techniques” (Clark 1988, as cited in Wrennall, 2010). Moreover, it includes “archival surveillance” which classifies and reorganizes individuals based on historical data. Although historical data is argued to be neutral, data collection processes are highly influenced by the societal context in which they are created and implemented (Lovaas, 2016, p.443). Technological techniques and objects (Noble, 2015) such as datasets and algorithms are a projection of social, political, and economic relations that have been normalized in our society. Thus, although these tools are touted as a remedy to biased human decision-making processes, they too were created from a culmination of societal ideologies and values that often oversimplify the context of child maltreatment cases (Church & Fairfield, 2017).

Specifically, within the context of punitive systems like child welfare, surveillance operates within a realm of family regulation and control such as the constant threat of child removal (Cloud, Oyama, & Teichner, 2017) and state-imposed standards of compliance (Cloud, Oyama, & Teichner, 2017 & Movement for Family Power, 2020; Copeland, 2021). Further, the use of archival surveillance is used against youth and families as evidence that often leads to future incarceration or further “physical restriction” (Lovaas, 2016, p.443). This process catches youth in a “web of criminalization” through surveillance (Lovaas, 2016) and creates a “social tagging” system that works to label individuals rather than protect them (Penna, 2005, p. 148). Social tagging and the web of criminalization impact Black children and families disproportionately due to systemic racism and a long history of anti-Blackness in the US.

Some researchers believe that surveillance has led to “digital welfare states” (Alston, 2019 as cited in Redden, Denckick, & Warne, 2020., p.507). More specifically, surveillance regime’s largely target, police, and punish poor Black communities leading to a digital poorhouse (Abdurahman, 2021 & Eubanks, 2018). For Black families who are poor, surveillance extends through the criminal injustice system and into the “child welfare” system (Lee, 2016; Micalsen, 2019; Roberts, 2014). The “child welfare” system is not immune to “racializing surveillance”, a way of “seeing and conceptualizing blackness through stereotypes, abnormalizations, and in spaces shaped for whiteness” (Browne, 2015, p.20). Not only are Black children monitored through harmful surveillance régimes, the interconnections between the criminal injustice, social service, and “child welfare” systems make it extremely difficult for certain Black women to receive support without surveillance (Roberts, 2014).

In a broader sense, the neo-liberal state has worked to expand the carceral net by devolving its functions to a broader network of nonstate entities, deploying its power less directly (Browne & Bloome, 2009). This is exemplified in data partnerships through the use of statewide databases which sustain child welfare practices that are “informationally invasive” (Fong, 2020). The use of multi-agency databases has been critiqued in the past. In the United Kingdom, the Information Commissioner previously warned of “function creep,” expressing concern with the movement towards a surveillance society and expansion of databases over time (Penna, 2005). Similarly, concern around interagency work in the provision of “child protection” has been a concern to researchers in Ireland who discuss the implications of the dispersal of policing into the “child welfare” system (Shannon & Concubhair, 2016). This interagency integrated work offers an opportunity for the immersion of policing logics to seep into child protective agencies, shifting organizations, and their work with certain communities (Shannon &

Concubhair, 2016). This sort of multi-institutional surveillance, as referred to by Dorothy Roberts, places especially Black mothers at the center of “social control and punitive regulation” (Roberts, 2019, p.1706). Roberts calls into question how anti-Black racism is proliferated through this apparatus and how prediction is a feature and approach of the carceral state (Roberts, 2019). In Los Angeles there are several shared databases with the child welfare system that includes law enforcement agencies, hospitals, the Department of Public Social Services, and the Department of Mental Health (Stop LAPD Spying, 2020b). These sources of data are used to inform caseworker decision-making and are also used to inform data driven decision-making tools.

Front-line workers and families have voiced low comfort levels with the use of these surveillance tools stating that there are system-level concerns that range from the behavior of the people and agencies in charge of the data, deficit and risk approaches to families, caseworker bias, to the way risk information is communicated (Brown et al., 2019). Research shows that not only is the data being used far from neutral, but the use of these tools also often violates the privacy rights and self-determination of youth and families (Glaberson, 2019 & Lovaas, 2016). Still, although the use of historical data through archival surveillance continues to form the bases of predictive risk assessment tools, there continues to be little known in “child welfare” literature about why and how these tools make predictions within the system.

Child Welfare Abolition

Several examples within history exemplify how social works original intention to be “emancipatory” has been foundationally misguided and historically disputed due to its contribution in inciting harm to and creating barriers for individuals, especially children and families (Garret as cited in Wrennall, 2010). Due to this, the discourses, ideologies, and tactics

utilized by the “child welfare” system are all critically important to understand by the field of social work. In integrating an understanding of the ways that social work has failed to be emancipatory, social workers might be able to reflect on the role of the “child welfare” system and begin to engage in learning about alternate modes of addressing harm. This requires a deeper exploration into alternatives to policing as well as the possibility and relevance of abolitionist praxis.

Dismantling the larger carceral ecosystem begins with an investigation into its inner workings, as dissolving the carceral ecosystems interconnected systems sever all the ties that retain its resilience and sustain its existence through space and time. Ergo, an exploration into the abolition of the “child welfare” or “family policing” system becomes a necessary part of examining the carceral ecosystem. As cited in Roberts (2014), the high rates of removing Black children from their families and communities have been justified due to the belief that it is “highly improbable that in any near future radical action will be taken to address social injustices (Bartholet et al. as cited in Roberts, 2014, p.433)”. A counter and insurgent movement against this notion, however, continues to be amplified by organizers.

Although research specifically exploring “child welfare” system abolition is severely lacking, there recently has been an increase in the literature (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Detlaff et al., 2020). Alongside grassroots organizers, researchers are starting to ruminate on the possibilities that reside outside of the confines of child protective services. Although there are current policy shifts in the United States that are now focusing on family preservation, the practice of family separation and surveillance remains. Furthermore, current modalities and processes within social work that address harm, including pipelines into drug treatment and programs like anger

management, may still act to reproduce and perpetuate “penal regimes” and self-regulation (Garland, 1997 as cited in Brown and Bloom, 2009).

Prison-industrial complex abolitionist, organizer, educator, and Black feminist Mariame Kaba suggest that the Department of Children and Family Services needs to begin by reconsidering its false claim as a social service agency (Cloud et al., 2018). Though much of this discourse is lacking within academia, Dorothy Roberts has reframed the child welfare system as one that punishes and regulates Black and poor families (Roberts, 2006). More recently, Movement for Family Power, a grassroots organization in New York working to end the Foster System’s punitive tactics provided additional recommendations to child protective service workers in their most recent research report (2020). These suggestions include calling for a reduction in the systems overall scope and size, a transference of power and resources to the community, a halt in philanthropic funds to the system, abolition of the foster system, investing in community-based organizations, ending the policing on drug use, and embracing harm reduction approaches (Movement for Family Power, 2020).

Academic scholarship has begun to echo community members, expressing the need to work from an anti-racist framework, shrink the “child welfare” system, abolish it, and replace it with community-based supports that address the well-being of children (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Much of the current research in academia builds off work that advocates for the shrinking of the “child welfare” system and resourcing of programs and services that reduce vulnerability to violence (Roberts, 2016). Recent academic literature has specifically called for social workers to seriously consider what might be gained with abolishing child protective service in its entirety and the role CPS abolition plays in the broader abolition of the prison industrial complex and borders (Bergen & Abji, 2020). Policy has also started to shift, though it could be argued that a

more substantial transformation needs to occur. Casey Family Programs poses a framework for the “21st Century Child Welfare System” (2019b). The vision of the new system is to transform the “child welfare” system into a “family well-being” system that collaborates with children, families, communities, and agencies (2019b). The core principles include “population-level interventions,” ending the “isolation of child protection agencies in communities” so that they are seen as a community partner, “broad coalitions of partnerships” beyond child protection, and the “public will” (Casey Family Programs, 2019b). Yet they are pro-surveillance through data-sharing partnerships, stating that the data from CPS and law enforcement is critical and needs to be shared to “promote a more complete picture of the child and family” and act as a “basis for greater collaboration on investigations between CPS and law enforcement” (Casey Family Programs, 2019b).

Additionally, the passing of the Family First Act in the United States has shifted many current policies in “child welfare” and provided additional resources for families and those working within the system. One addition under the Family First Act was the creation of a clearinghouse that is a hub for information on “evidence-based” prevention services funded by the Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Family First Act, 2020). These services are able to be funded for one year and address mental health, substance use, and in-home programs (Social Security Act, 1935/2019). The database, housed under the Department of Health & Human Services, created standards for services, including categorizations of “well-supported,” “supported” by research evidence, “promising research evidence,” “evidence fails to demonstrate effect concerning practice,” or “not able to be rated” (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare [CEBCW], 2020). The clearinghouse also provides ratings by “child welfare system relevancy,” defined as the extent to which programs are designed for and used to “service

children, youth, young adults, and families with similarity to the child welfare service population” (CEBCW, n.d.). Though the clearinghouse is an additional resource, a closer examination of its utility and efficiency needs to be conducted. There are only 22 “well supported” or “supported” programs that have high relevance to child welfare. None of these include restorative justice modalities of addressing harm. Most “well supported” and “supported” highly relevant programs utilize psychotherapies, cognitive-behavioral therapies, treatment planning modalities, and in-home services. Though the latter is an improvement considering the reality of family separation, the question of additional surveillance arises. Searching for “restorative” practices only resulted in one program categorized as “not able to be rated.” There were no results for “transformative” programs and two for “harm reduction.” Harm reduction practices included in the database were labeled as “promising research evidence” with “medium” relevance and “not able to be rated” with “high” child welfare relevance, respectively. The lack of restorative and transformative justice practices may impact communities and individuals who do not entirely benefit from or do not wish to engage in standard modalities of therapy and invasive in-home supports from institutions.

Amongst several events that have shifted our societal views on family preservation and child protection, the United States is now left with the choice to reform, create a new system, or abolish all public child welfare systems in their entirety without intent to create anew. The movement towards family preservation through the Family First Preservation Act and subsequently the clearinghouse, renders into focus an attachment to what Sylvia Wynter terms a “Western Framework” (2006). Through this Western Framework, Black individuals are expected to accept and ascribe to the “child welfare” system and other systems within the carceral ecosystem. This Western Framework is the prevailing epistemology-ontology that has built and

sustained our current infrastructure which is our current world. This is the world in which Quashie contrasts with a Black world (2021)— it is one that works to “save” and “rehabilitate” through “normalizing” and “evidence-based practice”. A potential way to ruminate on the decisions to reform, re-create, or dismantle, is to shift and break notions of the Western ideological bonds and to take up as suggested by Jones and Baraka (as cited in Wynter, 2006) an exoticization of Western thought. This allows for a discussion on how Black children are discussed and addressed under the current epistemological-ontological regime through lenses of reform and re-create. It enables a discussion on how or if we should as Mignolo states “delink” from (McKittrick, 2015), re-creations of systems both ideological and physical, or manifestations of the familiar that is of the biocentric scientific Western framework. In rejecting assimilation of care practices into a Western episteme, a rejection of embedding into the dependencies and entanglements of modernity & scientific Truth, there might be a path to reject the existence of all systems of violence whether that may be through carceral logics or infrastructures that enable this sort of othering and impossibility of qualification.

From Punishment to Accountability. Addressing anti-carceral and anti-colonial modes of navigating harm requires recognition of pre-existing community processes. A significant premise within abolitionist praxis is the need to shift society from punishment to accountability. It requires a process of calling each one another in, caring for each other in a complex way. Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms the current state of society as one of “organized abandonment” and “organized violence” (Kumanyika, 2020). This organized abandonment has caused individuals to experience immense loss and violence at the hands of the state without reprieve. By rejecting the culture and practice of organized abandonment, individuals open themselves up to the opportunity to engage in and normalize a plethora of alternative resources and community

processes that directly address harm. Accountability has been described as “an internal resource for recognizing and redressing harms we’ve caused to ourselves and others” (Connie Burks as cited in Kaba, Perez-Darby, Fujikawa, 2018).

Additionally, it has been defined as a way to make amends for actions and “make changes toward ensuring violence does not continue, and that healthy alternatives can take place” (Creative Interventions, 2018, p. S5-2). Accountability requires a multitude of people and supports, a process of relationship building and interdependence (Kaba, Perez-Darby, Fujikawa, 2018). Furthermore, Fujikawa states that accountability considers political power, social capital, and access to wealth that enables the culture of perpetuating harm and punishment (Kaba, Perez-Darby, Fujikawa, 2018). Our current system's inability to create spaces for survivors to heal and have their needs met is lacking (Cloud et al., 2018). Within our court system, punitive practices add to the culture of abandonment, relying on state remedies to harm instead of person-centered healing (Kaba as cited in Cloud et al., 2018). An alternate way of addressing harm will allow for people to admit to and face the harm they’ve caused, as Kaba states, this will require as many services and social workers as people want and need (Kaba as cited in Cloud et al., 2018).

Transformative Justice, Restorative Justice, and Community Accountability. Various community organizations have also defined and detailed types of restorative justice and transformative justice practices that can be used to address harm and violence. Transformative Justice (TJ) has been defined as “an approach to and processes for addressing the harm that seeks not to only address the specific situation of harm in question, but to transform the conditions and social forces that made such harm possible” (Creative Interventions, 2018, p. S5-6). Restorative Justice (RJ) has been described as “a model that aims to repair harm by engaging community members and restoring community balance by calling on shared values, principles, and practices

of accountability” (Creative Interventions, 2018 S5-P5). Both TJ and RJ are utilized in a range of community processes to address harm, including community accountability processes.

Community accountability processes (CA) are additionally informed by trauma-informed practice and harm reduction (Kaba & Hassan, 2020). CA is a process in which individuals work together to “transform situations of harm” (Creative Interventions, 2018, p. S5-2). During this process, the community might also recognize the ways in which they have participated in allowing or causing violence to happen (Creative Interventions, 2018). CA includes a “range of creative strategies for addressing violence as the art of organizing efforts in communities when you can’t or don’t want to access state systems for safety” (Cloud et al., 2018). Those who utilize CA accept that there are underlying guidelines that should generally be accepted but also acknowledge that each situation is unique and requires different and complex processes and resources (Bierra et al., 2016). Principles of community accountability include:

“recognizing the humanity of all involved, prioritize self-determination of the survivor, identifying a simultaneous plan for safety and support for survivor and others in community, carefully considering potential consequences of your strategy, organizing collectively, making sure everyone in the accountability-seeking group is on the same page with their political analysis of sexual violence, being clear and specific about what group wants from the aggressor in terms of accountability, letting the aggressor know your analysis and demands, considering help from aggressors community, and preparing to be engaged in the process for the long haul” (Bierra et al., 2016, p.251).

Several texts help guide those who facilitate community accountability processes (Creative Interventions, 2018; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2016; Kaba & Hassan, 2020)

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective and Pod Mapping. The Bay Area

Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC): Building Transformative Justice Responses to Child Sex Abuse created a process that engages individuals and their supports to address harm and violence caused to individuals. A pod is defined as “a type of relationship between people who would turn to each other for support around violent, harmful, abusive experience, whether as survivors, bystanders, or people who have been harmed” (Mingus, 2018). These pods consist of people that survivors or those who have caused harm can call upon when they are seeking support (Mingus, 2018). The TJ process has special utility in addressing child sexual abuse, in which children are able to be reached where they are. Building on abolitionist praxis and accountability, pod making requires both sustaining and creating relationships and trust (Mia Mingus, 2016).

Mutual Aid. Mutual aid has been defined as “reciprocal social support through concrete aid, information, and emotion (Haines as cited in Andrews, 2015). As defined by the community, it is a form of “anti-authoritarian” processes in which there are no experts (people for people Los Angeles, 2020a). Further, it is a space for people to co-create and co-organize through acts of both exposure and provision (people for people Los Angeles, 2020b). In embracing accountability and relationships through abolitionist praxis, mutual aid depends on relationship building, provision of self and others, as well as a re-imagining of the ways in which we address harm and need. Historically, mutual aid has been suggested as a way to strengthen neighborhood networks, reduce isolation, and prevent child abuse (Cohen, 1982).

Rejecting Dataveillance, Embracing Dark Sousveillance. If social workers were to adhere to a restorative and transformative justice framework through an abolitionist praxis, the need for algorithm and predictive technology to address harm becomes questionable. Similarly,

utilizing a lens of Black feminism and the “intersectional aspects of identity,” allows for an analysis of the notion that “instrumentality of technologies” are benign (Noble, 2018, p.21). Though a great deal of research in this area needs to be conducted, I propose that chipping away at the broader risk-society as well as the “child welfare” system renders risk-assessments, multi-agency surveillance, and the generational tracking of families generally unnecessary. The need for risk assessments and the prediction approach arguably “promotes public support for the punitive governance” and as such is not a path towards liberation (Roberts, 2019, p.1724).

Resistance to forms of surveillance has already occurred in communities impacted by the “child welfare” system. Youth continuously challenge narratives created about their lives by seeking both resources and platforms outside of the “child welfare” system (Lovaas, 2016). This direct countering of pathologization exerted by the system allows for the youth to control their experiences. Counternarrative practices as resistance have included taking the internet to combat “DCFS’ digital archive” and curating their own archives and resources made for and by foster youth (Lovaas, 2016). The ability to share resources with one another across “borders” and “digitally re-narrativizing” their lives have been a critical form of re-claiming power.

In addition to these forms of dataveillance resistance, Simone Browne’s (2015) conceptualization of Dark Sousveillance remains an essential practice in Black fugitivity. Dark Sousveillance is described as “an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance through antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices” (Browne, 2014, p.21). This encompasses various ways in which we can confront surveillance and the discourses and ideologies that allow it to exist. In expanding Nobles (2015) critical analysis on the use of search engines and Google, those implicated in the “child welfare” must continue to interrogate who owns families records and data and how to reclaim them both

as and for individuals and communities (Noble, 2015). Suggested by Roberts, we must envision other ways to interact with technology and politics by rejecting “carceral data collection, prediction, and automation” (Roberts, 2019, p.1727). Future research should aim to address these complexities more in-depth. The current study is only the start of a novel body of literature that is guided by Black feminist thought, and that lies within the intersections of child welfare studies, critical technology studies and surveillance studies.

Statement of the Problem

The carceral ecosystem framework provides a metaphor and pathway for researchers to examine the “child welfare” or “family policing” systems tactics of regulating and policing youth and families. The conceptualization of “panarchy” within the carceral ecosystem framework suggests that systems-within-systems are building blocks of resilience. In other words, resilient nested systems add to the stability of the larger ecosystem. Therefore, the “child welfare” system becomes a focal point, an integral part in maintaining the resilience of the carceral ecosystem. Over the years, the “child welfare” system has transformed into a densely integrated system that utilizes and necessitates multi-agency collaborations and information-sharing practices, which have been suggested to be proliferated by the neoliberal state in conjunction with the discourses of child protection. Literature has shown that “Child Protection” has obscured the impacts of policing tactics utilized by the system and the systems exertion of dataveillance and racializing surveillance. This continuously harms families of color, Indigenous families, and Black families.

In efforts to move the “child welfare” system into the 21st century and reduce its disproportionality and disparity, researchers and practitioners have called for an increase in multi-system partnerships, an increase in data accumulation and sharing, as well as the use of predictive analytics to predict future risk. Yet, these efforts to “transform” the system all continuously work under the premise that both surveillance is necessary, and that family

separation remains a tool that is at the disposal of caseworkers. Due to this, the current study aimed to dive deeper into child protection as a discourse, the use of surveillance through multi-agency collaborations and information-sharing partnerships, and the perceptions and practices of abolition as an alternative to address harm.

Current Study

The current study will be guided by four research questions:

- 1) In what ways do DCFS stakeholders (SS) and individuals impacted by the “child welfare” system (II) perceive and understand “child protection”?
- 2) How do SS and II perceive the role of the “child welfare” system?
- 3) How are practices of surveillance and data-sharing perceived and/or utilized by SS?
- 4) What are stakeholders and impacted individuals' practices and perceptions around abolitionist praxis?

Chapter 3: Methods

The following chapter presents the methods that were utilized for this study, along with the epistemological frameworks that guided it. Furthermore, this chapter includes details about the research design, data collection and analysis, a statement of reflectivity, and consideration of limitations to the research.

Black Feminist Abolitionist Epistemological Framework

The current study is guided by a Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemological framework, in which I utilize both Patricia Hill Collins (2000) Black Feminist Epistemology and Abolitionist praxis as described by Ben-Moshe (2018). Defined generally, epistemology sets forth the standards for how one might “assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true” (Collins, 2000, p.252). A Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology influences the principles of how this study was conducted in its entirety, including the conception of “the “carceral

ecosystem” framework, the creation of research questions, the perspective of gaps within the literature, all methodological decisions, data collection, data analysis, and reporting and disseminating findings. Black Feminist epistemology is rooted in liberatory, and fugitive practices interweaved with an ontological positioning that rejects Cartesian binaries and objectivist logics (Stanley & Wise, 1992). It considers the use of binaries and binary thinking violence (Davis, 2013). Core assumptions and values innate to a Black Feminist epistemology are as follows: (1) an ethic of caring, (2) an ethic of personal accountability, (3) lived experiences are a criterion of meaning, and (4) dialogue as a means to validate and assess knowledge claims. In extending this epistemological framework, abolitionist praxis similarly prioritizes care and responsibility of self and others, accountability, and the potentiality in imagining an alternate means of “being” outside of the confines of carceral logics (Meiners, 2015). Additionally, abolitionist knowledge considers and prioritizes those who have been impacted by the state and through techniques of capture (Harney & Moten as cited in Ben-Moshe, 2018). Together, a Black Feminist Abolitionist Epistemology utilizes concepts and practices of relationality (Davis, 2013) and uplifts the importance of collective knowledge creation and understanding that is grounded in empathy and accountability.

An Ethic of Caring

A core tenant of Black Feminist epistemology is the ethic of caring, which encompasses “the value placed on individuals' expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000, p.264). Within this ethic, the researcher and partners in research are all seen as unique individuals that contribute to knowledge creation. The researcher understands that their ideas and creations are embedded within the research process. Moreover, it acknowledges that every individual's unique perspective will “enrich a group’s understanding.”

Similarly, Ben-Moshe's conceptualizations of carceral abolition epistemology or dis-epistemology posit that there is no one way of ridding our society and selves of carceral logics (Ben-Moshe, 2018). Thus, individual contributions and ideas in re-imagining society are both innate and welcome. Within the tenant of ethics of care, Black Feminist epistemology necessitates a space for emotion during discussions and interactions. The emotion that arises during dialogue is considered a part of knowledge validity (Collins, 2000). The practice of an ethics of care that embraces emotion also calls for empathy (Collins, 2000). Empathy includes not only an of experiences but seeking and valuing individuals' perspectives throughout the entire research process. In this way "the group also appraises the way knowledge claims are presented" (Collins, 2000, p.265). In extending the Black Feminist Epistemology, care is described by abolitionist praxis as antithetical to the penal, to violence, and to the carceral (Coverdale, 2020). Care ethics is thus necessary for working towards dismantling the carceral ecosystem, even when designing and conducting research.

An Ethic of Personal Accountability

The second core tenant of Black Feminist epistemology is an ethic of personal accountability. This ethic rejects the notion that an individual or researcher's perspective is separate from discussions of the research. It instead acknowledges that views and actions from the researcher are personal and derive from their core beliefs (Kochman as cited in Collins, 2000). According to Black Feminist epistemology, emotion, ethics, and reason are all interconnected and necessary to assess one's knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). Within this ethic of personal accountability, abolitionist epistemology also posits that the "ethical position" that arises from abolition requires what Ben-Moshe cites as "epistemic humility" (Ben-Moshe, 2018, p.3). Epistemic humility is defined as the ability to recognize when one is unsure about what to

do or how to continue (Ben-Moshe, 2018, p.3). Practicing epistemic humility allows for accountability and transparency about knowledge claims and knowledge production.

Lived Experiences as Criterion of Meaning

As maintained by Black Feminist Epistemology, lived experiences are a criterion of meaning. Collins (2000) refers to lived experience as the distinction between knowledge and wisdom, situating wisdom as essential to “the survival of the subordinate” (Collins, 2000, p.257). Knowledge is considered to be adequate for those in power but insufficient alone for those who have been impacted by structures of oppression and violence. Because of this, wisdom gained through survival provides insight into specific knowledge bases that are gained only from lived experience (Collins, 2000). These lived experiences are not only shared by those being interviewed in research studies but are exerted by the researcher who selects certain topics and methodologies for study (Collins, 2000). As suggested by Roberts (2006), feminisms reclamation of the person as political allows for space to take women’s, especially Black women’s voices, seriously. Adding to Black Feminist epistemology, abolitionist epistemology upholds the importance of our personal relationships and experiences to and with knowledge and knowledge production. Abolitionist epistemology focuses on knowledge and experience that influences political action, embracing a process of becoming (Ben-Moshe, 2018).

Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims

Lastly, the Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology holds dialogue as a necessity in assessing and producing knowledge claims. This dialogue often occurs with members within a community and asserts that connectedness is essential to knowledge validation (Collins, 2000, p.260). Dialogue, as utilized and described by Black Feminists and traditional African societies, is a form of empowerment through the community (Asante as cited in Collins, 2000). Dialogue is

a way in which people can interact that directly leads to harmony (Asante as cited in Collins, 2000). Abolitionist epistemology and practice also acknowledge the importance of community and dialogue, as they are both a significant means of abolishing the carceral continuum. This is exemplified in community accountability processes and restorative and transformative justice practices like healing circles. Dialogue is a critical component in community-building with activists across space and time, a means of solidarity in addressing carceral abolition.

Research Questions

Guided by a Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology and subsequent research into gaps within the literature, the current study aimed to explore the mechanisms in which the “child welfare” or “family policing” system maintains the resilience of the carceral ecosystem, if at all. Additionally, it aimed to explore perceptions of liberatory praxis through “child welfare” system abolition and transformative and restorative justice practices. In addressing these aims, the current study investigated discourses around Child Protection, perceptions of the role of the system in addressing the harm caused Black and Latinx children in Los Angeles, the use of surveillance, and multi-system partnerships, and perceptions around abolitionist praxis. Current research questions were also inspired by Our Data Bodies and Stop LAPD Spying LA coalition. The research questions utilized by this study were collaboratively shaped with members from Stop LAPD Spying and the Downtown Women’s Action Coalition through a partnered review process. The current study explored the following questions:

- 1) How do system stakeholders (SS) and individuals impacted by the “child welfare” system (II) perceive and understand “Child Protection”?
- 2) How do SS and II understand and perceive the role of the “child welfare” system, specifically regarding the protection of children from historically marginalized communities?

- 3) In what ways is surveillance and data-sharing used and understood by SS and II?
- 4) What are SS and II practices and perceptions around abolitionist praxis?

Research Design

Community-Based Qualitative Research

Guided by Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology, the current study utilized community-based qualitative research. A Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology prioritizes collective knowledge of those with shared experiences, especially those who are impacted by the societal matrix of domination. Similarly, the conceptual framework “carceral ecosystem” calls into question how individuals may hold, exert, and perpetuate discourses that are foundational to larger systems. Due to this, a qualitative exploratory methodological approach was an appropriate fit. Upholding the Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology requires a commitment to reflect on and minimize power relations with partners in research. Thus, working in partnership with the community became a priority of the current study. By working with the community organizations for this research project, the core tenants of Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology, ethics of care, and accountability are both utilized and continuously reflected on. Developing knowledge claims in partnership with other research partners allows for spaces of dialogue, emotion, and empathy. Moreover, it allows for a consideration of ideas from all individuals and a space for building community through shared lived experience. The tenants of Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology are aligned with community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) praxis, which similarly uplifts “collective and situated learning, reciprocity and social change, and empathy” (Ritterbusch, 2019, p.1300). Beyond the study, the current research design begins to chip away at understanding the role of partnerships between communities, grassroots organizations, and the university in enacting social change (Cahill as

cited in Ritterbusch, 2019). It assesses the ways in which researchers across the university and community planes might collaboratively engage in the PAR cycle of research, action, and reflection, as noted in Kindon, Pain, & Kesby (2007).

Individual Interviews and Community Conversations

Both individual interviews and focus groups were utilized for the current study. In committing to the ethos of Black Feminist epistemology and CBPAR, which uplifts connectedness, dialogue, and lived experience, community-based community conversations and interviews with individuals impacted by the “child welfare” system fit the current research design. The use of focus groups was chosen due to its ability to consider group interactions, points of shared and diverging perspectives within and across groups, and degree of consensus on the topic (Morgan & Krueger, 2013). Focus groups with families impacted by the system were renamed “community conversations” by the researcher, Stop LAPD Spying and DWAC members. Community conversations were conducted with those impacted by the “child welfare” system, as a means to engage with both shared-meaning processes and in encompassing the tenants of both care and collectivity within Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology. Community conversations ranged from 1.5 – 2.5 hours. Individual members each received \$50 gift cards for participation in a community conversation.

Document Analysis

In conjunction with the qualitative interviews, documents regarding the Los Angeles County child welfare system and Skid Row were included in the study. A portion of documents were found from archival research, which included searching through periodicals during various time periods. The databases “Black Studies Periodicals” and “African American Periodicals” were largely used in conjunction with Google searches. Searches included the time periods in

which there was implementation of policies such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), or massive societal shifts such as the era of crack cocaine criminalization. Documents utilized for the study were either directly related to Skid Row or directly related to LA County DCFS. The researcher used data from the interviews and community conversations to guide the specific document search. This included researching institutions like the MacLaren Hall Children's Center and the Children's Welcome Center. Further, documents were requested from DCFS through a public records act request that was created by the researcher and Stop LAPD Spying Coalition. The request involved documents around predictive analytics use in the system including Amazon Web Services to understand what data is shared, how it is shared, and who it is shared with (Appendix D). The documents were coded and themed along with the transcripts from community conversations and individual interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sampling

This qualitative community-driven research study explored research questions in collaboration with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Downtown Women's Action Coalition of The Los Angeles Community Action Network. Stop LAPD Spying is a grassroots abolitionist organizing coalition focusing on surveillance, policing, and information sharing within Los Angeles County. DWAC has a mission to "empower women who live and work in Downtown LA to influence public policy change that promotes health, safety, and economic and social justice for women through collective action, public education, community building, advocacy and leadership opportunities" (DWAC, n.d.). Upon dual IRB (Institutional Review Board) and community ethics approval, I held both community conversations and individual

interviews. Individuals were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling based on their involvement and experiences with the “child welfare” system.

Community conversations were conducted with individuals who were impacted by the “child welfare” system. Individuals were required to identify as Black, Indigenous, or person of color and have been directly impacted by the Department of Child & Family Services in Los Angeles County. This includes individuals who have experienced investigation without subsequent substantiation of child maltreatment. 15-30 system-impacted individuals were recruited for this study, which ended in a sum of four community conversations ranging from 4-6 individuals per group.

System-impacted individuals had the option to participate in individual interviews that were non-confidential or confidential. During recruitment, individuals were asked if they would like to participate in a community conversation, individual interview, or both. A point of consideration was the ability for individuals being interviewed to have the option of publicizing their interviews as a means to add to the work they may be doing or as an act of countersurveillance. Due to constraints and commitments in respecting the anonymity of other community conversation members, individuals were able to opt into doing individual interviews, with the option to share their work without remaining anonymous. In understanding that the current research topic is a point of complex engagement with those who are continuously at the crux of social action, the option to utilize research in a manner ethical to them was important.

Individual interviews were also conducted with the “child welfare” stakeholders in Los Angeles. Stakeholders included any individual who partnered directly within the “child welfare system” or had experience working for the Department of Child and Family Services. Those who did not work directly within the department but worked within direct partnership with the

Department of Child and Family Services were required to have contracts with DCFS and/or be completing work that required direct partnerships with DCFS. Examples of this type of work included individuals who work within government offices that oversee DCFS work, the Commission for Children and Families, or the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect. 15-30 stakeholders were recruited for this interview with an aim for at least 10 interviews. Finally, one community conversation was held with community organizers and scholar-activist who do work around the child welfare system (Appendix C). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. A total of 5 organizers were recruited for this interview with an aim for at least 3 participants within the community conversation.

Recruitment for interviews and community conversations began in the Spring of 2021. When contacted by interested participants, the researcher explained the research project with materials about the project. Recruitment emails were also sent to individuals who were interested. Further, recruitment through social media like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn occurred. After the completion of interviews and community conversations, I utilized snowball sampling to recruit more participants. Individuals were asked if they know of any other interested people who would be willing to interview. Individuals were given the researcher's contact information that they could share with anyone interested, so that they could follow up for scheduling.

Qualitative Instruments

Three semi-structured interview/community conversation guides were used for this study, and were influenced by Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology. Two interview guides were used for the community conversations and focus group (Appendix A & Appendix B), and one was used for the individual interviews (Appendix C). The interview guide opens with

introductory statements to allow for everyone to become comfortable with one another and the research process. Before beginning the interviews and community conversations, individuals were provided with an information sheet and were also provided with information about their rights.

Interviews and community conversations were conducted in person, through Zoom, and via phone call. All interviews and community conversations conducted over zoom or phone call were recorded using Otter.Ai. In-person interviews were recorded using two audio recorders. The audio recorders were locked in a safe in the researcher's home. All digital recordings were kept on an encrypted password-protected file on her computer and deleted after the conclusion of the study, unless otherwise stated on the consent form for future use. All transcripts were hand transcribed by the researcher or sent to a transcriber as a de-identified transcript.

Analysis

A theoretical constructionist thematic analysis (TA) in conjunction with grounded theory coding methods was utilized for data analysis. Thematic analysis is underpinned by a qualitative paradigm and assumes both reflectivity and situated meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2018). It encompasses an array of methods and is not bound to any specific theoretical framing. A constructionist theoretical thematic analysis specifically utilizes a latent approach to identifying themes while additionally seeking to understand the sociocultural context and conditions that enable individual accounts during the data collection process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Latent approaches in thematic analysis examine the ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations within themes, requiring interpretation from the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It posits, as aligned with Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology that themes are “active creations of the researcher” (DeSantis & ugarizza as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2018). TA involves 6 phases: (1)

familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase two of the TA included process coding as described by Charmaz (2014), which focuses on the use of action words or gerunds. Initial coding also included incident-by-incident coding in which a comparison of incidents in the data is a focal point. Additionally, constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss as cited in Charmaz, 2014), as well as components of situational analysis mapping (Clarke, 2003), were used for the study. Constant comparison methods allow for a comparison of data-to-data to find similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2014). Situational analysis mapping lays out “human, nonhuman, and discursive elements within. A research situation” (Clarke, 2003, p.559). Further, it addresses collective actors and positions taken or not by these actors (Clarke, 2003).

Memos, as guided by Charmaz (2014), were written alongside field notes before and after every interview and during coding. Memos, including reflexive memos and analytic memos (Glaser & Strauss as cited in Charmaz, 2014) allowed for the researcher to address biases, conflicts, emotions, and theoretical ties within the data. Furthermore, it allowed for a comparison of data through the theoretical lens of the carceral framework.

Research Parameters

Research conducted for the current study was based on first person accounts and perspectives; thus the researcher acknowledges that the constructed themes can be understood within specific parameters. First, the study relied on nonprobability convenience sampling through qualitative methods. Due to this, the study does not claim to be generalizable. The study’s findings are situated and contextualized knowledge that may be transferable in inspiring different research studies (Charmaz, 2014). Due to the use of snowball sampling, individuals

with similar perspectives were likely included within the study. An effort to recruit various individuals was made by the researcher. This was done by attempting to speak with various departments and organizations across Los Angeles County. Moreover, community conversations in this study were not fully representative of one another as unique individuals participated in each community conversation.

CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter will present a statement of reflexivity, an overview and description of the research participants and partners, overview and description of the data analysis, and an overview of the themes within the study. Chapter five will provide an in-depth discussion regarding the study's findings including the interpretation of constructed themes, identified boundaries of the research, and implications for future research and practice in social work.

Statement of Reflexivity

Black Feminist Abolitionist epistemology regards researchers as a critical part of the research process. My research, the epistemologies I resonate with, and the subject matter discussed in this research study has been influenced by my personal family history of “child welfare” system involvement, encounters with the criminal injustice system, and previous experiences working directly with both impacted youth and institutions like the academy and the non-profit industrial complex. Practicing reflexivity as a Black and Filipino activist-scholar was a necessity for me as navigating the blurred boundaries of ethics, community partnerships, and advocacy is both complex and sensitive. As an academic researcher, I knew that I had to prioritize efforts that would not reproduce the same harms that I was attempting to address through my research. Practicing ethical research standards that were provided by community was one way in which my academic formation could continue to remain a less salient part of the research agenda. In doing so, a part of this statement of reflexivity was acknowledging the

request of my community partners, Stop LAPD Spying LA, in rightfully addressing the harms that have been perpetuated against community by academic institutions. Besides the violent and harmful past research (Sabati, 2018) and tactics of academic gatekeeping, the academy has worked against community in less obvious ways.

Acknowledging Harms Caused by Academia

In specific, one of the ways in which the academy perpetuates harm intentionally or unintentionally, is through the institutional review board process or IRB. The IRB was created to protect communities from unethical research practices, violence, and exploitation (Cahill, 2007 & Moon, 2009). Yet, the IRB's tactics and requirements which are largely based on biomedical frameworks, are often contradictory or otherwise create barriers to completing community-based research with grassroots organizations in a manner that matches their ethics (Cahill, 2007; Flicker et al., 2007; Sabati, 2018). Due to this, the IRB becomes a possible barrier in completing urgent research, and a site of ethical dilemmas (Shore, Drew, & Seifer, 2011 & Shore et al., 2015). The IRB has historically added to academia's role in both the extraction, accumulation, and exploitation of communities and their knowledge (Sabati, 2018). To address this, I underwent a community review process with Stop LAPD Spying in conjunction with the academic IRB. Together, we worked to create and alter all the forms within this study including the interview guides, consent forms, and any other materials, to ensure that research was ethically sound.

Learning from Difficult Dialogues

Although I created the qualitative instruments with my community partners, points of tension occurred during the research process. These tensions taught me the importance of relinquishing academic claims to expertise, and instead relishing in the fact that I am a student—

a continuous learner. These tensions reminded me that intention and care can be taught by our community and movement research partners, and that there is always space to do better. As I progressed through a process of cleaning the transcripts from the community conversations in this study, I found it very difficult and often daunting to revisit. For some transcripts it was the feeling of shame, guilt, or embarrassment. For others, it was difficult dialogues and the recounting of deeply traumatic experiences that were shared by people who experience the world like me, as a Black woman. The pain and sorrow that occurred within some of these interviews were truly hard to bear, and I am grateful we did not have to experience it alone. Together we shared laughs, tears, and pain. Below I address two points of tensions and subsequent lessons learned.

The Importance of Community Agreements

During one community conversations session homophobic dialogue ensued and disrupted the feeling of comfortability and safety within the room. This transcript was difficult for me to revisit because I yearned to have handled it with more grace and intention. I attribute my inability to navigate this situation to both a lack of training and also a lack of intention. During this community conversation I had three returning members and one new one. Though the new member was very insightful, they began to use homophobic statements towards the end of the group discussion. This led to a shift in the energy in the room. People began to close up, not wanting to speak as openly or candidly. I recognized this shift immediately and attempted to divert the conversation, while giving the member space to finish his sentence. I was not sure how to balance the safety in the room with the ability for people to speak freely. I did not handle this in a way I felt appropriate—a way that made everyone in the space feel safe. I tried to model Monique, a core organizer of LACAN who showed me how to beautifully moderate a

conversation that included intense and traumatic experiences, but I feel that I did not live up to that standard. After the interview, one of the mothers reached out to me to talk more about what happened. I could not get into contact with her after a brief exchange of messages, leaving this tension feeling unresolved. This was difficult because I wanted to make sure everyone felt safe going forward. I reached out to the organizations I was working with to help me do better for the next community conversation session. From these conversations, it was suggested that I make space to create a community agreement before the community conversation. I was upset that this is not something I thought of initially, as it is something I always practice in other spaces. For some reason I did not make it intentional here. Was this because I was too focused on the IRB process? It's something I will never forget in the future. It taught me that we must try to be intentional about how other people view a "safe" space and what that can look like in real-time. It taught me that people should be able to speak freely, but there is also a way to incorporate ways of handling oppositional or even harmful views in a nonviolent way.

Context Matters

During my third community conversation I felt another point of tension occur. I learned from this situation that the context in which we carry out our research is a central part of planning and designing a research study. The community conversation I conducted all took place in a room within Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) in Skid Row where many people experience poverty and housing precarity. LACAN acts as an organizing and community hub in which people are able to create, plan, discuss, sing, talk, and find resources. To expect anything less would be to not understand LACAN's spirit and prioritization of care for one another. Every community conversation Monique would set out chairs in a circle, bring snacks (along with food I provided), a candle, and loving attitude. During the second community

conversation, one of the mothers stated that she would like to cook a big meal of tacos and snacks after the next community conversation session, something that she does from time to time. However, during the third community conversation mothers that day began pulling people from the street because they knew that there would a big meal later that day. As one mother said “I would never turn nobody away from food. Never. I don’t care, if it’s, if I’m eating and you’re hungry... I’m gonna give it to you”. As a Black woman and organizer this was beautiful to me. I loved the efforts to show care for one another. As a researcher tied to the academy this was difficult to navigate, and this made me feel like I needed to reflect. On this day we had an extremely moving and important group session. However, I only had a set amount of gift cards with me at the time. I ended up having to tell a few individuals that I would bring them gift cards the next day, and that felt terrible. I had to talk with the organization to be clear about how many gift cards I had each session, and to always bring extra just in case.

A critical part of this reflection is how to conduct PAR in a space where many people are in need. It made me think about the restrictions of academic research and the inability to shift as the space shifts. Things often happen in flux, and we aren’t able to control the environment, especially in the case of community conversation meetings where we are talking IN the community about a shared experience. What are the ethics of telling people there’s not enough space for them when there are more chairs and more food to share? What are the ethics of only supplying only a partial portion of the group with gift cards while the others might also have need? When the IRB attempts to not sway the participants by paying them “too much”, who is this truly protecting? These are so many of the things I have had to sit with. At times I was so frustrated with not having a suitable answer, or not crafting my research plan well enough that I was ashamed to listen back to the recordings and relive the memory. This was selfish, but a

feeling that many researchers share. I think back to the money I spent out of pocket and shake my head at the academy for not thinking these mothers stories were worth more than \$50 an interview. If I could do it again I would try and account for the flux in environment. I would think about how to better provide space for more people. What would this look like if not a community conversation? Would an ethnography be better, but what about the surveillance inherent in ethnographic methods? When are times that the recorder needs to be off and you just sit and hold space with people? There is still so much left for me to learn.

In getting through difficult transcripts I was reminded that working with community is special and helpful. I got through difficult times by writing with my peer Melanie who is also working through qualitative transcripts. I learned that sometimes you just have to do 15 minutes a day. I learned that you can always improve and learn from your mistakes. I learned that what's most important is the goal. I learned that we need to have more space in qualitative methods class to talk about not only conversations that can trigger participants, but how to handle situations where participants may disagree or say harmful things to one another. I learned that we need to know how to hold space for conflict, and make places safe after they arise— according to standards set by those who we are conducting research with. What we deem as safe or ethical may not be the same for those in the space.

Study Demographics

Context of Community Conversations with Family Members Impacted by the System

The current study was partially conducted in Skid Row of Downtown Los Angeles California with assistance from the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Downtown Women's Action Center (DWAC) of LACAN. Geographically, Skid Row runs between 3rd street in the North and 7th street in the south, and from Main Street in the West to South Alameda in the East (DWAC, 2021). In describing Skid Row, DWAC states that “structural racism is responsible for

why so many end up on Skid Row and why many are unable to leave” (DWAC, 2021, p.3). Acknowledging that Skid Row is referred to the “homeless capital of the nation”, DWAC highlights the history of the community which emerged around the mid 1930’s as male transient populations migrated there for railroad related employment. Today, the residential hotels that replaced the earlier accommodations for the workers are still geared towards men and has been “home to roughly 13,000 – 15,000 unhouses and extremely low-income people” (DWAC, 2021). DWAC states that there has recently been a sharp increase in unhoused women given the context of loss of housing and economic stability during the pandemic (DWAC, 2021). At the time of the community conversations, Los Angeles County continued to have a lack of resources for unhoused women, especially those who are Black and living in Skid Row.

Four community conversations were conducted for this study and included nine Black mothers, three Latinx mothers, and two Black men who have lived in or currently were living in Skid Row and have experienced involvement in the family policing system. Community conversations ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours and differed in topic area per week. The topics included: the role of the child welfare system, use of surveillance in the child welfare system, the meaning of child protection, and envisioning responses to child maltreatment. Each community conversation was held in a large room at LACAN and required individuals to be masked and socially distanced.

Focus Groups with Community Organizers/Scholar-Activists

Additionally, community conversations also included a discussion with three organizers/scholar-activists (Appendix C). The discussion lasted 1 hour and were held over zoom call. Organizers were asked about what drives their work, what barriers they experience, what ideologies they run into, and how they see the impacts of surveillance if at all within the child

welfare system. All organizers/scholar-activists identified as Black women and had prior experience working directly with families who had been impacted by the child welfare system. One individual had ten years' experience working previously as a DCFS caseworker and then for a non-profit within the child welfare system. She currently identifies with an abolitionist praxis and is practitioner and scholar-activist. The next individual had six years' experience working with families impacted by the system including direct work with youth and families and then policy research. She is now currently organizing around abolition and continuing research.

Individual Interviews

10 interviews were held with child welfare system stakeholders through zoom or phone call. Caseworker interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Caseworkers identified as follows: two multiple ethnicities/races (one Mexican, Native American), three Black or African-American, three Latinx/Latin@/Hispanic, one Mexican-American, and one white. The occupational roles of stakeholders within the child welfare system varied, though seven out of ten stakeholders worked directly for DCFS as caseworkers (Table 1).

Table 1

Occupational Role Table

<i>Caseworker</i>	<i>Occupational Role(s)</i>	<i>Years Working in System</i>
1	Court-Appointed Advocacy with Children	1
2	Emergency Response Caseworker at DCFS	2.75
3	Continuing Services Caseworker at DCFS	2.75
4	Caseworker, Child Welfare Research Organization	3
5	Clinical Work, Child Welfare Research Organization	3

6	TAY Case Management, Child Welfare Research Organization	4
7	Emergency Response Caseworker at DCFS, Dependency Investigator at DCFS	7
8	Legal Work with Families in Child Welfare System	17
9	Continuing Services Worker at DCFS–Wrap-Around Services	23
10	Field Social Worker at DCFS	26.5

Research Methodology Applied to Data Analysis

The research analysis was shaped by a Black Feminist Abolitionist Epistemology and the conceptual framework Carceral Ecosystem. The epistemological foundations of the study influenced what questions were asked, how questions were asked, and how data was coded. A specific example of how a Black Feminist Abolitionist Epistemology influenced the coding includes the attention that the researcher took to identify and code various care practices and shared meaning making processes that occurred between mothers within the community conversation. Additionally, utilizing the carceral ecosystem framework shifted the research questions and subsequent analysis to focus on certain aspects as seen in the examples provided in Table 2. Table 2 provides examples of various components of the carceral ecosystem framework, a definition of the component, an example of how it was used in the study, and the subsequent way it impacted the coding and analysis process.

Table 2*Using the Carceral Ecosystem Framework During Analysis*

<i>CE Component</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Study Example</i>
Panarchy	Suggests that the scales above and below the current focal point of an ecosystem determine a system's resilience.	Resilience of the "child welfare" system can bolster the resilience of the broader carceral ecosystem. This study explored if and how the "child welfare" system was resilient to change.
Slow Variable	Slow variables are typically understood as variables that determine the infrastructure of the ecosystem, controlling its configuration and thresholds.	Ideologies such as capitalism, and anti-Blackness are slow variables within the system. This study explored if and how the system utilized various ideologies to fuel its practices and policies.
Perturbation	The term perturbation has been used as a synonym for disturbing an ecosystem (Rykiel as cited in Borics, Varbiro, & Padisak, 2013).	Changes to the "child welfare" system might require drastically changing or removing the entire system through abolition. The study explored the discourse and practices around abolition.

Overview of Themes

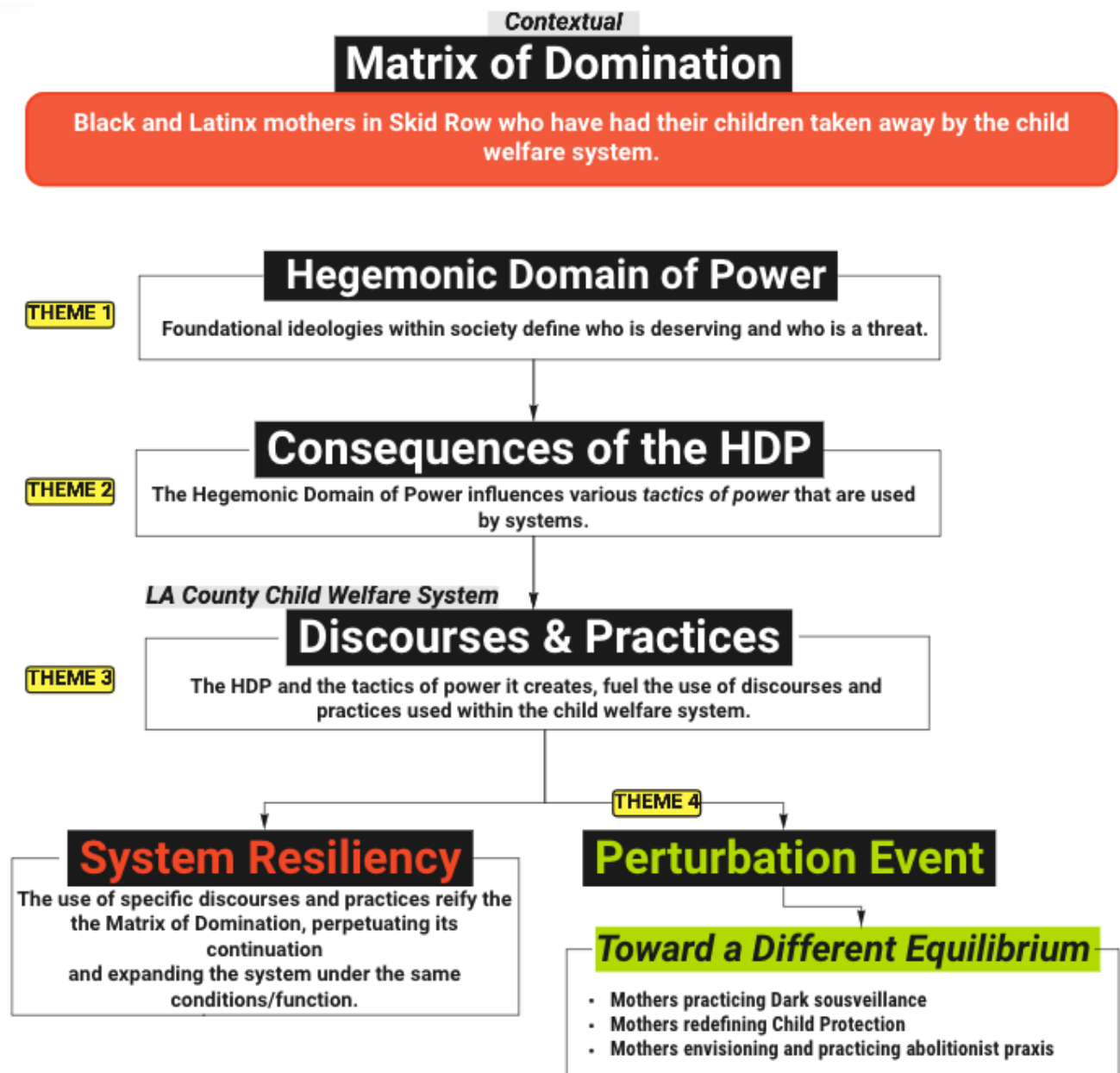
Four interconnected themes were generated by the researcher for the study, as illustrated in Figure 4. The first theme, *"There's things in place that keep you in a certain place": A Hegemonic Domain of Power* refers to the underlying societal ideologies that seep into the foundations of various social systems and organizations. The Hegemonic Domain of Power or HDP is a concept created by Patricia Hill Collins under her heuristic "The Matrix of Domination" and is defined as "a system of ideas developed by a dominant group or hegemony that justifies their practices" (Black Feminisms, 2019). The Matrix of Domination as explained by Collins is a heuristic that shows how interlocking forms of oppression are organized (Collins, 1990). Specifically for this study, the Matrix of Domination operates within the context of Los

Angeles County and is specifically discussed through the experiences of Black and Latinx families in Skid Row who have been involved with the child welfare system. Further, for this specific study the HDP influences how society determines who is underserving and who is a threat.

Theme 2, *“Before you give birth to your child, it belongs to the system”*: *Consequences of The Matrix*, explores the tactics of power used in the “family policing” system that are a result of the Contextual Matrix, demonstrating how power is broadly exerted through efforts to own, control, punish, and criminalize certain communities. Theme 3, *“DCF stands for Dividing and Conquering Families”*: *Child Welfare System Discourses and Practices*, discusses the trickle-down effect that the Contextual Matrix and its tactics of power have more specifically within the Los Angeles County “child welfare” system through discourses of “child protection” and practice of surveillance. Further, it discusses how themes one through three create a feedback loop in which the Contextual Matrix is upheld. Theme 3 describes how the Contextual Matrix exacerbates expansion of the “child welfare” systems through accumulation of capital. Theme 4 *A Praxis of Dark Sousveillance: Charting Pathways Toward a Different Equilibrium* explores how families in Skid Row who have had their children taken away envision a different way of addressing harm caused to youth, in effort to combat and prevent the trauma that results from involvement with the family policing system.

Figure 4

Full Model of Constructed Themes



CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the themes outlined in Chapter 4 and provides a discussion around the implications for future research and practice in “child welfare”. One central aim of this study was to understand if and how the child welfare system was connected to the carceral state. A second aim was to explore discourses around “child protection” and surveillance. The third aim was to explore liberatory praxis or Dark Sousveillance (Browne, 2016) through an inquiry of the perceptions and practices around child welfare abolition and transformative/restorative justice. To achieve these aims, relevant research questions were asked and allowed for an exploration of the overrepresentation of Black families and families of color within the child welfare system, the systems data sharing and collection processes, the impact and meaning of surveillance utilized by the system, and the meaning of child protection. This resulted in the researcher generating four interconnected themes with relevant subthemes. For clarity and intentionality in Theme 1, key concepts are defined prior to the study’s analysis. The study themes and subthemes are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Study Themes and Subthemes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
Theme 1: “There’s things in place that keep you in a certain place”: A Hegemonic Domain of Power	<u>Subtheme A:</u> Fighting to be acknowledged— White Supremacy, Anti-Blackness and Racism <u>Subtheme B:</u> “Being from nowhere”— the Ubiquity of Organized Abandonment and Racial Capitalism. <u>Subtheme C:</u> Sexism, Misogyny, & Misogynoir
Theme 2: “Before you give birth to your child, it belongs to the system”: Consequences of the HDP	<u>Subtheme A:</u> “They take them to the plantation”— Objectification and Ownership

Theme 3: “DCF stands for Dividing and Conquering Families”: Child Welfare System Discourses and Practices

Subtheme B: “Why are we being treated like the enemy?” — Carceral Logics & Family Policing

Subtheme A: “What are we actually protecting kids from?” — Child Protection as Discourse and Rationale

Subtheme B: “It’s almost like a pre-crime approach” — Risk Aversion in the System

Subtheme C: “How long do we keep doing this?” – Maintaining a Resilient Child Welfare System

Theme 4: A Praxis of Dark Sousveillance: Charting Pathways Toward a Different Equilibrium

Subtheme A: Flipping the Script on “Child Protection”

Subtheme B: Building Trusting Relationships and Envisioning Community Resources

Theme 1

“There’s things in place that keep you in a certain place”: A Hegemonic Domain of Power

Throughout this study family members who were impacted by the child welfare system as well as system stakeholders described the societal context in which the system operated, including various ideologies that formed the basis of the systems practices. Stop LAPD Spying states that these ideologies often undergird and perpetuate systems, labeling people as “dangerous” and rationalizing violent practices (Stop LAPD Spying & Free Radicals, 2019). The three major ideologies that were central to this study were grouped by the researcher and included: anti-Blackness/racism and white supremacy, organized abandonment/racial capitalism, and sexism/misogynoir (Figure 5). Though the researcher separated these ideologies into subthemes, they were often overlapping especially regarding Black and Latinx communities in Los Angeles County and Skid Row specifically. The researcher used the term “Hegemonic Domination of Power” within the “Contextual Matrix of Domination” heuristic to describe this

interwoven set of ideologies. As one mother states, this interwoven set ideologies or HDP, shows how certain communities are marginalized and targeted.

Figure 5

Theme 1: Hegemonic Domain of Power



The term Matrix of Domination originated from Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and refers to the ways that intersecting oppressions experienced through race, gender, and class, are organized. The researcher added the word “contextual” to the matrix of domination to reiterate that “regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of a matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities” (Collins, 1990, p.228). The experiences of Black women and Latinx women cannot be separated into distinct categories of racialized oppression, class oppression, or gendered oppression. These forms of oppression as stated by Collins (1990) and Crenshaw (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013), occur simultaneously. The subthemes below, though categorized separately for conceptual framing, are intertwined and inextricable. Each subtheme name indicates the focus of the section but does not bar the analysis from extending into a discussion about other forms of oppression that are simultaneously being enacted onto family members.

During one community conversation a Black mother Ava said “they peg you because...’Cause of the color of your skin. Oh, no, the area you live in. Oh. Not even that, your credit score. God dang it, they don't care about us out here. They don't care about us out here”.

Another mother Maya replied, “they don’t”. In this dialogue, Ava points out that systems within our society target people based on their race, geographic location, and economic status. This targeting and consequential lack of care is a result of historical forms of abandonment and racialization. Because this study was conducted with mothers who experienced extreme poverty and houselessness, much of the community conversation discussions included salient experiences of class difference. Additionally, because community conversations were held with Black and Latinx individuals the discussions centralized around experiences of racism and anti-Blackness. Lastly, the community conversations were held with predominantly mothers who discussed the impacts of being a single woman of color living in poverty. As mothers in the Downtown Women’s Action Coalition within Skid Row say, “Black women have been locked out of the housing market, rejected by the education system, suffer discrimination in employment, pursued by law enforcement, denied healthcare, experimented on, had their babies stolen...All agents of the system got the memo” (n.d.). The people in power are constantly working to dominate Black communities and communities of color. They say “They’re coming for us, and it aint good” (DWAC, n.d.). The contextual matrix of domination reflects these positionalities and stories.

Subtheme A

Fighting to be acknowledged—White Supremacy, Anti-Blackness and Racism

Theme 1: Subtheme A is called “White Supremacy, Anti-Blackness and Racism”, and is explained first due to its influence on all other subthemes within Theme 1. Anti-Blackness and racism were at the root of many mothers’ stories, impacting and magnifying the effects of their experiences. Anti-Blackness is perpetuated through misogynoir and racial capitalism, it is part of what influences the organization of the racial regimes throughout the United States. For this

study anti-Blackness and white supremacy are grouped together, though the two terms are not synonymous to one another.

Defining White Supremacy and Anti-Black Racism

White supremacy is the political, economic, cultural system in which the control of power and material resources are held by white individuals— where white is the normal (Ansley as cited in Newkirk, 2017 & Gillborn, 2006). Within this societal context Black individuals are considered to be living in both a “time of slavery” and “afterlife of slavery” where “Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (Sharpe, 2014, p.60). The afterlife of slavery culminates in “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Sharpe, 2014, .60). Anti-Blackness is thus described as manifesting “itself in numerous ways that significantly limited how Black people might lay claim to human-ness” (Costa Vargas & Jung, 2021).

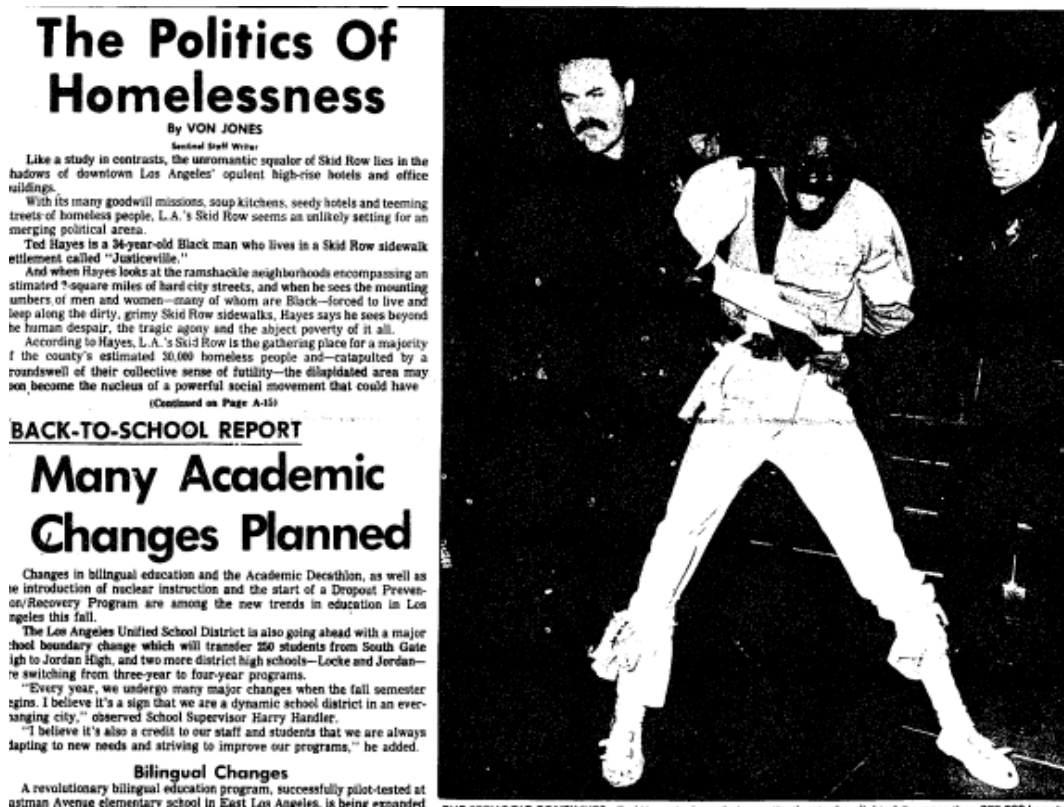
Study Analysis

All Black mothers in this study recounted the ways that society has remained attached to anti-Black racism, sharing stories about how their current situations parallel the era of slavery and accompanying plantation geographies. The mothers’ experiences of anti-Blackness stem from a long genealogy of racism within Skid Row, where there has been a constant projection of blame placed onto Black residents. Several documents from the 1960’s highlight these histories of racism within Skid Row, showing how police violence and the erasure of Black community members were severe and persistent. These histories impacted mothers’ experiences, even at the time of our community conversations. In a Los Angeles Sentinel article from 1985 (Jones, 1975), Von Jones writes about Afrofuturist and activist Ted Hayes who had just been arrested by two

police officers for a sit-in at the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Ted Hayes was organizing to call attention the stark “plight of more than 300,000 homeless people”, majority of whom were Black (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Los Angeles Sentinel Article: Ted Hayes and the Politics of Homelessness



In a subsequent article Rev. Wright-Riggins, member of the Black Leadership Coalition of Homeless with Hayes, stated that individuals in Skid Row were “young people for whom the economy of the 1980’s has no place. They are Blacks, Hispanics, whites and others” (Jones, 1985). In the article Rev, Wright-Higgins blamed racism for homelessness, stating that it rendered Black communities and communities living in homelessness insignificant or “invisible” (Jones, 1986). At the time of the interview, 45% of individuals experiencing homelessness in LA County were Black (Jones, 1986). Through stories like that of Hayes, periodicals during this time

show that instead of listening to Black community members in Skid Row, LA deployed law enforcement to incite violence on organizers and community members. Some residents, especially Black women, were also completely ignored.

More recent documents show that similar patterns of power and racism continue to occur in Los Angeles, and more specifically in Skid Row. As of 2018, LA remained one of the most segregated places in the United States despite Fair Chance Housing policies and institutional “efforts” to address the previous histories of exclusionary zoning and redlining that have impacted Black individuals (LAHSA, 2018). Black residents in Los Angeles County experience the most houselessness in Los Angeles with 68% of Black individuals experiencing homelessness in SPA 6 – South LA and 48% in SPA 4 – Metro LA & Skid Row (LAHSA, 2018). Moreover, parents accessing homeless services were 48% Black with a third being referred to child protective services and a third having a substantiated case within the system (LAHSA, 2018). The rates of Black individuals experiencing homelessness in Skid Row is correlated with systemic racism and anti-Blackness, and has been exacerbated over the years by efforts to push out specific communities. Black participants in a Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority report state that the system wants Black individuals to be at risk and vulnerable so that they could obtain county services (2018). This “supply and demand” model including racist policies and initiatives, has continued to impact families and caseworkers who participated in this study.

Tasha, a caseworker for DCFS, discussed her interpretation of the anti-Blackness and systemic racism that occurs in Los Angeles saying:

...they say “they [“Afro-american” people] don’t want to do better” or you know “that they don’t know that there’s a better way”. Um, there’s systems in place that prevent that

from happening. And so, you know, the most... with the little resources in place and the support in the community, it's basically like you are still coming at them like "you're the reason you're in this situation". You know, it's not really reflective of the point of you know, you might be in here because there's things in place that keep you in a certain place. And the community and educational level, financial status, and economic... you know all of that. I mean things are in place within society that impact our ability to you know advance.

In the excerpt above Tasha acknowledges that within society Black individuals are continuously blamed for issues that are related to lack of resources and support. This is equated to a lack of knowledge or yearning to "do better". She attributed these beliefs and treatment to institutional racism, something that she says effects Black people's ability to access various community and educational resources or attain financial security. As a Black social worker, she believes that we still live in a society where Black communities experience mass disinvestment while also being expected to work against a societal blame for not "wanting to do better". Another caseworker Andrea discussed this saying,

We- we didn't put ourselves here, just because we 'wanted' to grow up and live in you know Jordan Downs... as Los Angeles was forming they only put Black people in Jordan Downs. And would not let them come past the 110. [...] I mean... Then you got Bruce's beach celebrating because they took it from them years ago. [...] A lot of people don't have that knowledge at all. How can we get the systems in place to leave... you know let people breathe? We still have redlining and gentrification going on."

Through this recollection, Andrea shares that the position many Black Angelenos are in is due to racist policies like redlining that forcibly push Black people into specific areas which are then

disinvested from and labeled as high crime or hot spots. Although this is a reality for Black people in Los Angeles, many other social workers do not have this knowledge of disinvestment and theft from Black residents, which is reflected in the case of Bruce's beach and through the "child welfare" system as described by Tasha.

Just as caseworkers explained the plight of Black residents in Los Angeles, mothers who participated in the community conversations explained that they are constantly rendered invisible, or conversely, hypervisible by society. This shift of visibility occurs through the power and domination of White people, specifically White men who hold immense power within this patriarchal society. All mothers who participated in the community conversations reiterated that there is a societal belief that Black people are not enough. They explained that within society, Black individuals are seen as not worthy of care, attention, or acknowledgement— what one mother says is "akin to slavery". Racism, as stated by mothers, functions to keep Black and Latinx people subordinated which forces them into situations where they have to fight to be heard. Moreover, it deeply effects children and their experiences. One mother shared, "I talk to [my grandchild] and I tell her I'm sorry for what she went through and she, because uh kids would tell her she is ugly. Because she's dark skinned." According to mothers, the label of being "less-than" shifts if you are Black and poor or Black and woman. Tasha's sentiments parallel the mothers, she states:

So you know, you have to fight being who you are, as opposed to even getting your education needs met. You're fighting to be heard as the person you are. How can we even address education if you can't even accept me for who I am. So that, I mean... it can go education, to the finance and loans or financial systems, banks. It runs against us. I do

know that the systems that do affects us are like major entities within our societal structure. And yeah they do impact our families.

In this excerpt, Tasha reiterates that Black individuals have had to keep starting from a forced deficit in society, in which they are still fighting to be heard and accepted. This pours into societal institutions like schools, the medical system, and Black people's ability to get loans financed for housing or to take care of their families. Lynn, a scholar activist shares that she believes anti-Blackness runs rampant though insidiously through several systems:

So I think about like housing and the housing system, right. I think about our medical system, our social services and mental health systems and resources and really kind of trying to pull out the ways that these systems have historically oppressed Black people, how they kind of upheld anti-Blackness and how they are continuing to do so and kind of like a veiled way.

Much of the anti-Black racism discussed within this study by some caseworkers and mothers was described as hidden or less obvious to those who were not experiencing it. These experiences weren't occurring solely in the "child welfare" system but was instead experienced through multiple systems in similar ways that was exacerbated by "child welfare". This was exemplified in one poignant conversation between mothers where Denise shared her a story about her daughter's near-death experience during labor. She said:

Denise: "My daughter cannot have this baby natural." They thought I was playing. They really thought I was playing.

Keyshia: 'Cause they don't listen. They don't listen.

Monica: They don't listen to black women-

Keyshia: Yeah, that's bullshit.

Monica: Or their families.

Keyshia: They feel like they have authority over people's lives.

As expressed in this short dialogue, Black women continue to feel ignored and not taken seriously, even when it's a life or death situation. Denise shared that no matter how much she advocated for her daughter's situation, the medical professionals were not only dismissive, they blatantly ignored her urgent requests for help. During this conversation all five mothers chimed in saying that they continue to experience this lack of care due to being Black. Not only were the mothers not listened to, they also expressed that professionals working in various systems felt entitled to power which enabled them to make decisions over the mothers' lives—controlling the fate of their lives in several situations. This power hierarchy forced mothers into situations where they had to overextend both physically and mentally to protect their families, playing the role of family member and advocate. In Denise's story she ended up breaking her leg in the hospital as she ran to the room as her daughter began to cry out in pain.

Racism was also experienced by Latinx mothers in this study who state that migrating to this country was difficult, traumatic, and often violent. Mothers share that as immigrants they were expected to be perfect, compared to their white counterparts. One mother Maya states, "We didn't seek [this country] for that" when discussing the impact of racism on immigrant families. She adds, "we didn't know, we were just asking for help to try in this society and the chances were none. It was clear". Maya explained that since moving to the US she has experienced and witnessed how immigrant families are pushed into the criminal justice and "child welfare" systems due to rigid and unfair societal expectations that are grounded in racism and xenophobia. She reiterated that seeking help often resulted in her and others being funneled into punitive systems. All mothers explained how they felt like they were being forced into becoming a

“statistic” and shared the stress of having to live up societal expectations— the need to be perfect. They discussed how in schools, their children were treated poorly because of this country’s rigid and inflexible ways of teaching. When there was any sense of deviation from the norm, immigrant children were forced into therapies and were given medication.

Further, Black and Latinx mothers in my dissertation shared experiences of being judged against unreasonable and unfair societal standards. In one example the mothers talked about how the system enacts rules that do not reasonably accommodate non-white non-western cultures:

Mel: I know, I understand and I accept it and everything you know. Like I try, and everything. I move the bed you know. And sometimes, sometimes they don’t... we don’t know. Its always excuse, excuse, excuse. Always. Like this room is too small. But you know what, in Mexico we all have kids in one bed.

Jada: Right we do the same thing. Ten to a room.

Maya: That’s how we do it you know.

Jada: Its your family. We don’t mind being close we like it.

Mel: That’s what I told them. But they say that’s a bad thing.

In this exchange mothers coalesce around the fact that societal beliefs are held against cultural norms they grew up with as Black or Mexican mothers. These cultural norms deviate from what the U.S. sees as normal. Although it is not explicitly stated in any law, mothers experience unwritten rules that impact their ability to live how they want, autonomously in society. This translates into racist beliefs about what is safe and unsafe for parents and their children. There is an othering, a differentiation between the practices of white mothers and those who are Black or those who migrated to the United States. These shared experiences between mothers in this community conversation show that the systems within our society are fueled by unrealistic,

unfair, and highly racialized norms. These norms are fueled by racist and anti-Black ideals that seep into our systems, impacting certain communities' ability to live in this country autonomously. Anti-Blackness and racism form the basis of other ideologies contained within the hegemonic domain of power and broadly the matrix of domination, and is discussed in subthemes B – C. Further, anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and racism are discussed more in depth as driving factors within Themes 2 and 3.

Subtheme B

“Being from Nowhere”— the Ubiquity of Organized Abandonment and Racial Capitalism

Theme 1: Subtheme B describes the ways that economic inequality, precarity, and exploitation specifically show up for Black and Latinx Angelenos who participated in the community conversations. Both community conversation participants and caseworkers discussed the ways in which their lives and the lives of people they worked with were impacted by our economic system and the greed that it often comes with.

Defining Racial Capitalism and Organized Abandonment

Racial Capitalism repudiates Marx's definition of capitalism as a “revolutionary negation of feudalism” and instead centers the tendency of European civilizations through capitalism to “differentiate dialectical differences into ‘racial ones’ through the dependence on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide” (Kelley, 2017). As such racial capitalism is described as the inextricable linkage of racism and capitalism, the idea that capitalism was building up its wealth from the “transatlantic slave trade and colonial exploitation” (Olende, 2021). Race and gender are constitutive of the capitalist order, the modalities in which class is lived (Kelley, 2017). Further, racism is fundamental for the production and reproduction of violence, and violence is necessary for creating and maintaining capitalism (Kelley, 2017). Racial capitalism,

as reflected by mothers in this study, is described as the capture of communities, the stripping of land, and the destruction of Black economic institutions (Kelley, 2017).

In conjunction with racial capitalism, geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore often talks about the ways in which the state and capital intentionally abandon certain communities in this country. Building from David Harvey's (1989) conceptualizations of "spatial fix" and "organized abandonment", Gilmore thinks through how the advent and proliferation of imprisonment removed people from communities, subsequently removing earning power and "household and community camaraderie" while reconfiguring capacities to build up and staff carceral institutions (Gilmore as cited in Petitjean, 2018). Organized abandonment is arguably a reason for mass incarceration, austerity, outsourcing, underemployment, and capture by the state (Gilmore 2020). Further, Gilmore states that abandonment has resulted in people losing the ability to keep their selves, households, and communities together (Gilmore, 2020). It has laid the foundations for the withdrawal of social and public services, characterizing how Black people and poor people's lives have been shaped for the last 40 to 50 years (Walcott, 2020).

Study Analysis

A presentation published by First 5 LA entitled the "Skid Row Homeless Families Diversion Plan" shows that a Skid Row Outreach team of caseworkers and providers was once created in LA County to address family homelessness in Skid Row. The presentation stated that families need to be "removed from Skid Row", including undocumented families who were not necessarily eligible for housing assistance through the Department of Social Services or "DPSS" at the time (First 5 LA, n.d., p.6). The initiative sought to push Skid Row residents out of their community and house them in affordable housing outside of the city. To accomplish this, the team provided training for county staff and Skid Row providers to ensure that there was a "zero

tolerance for families on Skid Row Diversion Plan goals and objectives”, and sent out an Outreach team to rove the streets of Skid Row every morning (First 5 LA, n.d. ,p.10). With the help of DCFS and DPSS as well as homeless shelters and other non-profits, the county successfully deployed a process to remove community members from their community. Instead of providing families with housing within the community, systems attached their “helping” efforts to displacement. This displacement reflects the coercive nature of government agencies in Los Angeles and the abandonment of “helping systems” in the midst of dire material need that impacted especially Black and undocumented community members.

Mothers who participated in the community conversations discussed the feeling of being abandoned by society, and the profound effects that it has had on their ability to build a foundation. The inability to lay this foundation deteriorated their family’s ability to grow and sustain generational bonds, impacting the opportunity to build economic stability and community networks. Several mothers who participated in the community conversations believe that violence partially stems from people having nowhere to take care of themselves or their children. The stress of having few material resources and the simultaneous criminalization of poverty, they believe, is what leads to people making reports to law enforcement agencies including child protective services and the police. Mothers in one community conversation discussed this saying:

Keyshia: And so if we don’t have nowhere to take care of our children— that’s why the people have, um violence in the... All the situations that come from child protective services— all of them stem from poverty.

Monica: Exactly.

Denise: Right exactly.

Monica: All stem from people not having a place to call home or a place that's uh, to set roots down. To sit down.

Many mothers discussed how people in power have stolen the opportunity for Black and Latinx mothers to achieve economic stability from their communities, which has resulted in the disruption of their roots. This has forced people to be stuck in perpetual modes of survival. Black mothers throughout the community conversation stated that white individuals have purposefully disrupted communities of color and their ability to be accountable to and for one another. As such, the disruption of communities has been more than disinvestment, but has been the robbing of community opportunity to form networks of healing that would act as a barrier to involvement in carceral systems. Because of this lack of ability to sustain community accountability processes, people in power have intentionally and unintentionally forced people to become dependent on punitive systems. Mothers discussed this together:

Keyshia: Other people shouldn't be able to punish you. You know what I'm saying? If, if, but if you don't have nowhere to come from and everybody is all scattered around—

Monica: Right

Keyshia: there's no village to come from—

Monica: No

Keyshia: there's no people to—

Monica: Right

Keyshia: be accountable for your actions. It's easier for you—

Monica: that's right!

Keyshia: to be out here as an individual, and being subject or ward of the state.

The forced dependency on punitive systems has intentionally been set up to funnel people into the criminal legal and “child welfare” systems. The funneling of poor Black individuals into these systems allow for system expansion, necessitating the hiring of more workers and more funding that allow the systems to sustain new growth as described by Ruthie Wilson Gilmore. The cycle continues to trap specific people from communities that have been historically disinvested from and abandoned, decreasing their ability to rely on familial and community supports. They are subsequently expected to rely on state or county social welfare programs where they are surveilled and often funneled into other carceral systems. A few mothers state that those in power want to keep everyone separated and geographically “scattered around” so that they have to continue relying on themselves and government assistance.

The geographic separation of communities and rupturing of community and familial networks by those in power have long-lasting effects on Black and Latinx communities who live in Skid Row. These consequences extend beyond the loss of material supports and resources and includes the deterioration of community power which intentionally attempts to keep Black families socially controlled. Few mothers in the community conversations stated that being forced into a cycle of survival has diminished the community’s ability to be creative when conflict occurs, leaving people to believe that prisons and carceral punishment is the only “viable” remedy:

Keyshia: So, if you have to worry about where you’re going to live and what you’re going to eat–

Denise: Yes. Oh my god.

Keyshia: you cant think about nothing else.

Moncia: No you can’t.

Keyshia: You can't be innovative.

Moncia: No.

Keyshia: You can't be creative.

In addition to the disruption of communities through disinvestment and organized abandonment, mothers talk about how people in power force communities to live on top of each other spatially, making them believe that there is not enough room for everyone. They state that this is both coercive and intentionally psychologically debilitating. It is fueled by entitlement and greed. Mothers in one community conversation discuss that communities of color are tricked into believing that there isn't room for everyone, that there isn't land to make housing for everyone due to the land being owned by corporate interests. The compartmentalization of communities into specific parts of the city has allowed for control over the land, and the control over certain communities' mobility. Mothers say:

Monica: They want you to pay \$1,000 a month rent and then electricity bills and all that.

Keyshia: Compartmentalizing everybody.

Denise: That's crazy.

Keyshia: Putting us in these structures, making us live on top of each other—

Monica: Oh, God.

Keyshia: when we supposed to be side by side. We not supposed to be all up on each other.

Denise: Hell no.

Keyshia: So that makes us believe that there's not much room— that we do need population control. There's too many people in the world. No. There's not. It's usually

these little cities are built small and outside of your zone there's vast land where there's nothing.

Mike, one member of the community conversation, added that the city and its developers are trying to expand upwards without thinking about the communities. He states, "But being in the city is definitely that. It suppresses the people because there's only so much space in the city and developers are constantly trying to expand". The mass expansion of buildings not only leaves out communities who live in poverty, it forces communities to live in small spaces with few resources to go around.

The lack of investment and care into community also trickled down into mothers' experiences with housing precarity and their inability to acquire section eight housing. One mother Renee shares that she had her daughter removed from her custody and could not get her daughter back until she acquired housing. Although Renee was able to receive a section 8 voucher, no housing was available. She states, "I try to get my case now and I told them that I really need them to help me because I'm struggling and don't want my daughter to be in the streets. I need help to find a place. I got my section eight voucher but nobody will accept it." Renee's situation was dire. She was hoping to not raise her daughter in a tent, but was stuck being involved in the "child welfare" system until housing was made available. She had to choose between being houseless with her daughter or waiting until the rare chance housing would be made available.

This larger systemic barrier of lack of housing in Los Angeles elongates Black mothers time spent within punitive systems that were not created to address the extensive effects of racial capitalism and organized abandonment. The lack of housing in certain communities such as South LA or Downtown LA is a result of various redlining laws, the racism that led to

disinvestment, and the lack of care that continues now by the politicians who govern the county and state (United States District Court, 2021). Renee struggled getting housing for so long that her voucher was taken, she explains, “my vouchers got tookin already. I had it for a long time but there was nobody at all around here that would accept it”. She adds, “how can I get my daughter back when I’m staying in a tent? I don’t want my daughter in a tent, that’s what I don’t want to do”. Because of systemic issues within society, many mothers in this study were forced to sever bonds with their children due to their economic status. They were robbed of the ability to parent their children in the comfort of a home, and grow a foundation to sustain generational bonds.

Another Black mother explains that even though she finally received housing, it was several hours away in Riverside. She was forced to move away from family bonds just so that she could have a roof over her head. Her son was still in Los Angeles County and she had to commute every week just to see him, even though she had no car. She was forced to make it work under the systems rules. This was a form of displacement that continues to occur to communities of color within LA. Once this mother’s voucher was revoked like Renee’s, she was left to fend for herself with no help from the “child welfare” system which promised to assist her. She says:

I had to go out to Riverside to go get me some housing ‘cause LA didn’t have it for me when I was pregnant with him in 2017, when I graduated from [community program] in college. Nothing. I went way out there, stayed out there for three months. I came back out here ‘cause I didn’t have no family out there. And I got more messed over out here than I ever did. LA took my voucher, didn’t bother to help me with nothing else.

Like Ava's circumstance, several mothers in the community conversations stated that the "child welfare" system sets them up for failure by not address their underlying needs, including the lack of funds to pay for housing. The mothers discussed this saying:

Jada: They want you to look for places you can't afford. We gonna help you move in... but okay, what happens after that? I'm not making that money.

Monica: No.

Jada: I'm right back in your face and you looking at me like I've been doing something wrong when you set me up wrong in the first place!

As explained by Jada, Los Angeles County has a history of "setting people up wrong" regarding housing and the "child welfare" system, so much so that having a child removed from your custody while receiving "welfare-to-work services" could force you back into homelessness (Abrams, 2018). Thus, as explained by several mothers in the study, the same problems that DCFS tries to "prevent" often ends up placing mothers back into their same predicaments or worse.

In addition to the punishment and loss of rights that is inherent to "child welfare" system involvement, most mothers in the community conversations often found themselves not qualified for housing due to stringent standards that relate back to individualized blame. Documents show that in 2018 the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA) and DCFS entered a partnership to supply limited housing vouchers to parents. To be eligible however, mothers had to meet several requirements including: having children already removed from their custody, compliance with court orders, and homelessness as the only barrier to reunification. Moreover, families were only supported for one year as the program hoped that "families would be able to obtain jobs that pay enough to cover those costs" associated with housing. The documents

showed that systems give help only under specific requirements that mothers will attain jobs, take part in the capitalistic system, and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They call this “self-sufficiency” while ignoring the larger issues of organized abandonment and racialization.

The lack of attention to and availability of expansive housing in Los Angeles contributes to the cycle of poor Black communities being funneled into punitive systems— the continuance of organized abandonment and disrupted communities. This trickles from housing into community resources. Mothers complain that communities are completely disinvested from any type of additional resources that are offered for children.

Carmen: Yeah, one of the things that I, I realize within our communities is that, that there’s nothing that it’s offering, is offered for the children, for family. No community centers.

Monica: Nothing.

Carmen: You know, no activities-

Monica: Nothing.

Carmen:..for the community and, and the youngsters, the, the children, there’s nothing. Sports or art, nothing.

Instead of the state funding resources for housing that isn’t tied to stringent stipulations or directing money into community supports, money gets poured into specific housing developments and homeless shelters— both of which several mothers explain have funneled them back into punitive systems. Denise and other mothers in the room stated that the shelters have a reputation for being a direct funnel into the “child welfare” system. In one instance,

Denise stated that her daughter had no choice but to go to the shelter and ended up being drug tested by them simply because she smelled like marijuana:

Denise: She told them, she said, "I got an open DCFS case." And when they came to get my granddaughter... and when her worker got the call, she told them, "I'm requesting a on demand site drug test right now".

Monica: How you even gonna get a drug test anyway. Ain't that just a mission?

Denise: No. They have the means to them. They have them. It came, it was a new system that they had, they had the kit and everything they can do it, whenever they want to.

Monica: They had the means.

Several mothers explained that when you're poor and Black or Latinx there a few safeguards and barriers protecting you from being forced into punitive systems. Contrarily, there are gateways to punishment systems in almost every corner, making involvement feel inevitable. One caseworker Tasha says that the system makes entitled assumptions about Black people who live in poverty saying,

And they're like, "Oh. Yeah. They'll see these people in the projects. They just love being down here." No. You can't have that approach when you come in. You've got to know, like, "Oh. It's... There's reasons why they're here." They come here with a sense of entitlement, not understanding it. You know? And so it just complicates things.

As exemplified above, the consequences of racial capitalism and organized abandonment seep into the "child welfare" system in insidious and deeply violent ways, exacerbating and fueling issues that pertain to "child protection". This is discussed in more depth in Theme's 2 and 3.

Subtheme C

Sexism, Misogynoir, & Motherhood

Theme 1: Subtheme C refers to the broader experience of Black and Latinx women as mothers in this study. Experiences of anti-Blackness and organized abandonment were exacerbated by being a single mother as explained by women in Skid Row. Misogynoir was used to describe this section because many of the participants in the community conversations were Black mothers who described the ways society has shaped normalized standards of parenting. More specifically, mothers often discussed how being single and being Black or Latinx resulted in a lack of care and resources to ensure their safety due to being labeled a bad mother.

Defining Sexism and Misogynoir

While sexism has been defined as “the institutional discrimination and maltreatment that women face on the basis of gender/sex” (Wrisley, 2021, p.4) or the “institutionalized expression of individual misogyny” (Wrisley, 2021, p.5), misogynoir is defined as anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women and girls experience. Misogynoir and sexism have direct impact on how Black and Latinx single mothers are treated (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Both sexism and the negative perceptions around Black motherhood are part of a history of slavery and general intention to eradicate the Black family as a viable entity outside of the master’s domain. This has been exemplified in the Moynihan report (Geary, 2015) and many other anti-Black events and documents produced throughout history (Morgan, 2018).

Study Analysis

Mothers in this study discussed the difficulties they experienced when raising children by themselves, unmarried. They talked about how women are taught to believe that they should not be in relationships when raising children by themselves. One mother Monica states, “and women

have to be programmed to know when they're raising their children that they just can't have a relationship". She adds "you should not have to be with a man unless you're capable and ready to be with one. You shouldn't have to be forced to be with a man". In her discussion around the control of Black mothering, Monica discusses how society either expects you to stay married to the "biological" father of your child, or to be single and make enough money to take care of a child on your own. If you are dating someone casually while mothering, you are seen as careless, irresponsible, or distracted. These societal expectations are a result of the same anti-Black anti-woman policies that allowed for the crackdown on welfare fraud and criminalization. A large portion of these societal expectations were birthed out of the subordination of Black woman who were labeled "jezebel" and "welfare queen" (Gustafson, 2011).

One Civil Grand Jury Report on DCFS referred to single mothers having a non-material relationship as the "mother/live-in boyfriend red flag dynamic" (County of Los Angeles Civil Grand Jury, 2020, p.8). In the report the Civil Grand Jury claimed that they found child fatalities to occur in homes where mothers had boyfriends living with them. This correlation was based off of little "evidence", and yet, DCFS agreed with the Civil Grand Jury that they should implement training and provide parenting skills to mothers so that they could better understand and address this red flag dynamic (County of Los Angeles Civil Grand Jury, 2020). These types of county recommendations shows that the system has continued to blame mothers through policing and criminalizing their marital or relationship status. These societal "norms" impact how mothers are able to care for their children and broadly impact what is deemed as abnormal or harmful to the children. This phenomena or categorization is not similarly seen with fathers or nuclear families, indicating a history of sexist ideals.

Because of these various societal expectations, a few mothers explained that they are forced to marry men so that they are seen worthy enough to receive government benefits and help from society. Monica addresses this saying “I don’t think no woman should have to be forced to be with a man. It should be your own free will... not because you need a dollar, or something to feed your child. Because they take advantage of that situation. I’ve seen a lot of them when I worked in the shelter”. Black mothers in this study discussed how women have little autonomy over who they date and when, based off societal expectations of adequate mothering. They also described how some men can capitalize off the vulnerability of a woman’s situation, sometimes leading to sexual violence that is exacerbated by a subsequent loss of choice over reproduction. For example, one mother states “children grow up and they grow fast. You know, and its hard, its very difficult how the system forces mothers into mothering. A lot of women have been raped that have children”. She continues saying:

You know, they have not been asked to have this child, but they did. They didn’t want to have... some don’t believe in abortions and stuff like that. What are you going to do? I’m talking about women who had good jobs. You know. What she do now? She don’t have a job, she’s going to have to go to welfare which impacts their lives materially, leading to loss of jobs and having to depend on the state for welfare.

This is compounded by being Black as one mother Ava states, “You a single mama. You Black on top of that and you could be treated like you aint nothing” in which Monica responded, “that’s how they do it”. Ava and Monica discuss that the compounding impacts of being Black and a single mother are normalized in society to a point where systems treat you like you are worthless. Black mothers in the community conversations described this as being invisible. They shared how their safety has been deprioritized by society due to being Black, a woman, and

having little income. One mother shared how she feared for her life when living in Skid Row in the 80's. Monica states:

Well when i came here... My daughter was 16 and a half. I almost got killed. They sent me here. I never slept inside again, I always slept in the doorway. I said I'm gonna holler, somebody's gonna hear me holler. I didn't know anything about being on the streets, and I didn't want to go to my mom because I was on drugs and alcohol because of my husband. I didn't want to be inside uh, with family members, because they probably wouldn't understand, and I didn't know how to get release from this stuff. So, I just stayed in the doorway.

She adds,

Wouldn't have dared have my kids out here, it was a no, no. It was a nightmare for me in the 80s. And um, it was hard out here. I'm thankful today that I survived it because I see some stuff out here in the 80s that was unreal. Totally unreal. So seeing it today, and being a part of Skid Row, and stuff like, I'm just so thankful, I'm just so thankful but I would not have had, I wouldn't have no kids, there is no way I could have kids on Skid Row. Not in the 80s. I've seen it as progressive, it has got different, and people look more out for each other now.

Monica's experience encapsulates the impossibility of circumstances that being a Black woman puts you into within the confines of an anti-Black society that is fueled on misogynoir. For Monica, there was no support for getting housing, and no safe way to end her substance use. Given the history of Skid Row being largely male focused and because of previous sexual assault experiences, she explained that she lived in constant fear that resulted in using substances to deal

with the threat of violence. She was unable to have her children, even though she shared later that she desperately wanted them.

These experiences of misogynoir do not disappear once women find themselves interacting with various systems such as “child welfare”. Experiences of misogynoir occur through the trauma that Black women experience once their children are placed under the custody of the state. One mother Keyshia discusses how traumatic it was to see that systems did not know how to take care of Black girls. She recounts this experience to the group, describing how difficult it was to see her child at Child Haven after she was incarcerated:

The hardest thing for me to do was go there to visit my daughter... because that didn't look like my baby. She was always ashy, and her hair was always messed up. And her clothes looked tarnished, and she wanted to know why she couldn't go home with me you know? They were very like... they didn't know how to deal with a little Black girl. Combing her hair and you know putting lotion on an you know I mean all of these different things. It was really really hard for me.

Against what society tries to make people believe, Black mothers' care practices for their children remains paramount to them. Yet, these care practices are not reflected in and often ignored by societal systems. Systems that ensnare Black children were not made to prioritize their care and needs. Though some might think applying lotion or hair combing is not essential, they were extremely important to Black mothers in these community conversations. Seeing her baby in a wrecked state was extremely difficult for Keyshia. It became so bad that her child became recognizably different. This is but one example of society has lacked the intention to cater to the needs of Black women and girls, because they do not deem it as significant. They are rather, punishment systems made to align parents with socially-constructed standards. The

systems in our society were created based on White -typical standards, even though they mainly “serve” Black communities.

Instead of receiving help Black mothers describe continuously being interrogated and psychologically impacted by systems. They say that systems in society blame Black and Latinx mothers for their circumstances, assuming that mothers lack responsibility and are sexual promiscuous as seen in tropes of the Jezebel. Mothers discuss this together:

Monica: And it was all screwed up and by the time they got through drilling her, she was a wreck. She ready to go out there and sell her pussy or get drunk or loaded on some drugs because they screwed her mind up. And all she did was step in there by righteous, by the law, to get help for her and her child. Well, they ask you— when is the last time you had sex? And what did you do after that? It’s all your fault you’re in this situation.

Carmen: They’re built to make us believe “there is something wrong with me”.

Similarly, Maya recalled a time in which this happened to her saying;

This happened with me and my mom, um, they wanted to interview me. And they had me go to the office and they would not let my mom go inside with me. And they said, because they were going to ask personal questions. And I remember, my mom was fighting with them. And um, as soon as I got in there, they were asking questions just like that. When’s the last time you had sex? How many sexual partners do you have? Just weird questions like that.

Several mothers believed that the psychological impact of blame and interrogation has led to mothers of color and children of color wanting to turn to drug use to cope with the violence. The interrogation from the “child welfare” and social welfare systems were deeply traumatic to their psyche and has continued to trickle down through generations.

Due to this societal blame placed on Black and Latinx mothers, many mothers who participated in the community conversations often felt the need to justify their rights. Several mothers described the ways that they were acting righteously, often stating to the group that they were not taking drugs and trying to hold jobs. Mothers often said things like “I wasn’t high, I wasn’t on drugs or anything like that when I had her [her baby]” and “I wasn’t using or anything like that. I was not under no type of drugs whatsoever”. These forms of internalized blame are discussed more in depth in Theme 2 but is generally described as an intentional attack on Black women, to disrupt their ability to heal and progress in society. It is a tactic of the oppressor to keep women subordinated and blaming themselves, as it makes the job of the oppressor easier. In this space, mothers often supported each other and validated their experiences to relieve the self-blame which is discussed more in Theme 4.

The effects of sexism and misogynoir, combined with anti-Blackness and racial capitalism form the foundations that are underlying the systems that Black and Latinx communities interact with. To understand the “child welfare” system, it is important to understand what fuels its practices. The Contextual Matrix of Domination has resulted in the use of various tactics of power that oppress Black and Latinx mothers in Skid Row. These tactics of power include ownership, control, and punishment/criminalization seen in the “child welfare” system and carceral ecosystem writ large.

Theme 2

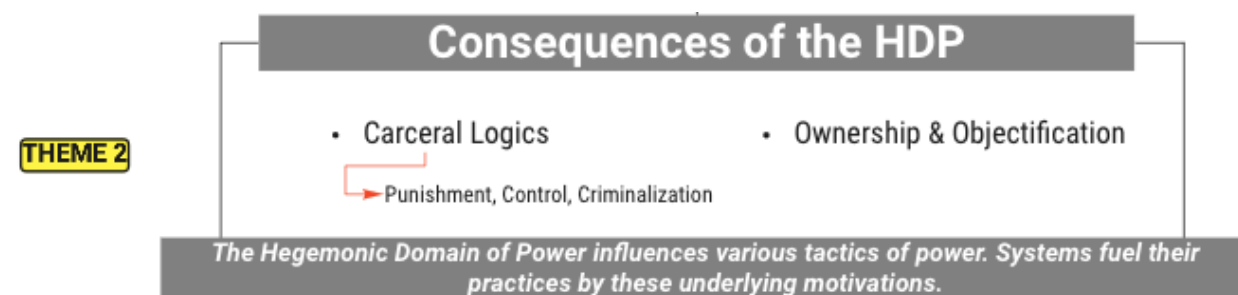
“Before you give birth to your child, it belongs to the system”: Consequences of the HDP

Theme 2 discusses the ways that DCFS utilizes certain tactics of power including ownership and objectification as well as carceral logics (Figure 7). Carceral logics for this study includes the use of punishment, control, and criminalization. These tactics of power are fueled by

the ideological attachments that underpin the “child welfare” system, better known as the hegemonic domain of power as explained in Theme 1. Through experiences of objectification, punishment, and control, mothers in this study described the ways that they have been treated within the system based on categorizations of race/ethnicity, occupation, mental health, or economic status. The systems tactics of power have had long-term generational effects on mothers’ and their communities and are covered in-depth in the subthemes below.

Figure 7

Theme 2: Consequences of the HDP



Subtheme A

“They take them to the plantation” — Ownership and Objectification

The title “Ownership and Objectification” for Theme 2: Subtheme was created based on the recollections and perceptions of system stakeholders and community conversation participants who described how Black and Latinx families are intentionally targeted and treated as less-human by the “child welfare” system. The words ownership and objectification reflect the ways that foster care and adoption have turned into a profitable business, one that several mothers’ find is similar to the profitable violence enacted during slavery. A few Black mothers shared that the “child welfare” systems tactics of ownership and objectification are not just similar to the processes of family separation during slavery, but instead are a *continuation* of slavery through legal kidnapping and human trafficking. Caseworker interviews and archival

documents add to the experiences of mothers', revealing how child removal has been fiscally incentivized, highlighting the particular ways that the system has increased adoption marketing for Black children and children of color.

Across several interviews and community conversations, caseworkers and mothers' described how Black families continue to be separated due to a societal want and need to dominate and own Black individuals. One mother explains the fear she has felt in life due to this stating, "they're so hard on our color. They want our little Black children. And then it's hard especially on Black like women. I don't know about other races but I know Black women they're taking their children away from them." In this excerpt Denise stated that the system is especially hard on Black mothers because they want their children. A caseworker Greg similarly attempted to talk through his feelings around why Black children remain so sought after. He says:

I don't know what it is, and it's not a judgment call... but it's- it's like you have, in my case we've had wealthy individuals that only wanted Black babies. I don't know what that is. I can't figure it out. Only Black female girls- some boys. Um, you had movie stars run through, "We just want black babies. We don't- if they're older than five, we don't want 'em." They want black babies. I'm like is it that they want the melanin in their skin to live on? I have no idea what this- I- nobody ever explained it to me. And that's fine. But it's just- that's- it just- I don't know. You would think that-I mean you know, we saying, you know, you- your preferences, okay. But the just a specifically- not a baby, just always just want *Black babies*. "We want the Black babies".

Greg stated that in his over twenty years of working he has consistently seen Black children be sought after, specifically by white parents with higher incomes. He states that this is something

different than parents stating they have a preference. Similar to Black mothers' recollections of their experiences, Greg discussed how many white families seek out adoption and foster care specifically to get Black children who continue to be funneled into the system at high rates. The cycle continues as a sort of horrendous supply and demand. This occurs despite mothers saying that society does not like Black families. In one community conversation mothers highlighted this contradiction saying:

Jada: They want our babies.

Monica: But yet, they don't like us.

Maya: Yup.

Based on the stories shared by Black mothers' and several systems stakeholders, Black children continue to be separated from their families and communities and are instead being rendered a "possession" or object to be taken.

In the United States owning Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children whether through residential schools, slavery, or indentured servitude has historically allowed for white families to establish precedence, a reputation, and a stake in the capitalistic society. This still occurs today within the "child welfare" system. According to some mothers, separating Black children from their families and placing them with white families became a way for white families to "save" children from being harmed. It has allowed white families to become saviors, to become heroes. Some mothers believe that other organizations within the "child welfare" system, such as hospitals, collude with DCFS to make this process of white ownership easier. A mother states, "So you can go to the hospital, they're like 'Oh, you got drugs in your system. Here you go. Take that baby from you, put it over there with the white people'. Family separation, which dates back to slavery, has occurred not because white families particularly like Black children or

children of color, but because they were and continue to be treated as a means of producing and circulating capital. One mother Maya recalls a time when she was a foster youth living in a home that was part of a secret society. The house was plastered with plaques from DCFS because the family donated large amounts of money, making her feel extremely uncomfortable. Even though Maya and other foster youth in the house were abused, threatened, and mistreated she states that the family was able to do what they wanted to their foster children without DCFS attention because of the amount of money they donated to the system. These normalized processes of adoption and foster care that treat children as object are fueled by the HDP and continue to fuel family separation which exacerbates the cycle of terror for many Black and Latinx families.

Commodifying Family Separation

As reflected by the experiences of caseworkers and mother, the processes of seeking and collecting children has continued into the 21st century and have been exacerbated through various laws that power DCFS. One significant law includes the Adoption and Safe Families Act [ASFA] of 1997, which reflects how the “child welfare” system has continued to be a profit-making machine. ASFA created what researchers and advocates call a “bounty system” (Copeland, 2021b), putting a price tag of \$4000 on children who were to be adopted out of the system. In other words, states were incentivized to terminate parental rights of birth parents and instead place children with adoptive families (Copeland, 2021b). Moreover, ASFA allowed for “reasonable efforts to ensure family preservation” to be undermined if families were at “imminent risk” a standard that remains completely discretionary. ASFA impacted the state of Black families within the system, shattering more bonds legally.

It is especially salient that the phrase bounty system was used by researchers and advocates. Bounty is defined as:

A reward, premium, or subsidy especially when offered or given by a government such as an extra allowance to induce entry into the armed services, a grant to encourage an industry, a payment to encourage the destruction of noxious animals, or a payment for the capture of or assistance in the capture of an outlaw” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

The use of the word bounty reifies the ideological foundations during this time around Black families and broadly family separation. By rendering the adoption processes as an award system, marketplace, or payment for capture, Black children were and continue to be further reduced to a commodity or object by those in power. Commodity is defined by Rover & Lee (1993, p.104) as “anything that possess both use-value, that is, that has utility in satisfying human wants and needs whether essential or fanciful, and that also has exchange-value as a product of human activity”. The definition of commodity provides further reasoning to how the system through ASFA works as a capitalist mechanism, a process of ownership and property. As suggested by a few mothers, Black children are seen as highly sought-after objects that “need protection”.

Figure 8

Black Adoption Festival Archives

'Black Adoption Festival'

A Time for 'Getting to Know You'

By STEPHANIE CHAVEZ,
Times Staff Writer,

Deborah Lane, with a camera around her neck and a notebook in one hand, knelt on the grass and gently stroked the face of a 2-year-old boy.

“Oh, you’re so cute. What’s your name?” she asked, quickly snapping a photograph of the boy. The child shied away from her, but Lane seemed pleased. The 30-year-old Compton woman is going to become a mother soon and this child may just turn out to be her son.

At Victoria Park in Carson on Saturday similar scenes were repeated throughout the afternoon as about 400 prospective adoptive parents gathered to meet 150 black



As seen in Figure 8, a Los Angeles Times news article from May 17, 1987 reads in bold letters, “Time for getting to know you” a byline for the Los Angeles Black Adoption Festival (Chavez, 1987). This byline is accompanied by a picture of two young Black children outside at the festival, smiling with a balloon and a jubilant presumably future adoptive parent or caseworker observing in the background. In the article a spokesperson for DCFS stated “We don’t want the kids to be on display and we don’t want anyone to feel under pressure. What we do is market precious little lives”. Marketing precious lives has been a way in which the objectification of Black children within the system has occurred. In one community conversation mothers referred to this objectification of Black children as “human trafficking”:

Keyshia: Human trafficking. That’s what it is. It’s human trafficking.

Carmen: It is human trafficking.

Keyshia: It’s illegal human trafficking. They can take your baby and give it to whoever the fuck they decide to. That’s crazy. And then, the rest of them that are younger, like 19 or 20 and have their babies, they get to take them and use them for human trafficking.

And keep them in a state of need by giving us WIC and giving us welfare.

In this dialogue, several mothers were discussing how children continue to be “stolen” and “kidnapped” from their custody without hesitation. As stated above in Theme 1’s discussion of racial capitalism and organized abandonment, some mothers describe this form of human trafficking as a way to keep Black and Latinx families dependent on the government, exacerbating the cycle of forced dependence and robbing families the opportunity to live autonomously. The Heart Gallery of Los Angeles who contracts with DCFS, shows the extent in which commodifying language is adopted by the system. On their website the Heart Gallery lists children and their names with the phrase “on hold” for those who are being considered for

placement by adoptive parents (Heart Gallery, n.d.). This language identifies deep issue within foster care being conducted as a business. These words and phrases matter, and they reflect the “missing” experiences of mothers who have had their children taken from them.

Greg, who was a caseworker at DCFS, shared stories about how the child welfare system has sometimes functioned as a profitable system. He states that one of DCFS’ prior directors was focused on detaining children to receive money:

...when the emergency response referral came in and we made contact with the family, if any of child or children were detained, there was a dollar amount associated with that from the federal government. \$1,000. So there was a indirect drive to augment our budget. With, um, the first director I had, "If in doubt, detain." Now that was *his* motto. But the bookkeepers were able to report out to him that we're being fiscally responsible. But that's- that's the wrong way to look at it. 'Cause you could be detaining, you know, kids for the wrong situation.

Greg shared that the system had to change its way of transferring and directing money due to the fact that it was tied directly to children being funneled out of their homes and away from their families. When funding is attached to family separation, caseworkers felt more pressure to detain rather than preserve familial bonds. Later, Greg added that some caseworkers have taken bribes to place children in certain homes. He stated:

Unfortunately, we did have cases where a lot of workers were just unethical. They were getting kickbacks from the, uh- um, those placements. You know, uh ... 'Cause we had discretion to remove 'em. And we had a lot of discretion to remove. We really didn't have to justify it. You know, especially if you got a group home up to level 11. Back ... I mean, last time I checked, we'd get maybe 6,000 or 7,000, you got level 14 and above, you're

getting 12,000, 15,500 dollars. But it- it was like severe, medically fragile, uh, severe emotional abuse. But you got cases where, hey, what am I gonna get if I place this child here?

The ability for workers to have discretion over placement decisions created a way for them to profit off the placement of children into various group homes, which was not based on the premise of “well-being” but was grounded in personal greed. This monetary value to child placement seeped across statelines where one caseworker says that agencies would harbor children until invoices were sent out. These stories from caseworkers affirm mothers in the community conversations who claim that the system not only ignored their material needs, they harbored money and capitalized off of their suffering. One organizer Joi feels similarly as she recounts her mutual aid work stating,

And so, just like the frustration of where the funding— where the money is, is within coercive systems. And not wanting to point people towards them and wanting to safeguard their families, but also wanting people to have what they need right now. I think is like something I've been thinking about a lot.

Joi discusses in this excerpt the difficulties of trying to help mothers and families who have been objectified and commodified by the system and who are continuously shuffled into preventative services that continue to harm them. She states that funding is held up in coercive systems and thus there is not much available to help people with their material needs—the main reason the system targets them in the first place. Instead of placing money directly into communities and families, money is made off the constant suffering of families and is placed in systems that continue to harm and entrap them. As such, the cycle of objectification and ownership continue with ease.

Generational Harms of Ownership and Objectification

Ownership and objectification as tactics of power have led to generational harms for those involved within the “child welfare” system. More than half of the mothers who participated in the community conversations had previous experiences in the system themselves, and the two generations after them were subsequently involved in the system. Keyshia, a mother who participated in the community conversations, stated that the goal of the system is to control the reproduction of families. This control determined “how this next generation is, where your ties are, and where your community is”. Another mother Maya agreed and shared how in her foster home she saw a foster parent attempt to control reproduction by claiming the child of a foster youth whom she was placed with. She explains:

The other girl that was in the foster home, she told me that she was pregnant and she [the foster mother] had already claimed the baby inside of her. And she told me that the child was hers. And I was so confused when she said that because how was unborn child already gonna belong to you if that was just a girl in the foster home?

The claims to ownership of foster youth and their unborn children is deeply problematic, and indicative of entitlement that reaches far beyond the current context of the system. Members in the community conversation described the “child welfare” systems claim to ownership as extending over flesh and body saying, “Owning someone than owning their child... you own reproduction that way”. As seen in the era of slavery, the control over reproduction and the revocation of Black mothers’ rights to their children is a violent act that attempts to diminish any power that a Black woman might have in society. These acts of ownership were necessary to maintain the treacherous cycle of capital production through the birthing of new slaves and new bodies to work on the plantation. These violent acts seen in the control of reproduction attempt to

continue diminishing Black and Latinx women's humanity. Mothers discuss this in one community conversation saying:

Keyshia: I feel like they wanna keep black families separated.

Monica: Yeah, they do. Yeah.

Keyshia: They don't ... They don't wanna keep ... Because with the majority of Child Protective Service cases-

Monica: (laughs) They're black kids.

Keyshia: I see Mexicans and white people in the courtroom, but I see majority Black kids.

Monica: I see mainly the Black kids now.

Keyshia: The other children gonna get sent back to their parents.

Keyshia: They don't send the Black kids back.

Monica: No, they let them ... They ... And that's the truth. They don't wanna send the Black kids back. The white folks getting the Black kids now.

Keyshia: They doing it like they were doing it before.

Monica: They don't even like Black kids. What they doing with the Black kids?

Keyshia: Before, the way they was breaking it up was, they was like this. They have the family, right? They take them to the plantation.

As mothers discuss above, Black children deliberately do not get sent home to be with their families. This is why Keyshia finds the "child welfare" system to parallel the plantation. The plantation is where children are taken to their owners, away from their birth families and their community.

As outlined in Theme 1, the removal of Black and Latinx children from their homes is described by several mothers as more than just a breaking of relational bonds, but is also a way to ensure that communities remain in a state of need and subordination. Keyshia states above that people within the system have the authority to do as they please with Black women's babies, and more than that, have the power to control the next generations of children by taking them as well. The cycle for Black women continues due to the endless effort to target and subordinate women of color. When asking mothers what the role of the system is to them, they reiterated these statements saying:

Keyshia: I think that they play a role, they kidnap.

Jada: So this is why I say they need to be shut down.

Maya: Yeah.

Jada: They not, they not DCF... They are dividing and conquering families.

As Jada points out, the United States conquest to own and conquer has been used to divide and separate families, or what mothers deem as legal kidnapping. For Black mothers within the community conversations, this violence within the system is significantly impactful to their ability to build generational bonds and impacts their health and mental health— just as slavery did.

Some mothers believe that the state, through the “child welfare” system, claims and retains their right to children once they are born and once they are removed from the home. They say:

Ava: They retain the right to still come back later. I done everything I was supposed, why you reserving the right to be able to come back into my home?

Denise:...because yall don't have custody.

Ava: You have to go file for custody of your child before you give birth to your child.

Maya: Yes.

Ava: Before you give birth to your child, it belongs to the system.

Ava later adds,

Your kids are automatically ward of the state of California. If you're pregnant, like I was, and I miscarry, right? I would go to court right now to file for full rights of my child, because it's my child. Not the states.

This sense of system and state ownership is the reality for Black mothers involved in the “child welfare” system, who must constantly be aware of how and when they can ensure they have protected rights of their own children. For Black women this often includes thinking about their rights and their children’s rights before they’re even born. Ownership, a tactic of power that is consequential to the matrix of domination and HDP, is not just violent to mother’s ability to make autonomous decisions — it intentionally aims to violently disrupt Black futures that are yet to be lived out.

Subtheme B

“Why are we being treated like the enemy?” — Carceral Logics & Family Policing

Theme 2: Subtheme B discusses how the systems use of ownership and objectification is coupled with tactics of punishment and control. These specific tactics of punishment and control are subsumed under the name carceral logics which builds off Foucault’s ideas around carcerality, discipline, and confinement. More than half of the system stakeholders interviewed for this study stated that carceral logics largely define the role of the entire system. The role of

the system as defined by these stakeholders have both individual and broad implications for Black communities and communities of color in this study.

Beth, a system stakeholder, believes that the inherent role of the system has been to punish and criminalize families:

Well, the role, if we're talking about specifically DCFS and Department of Children and Family Services or Administration of Children Services in New York or whatever else they call themselves, the purpose is to police families... and to primarily police Black and brown families living in poverty.

Another DCFS caseworker echoed Beth saying, "Okay. I mean, as it is, it's really hard to say that the role of the child, child welfare system is anything other than punishing and regulating families, predominantly families of color or Black and Indigenous families mostly". One DCFS caseworker additionally shared that the system hasn't been about welfare, but instead has been forcing and policing families to meet notions of what people in power think a family *should* look like. Further, an organizer states that the role of the system is embedded in control not care:

Care is just not something that the system is really capable of. Because the purpose of it is not to care, it's never been to care. It's been one, like- out of just fear you know, like, one, like, fear of certain communities, fear of black communities, fear of brown people, but also, like, the fear that you always hear them say of like, "Oh, the child's going to be killed or something bad will happen." So they're just always operating out of that extreme fear and then also just trying to control people, trying to keep people in place, trying to keep people dependent on something, trying to keep people, you know, from, uh, subordinated. They might, the system might do a little bit of care along the way to doing what its real purposes are. But it's bottom line purpose is never gonna be care.

As described by mothers and organizers, the role of the system for years has been to cause harm and incite violence on specific communities. This effort to control families requires society to believe that families deserve punishment. For this to occur, mothers must be either labeled, criminalized, or fully erased from the picture. To ensure that society believes the system is successfully saving children from underserving or harmful parents, it must subsequently delineate forms of punishment that are based on these false narratives that they create and perpetuate. These forms of punishment include and extend beyond child removal, making family reunification extremely difficult and contingent on “compliance” with the systems expectations. Forms of punishment and control leads to an alteration and sometimes permanent shifting within the fabric of communities. According to several mothers and stakeholders it has resulted in the deputization of communities and the generational dismembering of families. The violent processes that are fueled by carceral logics, and the ways that they shift the landscape of Black communities, are detailed below.

Controlling Mothers’ Rights through Criminalization

As stated above, efforts to exert control over individuals in the “child welfare” system has depended on mothers’ and their actions being labeled, criminalized, or erased. Instead of attributing families’ issues to societal failures, the system instead perpetuates individualized blame and pathologization. The labels that the systems places on individuals are largely based on societal stereotypes or assumptions that also function as the systems justification for future punishment. All mothers in this study experienced this exertion of control over their lives and discussed the ways that the system was constantly “building up this monster of you” to other people. This had the most impact when the system convinced mothers own children that they were “no good”. According to several mothers, the system coerced children into believing that

their families were not the best option for them. One mother Renee shared, “And you know my daughters gonna think my mom was crazy. [saying] She doesn’t know how to act and I don’t wanna be with my mom”. This was extremely painful for mothers who were constantly battling to keep their children. Community organizers also recalled seeing this occur within community agencies who worked with children in the “child welfare” system. Joi explained,

It was a very unique way to see like the damaging narratives that community-based programs, quote-unquote, are inflicting upon children and like the narratives about their families that were being inflicted upon them. And so like, I'm doing that work, and I'm like, okay, well, this doesn't look like help and it definitely doesn't look like healing, right? These are kids with a lot of trauma. And you have mostly white mentors, you know, telling them like their moms are no good, like, just really like damaging terrible things.

Joi states that these damaging narratives distract from and disrupt the healing that is necessary for families, and yet it is often overlooked due to organizations’ reputation as “helpful community resources”. The control over the narratives of mothers, children, and communities gets taken up by academia, policy, and the system creating a damaging cycle that is constantly being reinforced to rationalize the treatment of families.

Even when mothers had underlying mental health conditions, they found that their conditions were exploited by the system. Denise told the group how her family was treated poorly when they reported that her grandchild had been molested. She states:

These people don't want to hear nothing you were telling them about what your sister did to you. They told your mamma she was crazy. That she didn't know what she was talking about because she had mental issues. But this is the worker that we were dealing with.

She added,

My daughter is diagnosed um, um, schizoaffective. So because she's diagnosed schizoaffective they already judged her. They say she was retarded she can't handle nothing. So they literally put in a report that my daughter was hallucinating. And they went after my granddaughter tooth and nail, the whole three years. [...] And my daughter didn't have any teeth, stereotyping her, "oh you've been on drugs all your life you don't have no teeth". No, my daughter have no teeth because she had gingivitis, she has a gum disease, that's why she has no teeth. Not that that has anything to do with my granddaughter being molested.

Denise shared that because her daughter was labeled as "crazy" her granddaughter was not only removed from their custody, she was never given care to help with the abuse that occurred.

When her daughter tried to report any grievances, she was labeled as hallucinating or as a drug addict. Denise explained that the caseworkers were constantly attacking and blaming her daughter while simultaneously ignoring her and her granddaughters needs. This was a common reoccurrence with Black and Latinx mothers in the study who were often criticized and subsequently punished for any "imperfection", resulting in their children being taken away for reasons other than "safety".

A few mothers were also shunned for the jobs they were working, which led to caseworkers justifying their assumptions about mothers' inability to care for children. Jada says, "Instead of them telling me.. I'm- I'm excited to get my kids to come home.. she says to me, in a meeting, 'How are you going to take care of all these kids off of a Target job?' In the front of my kids. She said that to me". These stereotypes and the labeling of mothers leads to subsequent domino effects within the "child welfare" system and in mothers' lives. Words have immense

consequences within a system who has the power to govern who should have their rights revoked, under what conditions, and when.

Criminalization of Poverty and Substance Use. The “child welfare” system has not only created false and harmful narratives about mothers, it has also criminalized them based on their economic status and living conditions. These constructions of criminality have been rooted in discretionary judgements about child neglect by the system, a concept often made synonymous to conditions of poverty. Many mothers experienced having their children removed from their custody due to these nebulous and discretionary definitions of child neglect. These definitions of child neglect remain highly subjective and what some mothers referred to as “racialized meanings of neglect” that were created by white individuals and institutions.

Documents from DCFS show that the Structured Decision-Making Tool or SDM that is used in Los Angeles to assess risk of maltreatment continues to build from these definitions of neglect. The SDM is critical to caseworkers in their decision-making process regarding who gets to stay in the home, and who should be separated from their families. One example from the SDM policy manual states that “child’s health/safety is endangered” when “the caregiver has willfully not provided adequate clothing, shelter, supervision, care, or medical care AND there is imminent risk of serious illness or injury; or serious illness, serious injury, or death has already occurred” (Evident Change, 2021, p.26). Under this discretionary description, they suggest that when assessing for neglect workers should “consider child’s age, behavior, and vulnerability. For example: Housing conditions result in lead poisoning, severely exacerbated asthma due to smoke exposure, and/or multiple bite infections. Child is not supervised to the extent that the child has been seriously injured, is at risk of being seriously injured, or avoided serious injury only due to intervention by a third party.” (Evident Change, 2021, p.26). Yet, there is no common standard

for what caseworkers should use to determine if a child is “too vulnerable” or behaving out of the norm. Moreover, the SDM defines “general neglect” as inadequate food, inadequate clothing/hygiene, inadequate/hazardous shelter (such as rotting food), or inadequate supervision (Evident Change, 2021, p.28) amongst many other discretionary standards that directly correlate with conditions of poverty. These definitions of neglect reflect the criminalization of poverty that reiterates the belief that those who are not able to access material supports or adequate housing options are neglectful.

All mothers within this study directly experienced consequences stemming from these discretionary definitions of neglect. Maya, who had experienced houselessness, told the group that her child was removed from her because she had no address. She states, “I remember when I went to court with my kids and they told me that if I didn't have a mailing address that I wouldn't be able to meet in the court to get my children. So they took my children that same day because I didn't have a mailing address”. Often removals for child neglect were based on even more abstract and discretionary reasons. Jada recounts how she left her children with her partner due to the inability to take care of them on her own. However, her children ended up being removed due to the cleanliness of her partner's house. She says:

But before I could do that, they took them from him. They took them from him. The toilets were stopped up, backed up. The, the kitchen had roaches in the refrigerator. And, um, before I could get 'em, and because I didn't have nowhere to take 'em, they put 'em in the system.

Unfortunately for Jada, she had no choice in the placement of her children once they were in the system, as she did not have “suitable housing” that met the standards of the system at the time, even though her children were not *actually* being maltreated.

Interestingly caseworkers interviewed for this study had differing opinions when it came reporting neglect. Greg, a DCFS caseworker, confirmed that children are removed based on their outward appearance and assumed cleanliness saying, “you know, we see the neglect. We see the fact that they're dirty, disheveled, wearing the same clothes every day, you know, that type of thing”. Even though the predominant reason children wear the same clothes every day is due to lack of materials resources. Other stakeholders believed this assumption of neglect to be false. Ramon who was also a previous DCFS worker says that the system claims they do not remove children for poverty, yet they make neglect synonymous to being impoverished. He says, “people always say like, oh, we don't take children away because of families living in poverty. But they still do. They basically just call that neglect”. Another caseworker Erin states that due to these standards within the “child welfare” system, teachers become overzealous in reporting. Many teachers will erroneously consider standards of cleanliness synonymous to neglect, even if the children might just be experiencing poverty. She says:

...maybe they don't really know how to interpret what's going on in the home, and like, they'll call the hotline and report that the child, let's say, "The child has come to school with the same clothing, like every day, every day this week, or the child comes to school and they're kind of like, you know, they kind of like smell, like maybe they haven't taken a bath." And so to them that's neglect. But to us as social workers, we think about it, and then- then we turn it back on them, and- and we'll tell them, "Well have you ever considered that maybe the family's very poor, or homeless, and they don't have a place where they can ba- bath every day-... or this is the only clothing that they have? They- they have to wear it the whole week".

She continues explaining,

...I think sometimes the way they see information, and to us that's not neglect. The- the fact that the- the child has a pair of clothing, even if it's the same one for the whole week, that doesn't mean that the parents are being neglectful. So we kind of put it back on them, and try to make them understand that the situat- that the family, maybe the family's homeless, or they're experiencing, you know, certain issues, to kinda try to educate them on what's abuse and what's not. And to try to prevent them from calling the hotline over simple things like this, that really are kind of like a waste of our time.

Erin states that it is incorrect to hold neglect and poverty as synonymous, especially given that families experiencing houselessness do not always have options to keep up with the hygiene standards that have been normalized. Signs of failing to meet certain hygienic standards within our society has become criminalized. One caseworker Andrea adds that poverty or houselessness does not legally equate to a safety risk. She says that caseworkers often have to consult with attorneys because of these discretionary terms that are often holding families to a middle-class standard:

And we always have to consult with attorneys. And it has to be like on a legal basis, too. Because like I'll have a case right, and they're like, "Oh, like, why would you close this case" and stuff like that. "But is it, is there a safety issue"? You always have to connect it to safety. Like, are, okay, it might not... and it's called, we call it, "minimum level of sufficient care". Okay. So when- whenever we open up the case, what was, what is the bare minimum? Not that we're, we're not even trying to have this family at like my ideal, right? Of like, uh, middle class family that, you know, that's going to the, like having like gatherings all the time or spending super quality time all the time. No, it doesn't have to

be my ideal. It has to be, "What is the minimum level of care that this family needs"?

Like just for them to be reunified. So they may not have the best of everything.

She adds,

You don't need to focus and compare them to other families. This is for this one family, just as long as there is no safety problems which means like, you know, any type of abuse towards the child. Other than that, it doesn't matter, like the poverty level. It doesn't matter... It doesn't matter if they're homeless, you know? As long as the children are not unsafe, then, hey, that doesn't matter. 'Cause I've had like parents complain to me, like, "Oh, you know, the mom doesn't have a crib for the baby." So what? That's doesn't sound... That's not enough for me to detain, because she doesn't have a crib for her. She has financial needs. [...] Also, like if the house is not, you know as tidy as you would like it. That is no longer a reason. If the children are failing classes. That is no longer a reason. All you have to do is then just connect them and provide them with the help that they need and you walk away.

Caseworkers acknowledge that these terms can often be used to police and criminalize mothers and their circumstances, even though they are not grounded in any safety concerns. Rather, these notions of categorization stem from a “failure” to meet societal expectations for “adequate parenting”. These abnormalized standards, such as affording a crib or having a dirty house, have contributed to the funneling of Black families and families of color into the system for decades without being addressed.

Simultaneous to the criminalization of poverty, mothers in this study also experienced being labeled as drug users and drug addicts. This criminalization presumed that mothers engaged in “illegal behavior” and that behavior justified the removal of their children. These

assumptions about drug use stem from a long history of criminalization in LA county. An article from the Los Angeles Sentinel in 1992 reads “adoptions up dramatically among African-American children”, describing an adoption increase of 31% in LA County (Los Angeles Sentinel, 1992). Peter Digre, DCFS director at the time, stated that the boom was directly correlated with the increased use of crack cocaine and removals of infants once they were born (Los Angeles Sentinel, 1992). During the “crack cocaine epidemic” DCFS amp up its efforts to publicize the “availability” of Black youth who they wanted to market through adoption fairs and television broadcasts. This predominately impacted Black mothers while there was also rampant incarceration of Black men due to severe criminalization policies within California. In LA, the criminalization of mothers went as far as eugenics and sterilization practices (Figure 9). Mothers in Los Angeles were paid \$200 to tie their tubes in exchange for sterilization by a program run in Orange County (Los Angeles Sentinel, 1997). The program was called CRACK or “Children Requiring a Caring Kommunity” now called Project Prevention and was created by a woman to reduce the “amount of drug-addicted babies taken from their mothers at birth and placed in foster homes” (Los Angeles Sentinel, 1997). The same woman herself adopted four children of one of the women who she sterilized. She states: “People who used to be drug addicts told me \$20 would be enough. All they’re thinking about is getting money for drugs. Most of the people are probably going to use the money for drugs” (Ourlan, 1997).

Figure 9

Sterilization Practices in Los Angeles County

Crack Moms Paid to Have Tubes Tied

Two women from Los Angeles and Orange counties who have given birth to several addicted children have accepted offers to have their tubes tied in exchange for \$200, it was announced last week.

dicted babies,” Harris said.

Harris announced several months ago that she had come up with CRACK to reduce the number

See Moms on page A-5

Project Prevention is only one example of the violence placed onto Black and Latinx women who are also involved in the “child welfare” system.

Denise, Ava, and Renee were three of several mothers who shared how harmful assumptions of substance use and subsequent criminalization was to them and their ability to be with their children. Ava shares, “They just take your kid from you, right. And tell you, ‘You crazy. You a drug dealer’. They go off with so much stuff that has nothing to do with your kids”. Renee felt similarly saying, “Right now I believe that they got me labeled as a person who incapable a drug addict that always like having outbursts”. The criminalization of mothers made it easier for the system to remove children, as they had ample justification and societal support to “prove” that children were not safe. At times, this criminalization led to mothers being completely erased by the system. Renee shared that as a foster youth the system told her that her birth mother was dead,

I was in foster care so I didn't really go through a lotta stuff that, you know, yall was saying, but I did go through a lot. They told me that my mom was dead and I did not get a chance to see my mom, you know, until I was like 18 years old.

Another mom shared that the system tried to change her babies name without her knowledge, They tried changing my daughters name behind my back and I had to go to court saying change it back again. I was going to court for her, and when I gave her, when I gave them the name they was like, "Oh we don't know who that is, there's not a name like that in the system." So I had to go back upstairs, and this lady says, "Oh no, that's not her name".

I'm like "no, THAT's not her name, that's not her name".

The complete erasure of mother's existence enabled the system to feel justified in its decision to remove children from their homes. It is part of a long legacy of societal attempts to erase Black women and dehumanize them, a clear example of how the HDP within the contextual matrix of domination continues to seep into the system. Some mothers say that this erasure is the systems end goal:

Ava: I don't matter where... we don't matter no more when they take your kids from you. They stop helping you, they stop calling you, they stop giving help. You no longer exist.
Monica: That's true.

Ava: They, they did what they came to do. Take your child.

Once DCFS takes mothers' children, "what they're supposed to do", mothers feel that they no longer exist—that they are no longer necessary. It has created justification for the subsequent punishment from the system that many mothers have had to endure.

"Dismembering Families" as Punishment

Punishment within the system is directly connected to how the system controls and shift narratives of mothers. Although punishment includes the obvious violent act of family separation, mothers continue to experience punishment after removal of their children through expectations of compliance and the simultaneous loss of rights to visitation, information, and decision-making power. Further, through the use of carceral logics, mothers' also lose what system stakeholder Beth calls "constitutional rights".

All mothers in who participated in the community conversations explained that part of the systems attempt to control their rights was made possible through the dismemberment of families. The use of the word "dismember" is extremely important to note. Dismemberment is defined as, "To cut off or disjoin the limbs, members, or parts of" and "To break up or tear into pieces" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Dismember connotes a type of violence that is not seen when we use words like "remove" child from the home or "place" child in out-of-home placement. Similarly, it signifies a steep departure from using words like "impact" communities. Maya's use of the word "dismember" depicts the violence that occurs within family separation. There is a cutting off or disjoining— there is breaking and tearing. Maya defines "dismembering families" as a loss of family, the ultimate punishment for mothers in her eyes.

The dismembering of families as punishment occurs through various "child welfare" system processes. These processes include the prevention of contact between mother and child, the restriction of visitation, and the revocation of mothers' rights over parenting decisions. One mother Renee shared that once her daughter was removed from her custody, caseworkers did not let her know where her daughter was located or how to contact her. She additionally stated that she had not been allowed to visit her son without "proper" justification. Keyshia additionally

shared that after being incarcerated on a false charge, she could only visit her daughter twice a week and until her classes and drug testing were completed. She said,

... They took my baby that night. So I went to jail and I got out two weeks later. I had to find my daughter. And I found her, she was in a foster home, and I had to go down there and figure out— sign up to see what they needed for me to get my baby back. And they was like, "Okay, well, you got to go through the drug test, you go to go through the parenting class, you have to go to anger management class and, um"... "And then you have to come here twice a week to come and visit your daughter."

Both Keyshia's and Renee's visitation rights or lack thereof, were hinged on how the system labeled them. They required compliance with the systems requirements, and if that wasn't enough, it led to caseworkers' refusal to share any details regarding their children's whereabouts. Another mother Ava shared that she was only able to see her daughter once a week because of her marijuana use, which is legal in California. Further, it was extremely hard for her to visit her children because they were placed so far. She explained:

They took my son for marijuana. And I'm in a drug treatment program. [...]. You gotta understand, my mama just died, lady. And she came and took my son. I did everything to get that baby back. And they only gave me one time out of every week to see him. One time out of every week to see him! And you wanna know where I had to go see him at? Pasadena. And I live in Compton. I had to go to Pasadena every Saturday or Sunday.

However these people see fit for me to see my son.

Ava described the ways that her visitation was directly tied to the convenience of the system, having no say when and where she could see her own child. She stated that it was extremely difficult as she was trying to work to be able to provide for her children, while also trying to get

housing to get them back. The mothers in the community conversation chimed in saying that the system gets to decide when you can be in contact with your children. They stated:

Renee: It's always a loop that I have to go through... to be able to see her. Or I can't get in touch with the foster mother. She's not answering the phone.

Denise: But they can contact you when they want to.

Monica: Yes, they can.

Moreover, Renee describes how the system revokes mothers' decision-making power regarding who can see your children and when. She shared:

I got a order to say that my dad, I don't want my dad to visit her because um, he has a problem with lecturing and getting mad all the time. And he gets very frustrated all the time. [...] and they went against me and they asked me to allow my dad to see her. And uh, they stayed in touch with my mom. I don't want my mom to have no contact with any of my kids because she has her own issues, she's doing drugs, and she's a totally different person.

Monica: Hm-mm-hmm (affirmative)

Renee: And I don't want my kids around any of that and they did the opposite.

This complete overhaul of mothers wishes reflects a disregard of their voices and their rights as previously stated by Beth.

One caseworker Andrea argued that the system exerts these tactics of power to ensure that parents are implementing changes that the system requests. She explains:

So they're doing services, right? But not just because you took a parenting class does that mean that... What did you gain from it? I need to understand that you understand something from it and how will you be able implement that in your life and what are the

changes that you're going to implement as well. And then once you do have the children, I need to be able to see that you're actually implementing those new changes.

This paternalistic explanation of compliance was felt by mothers in the study and described as a relentless battle. They say that it is often impossible to juggle all the tasks that the system requires and to also meet the “expectations of character” that the system workers assume ensures child safety.

To further ensure compliance, DCFS relies on both coercion and threats. The doubling down on punishment, and threat of more punishment, keeps mothers in a mental bind. Ava shares, “Every time something happens, you know, she [the caseworker] feels like I'm not doing what I need to do, she's threatened to take my daughter. Every time”. Maya adds to Ava’s story sharing that she only was promised help if she gave up rights to her child. She said that the caseworkers told her “We cannot help you unless you- your daughter ends up on foster care”. Instead of attempting to rationalize this loop of punishment and compliance, one caseworker Faith confirms mothers saying that the system focuses on making families dependent on the system by taking away choice. She says:

I think, right now, I don't see the focus being on like, you know, if someone is brought into the sys- some, “let's get them out as soon as possible.” I think that there is a lot of just like, “okay, well then like, let’s” ... They don't say it like this, but like, “let's make these families dependent on us by getting them involved in this service, in this service, in this service,” that they have no choice in. Like they are, if they don't go to this service, then like their kids might... might be taken away.

The systems focus on coercive models of compliance and threat of removal punishes and controls mothers who have already been deeply criminalized as a result of the contextual matrix

of domination. These carceral logics have long-lasting and pervasive impacts on mothers and communities as stated by Shattered Bonds (Roberts, 2002).

Carceral Logics cause Long-Lasting Effects for Individuals and Communities

As stated by Roberts (2002), the “child welfare” systems use of punishment and control has crippling effects that impact Black families and families of color, their communities, and their futures. The system does more than separate families as punishment, it changes the entire fabric of communities by attempting to diminish community power both materially and politically. Additionally, the “child welfare” systems reliance on punishment and control has resulted in long lasting effects for mothers including the loss of jobs, loss of housing, inability to reunify with their children, and years of trauma.

Ava shares that while being in the system, she lost her job and had to stay in a hotel. She shares:

And what it comes down to, I lose my job, I stay in a hotel room, can't get help from the community organization, can't get help from the county building, cuz I been trying to get housing help from them. “Oh, you can't get no help. Only thing you can get is moving assistance”. How am I getting moving assistance if these people talking about you gotta pay, you gotta make double the rent?! Who? Where? I’m barely trying to keep two damn jobs!

Other mothers also shared that they have had their housing revoked saying:

Carmen: And they called and we were living in a car and he put the speaker on and said, "Well, we are calling to let you know that your credit passed. So you are welcome to come anytime." "Oh, thank you very much." You know, "Just bring your deposit, blah, blah, blah. But I want to tell you something about your partner. She is not welcome here."

And one thing that we have to tell you that if you even dare to ha- to give her a key and she's in there, we're gonna call the police on you guys. And you will be evicted with no questions."

Monica: What?

Jada: Huh

Carmen: Because me. You know, I was like "What? What did I do?". But its all this built up situation with the system.

Jada: They take the kids and then they take the housing. Everything gotta go.

Carmen in the excerpt above describes a situation in which she was living in her car with her partner as they applied for housing together. She stated that even though they saved enough to move and had adequate credit, they were unable to secure housing because of her history within the system. She was discriminated against because of problems that were of no fault of her own. In addition to these material ramifications of "child welfare" systems punishment, all mothers explained how punishment had detrimental effects on their mental and physical well-being. The "child welfare" systems punishment reaches far beyond the act of separation, it is consistently ongoing and very damaging to mothers despite their relentless persistence to be reunited with their family. Mothers say that part of the systems punishment scheme is to diminish their autonomy and break their spirits down:

Monica: They want you to be exhausted to give up—

Denise: and that's true. That's basically what they do. They try to break your spirits.

Monica: and let the babies get adopted out of their homes.

Several mothers shared that when you break someone's spirits, you give them a reason not to fight anymore, you give them a reason to not question the "inevitable". Several mothers also

stated that it compounded their feelings of having nothing, making them feel like they're going crazy or that they're "going through the fire". They shared:

Monica: Nothing belongs to you. Nothing. Not even a chair that you can sit in.

Keyshia: Exactly. So, you, you're going—

Monica: Crazy.

Keyshia... you're already on edge as it is.

Monica: Right. And then, then you wanna get, they want you to get a job and separate you from your children.

These mothers described feeling like they were on "pins and needles" at all times and feeling a complete loss of autonomy, all while having to be prepared for the system to test if they were truly being compliant. Tests of compliance included random caseworker visits and documentation of their behaviors at any time.

Moreover, several mothers described how punishment from the system impacted their physical health which led to miscarriages and anxiety attacks. One mother was placed in a hospital on a 5150 for 14 days once her child was removed due to feeling utter and complete distress. Another mother said her daughter was hospitalized and witnessed the deterioration of her diabetes and subsequent kidney failure. These consequences impacted mothers' children psychologically and physically as well. Denise expressed how her granddaughter felt like she was punished for telling her parents about sexual abuse due to her being removed from the family home. She states:

Because she came, she was taught when somebody touches you, or somebody does something that they have no business doing, to come and tell us so we can protect you.

And she did that. And she was took from us for trying to protect her. So now she's so scared she don't want to say nothing.

Keyshia: It's just an example of how people who use your circumstances against you.

Denise: Yeah, she scared they gonna take her again.

In the excerpt above, Denise's granddaughter felt like she was being punished for being open about the sexual abuse that occurred, leading her to not want to open up to her family after their reunification. Some mothers shared that their children felt that they simply were not wanted, which lead to suicidal ideation. One mother shared in tears:

Because at first she came home she hated us, she hated us. Because she really thought we didn't want her. She really felt like we just let her go. I just had to, my dau-, she would tell her mom, "I hate you, I hate you. You didn't want me, you didn't try to fight for me".

Carmen similarly shared that her children were not the same after being reunified. They were so scared of being punished again that they would not tell her anything that happened in foster care. Moreover, another mother shared that her children would flinch anytime she moved her hand. She said, "And I'm not sure what exactly happened, but my- my daughters, every time I- I talked, because I talk with my hands a lot, they would- they flinched".

The systems use of carceral logics had extreme consequences for families not only physically but psychologically. The system is predicated on the replication of trauma and violence, and the undoing of the violence from the system is often a lifelong journey for Black and Latinx families. This is a reality that is not exemplified in the systems mission statements, and it is not addressed through cultural competency courses. Yet, it is the story that many mothers shared over and over throughout the course of the community conversations. It is a

reality that has been rendered invisible, even though these forms of punishment and control are the only reason that the system continues to exist as is.

Carceral logics alter the fabric of communities. Along with the effects that mothers and their children have experienced individually, the system also causes damages to future generations and more broadly communities. Maya describes how the dismembering of families impacts the power of society. She states that there is power in keeping families together, not just because of the bonds between child and parent but because the fabric of our society is strengthened when we empower and care for each other. That is, when families are preserved. Maya suggests that a loss of family, similar to what Roberts (2002) describes, is a loss of community power, autonomy, and integrity. It is one of the goals of state violence. Maya explains that people who lose familial bonds “don’t have any possibilities, any-anything, any opportunities”. She adds that dismembering families forces people to work harder to “achieve what society has to offer”. While Black and Latinx families are forced to deal with impoverishment caused by organizational abandonment and expansive criminalization from legal and regulatory systems, predominately white affluent communities are able to live life as they intended. Family separation is thus one of the worst forms of punishment that mothers say they feel.

When the system dismembers families, it separates children from their ancestral knowledge, inheritance, and culture. Mothers explain that the separation of children from their families and placing them in unknown environments allows for the cycle of “being from nowhere” to continue. It is another way that the system changes the fabric of communities generationally. Monica shares,

The children, once they get a certain age, they move them to another place. So, that kid already has been removed from its culture, any type of family knowledge or inheritance or anything like that. And so now they're, now they're with these new people, and it's already different. They take the men, and they separate them from the women, and then they take the women and children, and then they move them.

Mothers chime in saying,

Keyshia: So, every time the older people— they separate the older people from the younger people. So, they're separating education. The older people can't teach the younger people what they know already, and so you don't learn anything from there.

Monica: Right.

Keyshia: Then, you gotta go to another environment where you're a stranger-

Monica: Mhm.

Keyshia... and then that's how they keep on doing it that way,

Monica: That's right. There you go.

Keyshia: So, now, with this Child Protective Services, they don't have to ... They can do it legally.

Jada shares the permanent repercussions of this saying, “my family, we aint been the same since. We have not, we have not, been the same since. Not one family cookout together. Not one family meal together. Nothing”.

Once again, mothers discuss the parallels between the systems reliance on separation and slavery, highlighting the disruption of ancestral and survival knowledge or what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) might call “lived experiences”. The mothers share how the separation and constant forced movement of Black individuals disrupts their ability to share critical knowledge

between elders and young children, the foundational ability for culture to continue to be shared throughout generations. Although this was an intentional act within slavery, it continues today and is made more insidious because of its blatant legality. Beth, a system stakeholder, shares similar sentiments as mothers saying that the system has “removed them [children] from the village that could've taken care of them. They were placed in group homes or they were moved around the county. They were deprived of the opportunity to have community bond that would then support them.”. The use of family separation controls and shifts the apparatus of community care available to Black families and families of color, an intentional and unintentional form of erasure and disinvestment. This trickles down to individual members and back up to communities, causing a loop of constant impact.

The systems ongoing use of carceral logics has also pushed the community to transform into one that unconsciously and consciously relies on punitive forms of conflict resolution. The deputization of community occurs by enacting and enforcing processes and laws within society that become normalized. The normalization of processes like anonymous hotline calls begin to be unquestioned, with many forgetting that there was a time in which there were *no* mandatory reporting processes. In community conversations mothers shared that because of this normalization and pressure from people in power, all community members and society writ-large become deputized themselves and tricked into thinking that the system is the only way to address harm caused to youth. This was reflected in Theme 1 as a consequence to organized abandonment and continues to surface within the “child welfare” system as a function of control. Mothers share their experiences saying,

Jada: I’m a schoolteacher and it affects me as a mother of nine.

Ava: it seem like... the white lady got it better than us. Cuz if she went through the same thing it wouldn't happen. But it opened up my eyes right. Its a white lady right here, who going through a whole bunch of stuff. It don't mater if she is famous. "Why would you do that with your baby"? They put these people on blast... they don't call DCFS! Either you gonna correct it or you aint gonna correct it. Or if we see it again we gonna put it out there again. But if the cops or DCFS come than oh well that's your fault 'cause we told her. But for us... It gotta be an anonymous call. It could be someone living right next door to you and they gone call.

Jada: Yes girl!

The discussion above exemplifies the difference in how Black and white mothers are treated when they abuse their children. Several mothers describe that with white women, society and the community have defaulted to public shaming or pointing out flaws, if not all together overlooking child maltreatment. They do not rely on carceral systems but rather forms of accountability from the community. For many Black women the default response to harm is for others to call law enforcement agencies, either DCFS or the police. Black families are not given chances to work out accountability within community but are rather directly handed to law enforcement to be punished. This has seeped down into the same neighborhoods that mothers live in and has been highly influenced by narratives pushed by people in power and the media. Mothers say that community members act out of fear of repercussion for not reporting, something that wealthy or privileged families do not have to be concerned about as frequently. Together the deputization of communities, the breaking of ancestral knowledge, and the dismembering of families exemplifies how communities are impacted by the systems use of carceral logics. These carceral logics have acted as rationalizations for other system specific

practices and discourses which have been normalized and thus overlooked. Theme 3 discusses these specific practices of surveillance and the discourse around child protection.

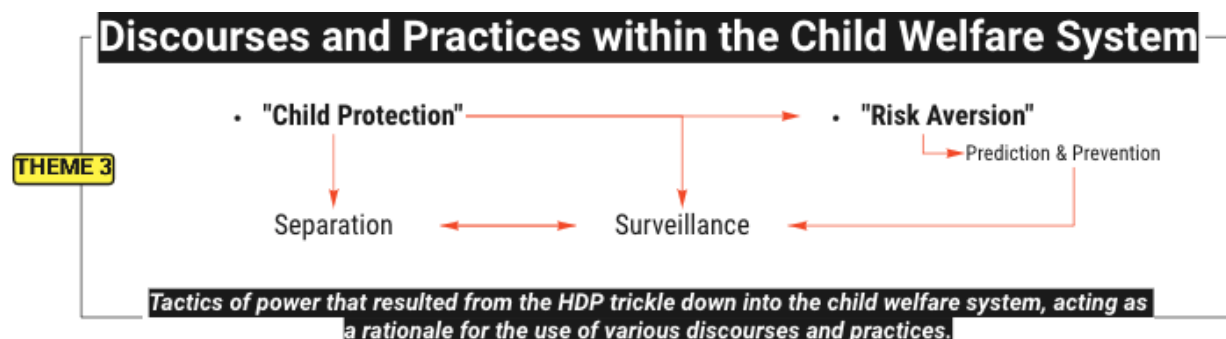
Theme 3

“DCF stands for Dividing and Conquering Families”: Child Welfare System Discourses and Practices

Themes 1 and 2 discussed how the HDP within the contextual matrix of domination has provided a foundation for the “child welfare” system in Los Angeles, and how it has resulted in the systems use of certain tactics of power including ownership and carceral logics. The HDP and its consequences directly impact mothers within the “child welfare” system who live in Skid Row. Theme 1 and 2 help lift up these specific experiences with the “child welfare” system that have otherwise been rendered insignificant or adjacent to the systems narrative of “protection”. In building from and with the first two themes, Theme 3 discusses the ways that the “child welfare” system purports that it is in the business of “child protection”, and how mothers and caseworkers divert or agree with this claim (Figure 10). Additionally, Theme 3 explores how through discourses of child protection and its resulting practices, the system has adopted a stance of risk-aversion. This stance of risk-aversion necessitates a reliance on prediction and prevention which has subsequently led to the systems rationalization of its use of surveillance tactics. Surveillance is used as both a preventative measure and a liability check for caseworkers in the system as shown in previous research (Copeland, 2021a).

Figure 10

Theme 3: Discourses and Practices within the Child Welfare System



Subtheme A

“What are we actually protecting kids from?”— Child Protection as Discourse and Rationale

Theme 3: Subtheme A dives deeper into how the “child welfare” system uses child protection to rationalize its reliance on family separation and surveillance. Child protection is one of the most frequently used phrases within “child welfare” and is marketed accordingly. LA County states on their website that they are the “largest child protective service agency in the nation” and are tasked with being “responsible for ensuring the safety of more than 2 million children” (DCFS, n.d.). In various flyers and information sheets DCFS uses the word protection to reiterate this mission. One flyer created by DCFS (2020) reads “What you need to know to help protect children” as a reaction to the lack of mandated reporter calls made to the agency during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 11). The information sheet proclaims that we can protect children by knowing the signs of neglect, which they define as: children presenting with marks on their bodies, lacking adult supervision, or presenting as consistently dirty. Further, they purport that protection can be and should be handled by calling into the Child Protection hotline as to avoid future criminal liability of the potential reporter. The rouse of child protection has

become attached to the coercion of reporters who otherwise would not be facing jail time or hefty fines. This is made possible through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act or CAPTA which both set forth the definitions of child maltreatment and instituted repercussions for individuals who were mandated to report any “reasonable suspicion” of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Figure 11

Child Protection Hotline

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO HELP PROTECT CHILDREN



1 CHILD ABUSE REPORTS ARE DOWN

Since the pandemic began, calls to LA County's Child Protection Hotline have declined by as much as 50 percent. With children home, the safety net of mandated reporters is not present. We need everyone's help to keep children safe.



2 WHAT ARE SIGNS OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT

- Child with unexplained burns, bites, scratches, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- Child lacks adult/mature youth supervision
- Child is consistently dirty
- Violent altercations can be heard in the home

More signs here: <https://bit.ly/2TObZ30>



3 REPORT SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE TO 800-540-4000

- The Child Protection Hotline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Anyone can report suspected child abuse or neglect.
- Anyone who reports child abuse in good faith is protected by law from civil or criminal liability.
- Callers can make a report and remain anonymous, except for mandated reports.



4 WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I CALL?

After you make a report, the information is reviewed to determine if an investigation is needed or if the family can benefit from extra support. In LA County, families may be connected to agencies in their communities for support. If an investigation is needed a social worker will visit the family to assess for child safety.

 Learn more about reporting suspected child abuse at childwelfare.gov

Child protection, as discussed and marketed by the system, has been used to justify and rationalize the systems tactics of ownership, control, punishment, and criminalization. It has been used within the system as a scapegoat for the violence that has been enacted on families. While some caseworkers claim that the system does indeed protect children and should continue to do so, all mothers who participated in the community conversations argued that the systems definition of child protection does not actually reflect their personal definitions of what it means to “protect” their children.

Child Protection Means the System will Ensure Safety and Well-Being of Children

System stakeholders who believe that the system does and should “protect children” focus largely on individualized reasons for why children are involved in the system. This specific group of caseworkers described child protection as being able to trust parents to advocate for their children. Heather states:

...it means safety. Um, yeah. It means like, can we trust these parents? Um. Can we trust that they will advocate for this child, or they will do whatever they can to keep this child safe, and have their needs met? Um, or that they can, or that they have the resources to be able to do that. Can we trust? Can we trust them? That-that's how I feel.

Heather believes that the role of the system and its mission of child protection is to ensure that individual parents can take care of their children efficiently through building enough evidence that they are trustworthy. Some caseworkers specifically added that ensuring children are protected requires knowing that caregivers can stand up for themselves during violent interactions and seek help. Andrea states that even though people can do this alone, some people are not in the position to change or want to change. She explains:

Hm. I mean, for me, it means like ensuring that they're not being abused in any sort of way, right? Protecting them, being able to protect them. Because a lot of these parents that we see, it's like they fail to protect the children because they, themselves, are scared of the perpetrator so they're not gonna stop them. The children then being physically abused themselves, sexually abused themselves. So for me, it's, like, for you to be able to stand up for yourself and protect yourself and the children... and seek out help, and not stay in that type of situation. So it could be on our own.

These two responses from caseworker focus largely on the individual and believe that mothers must prove that they are able to mitigate the reasons that they became involved in the system. Individuals are expected to navigate their complex situations adequately and up to the standards of the system. These specific expectations stem from the premise that when parents abuse their children, they cannot be trusted by society.

A few caseworkers believe that instead of focusing child protection efforts solely on the individual, it requires attention to both individual responsibility and the family home environment. Erin states “The child welfare system is there for two roles. The primary role is to protect children from abuse and neglect in the home. The second role I think is to help families address the issues that are causing them to perpetuate abuse on their children” She adds,

Okay. So for me, um, child protection, it- it's a two part answer. So- so part of- of child protection, obviously, the biggest one is, if- if a child is experiencing abuse in the home, where we need to remove the child from the home or take some sort of action to get our court involved, and provide the family with services where we're going in there to make the environment in the home better— to stabilize the environment and to address the

issues that are going on so that that child feels safe, and they're no longer abused. That's a big part of it.

Erin believes that stabilizing the environment sometimes requires the removal of a child until the child says that they feel safe. Two other caseworkers go as far to say that child welfare agencies are a safety net and it's their responsibility to "pair children with a loving home" in cases here reunification isn't possible. One says, "the role of the system is a safety net. When the ability of a parent to provide care, control, and custody of the child... if there's a reach or a failure we come in". Greg adds to this saying that "in the event that we can't re-place a child, then we look for the most appropriate permanent placement which will contribute to the wellbeing and thriving of the child until adulthood. That simple". According to some caseworkers, family separation is necessary though it has to be clearly rationalized by the worker and only sought out if imminent safety risk is existent. Moreover, some caseworkers believe that the system protects children by playing the role of a safety net and finding adequate homes to provide children with the ability to "thrive". This group of caseworkers distinctly focus on the issues within the home and family unit without addressing larger systemic issues that might be impacting the families.

There were few caseworkers who agreed with the mission of child protection but acknowledged that the system is not adequately living up to its standard. Greg states that as a caseworker, he sees a disconnect in the systems mission to protect children and its actual practice. He says:

If it takes a village, then why are we- why are children still being, you know, uh, caught up or- or they go through the gaps? There- there's something going on that's not working, so our mission and business statement says one thing but we're still not achieving those

goals. One child that- that is not able to get reunited is one too many. I don't care what the circumstances is.

Another caseworker spoke more specifically about the treatment of Black individuals, stating that the department needs to do a better job at protecting and advancing Black communities, something she has not seen the department move on. Although these caseworkers did not disagree with the premise of child protection, they believed that the system is not yet meeting its goals due to lack of care and lack of training.

No matter the nuance in responses from these groups of caseworkers, all agreed that the system was necessary to ensure that children were not harmed. They believed that without the system, there would be no guarantee of child protection in society from maltreatment. One caseworkers Erin says,

I think, families knowing that a system is in place, and there's laws, a lot of laws that protect children, I think that in itself helps to- to protect children. I don't know, does that makes sense? Because, I think if there weren't laws in place, like families would just do whatever they wanted to do without consequences.

Erin believes that the laws to protect children and the system that enforces them, creates a threat of consequence for families who would otherwise act without regard and abuse or neglect their children. She, as well as others, believe that the pure existence of the system in itself is a way to deter harm, something that is akin to the rationale that has been used to justify the criminal legal system.

Child Protection within DCFS is a Misnomer, a Façade

Contrary to some stakeholders within the system, majority of the mothers and stakeholders in this study believed that the systems claim of “child protection” is contradictory to

its foundational practices. One caseworker believes that the systems' claim of being protective is a misnomer as the system does not address or protect children from systemic issues that impact families. He states:

Hmm, I mean child protection, the little image I get is a white social worker going into a home and taking a kid away that's kicking and screaming who doesn't wanna be taken from her family. That's like the little image that I picture every time, the word, like the word child protection come up. But it's like, also again, protection is arguably a misnomer. 'Cause like you're not protecting the kid from what? You know, like the alleged improprieties of their parents, which are like, not really well-founded, they're not actually protecting the kid from systemic issues that are gonna be following them for their, the entirety of their lives. So again, like what are we actually protecting kids from?

This interrogation of what the system is protecting children from extends the focus and framing of the systems failure beyond individualized blame, and instead calls into question who is being deemed a threat and why. Turning the question back on the system brings into question the ideologies that have caused the labeling of mothers, shifting the onus back onto the system.

Following this line of questioning and analysis Lynn, a previous caseworker and current scholar-activist, says that the systems version of "child protection" is rooted in whiteness. She explains:

But I feel like the system sees child protection as finding ways for Black families to align with whiteness, and like, values of like white parenthood and the white standard of like, this is what parenting should look like. This is what a nuclear family should look like. This is what you should be doing as a mother to parent your children like, this like white middle-class idealistic "Leave It to Beaver" like family type model... that they're basically wanting to be reproduced. That they're trying to basically uphold.

Lynn adds:

So it's like well, you need to have a job. You need to have a dog and a house, all of these different things. And they think that if you have a child within the context of that type of family, then they will be safe, then they'll be protected, they'll have access to resources, they'll have their needs met. I don't think that Black families necessarily look at it in the same way.

Lynn argues that the systems view of child protection is tied to a specific white nuclear family model and as such, any deviation from it equates to children being considered unsafe. It has acted as a way to abnormalize the ways in which Black family's parent. Further, it is attached to the line of thinking that equates having resources to a specific standard of family. Ramon a past caseworker adds that the system is "just trying to like make families meet, uh, oftentimes arbitrary, like notion of what family life should be, what raising children should be, but you're not actually trying to promote their wellbeing." Several stakeholders believe that this version and vision of child protection held by the system does more harm than good. The systems relation to and foundation in whiteness and its subsequent intentional failure to protect children from systemic issues, trickles down into how mothers experience the system.

Most mothers in this study explain that the system does not prioritize a caring stance or attitude. Ava shares that the system treats her far worse than the criminal legal system. She states, "the criminal system did me way better than what they [the "child welfare" system] doing right now with me and my kids". She explains further,

I lost my house. I have slept in my car, I have slept in a tent. Hell, I done been at people's houses and everything, okay? Paying rent to these people. I don't get no help from DCFS for nothing in the world. The last time that I got some help was when they took my boy. I

went to the psych ward. Uh-huh (affirmative). I told them, "Y'all gonna take my kid from me, I swear to God I'm homeless." Everything I told them, happened. "Oh, no, we don't take your housing"... It's already gone. You know DCFS they supposed to give you referrals and stuff, that they want you to do, right? Or a bus pass, or gas quarts. I don't get none of that.

Jada: Me either

Ava: But I aint never heard y'all not help out with housing. If you can take the kid you can help. They didn't care. Once they took my boys from me they gave me a whole new social worker, and you know she was young. And you know what she told me? "They don't care about you."

Ava's experience shows that the system claims to protect children and assist with housing, all while neglecting to provide families with resources or at the minimum— a caring attitude. In this example, a caseworker blatantly told Ava that the system did not care for her, providing her reasoning for the treatment she received. Moreover, this lack of care and lack of provision of resources led Ava to become homeless once again and even caused her to be placed into a psychological ward. Mothers later chimed in, reiterating that the system is unable to provide any circle of care because they lack sympathy:

Monica: I think it's a bunch of bullshit. I think that they do not have a circle of care—

Denise: Not at all.

Monica:... for mothers with children.

Monica: I think it's wrong and I think they need to do something about it because this is real stuff.

Ava: They don't have no sympathy.

Jada: They don't have sympathy or empathy.

Ava: But they want you to drug test though! No matter what!

The lack of sympathy and empathy from caseworkers was explained by one previous foster child and current system stakeholder RJ, as intentional due to the nature of the work. She states,

So it's more like my social worker comes and meets with me, answer some questions, I talk to them, and do all that kind of... uh, it- it's almost like a check list of going down the check list and marking the boxes. And then, you know, with all those other kind of support systems that I've had or other support that I received, uh, it definitely was more personable. I feel like, oh, that's the difference. People did these things or supported me because they wanted to not because they had to or lose their jobs-

In the excerpt above RJ states that the system treated the relationship with her as a foster youth as a business one. The caseworker over her case did not care about her well-being above and beyond marking things off on her list. RJ believed that this treatment was tied to workers being more focused on their role within the system versus feeling compelled to personally support foster youth. This lack of intention and care seeped into the ways that caseworkers provided, or failed to provide, resources to mothers. Lynn, a prior worker for DCFS observed herself as a foster sibling saying,

And even like from a like a very young age I could tell that like the system was not functioning the way it was like supposed to. And I feel like I saw from like, the perspective of a foster sibling, like the ways that my other siblings like were not getting their needs met and were not able to get access to resources. The social workers were always playing games and doing bullshit. And it was just like they weren't... it didn't seem to be protecting them and doing what they needed to be doing.

In addition to this lack of sympathy and care, several mothers and stakeholders like Lynn shared that access to resources for families was either nonexistent or severely lacking. When mothers or their children did receive the few services presented to them, they were often inadequate and insufficient— unable to address the societal ramifications of systemic racism and organized abandonment. Mothers say,

Ava: "Oh, there's nothing we can do. We can't help you." Um, um, um, "You're gonna have to go through all these resources to get some help." These resources ain't helping me.

Monica adds:

When you got a lot of people that's using the system, not properly, it gets all messy for everybody. And especially the people that need it the most. The people inside the buildings, they know relatives, they know this, they know that, and they help them. [...]. But what about the mother and child that don't have a family member, that don't have nobody? And she was, she needed service.

Mothers describe the systems claim of protection as hypocritical due to their experiences of negligence and carelessness from their caseworkers. They explain that people can avoid the system because they are connected to their families who can support them, all while mothers in the system are being punished for experiencing a lack of adequate resources and the connections to resources that they need as single Black women. To make matters worse, one mother explains that the system doesn't just lack connections to resources, they deliberately hide resources. One remarks, "they lie to you and say they aint got no housing. Or they can't help you with housing. They wanna lie to you like you stupid."

The systems lack of care and follow-through with their own mission of protection was described as traumatic for mothers who expected help from DCFS. Though the failure to provide families with resources is indeed negligence and an extension of organized abandonment, several mothers also experienced abuses from the system that were much more heinously contradictory to the systems mission of child protection. Because of this, many mothers and some system stakeholders claimed that the system never intended to “protect” their children, that protection was just a façade to get more money. They claim that the system has been functioning as it was intended from its conception, to investigate and police families. The use of the term protection implied care, but to these mothers, the system was incapable of providing care. Many mothers explained that they believed this because they or their children had been physically and mentally abused while in the custody of the state, all while the system played an “innocent role”. This innocent role to the public has masked the violent treatment of mothers by the system. Two salient examples of abuse in care were mentioned by caseworkers and mothers in this study. These sites of abuse were the Children’s Welcome Center, and its predecessor the MacLaren Hall. Both sites have been shut down due to lawsuits and pressure, however their impact has left an imprint on so many foster youth and families who will never forget.

MacLaren Hall, a prison for “kids no one else wants”. In his interview, Greg a DCFS caseworker, recalled various facilities that have been built over the years in LA County to “assist” foster youth. One facility he mentioned was MacLaren Hall, a probation facility in El Monte that was taken over by LA County in the 60’s to become a shelter for children who could not go home or be placed in foster care. Greg recalled that MacLaren had different cottages for boys and girls, separate living quarters for babies and children with medical issues, and even cottages for transgender children. According to Greg and several archival documents, the facility

was shut down in 2003 after being sued by a foster youth. He recounted that the facility would be extremely abusive to children saying, “Cause what they would do with a child acting up, they restrain 'em, put 'em in a restraint room. Mental health will come back, if it was on a weekend, on Monday. So there was a former youth, foster youth, who had ... who had sued the county”. The Hall’s restraint rooms acted as a way to violently silence youth who were revolting against the abuse occurring within the Halls walls. After MacLaren shut down, Greg says that LA County created a 23-hour facility with USC to hold children.

In an article written in 2021, Julia Walrath describes how MacLaren Hall “warehoused” children, forcing them to live in poor living conditions, and over-medicating (Walrath, 2021). According to her research, the Hall housed over 4000 children a year (Walrath, 2021). Juvenile records describing the abuse that occurred in the Hall were either destroyed or lost (Walrath, 2021). Survivors of the Hall share that it was run like a jail with “perimeter security measures, which include flood lights and a 14-foot chain link fence, topped by five feet of wire mesh” written in an LA time article (Figure 12). They recount the trauma that they still live with due to the systems efforts to “protect them” from their parents, or from the streets (MacLaren Hall Survivors, n.d). One survivor writes, “I remember being taunted by staff and made fun off and treated like an animal. I heard the screams to and knew the story’s of what happens when the lights go out. I had a bed in the hall way when I first-ed arrived so I knew if I didn’t keep my mouth shut about what I heard and seen I was next”.

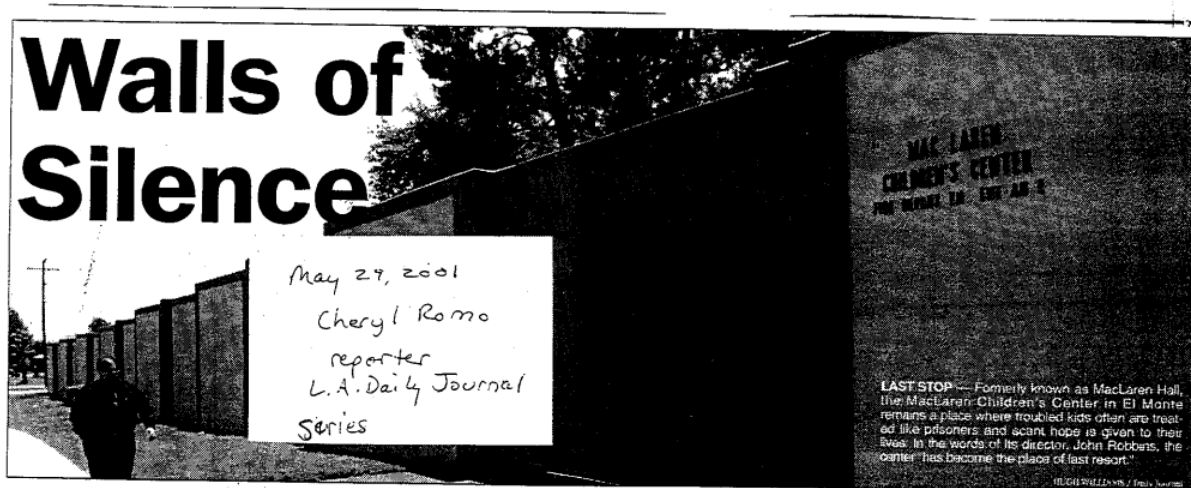
The Hall made about \$270,000 per child each year, raking in money directly from the suffering of children (Fox, 2003). When reporters tried to interview children, they were faced with evasion and excuses from workers (Romo, 2001). The Editor of LA Times wrote, “the little bit we were able to glance at between the slats erected over the thoughts of the children is

haunting. Little beds in a breezeway, a Tiger. Beat on the wall, broken arms and battered souls” (Romo, 2001). The headline of the article reads “Walls of silence: MacLaren Children’s Center has become a hard-edged limboland for kids no one else wants” (Figure 12). The authors use of the words silence and the phrase “kids no one else wants” surfaces major ideological attachments that still occur today. “Walls of silence” indicates the ways that foster youth and their birth families have been confined, punished, and silenced as seen in Theme 2. Moreover, the statement “kids no one else wants” continues to perpetuate the assumption that mothers who have had their children taken away do not want them, when indeed it is continuously reiterated by the system and society that they do not deserve to have them.

The abuses from these “child welfare” system facilities continue to live on today. Although MacLaren no longer exists, the foundational ideologies that rendered its creation possible continue to run through the system. Closing MacLaren Hall was not an easy feat. Similar to the sense of risk-aversion that is occurring now, system stakeholders publicly stated that they were against the shutdown of the facility : “We want children to have families but closing MacLaren does not create families. The county seems to be in a rush. They need to be absolutely sure that the alternatives are in place” (Fox, 2003). Stakeholders continued to make excuses which rationalized the abuses that occurred at the Hall, while also blatantly acknowledging that the resources they provided were insufficient. The haunting stories behind MacLaren were carried over into the systems next rendition of a protective placement for “hard to place kids”, the Children’s and Youth Welcome Center.

Figure 12

Daily Journal Article, MacLaren Hall



MacLaren Children's Center Has Become Hard-Edged Limboland for Kids No One Else Wants

By Cheryl Romo
Daily Journal Staff Writer

In three decades, the memories have not faded. Andrew Bridge was 6 years old when police and social workers took him from his mother. An hour later, he was a prisoner behind the barbed wire, high walls and locked doors of MacLaren Hall.

"It was a brutal place," he said. "A tough place."

Special Report

Things have changed over the years. There's now a yoga class and an emergency mental health clinic instituted by a reform-minded director. The residents have changed, too.

"MacLaren has become the place of last resort," John Robbins, the director of what is today called MacLaren Children's Center, said. "Today, the population has become older, more damaged, more difficult — and that's where the long-term thing comes in."

Today, MacLaren remains a place where trou-

Letter From the Editor

Today's special report on MacLaren Children's Center has been a year in the making. Our award-winning reporter, Cheryl Romo, spends most of her life talking to children and those who have the children's well-being in their hands.

More than a year ago, she began to wonder what was going on behind the walls of MacLaren after hearing reports of beatings and inadequate conditions for the 130 children there. At the same time, she knew a new leader with a strong reputation had been hired by the group charged with improving the institution in the wake of a child's death there.

Her reporting assignment seemed simple enough: Talk to children who are housed at MacLaren as well as others who have been.

Talk, as well, to John Robbins, the new director, members of the governing consortium and lawyers, judges and others involved in helping children. Then give our readers a status report on the lives of the kids whom Los Angeles County is charged with protecting. Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Terry Friedman

gave us permission to interview 10 children, and we were told all were volunteers who were eager, in fact, to have their stories told.

And then we fell into the rabbit hole. At every turn, it seemed, adults found reasons the children couldn't talk, ostensibly for their own protection. In particular, the LA County Counsel's Office repeatedly appeared to find ways to avoid our conversations with the children.

Seven of the 10 children never got to tell us about their experiences at MacLaren.

The County Counsel also denied us access to meetings of the consortium, keeping any meaningful oversight of this vital group out of the public eye.

The title bit we were able to glance at between the slats erected over the thoughts of children is haunting. Little beds in a breezeway, a Tiger Best on the wall, broken arms and battered souls.

It's hard to believe we can't do better.

Katrina M. Dewey
Editor

bled kids often are treated like prisoners and scant hope is given to their lives. It no longer houses delinquents, but it is the only emergency shelter for abused, abandoned and neglected minors in Los Angeles County. Kids facing lesser challenges are immediately placed into foster homes.

After years of lawsuits and attempts at change, MacLaren today resembles the institution Bridge can't shake — with one major exception. Many of the children it houses are severely emotionally or mentally troubled.

"MacLaren was never intended to become what it is today, and that's a mental health facility. It's time for L.A. to recognize that," Bridge, now the chief executive officer and general counsel for the Alliance for Children's Rights, said.

About 130 kids, with an average age of 13, call this place and its military-style barracks home.

During a recent Daily Journal tour of the facility with Robbins, I saw one cottage for 11 girls — ranging from small children to developmentally delayed teen-agers. Nine little beds, most with

See Page 10 — MACLAREN

Children's Welcome Center, a "House of Horror". The Children's Welcome Center that opened in lieu of MacLaren Hall evoked the same violence of its predecessor. Carmen, a mother in one of the community conversations recalls witnessing the abuse of foster kids at the Welcome Center, something she says still haunts her today. She says:

There was a lot of, um, maybe not towards me, but there was abuse towards other kids, and just the- the worst things you could think of. Um, I was, there was this center called, The Children's Welcoming Center, and that's where they put all the- all the kids that were just detained. So babies, toddlers, kids, um, really little kids. They would have them all in that center and, what I saw when I was there was terrifying. They would pull- they would

pull babies, like, they would yank them around like little dolls. They would smack them. They would force feed them. But it was like a house of horror. I- I know now that- that spot is um, no longer... They closed it down. I'm sure it was because of that.

She adds,

The things that I witnessed were um, employees grabbing newborns by their arms and yanking them out of their car seats. Um, then force feeding toddlers that didn't want to eat. Then slamming babies into the crib when they were crying and rocking the cribs violently so they would go to sleep. There were a lot of things that I saw at that specific um, center.

The Center opened in 2012 as a partnership with USC and with assistance of Dr. Astrid Heger who also created the existing HUB clinics that are still being used by DCFS today. HUB clinics are where youth receive exams and “care” when they are being investigated for abuse or neglect. LA Times articles from 2015 called the Welcome Center a holding facility (Therolf, 2015) that placed youth who were “older teenagers, sexual minorities, mentally ill or medically fragile”. A significant number of the youth were said to be “involved in prostitution” (Therolf, 2015). The conditions were similarly bleak like MacLaren Hall, children slept on cots and were not allowed to stay at the facility for longer than 24 hours. As such, Greg says that caseworkers would drive off the lot and come back to restart the clock. Every time a child was at the center for more than 24 hours the facility had to log it as a violation of state regulations. As such there were over 800 violations within one year (Therolf, 2015). Articles from the LA times describe the center as jail like, just like MacLaren Hall. As depicted by the image in an LA Times article in Figure 13, the facility was enclosed by gates, and inside were both employed social workers and guards (Figure 14). Caseworkers would demand teenagers to empty their bags and relinquish their contraband

which included items like glass and nail polish (Therolf, 2015). Children would ask when they could go back to school or home, and were met with cold responses from workers who claimed that answering these questions was not their job (Heimpel, 2016). After youth tried to rush out of the Center and wrestle a gun away from the guards, DCFS began working intimately with law enforcement, locating a sheriff's deputy within the waiting rooms (Therolf, 2016). The center was finally closed after lawsuits, and instead transitional shelter care programs were created (DCFS, 2017). However just as MacLaren Hall is a relic of the past, the Youth and Children's Welcome Center continue to haunt families.

Figure 13

Youth Welcome Center Exterior: Los Angeles Times



Figure 14

Los Angeles Times, Youth Welcome Center Workers



Heger called the Welcome Center an “overwhelming success” that protected children who “come in to the CWC dirty, abused and abandoned”. (Heger, 2015). With assistance from the LAC+USC Medical Center in partnership with the Department of Health Services, the space continues to be operated and provides mental health assessments and interventions outside of its direct contract with DCFS. When both MacLaren and the Youth Welcome Center were closing Heger stated that children would become invisible, a term she used often to describe the ways that children were not coming into contact with the system (Heger, 2016). This use of visibility is one that erases the significance of families who had long been erased by the system. It also reifies what Simone Browne calls the White Gaze, or all-seeing eye (2016). The use of the word invisibility by Heger is in stark contrast to how all mothers in this study described their visibility.

Mothers diverged from Heger’s narrative, insisting that it is contrarily the *hypervisibility* of their movements that funnels them into abusive systems and facilities like MacLaren Hall. This divergence between mother’s and stakeholders’ perceptions and discourse around visibility reflects the distinct differences in the ideological foundations that have rationalized the use of DCFS, MacLaren Hall, and the CWC. Several Black and Latinx families yearn to be left alone by the same system so that they can stop being tracked, monitored, and harmed. Contrarily, some white system stakeholders yearn for children to become more visible to these systems so that they can be “saved” and “protected”. This attachment to visibility through and for child protection has continued to fuel the use of racializing surveillance within the system.

Subtheme B

“It’s almost like a pre-crime approach” — Risk-Aversion and Racialized Surveillance

Theme 3: Subtheme B discusses the ways that child protection as a discourse and practice has pushed the system into a stance of risk-aversion, which consequently has been used to rationalize racialized surveillance within the system. As seen in the PSA flyer from Figure 11, the systems use of “child protection” has opened the opportunity for and depended on the ability to investigate and track families. As one caseworker says, “It is surveillance. But for the safety of the child. like I completely understand. It's not fun, and, you know, and at this moment though because she is part of the court system, we do have to, in a way, surveillance toward you and your family at the moment”. The need to track families is often fueled by external pressures outside of the system, such as the media and politicians, that are adamant about the system preventing child fatalities. Caseworkers describe the ways that they feel the system makes them fear liability, causing them to always act on their suspicions in efforts to protect themselves from being sued or incarcerated. One caseworker Heather says,

I think we operate not differently from like, an emergency room, where, like, we're not in the business of prolonging life. [...] I think a lot of the conversations and a lot of the decision-making ends up being like, well, what's gonna happen if we leave this home? You know? And so in that sense, I'm like, oh, okay, so you guys are worried that something's gonna happen while we're gone and then it's going to be our fault. I, it's just like, it's like a liability standpoint. I'm trying to avoid liability. I can't speak for other counties, but I know that their stated intention [LA County] is, you know, safety and well-being, but-I think a lot of it is, like, just trying to keep kids alive”.

Although Heather recognizes that the system claims to prioritize safety and well-being, day-to-day decision-making occurs under the pretense that it is the systems duty to keep children alive. Because of this, child protection often looks like mitigating risk to prevent future child fatalities, even before there is evidence that it might occur. As Faith discusses,

I know when... whenever a child's death happens, the whole department, just, like, goes into like, emergency mode like "Who needs to be fired, what policies to be implemented?" Like it, there's just like this, um, this fear that also gets put into, you know, the people that work in the Child Welfare Department because I think a lot of people feel responsible. It is... it's really nerve wracking to see when that happens and at least to see the responses of people in power when that kind of stuff happens, like all of a sudden a closed work group starts off.

This risk-averse stance means that the “child welfare” system is oriented towards preventing any possible child death or liability risk in the future.

The “child welfare” system has been very focused on calculating the risk that parents might maltreat or re-maltreat their children. To predict this risk and prevent it from coming to

fruition, the system deploys processes that require large datasets and data collaborations which are often sought out from multiple other organizations and systems (Stop LAPD Spying, 2020). These databases include the Family and Child Index that is shared with several law enforcement agencies and DMH, as well as the Electronic Suspected Child Abuse Report System “E-SCARS” which is a database shared with several law enforcement agencies. E-SCARES comes with a E-SCARS response team that collaboratively investigates cases of child maltreatment with police (LACCGJ, 2020). The use of prediction is only made possible by mass data extraction from different sources including families and is what most people in the study called surveillance. One organizer Key states that the marking of people, including babies who are yet to be born, is like “warehousing human beings within a carceral state and carceral bodies”. The systems use of surveillance is akin to the tactics used to incarcerate individuals within the criminal legal system and is similarly most impactful and burdensome on Black communities and communities of color.

The surveillance that occurs within the “child welfare” system is referred to as racialized surveillance due to the nature of how it unfolds within a racial regime, calling attention to who holds the gaze (Browne, 2015). As described by several caseworkers, mothers, and organizers, data collection has been weaponized against Black communities and interpreted through a “white Eurocentric heteropatriarchal gaze”. One system stakeholder says that looking at numbers has a way of furthering the “racial colonial project of the US”. He adds:

We're really just looking at numbers and then just slapping, using that, to make an argument that ultimately upholds like white supremacy, if I'm being honest. Like I find myself thinking about Dylan Rodriguez, his “White Construction” a lot when I think

about the way we use data. Because it's just like we look at these numbers and then they're ultimately just use further this racial colonial project that is the United States. Racialized surveillance that occurs within the “child welfare” system has exacerbated conditions of hypervisibility within the larger carceral state and society. The systems use of surveillance spreads into systems like schools and hospitals (Harvey, Gupta-Kagan, & Church, 2021 & Copeland, 2021a), due to the need to combat and prevent risks across the board. This data is collected from the surveillance of communities and according to several mothers in this study, often done without true consent. This data is also historical, spanning back for generations for many Black families and families of color. Some systems of surveillance are already being used such as the LA County DCFS Mobile Client portal that allows social workers to access children’s records and upload client photos, upload photos of their homes, be notified when families miss dental and health appointments, and request criminal background information from the Criminal Law Enforcement Telecommunications Systems (Hughes, 2018). However more recently, algorithms have been used to predict risk of harm that has yet to happen using historical data from families.

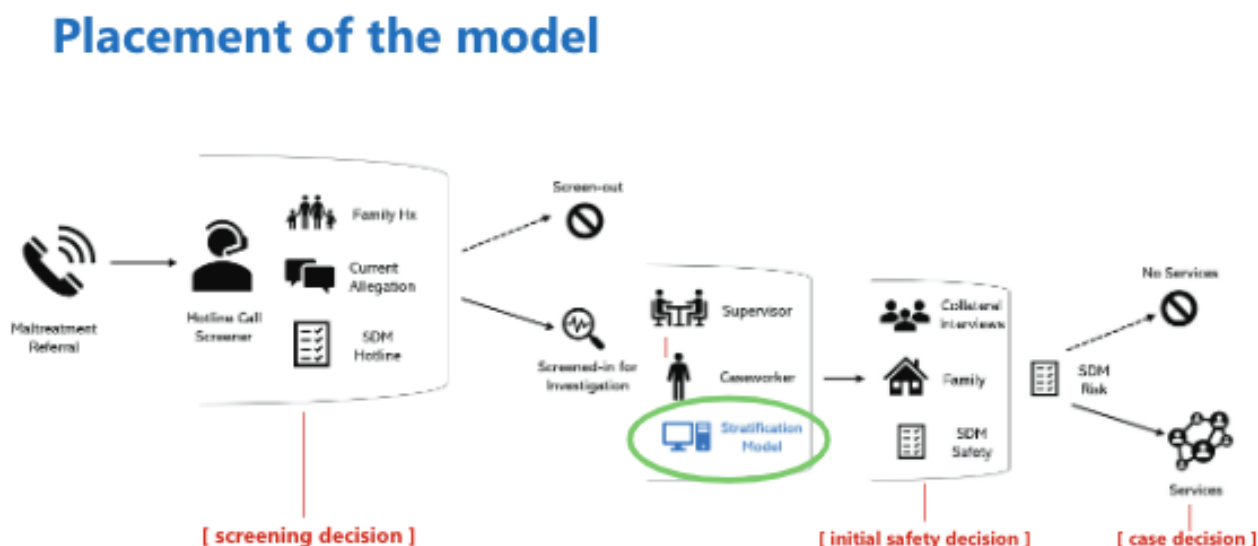
Prevention through Prediction: Using the Past to Estimate the Risk of Future Harm

As discussed in one community conversation, the “child welfare” system often attempts to predict risk of harm to children, sometimes before they are even born. The stance of risk-aversion has created a system that is infatuated with knowing when and where abuse will happen, outlining the steps of Black communities and communities of color before they’re even born. This estimation or prediction of harm is rationalized as “prevention”. To prevent and protect has become the systems way of dealing with child maltreatment. Prediction and prevention are made possible through the use of various algorithms like the Risk Stratification

Model which is currently being deployed in LA county, alongside new machine learning tools that are being used on the Child Protection Hotline. Records turned over by DCFS through a Public Records Act Request show that the new Risk Stratification model is using screening decisions and pre-existing data from systems like the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System “CWS/CMS” to input into a stratification model (Invest LA, 2021). The CWS/CMS includes information like referral date, referral time, referral reporting source, age, gender, current and prior allegation type, age at first removal, positive toxicology, special education referral, and developmental referral (Invest LA, 2021). This information also gets fed into the SDM risk tool which subsequently impacts decision-making on the case (Figure 15).

Figure 15

Risk Stratification Model



The SDM itself requires the input of various levels of data. Caseworkers say this data ranges from health records and demographic data to child behavior data from schools. This data is collected from various partnered organizations and from interviews with parents, children, and neighbors. Erin shares:

On the school side, we wanna collect, you know, "What is their attendance like, do they come to school on time, how do they look when they come to school, you know, are they clean, you know, wearing like clean clothes, do they look like they slept well, like they've eaten well, that kind of stuff. How's their mood? Who brings them, you know, who picks them up?" Um, you know, "The- the chi- the child's relationship to other kids at school, are they like friendly, or are they like alone," things like that.

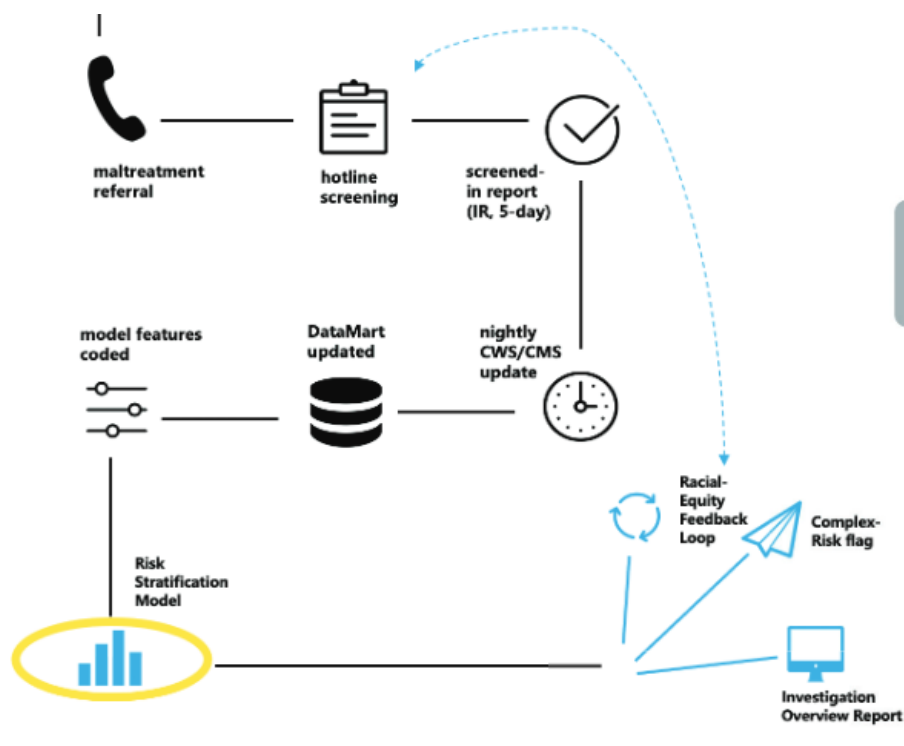
As seen in the quote above, these data inputs are highly discretionary and not based on standardized judgements. Creators of the Risk Stratification tool state that “hundreds of data elements can be used to better understand differences in risk so we can target our responses and prevention services more effectively” (Invest LA, 2021). The model generates a risk score based on maltreatment history and information from the allegation with some reports being deemed as “complex risks” and flagged for immediate Emergency Response supervision attention (Figure 16). This new tool is fully automated, integrates information from hundreds of fields simultaneously, and is used to assess for risk of future harm— in other words harm that might not even happen.

The Risk Stratification Model was created by the same developers who are also creating the “CMI Data Linkages” project that uses hospital records to link with child welfare data to “increase the predictive power” of existing risk models (Putnam-Hornstein, et al., 2021). The creators of the tool, Children’s Data Network, focus on “linking and analyzing administrative records” through numerous data agreements with agencies that have given them permission to link cross sector data together (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021). The project uses machine learning to understand how we can better predict a child’s risk of future involvement with child

protection once a referral for child abuse or neglect has been made. This decision occurs before maltreatment has been substantiated or confirmed to be occurring.

Figure 16

Risk Stratification Model Process



The researchers who developed this model acknowledge that it is looking through “the lens of the child protection system” and confirms that there is no causation between being identified as high risk and maltreatment-related injuries (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021). Yet, these technological decision-making tools continue to be taken up by the system at an alarming rate. Predictive risk models are not a silver bullet to identifying exactly who and when someone may abuse their child and can be significantly damaging to communities of color based on its foundational ties to White standards of parenting— the “lens of the child protection system”. The rationalization of these tools and the logics they were created with are embedded within the

contextual matrix of domination and have been largely obscured by the community due to this veil of “child protection” and department secrecy.

Prevention through prediction harms families. As stated by many system stakeholders and mothers’ in this study, cyclical use of historical data to predict future harm is extremely biased. Much of the data collected by the system is historically embedded in racist practices and is collected without the true consent of parents and children regarding its future use. For many mothers, any history in the system leads to being marked as a risk, a “red flag” as one mother Carmen states. Becoming a red flag causes generational impact for mothers and their families. These markings were most profound for Black and Latinx children in this study, who come from families who have also been marked as high risk. Caseworkers within the system expressed feeling both in awe and uncomfortable with the amount of power they had over people’s lives through the use of data and these new technological decision-making tools. For many caseworkers, it flagged already pressing concerns about racial disparities within the system. One caseworker Lea explains:

Just with her driver's license we're able to collect all this information. And I just watched, as this computer screen detailed all of this women's life— this woman's life history, and then it went further back because apparently her mother, she had been in foster care as a kid. And so it went all the way back and showed her own referral system and why she had been referred to the child welfare system. And then it showed like her mom like her mom had been in for her childhood. And so literally, like on this computer screen, I saw three generations of like, harm and trauma that had occurred to this one woman and on like, and all of that was also being used as a decision-making processes as far as why she could or could not have her baby back”.

Erin similarly acknowledged the ways that some families are treated worse than others,

I think when families come into our system, and if you see families of color, whether they're Hispanic you know or Black, a lot of times they have history that comes with either their family... or they were involved with the system or, you know, they have issues because of A, B and C. And that all gets kinda taken into consideration. So, whereas maybe like a white family, or a more affluent family, may have the same issues but not have the history.

Based on the systems tactics of power and its embeddedness in the contextual matrix of domination, it is unsurprising that caseworkers find surveillance to be racialized.

Mothers in this study express similar sentiments as Lea and Erin, finding that much of their future life and ability to regain autonomy has been lost due to the “child welfare” system. Many mothers find that their ability to parent their children and their grandchildren is completely destructed because of their histories. They explain that it is both hypocritical and intentionally harmful that they are punished for a record that was given by the same systems that are claiming to help:

Jada: It's “oh, that, that, that person, they got a record, you can't have them watching your kids. That person? They cant watch your kids.”

Monica: You gave them the record. You gave them the record.

Black and Latinx mothers find that the system funnels their children into foster care more easily because they give their entire communities and extended families records that they cannot get rid of. This is an obvious way that the system constrains families far into the future, impacting their mobilities and their ability to build familial connections in the future. Even non substantiated cases are held against mothers generationally. They say,

Jada: Because an empty it's still a file. If you get a call and it's still- it- it- it is not validated, it's still sitting there.

Monica: Oh, God...

Jada: An empty file is still a file, even if every paper that was, okay, not credited, not credited. Now you still got a big ole' file. Whether it's valid or not.

Keyshia: It's like, "Oh, their names in the system already. We already got them in the system."

This re-traumatization and punishment occur generationally for families who have historical involvement within the system. For many mothers, having a history in the “child welfare” system whether as a past “perpetuator” or past “victim” was held against them for future punishment. The consideration of prior history in the “child welfare” system limited mother’s ability to be seen in light of their current situations, erasing their current predicament for what may have unfolded in the past. Keyshia says, “Or- or... And to make it worse, if you are a grown adult and- and you- your mother went through the system, they're like, "Oh, shh—her?! You don’t need no kids. your mama was in the system, and now you're in the system. Give me the damn kids”. Ava adds, “It only hurts that you have a history of DCFS. I was in the system, so they coming after me. I understand, you know what I mean? Y'all do this to a lot of people. But I want this stuff to stop for me. Because my... I can't do it again”. This endless cycle of terror for mothers makes it nearly impossible for them to find ways to remain off the systems radar, and out of the systems future traps.

The stories shared by mothers who participated in the community conversations were reconfirmed by the Attorney General “OAG” and Department of Justice “DOJ” who preside over Los Angeles County and administer the Child Abuse Central Index (CACI). The CACI was

created in 1965 as a tool to “protect the health and safety of California’s children” (OAG, n.d.). Reports of substantiated cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, mental/emotional abuse, and/or severe neglect of a child must be reported to CACI so that the information can be available to “aid law enforcement investigations, prosecutions, and provide notification of new child abuse investigation reports involving the same suspects/victims” (Office of Attorney General California, n.d.). The CACI is also used to screen applicants in childcare facilities, foster homes, and for child placements and adoption.

The OAG states that if an investigative report was inconclusive, such that caseworkers were unable to determine if child maltreatment occurred, the report still “must be retained for ten years unless there is an investigation of subsequent allegations of child abuse or severe neglect against the same child” (OAG, n.d.). Because of this tracking regardless of “evidence” or “proof” of maltreatment, all mothers have had files on them that are kept for decades. Lynn states that as a caseworker she was able to see this most prominently for Black mothers. She shares:

I had another family and there was, had to literally been 20 referrals made on the family even they though they weren't legitimate. There was like all these different random ones, but every single one was documented. And I remember the mom was a little bit more savvy, and she was actually trying to use like the law and had a lawyer to try to get them removed, and she still couldn't, like basically it didn't matter like that was gonna forever follow her. And I was like, so basically when her little girl grows up if she ever was to become interacted with the system, they are now going to pull up the 20 reports that were on her when she was a kid. And so it just it was crazy to me that I was like y'all are watching and documenting everything and basically keeping a database of every misstep that you believe.

Andrea adds that you can see “what happened to them and see everything, where-where their case is, what happened to them, what were the detention orders.” This calculation of Black and Latinx families’ steps and missteps is disproportionately used on their families who have no other way out of the system. Surveillance through data tracking is justified upon investigation and reified through attempts to reunify families. It follows mothers before they enter the system and tracks them for decades after through the CACI.

Surveillance is about power. The systems use of surveillance continues to perpetuate the tactics of power outlined from Theme 2, including the use of control and punishment to deny Black families the rights to live autonomously. This has occurred more insidiously in Skid Row than in other communities, as government agencies have used “affordable housing” efforts to justify displacement of Skid Row residents from their communities and add additional surveillance. As previously mentioned, the Skid Row Homeless Families Diversion Plan that was published by First 5 LA states that “child safety” is their first concern and requests that DCFS conducts child risk assessments on all Skid Row families encountered (First 5 LA, n.d.). Moreover, the plan explains that the Midnight Mission and Union Rescue Mission have collaborative agreements to identify families, funnel them into the system, and “move families to transitional housing outside of Skid Row”. Under this specific initiative DCFS, DPSS and other county departments can share data and thus states that families only need to sign a Consent to Share Information Form only if information needed to be shared *beyond* county teams. In 2006, the DCFS Child Protection Hotline created an internal flagging system to ensure that referrals of maltreatment specifically in the zip code area of 90013 were flagged and expedited for assignment to a regional office (DCFS, 2006a). Further, DCFS also established a new supplemental risk assessment protocol specific to the Skid Row Outreach Team and DCFS staff

who were co-located at the missions to ensure that *every* family encountered by the team were checked for: previous DCFS history, history of refusing community services, history of domestic violence and mental health, inability to provide minimum sufficient level of parenting, parents failure to protect child, caretakers explanation for homelessness, parents inability to access services, chronicity of homelessness, caretakers ability to meet the child's immediate needs for supervision/food/clothing, physical living conditions immediately threatening to health or safety of child. (DCFS, 2006a, p.3). These documents also asked about families "History of Community Service Refusal" as well as perceived inability for families to provide "minimum sufficient level of parenting" including keeping children in shelters and experiencing an inability to access services as seen in Appendix E (DCFS, 2006b). During the time that this initiative was implemented, children living in Skid Row were removed at twice the rate of other children throughout the county (Anderson, 2006).

It remains clear that the collection and sharing of data is seated within larger issues of power and social control. These surveillance processes unjustly categorize, monitor, and label individuals, while also erasing their lived experiences. Caseworkers in the study admitted that the data collected by the system does not capture the entirety of family's experiences and the resilience of Black families. One caseworker says,

The data we're mostly quantitative predominantly. So it's just like all their interpretation is relying on me. so like their words really weren't able to, to capture their experience. [...] I feel like there's so much that we're not capturing in terms of just the resilience and the... how ingenious people, like how genius people are in terms of figuring things out and making shit work- [...], like understanding that families really do "make it work" in so many adverse situations and they really have beautiful social networks that they draw

upon. Um, so I think it's just really hard to like, when we look at these data to actually interpret them in a way that truly sits, that truly reflects the experience of the community that we're trying to serve. And then on top, I will say also like on top of just like potentially misinterpreting it from experiences.

According to many system stakeholders, the use of data to predict risks not only diminishes family's ability to voice their circumstances and experiences, but it also helps the developers and users of the models construct specific narratives about communities from the gaze of the system. Thus, through the reliance on these algorithmic tools, families' stories are often unacknowledged and rendered insignificant. One caseworker says that it is extremely difficult to see families being generationally harmed by the collection of data. She says,

They were literally holding her [a mother] accountable for like, the things that her mom had done. And were like, "oh, well, you know, this is kind of like a familial thing for her". And I was just like, wow, so you all have just been watching her family since it was her grandmother and her mother and so it just like that hit me in a really gross way that I didn't realize that our families were being looked at.

The circumstances of mothers, particularly Black mothers, become nested into a biological or genetic ancestral trait, not too far off removed from the arguments within the Moynihan Report that used the term "tangle of pathologies" to describe the "inefficiencies" of Black families (Geary, 2015). The Moynihan Report which helped spur the individualized focus on child maltreatment that rippled through the medical community, says "the combined impact of poverty failure, and isolation among Negro youth has had the predictable outcome in a disastrous delinquency and crime rate" (Geary, 2015). He adds, "a national effort towards the problem of

Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure” and attributes the most issues within the Black community to Black single-mothers.

As stated above by Lynn and explained by all mothers, surveillance is used divisively and intentionally against Black communities. Tools are used to predict premature death, calculating the fatalities of Black communities as inevitable (McKittrick, 2020) and are used to instill fear into society and control the behaviors of Black family. Mothers explain that surveillance through the “child welfare” system is used to distract communities from bonding with one another, and instead turns them against one another so that it is easier to control them. When asked how surveillance has impacted them, one group of mothers responded:

Monica: You see what it's doing to communities!

Denise: Mm-hmm.

Monica: Turning against each other. Turning against each other.

Keyshia:... to create, um, a diversion of whatever they want to happen, for them to come in and move-

Monica: Exactly.

Keyshia:... and do what they need to do. To break the homes down, um, move the husbands or take the children.

Monica: That's what they do.

Keyshia: They, they keep it ... They keep themselves at an advantage, and I think it's invasive.

The surveillance that mothers describe has bolstered the power hierarchies within the system, ensuring that people who are in power are able to keep their power intact. Caseworkers suggested that this type of surveillance is extractive, saying, “so it was just like, that's what I

started to kind of get itchy and feel uncomfortable with like extracting data from families or children and families, and not necessarily providing and giving anything back”. In addition to the extractive nature of surveillance as a way to uphold power hierarchies, surveillance also works to diminish family autonomy and does so through masking or removing the ability for families to consent.

The “child welfare” system has been able to sustain its power by providing loopholes for themselves and other systems regarding parental consent. This evasion of family rights is upheld by notions of child protection and exacerbated by wide-reaching multi-system partnerships. Developers of the technological tools themselves state that there is messiness in consent processes. They say that “clarity is needed about who has the authority to grant access to sensitive data and which parties are needed as signatories”, unsurprisingly the mention of communities as consent holders is not mentioned or prioritized (Putnman-Hornstein et al., 2021). There are various loopholes to consent within the system that aid in bolstering the already existent power differentials between system and individual family (Copeland, 2021). Erin states that one loophole is with the County Department of Mental Health or “DMH” in which their partnership overrides consent processes. She says,

So we have a system where we get to see if the family has accessed any services, any mental health services, and we actually get to call and find out without a consent, like we get to call and find out if there's been any psychiatric hospitalizations for anyone in the family, if they did receive therapy, for how long, with what provider. So we get a lot of information from DMH. [...] for DMH you don't need consent, because they won't give you information, they'll just answer questions that you have.

These processes mark a hidden and yet extremely harmful point of contention for workers and families. Further, even if mothers are able to sign blanketed written consent forms, it is often under coercive measures that hinge on their reunification with their children and do not include statements about how their data will be used and when. Ramon states,

I don't think that ev- anyone who, for example, participates gets a form saying, “hey, your data might be used for research or might be used to like for policy stuff”. I don't think they are, maybe they are, but it's buried deep, deep, deep, deep into the myriad forms that they have to sign.

He adds, “They're they just signing it just to not create problems, not to risk like punishment. So there definitely is that aspect of coercion”. Several mothers say that the current consent processes are confusing and secretive, allowing mothers to sign for things they do not truly agree on or have enough knowledge about. This is later used against them. Keyshia shares “they make you sign paperwork with fine print that makes you liable and say “hey you volunteered this information you're a part of it, you signed the paper”. Many caseworkers agreed with mothers, also raising points that findings from data collection processes are usually not shared with them or communities, and that many algorithmic tools occur within a Black box. Faith shares,

Um, so I think that even though there's a lot of data collection, there's not a lot of efforts to, you know, communicate findings to the community, or like, communicate these patterns back. Um, so it's kind of just like, a lot of that information is very much just like, kept up here and like decisions are just kept and made up here.

Heather adds,

It would be nice to know more about what happens with the data that gets collected. Um, like, because on my end of things, and because, like, we're also so inundated with just

whatever the day to day is, whatever we have to do, like, knowing that side of things is-is not necessarily like, it's not something that we it's not, that-that's part of my every day.

This harboring of information by developers and administrators dictates the amount of information that parents are able to access, and the actions they can take against their data being used. Similarly, it prevents caseworkers from being able to distill the information back to the families they are working with and truly understanding how data collection takes a toll on families in the future.

Although mothers can be reunited with their children, though less frequently for Black and Latinx mothers, family reunification is often tied to additional surveillance so that the system can ensure families will not re-harm their children. Mothers describe this as a never-ending cycle of the gaze of the system, leaving them feeling highly anxious. This form of tracking prohibits mothers from making any missteps or mistakes that other parents can make. These mistakes will be reported to the department immediately, according to mothers. This ubiquity of surveillance is described by mothers as “relentless”, like they’re always being watched. Mothers explain that they feel surveilled by the system’s ability to choose when and where they present themselves in mothers lives. They say:

Keyshia: All I knew is that they took my baby and I didn't have custody and, uh, when we went to court to get her back, they gave her back but we were under surveillance and they were watching us

Denise: That's how they do

Monica: Yup.

Keyshia: They can pop up at any time they want to.

Moreover, all mothers in this study collectively stated that surveillance within the system follows them, with Carmen stating it “haunts you for the rest of your life”. Maya shared that the systems eyes are permanent, she says: “being under the eye of the Big Brother, you know its gonna be forever. Forever.” To which Monica replied, “and once they put it in the computer you’re effed”. Renee agreed saying, “Exactly. And it’s not right”. This relentless cycle feels impossible for mothers to break through because their histories are worked into mathematical equations that the system relies on to function. Without historical tracking, the system would fail to meet their standard of “child protection”. Thus, the suffering of mothers through surveillance is necessary for the system to keep existing as is.

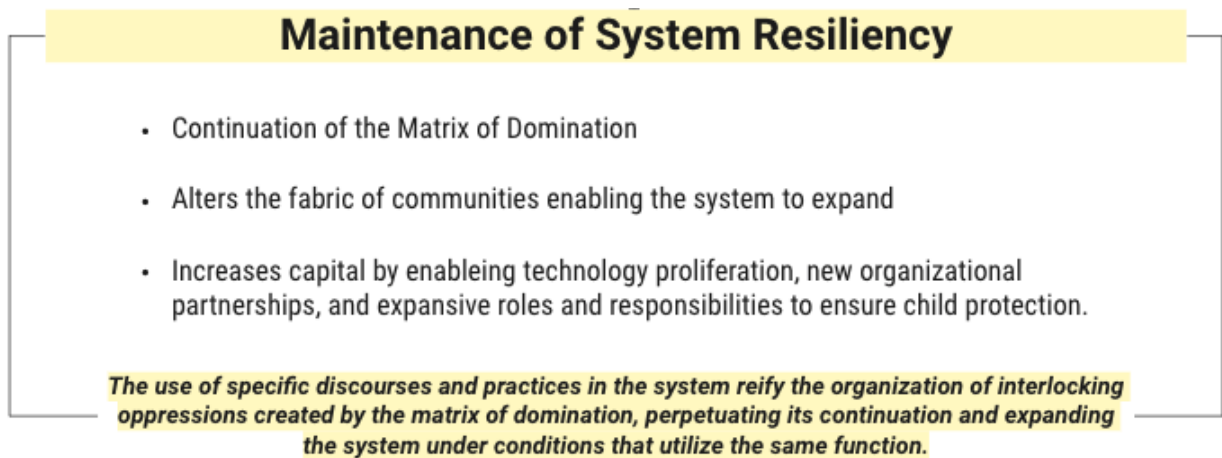
Subtheme C

“How long do we keep doing this?” – Maintaining a Resilient Child Welfare System

Theme 3: Subtheme C briefly discusses how “child protection” have enabled the system to fully adopt a risk-averse stance, which has allowed for punishment, control, and racialized surveillance to continue to be proliferated throughout the system. Further, this subtheme implies that the systems continual use of carceral logics, objectification, and surveillance continue to reinforce the systems embeddedness within anti-Blackness, sexism, and racial capitalism otherwise known as the HDP (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Theme 3: Maintenance of the Matrix of Domination



Further, the subtheme explains that regardless of numerous reforms over time, the system continues to lack change big enough or consistent enough to fundamentally shift its functioning as a family separation and policing system. While there have been several piecemeal reforms suggested to counter racism within the system (Loudenback, 2021), there continues to be mass amounts of money being funneled into “child welfare” for the purpose of surveilling and separating families.

Both archival documents and interviews showed that the systems reliance on surveillance technologies and racializing surveillance has shifted money away from families and instead into contractual agreements between DCFS and multiple systems to create an ever-expanding surveillance state. With the expanding partnerships, scholar-activist Lynn asks us to take a critical look at the ways the system is colluding with other larger networks to create a nexus of carcerality, reifying the carceral ecosystem. She says,

...looking more broadly at the carceral continuum, as like Carla Shedd calls it and looking at carceral logics and the ways that systems like I said, are kind of upholding the child welfare system. And so zooming out, I think, from just this individual entity, that I think we often are

in and really making a broader macro connection to the way that carceral logics are upheld in multiple systems and the interconnectedness. Looking at it as a nexus, as a web where everything is really connected and inter played.

The expansion of the “child welfare” system has increased the need to hire new developers for tools, new research teams, and new caseworkers to handle this new technological infrastructure. The information systems infrastructure alone had a gross appropriation amount of \$6,093,000 in Los Angeles for fiscal year 2019-2020. Moreover, the maintenance of CWS-CARES is already about \$44,000,000 annually (CWDS, 2020). The continuing accumulation of capital- as described through the carceral ecosystem framework’s conservation stage— has perpetuated if not exacerbated the resilience of the system to exist in its current form regardless of incremental reforms.

Some caseworkers believe that the system does not need to fundamentally shift, it just needs to address underlying racial equity issues. However, countless reforms— or as the carceral framework would call it, small perturbation events— have been unable to shift the systems entanglement with the matrix of domination meaning that it has continued to bind itself to the larger carceral ecosystem. The shift to a prevention model has led to caseworkers relying on the same tactics that exacerbate racial disparities and trauma. This includes racializing surveillance and mechanisms of control that have worsened over the past few years. The systems claim to risk aversion has resulted in a mass expansion of data sharing partnerships and the deputization of once non-carceral sites of support. Moreover, reforms that were brought up by caseworkers were noted as failures or unable to make the change they wanted to see. One example shared by Black caseworkers was the Black Family Investment Project. The BFIP was created around 1988 to “help” specifically Black communities. An LA Sentinel article from 1992 as shown in Figure 18

stated that the project was created to help Black families stay together during a time where high inflation and escalating costs were reducing the amount of affordable housing and health care (Los Angeles Sentinel, 1992).

Figure 18

Black Family Investment Project

Families are Important in Times of Financial Crisis

Individuals today are faced with higher inflation and escalating costs of goods and services. The decline and lack of affordable housing and health care and other challenges imperil survival because of the economic situation in our community and country. It becomes increasingly crucial that families remain united and emotionally stable. The family is important as a support for individual members in view of the present economic state.

According to Lucille G. Boswell, senior manager, consumer relations of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Los Angeles, "each individual family contributed to the success of its members and to the success of the nation. All over the world, families are coming together. They know with all of the concerns and troubles of the world the individual member is adrift without the nurturing, care and anchoring of the total family unit. Because of the unique background of the black family, it realizes, especially, the importance of remaining together and realizing measures

families but all families in the ongoing struggle of daily living. Our communities, states, nation and the world depend upon strong individual families. These families ensure continuation of our human society and civilization ad infinitum."

The Salute to the Black Family will honor two families in the community who are contributing in a positive man-

ner. These families realize the importance of family values and life. Their success can inspire others in the Los Angeles community and beyond.

The salute is sponsored by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company at Los Angeles. It was created by Lucy Boswell, who also serves as the chairperson. The honorary chairperson is Mayor Tom Bradley.



According to Greg, the program increased the likelihood of parents completing items for their case plans and increased rates of cases closing within 6 months to a year. However, Black caseworkers in this study weren't sure why it went away. Tasha says she believes it was dismantled because it was created specifically for Black individuals. She believed that the end of BFIP and its inability to be reestablished was caused by institutional racism from the system, which reprimands families and Black caseworkers for any mistakes no matter how slight. She says:

You want this for our families, but then you know you're definitely going to have to have every single thing in place, because if not then... And that's the whole part of- of being... you know, racism upon us. You know, that, I mean people do that with mistakes all the time... come on. Can you correct the problem and make it work better? The department makes mistakes all the time. Do they get... They haven't gotten rid of the department. You know? So... yeah. It's just... yeah. There's that institutional racism right there.

This system of institutionalized racism has caused many of the pre-existing reforms to falter because they do not address the underlying ideologies that the system is bound to. These issues are yet to be changed by culture competency and implicit bias trainings, as stated by majority of the caseworkers in this study. As Greg says, much of the trainings revolve around small band-aid changes that do not address underlying anti-Blackness and racism:

...if we keep it about the kids, man, it's just unfortunate sometime when you get the adults involved, a lot of stuff gets jacked up. 'Cause you- it ain't about the mission and purpose. It's about your agenda. And then your subjective viewpoint on how it should work. [...] And then- then the viewpoint where the- the implicit bias. We had a whole year of training on implicit bias and how it affects our work. And- which is good. But there's a difference between implicit bias and- and prejudice. And racism. (laughs) Don't- don't clump racism and that in implicit bias.

He adds,

You know what I mean? That- that- 'cause one's conscious, the other one's unconscious. Racism is conscious. You know, a lot of times prejudice is conscious. Impl- implicit bias, that's the difference. So I don't know if that's ever gonna get- be mitigated, because how do you prove that to somebody?

Of importance is Greg's questioning about whether racism can be truly proved, and if not, how it will ever go away. What preexisting reforms have done is coat over some of the most foundational issues within society that determine the systems function and role. Like Greg, Erin adds:

I- I think a lot of the times race does kind of play a role. Um, and I- I know the department is trying hard to like train the social workers to, for that not to be the case, and for us to work with families. But I think sometimes our internal biases does kinda play a role in that and so I- I do see that, and I- I don't see it decreasing anytime soon. I- I haven't seen a change in the time that I've been there.

Erin reiterates that the system is slow changing if at all when it comes to bias and further racism. This lack of attention to racism made several caseworkers question what all mothers in this study already stated, that the system is not meant to address the core ideologies behind its practices, but rather insists on continuing its harmful practices in a nicer or more insidious way.

Some caseworkers have given up and said they instead aim to work as a buffer in the system for Black families, as they know the system is a game and will never go away. One states,

And so I know the department really doesn't have our [Black families] best interest at heart a lot of the time. So, the information that I do collect, I don't... I don't... *sigh* it's- it's- it's all a part of getting to know your family and from my perspective how to help them get out of the system and not see us anymore. You know? [...] And I challenge the system, you know? I challenge the system, and it's a problem because, "Right. Oh no. You're not... You supposed to, you know, be on our side." And I'm like, "No. I'm for the families".

Half of the caseworkers in this study claim that they are in the system to reduce its effects on Black families, knowing that the system will not fundamentally change. While several caseworkers stated that they do not see the system going away due to the lack of a viable replacement for “protecting” children from harm, many stated that they wish the system could address its underlying racist roots. They explain that the current reforms have been inadequate and suggest changes like more consideration of the family context, training new workers on cultural disciplinary norms, and educating community about how the system works. However, they acknowledge that none of these suggested reforms have been systematically implemented or have failed to shift the systems underlying racist ideological attachments. Adhering to these reforms will allow for the system to still rely on family separation as a main tactic to address harm.

Even in the systems efforts to focus more on prevention to reduce the harm caused to Black and Latinx communities, caseworkers question the role and claims of the system. Heather says:

You know? And you can ask anybody in the department, like, we're not preventative. And it's sad, you know, because, um, I think we... I mean, the job is, the job has to be done right now as things are because the system is what it is. But I think, like, at some point, like, we all need to be willing to just be like, okay, but do we, like, how long do we keep doing this? You know.

Heather asks a question that came up in across several interviews, “how long do we keep doing this”? This was a difficult question for caseworkers to answer because of the responsibility they feel to families, and the pressure they feel from society to be the fixer of problems related to child well-being. Most workers were fearful of children having no protection without them, and

moreover worried about not having a job in the future. This led to many of the caseworkers questioning if the system could truly ever stop existing, even if they acknowledge that reforms continue to be insufficient.

Many caseworkers were looking for answers to what a world could look like without the system. For several, it was less of a blatant opposition to abolition and more of a questioning of what comes next, and if that plan is possible. They acknowledged that the system uses tactics of power that are fueled by harmful ideological attachments and described the ways that child protection has defined their role. One caseworker says,

Heather: Who's to say that we should have the final say about how to raise kids, you know? So, I think that, like, there's definitely, there definitely needs to be more flexibility and more, I mean, obviously more resources, um, but also, lik, just willing conversations where we're willing to take a chance [on abolition]. Um, and to just focus on, like, other forms of support.

All mothers in this study, as well as some system stakeholders, beautifully address some of these caseworker questions and tensions in Theme 4. Mothers flipped the script on “child protection” and instead discussed the ways that society can address harm without relying on tactics of power and oppression. As argued by the carceral ecosystem framework, a perturbation event large enough, or a mixture of small and larger perturbation events is necessary to creatively destruct the systems tactics of power within the matrix of domination. Mothers, stakeholders, and organizers contributed their thoughts the possibility of a different world, and how they would envision it in Theme 4.

Theme 4

A Praxis of Dark Sousveillance: Charting Pathways Toward a Different Equilibrium

Simone Browne's conceptualization of Dark Sousveillance reminds us that spaces can be created to critique and counter hegemonic and harmful discourse and practices. It is a term that indicates a flight from capture, "strategies used in the flight to freedom" that include critiques in the form of antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices" (Browne, 2015 p. 21). Dark sousveillance is creating modes of resistance through radical reimagination and informing ourselves about the uses of surveillance in order to resist them. It "charts possibilities and coordinates modes of responding to, challenging, and confronting a surveillance that was almost all- encompassing" (Browne, 2015, p.21). Theme 4 discusses how individuals in this study conceptualized ways to address harm without relying on the same tactics of power that are inherent to the current "child welfare" system. Theme 4 shows how mothers flip the script on "child protection", defining it in a holistic way and calling attention to the mass societal shift needed to address harm caused within communities. Further, through this praxis of Dark Sousveillance, mothers describe a process to reach this vision of abolishing the "child welfare" system, including the ways to navigate possible barriers. This theme is called "Charting Pathways Toward a Different Equilibrium" to signify a world in which the carceral ecosystem is creatively destructed and unable to reconstitute itself. This theme displays how communities shift into a new stable state and uptake a different equilibrium in which different tactics of conflict resolution are practiced. This different equilibrium doesn't rely on tactics of power or the contextual matrix of domination, rather it looks completely different than how the system has perpetuated harm on families today.

Because of this, mothers' stories in Theme 4 interrogate the role of caseworkers in this shifted equilibrium, redefining what it means to say, "it takes a village". Some caseworkers eagerly state that they want to be included in a system that allows for:

Humans the ability to repair, to restore, to regenerate, reinvigorate, and restart from a position of strength, where the- the community and community stakeholders, professional stakeholders can collectively come together to help support, uplift, and encourage the family. The old adage, it takes a village. You know, that thing's been appropriated so many times. It takes a village. That's the whole point.

Another worker adds,

It does really take a village, and I think everyone kinda plays a role, and there just needs to be like more education about what DCFS does, what our role is, what are the laws that we follow... so that we are not seen as such a negative agency— and where people can kinda see that we're trying to partner with the community to protect children.

In these excerpts above, caseworkers are working from the premise that their help is wanted and needed by community. This group of caseworkers envision themselves working within the system as partners with community— as part of "the village" which they believe can ensure their vision of child protection. However, through Themes 2-3 and continuing in Theme 4, mothers reiterate how the systems vision of "child protection" is both deeply harmful and violent. Through Theme 4 mothers choose to tell a different story, one that is a steep departure from what caseworkers may envision for the future. They provide a different vision of what and who constitutes "the village", one that rejects partnerships with carceral punishment systems.

Mothers in this study engaged in a praxis of Dark Sousveillance through abolitionist envisioning and abolitionist praxis which included defining "child protection" in their own

terms, reaffirming one another's experiences, radically prioritizing care of self, advocating for community care and resources, and building community networks. Despite many misconceptions by caseworkers within the system, mothers believed that getting rid of the "child welfare" system was both essential and possible. Moreover, mothers understood that harm does occur, and that abolition is not just idealistic vision, it could also be strategic. Mothers discussed this saying:

Monica: If you get rid of that [the child welfare system] you'd have to have a plan to go with it. You just can't boot it out and have nothing. You'll have an empty vessel. and when you have an empty vessel, you're going to have a lot of angry people. And it's going to start a riot.

Jada: You just have to replace bad with good.

Monica: Right.

Jada: We can have a whole nother idea counter parallel to it but actually serving the purpose it's supposed to serve. Helping the family and then, "Hey, y'all good now?" We always gonna be here but y'all good. Y'all still together.

Monica adds that this plan requires collective imagination and ideas from various people saying, Have a plan B if you're going to get rid of A. That's just the way it goes, and it takes a lot of work. And it takes... and it's not as much work if people talk about it and put it on the table. And get ideas and you know, like playing Monopoly. You put it, you put it on the board, you figure it out.

The idea of abolition isn't just a dream, it is a collective imagination and collective plan that takes intention and care. Abolition is thus described as not always easy, but always necessary work that can lead to collective freedom from carceral harm.

Flipping the Script on “Child Protection” and “Prevention”

Charting pathways toward a new equilibrium that is rooted in abolition allowed for mothers to express that their wants and need and as such, mothers provided their own definitions of child protection and prevention. Instead of using the same framing and terminology as workers within the system, mothers looked to each other’s experiences to think about what being “protected” meant for them and their families. Child protection for impacted mothers was rooted in countering the ramifications of the contextual matrix of domination, thus their definitions always included discussions around healing from racial trauma, sexual trauma, and state violence. Mothers explained that what they truly wanted and needed to feel safe and protected is a foundation for their children, and a way to disrupt cycles of trauma. They share,

Monica: And, what I had to learn when I had children and their dad had left me for dead... I said, "Wait a minute." That's why I listen to that song by Tina Turner, What's Love Got to Do with It. Because the concept- of how I wanted my kids back. I wanted a home.

Ava: A foundation.

Keyshia added, “I didn't want to upset my babies childhood. I didn't want her childhood to be filled with memories like I had.” Their definitions of child protection moved far beyond the individual child and included mothers, families, and the societal and systemic changes needed to ensure that they could build a foundation for themselves and their communities.

Many mothers recognized that the system did not believe that their protection as mothers was equal to their children’s protection, therefore many started off by saying “we should get a system where mothers are protected”, in which Denise responded, “yes, family child protection”. Mothers reiterated that child protection truly means that there is a focus on how being a single

Black mother impacts family. Mothers discuss that even in organizing and abolitionist movements there is a lack of attention to the plight of single Black and Latinx mothers. They say:

Monica: We have, we have so many marches, but we don't have a single mothers march. You know? I don't never see where women are sticking together. We have the women's march, but what is it for? It's for abuse, sexual abuse. Well, that's all in the single mothers march as well.

Ava: Yeah. We don't have it.

Monica: A single mother's march. Can you imagine how many mothers with children would be on this march?

Ava: Mothers in Action.

Monica: It would change the world. The mothers and the words they would say, "We don't get help from the colony. We on the streets. They don't help us. What are they there for? I mean, stuff like that." We gotta be a voice. For a lot of mothers not to, not to stand anything that's actually going on. [...] Mothers are dying, mothers are accepting less and it's wrong.

As Monica proposed, the idea of a march for single mothers would call into question the purpose of carceral systems and would ask women to speak out against violent treatment. Mothers stated that there needed to be much more attention to what Black women endure, and space for them to build together. Mothers' calls for solidarity within this study expanded beyond single woman however and was discussed more broadly as occurring through the building of trusting relationships and community networks.

Building Trusting Relationships and Community Networks. For mothers, and even a few system stakeholders, child protection outside of the system meant having people around that could care for mothers and their children. In this vision, supportive individuals would be able to provide care for families to help make sure their needs were met. Faith shares,

Child Protection looks like having, you know, uh, just like a slew of people around the child that you know, care for them. Doesn't have to be family or blood relatives, I don't think it has to be blood relatives. I'm a big fan of like kin- kinship care, and all of that. Um, I think when it comes to protection, I think of having their needs met. I think of having people in their lives that don't also have to be working the entire time, so that they can actually spend time and have quality time with, you know, that youth, that child.

In Faith's response and as echoed by all mothers in the community conversations, child protection was centered around providing community networks for youth. This also meant providing families with respite and help to take care of their children. Further it centered how children define safety for themselves, something that many other caseworkers did not address. Lynn, an organizer adds that for Black families, child protection has always been rooted in community care. She says,

I think for Black families. We see child protection as our children being safe and having an opportunity. I think it can look different ways having support through community support and through familial ties. Support through the larger community and through our Black identity. I think it's a more communal way of looking at parenting and parentage. Versus I think a very individual individualistic way of looking at parenting and family. And so I think for us, we think of protection and safety and children in a much like broader cultural way.

Not operating in a communal way was unnatural for many Black mothers, organizers, and system stakeholders in this study. Though everyone acknowledged that communal practices have been violently disrupted by colonial practices of organized abandonment and individualism.

When discussing efforts to build trusting relationships, mothers explained that community networks are needed. They stated that trusting relationships are really at the true core of living in a non-carceral society. Mothers shared that building trusting and loving relationships needed to occur within their own families and beyond to their communities. To do this, mothers said that they needed to unlearn societal norms that were forced upon them. Maya states that it is often hard for communities to build trusting relationships because society teaches them not to trust each other, to be fearful of everyone and to only care about your own well-being. She says,

“It’s always building community, building relationships, you know? And it’s hard— it’s hard honestly. Because you have to detach your mind from a lot of things. And you learn and you approach people to build those relationships. It’s hard. And then, building trust. It’s not easy, to build trust in this society. Because you are taught that you don’t have to trust anyone. To be scared of everybody.

Moreover, another mother shared that building trusting and loving relationships means affirming children amid racial trauma. Denise shared how she practices affirmations with her grandchild who deals with trauma from being in the system, and from being a Black child. She shares,

And this what I told her, I said, you are, I want you to always say, "you are strong". She say, "I am strong." You are intelligent, she say, "I'm intelligent." I said you are beautiful, she say, "I am beautiful." I say you are so important, she says, "I am important." I said you know you are. You always know you're worth, you never allow nothing or nobody to make you second guess who you are. Or make you second guess what you are.

This was something that all the mothers resonated with, saying that part of the journey of healing is building back relationships of trust within family that carceral systems had attempted to destruct.

In addition to these smaller scale acts of affirmations within child and caregiver, mothers also said that they needed to build trusting relationships with extended family, neighbors, and colleagues. Mothers said that this process would include identifying people's strengths and weaknesses to help each other. They shared:

Maya: By getting to know each other, then it feels, you know, we're getting strong.

Jada: Knowing the weaknesses and the strengths.

Carmen: You know, getting to know each other.

Jada: Whatever you're weak in, I could be strong in.

Monica: Right.

Jada: Whatever she is strong in, he could be weak in. Where are you weak at? Let me help you in that department.

Maya: We talk about support systems. What I found out, because I came to this country, like a lot of people, no family just my children, my ex. So I had to figure it out. I had to fill my support system with community. And that's what I feel.

Mothers believe that it is necessary for survival to become dependent on one another for help, and to be accountable one another. Renee says, "Everybody will be fending for each other and looking out for one another and pretty much helping people with the way they live. Or if they're going through something, everybody will be, in my hood, will be accountable to everybody."

With this mutual accountability and trust, mothers say that people can intercede for their families and neighbors, taking care of their children when they are stressed or in crisis. Carmen says:

All these women, all these parents, they've been having, um, um, experience taking care of the children and they know what needs to be done. Let's step up to those families that we see in crisis or those women that are alone or those men that are alone with children. [...] And if we see a mother or a couple, a family in crisis, I think we should be strong enough to step up and say, how can we help you? We see you, like, you know, it's not you know, getting into your business. But we really care and we don't want nobody else being involved, system get involved.

Mothers' share that this level of care requires individuals to be vulnerable and courageous, to ask people if they need help, to reach out and get to know neighbors and be vulnerable. The other mothers and one of the mother's sons chimed in and said:

Carmen: That person has the confidence to knock on the neighbors, say "neighbor, you know, this happened to me".

Mike: I was thinking that. I was just thinking that exact thing.

Jada: That's what I was thinking. We have to network and build relationships

Mothers mentioned that building these trusting, vulnerable, and mutually accountable community networks was once common in the past. They state that it was a way they often felt protected in their neighborhoods. It was a way that children learned from their caregivers, and depended on them for needed care:

Denise: My mama worked. So, when Mama was at work, Auntie looked after us. Miss Cruz looked after us. Mr. Birmingham looked after us. The neighborhood looked after us. And we didn't have to wo- If we did something wrong, we got it from the, the neighbors-
Monica: Mm-hmm. You better believe it.

Denise: We knew right from wrong. And all the adults protected us.

Monica: Yep.

Denise: We didn't have to worry ... If my mama couldn't take care of us-Miss Johnson got us.

Mothers would like to continue building towards having these forms of caring communities where they can “create a strong, solid foundation within us and start making connections to build our own systems”. This calls for society to rethink how we are in relation to one another, one that is not built on ideologies of domination, difference, and violence.

Sharing stories as a form of liberation. In conjunction with building trusting relationships, mothers discussed that sharing stories is also a vital form of healing and liberation. They say that coming together with people who share experience can help build strength and the foundations needed to counter surveillance. Thus, it is extremely important for them to build spaces where they can speak openly and freely. Renee says that in an abolitionist future, “everybody will have their own, their own, you know, thought of mind. They will be able to speak their mind”. By sharing stories, mothers can demystify and debunk experiences around abuse. They say that without talking about experiences with abuse, it can lead to suicide from feelings of isolation. Monica says even in the community conversations, it was helpful to hear other stories from women who shared similar experiences. Mothers saw themselves in many of the stories shared. Monica shares one example:

[speaking to another other] Its almost like that little girl, your granddaughter, is me. I mean, I went through the ringer, and it would, it sometimes, I didn't know. I didn't know, like I said. I thought I was the only one in it. And then I listened to her, and she's a beautiful woman, and mother, and she wants her kids back.

She discusses with Carmen:

When something is happening to you, you feel like you're the only person that it is happening to and it's a big load there. But when you hear somebody share, you give another person an opportunity to kind of release the fear, and the hurt, and the pain that you carry within yourself because its knotted up there. It's only happening to you. And what I like about certain situations when people can come in groups like this, and talk about it, are, if people can get into groups like this, and also in the schools...Even when they're small because its happening when they're young. And nobody actually gets freedom, that's why the suicide, suicide is so high. Those are the ones that didn't get to hear or relate, and it's, and it's really bad

Carmen: Yeah, as we said earlier... this type of, you know, uh, places make us more alike and understanding what we been through a lot of things alike. So we can think there's nothing wrong with me! Its them!

Mothers believe that through story telling you can allow people to release pain and fear and give people a new way to relate and feel less isolated— a direct countering of what carcerality intends to do. Sharing stories allows people to share advice and wisdom for other mothers to navigate carceral spaces, to navigate them out of confinement. This is what Collins (1998) was referring to when she mentioned lived experiences. Sharing stories is not only an act of healing, but it can also be a means of survival.

Mothers shared advice throughout the community conversations, encouraging one another and providing direction for them to deal with the trauma from the system. In one dialogue, mothers advise each other to be open and transparent with their children, and to love them.

Monica: And with your situation, I believe that, if you embrace your grandchild, you share with her, that shit happens.

Denise: Oh I talk to her about everything.

Monica: You understand what I'm saying though, in a way where it won't damage her so much.

In another dialogue, several mothers affirmed each other about their treatment in the system, validating their experiences of gaslighting. They told each other that they all had immense amounts of strength, and that their children wanted them and needed them, against whatever DCFS was saying.:

Monica: And so you have to, what makes you, you have to keep, you have to have the strength.

Renee: Got you.

Monica: You have to have the strength to not look in your past but go forward.

Mothers in each of the community conversations shared that being with each other speaking about harm and healing was one way to work on undoing the societal harms and carceral punishments that they experienced. It was about creating new geographies, countergeographies of resistance— charting new and different territories towards abolition. It was a way to build together, and share ideas about the future, one that protects children and families.

Reparations, Housing, and Community Resources. As mothers flipped the narrative about child protection, they also inherently redefined what it means to do “preventative work”. As seen in Theme 3, prevention within the system often came with added surveillance and control. However, all mothers and a few system stakeholders charted what this could look like outside of the system. Along with building and sustaining relationships and sharing stories,

mothers shared that there is a dire need for material community resources. These resources look like rooms to hold meetings, housing to live in, and land to build a foundation upon. It included reinvesting in communities and providing resources. One system stakeholder stated that “abolishing that system also means kind of defunding it and, you know, reinvesting into the community”. She adds,

When I think of, you know, places I know and trust, I don't think of like... I mean, I don't even know where the places like DMH clinic is near me, but I know where there's like, you know, an after-school paint clinic that I used to go to from, like when I was 6 till I was like 18 and that's a place that I know. That's the place I trust. That's a place in my community. Um, and I know that if I'm ever, you know, sick, or if I need help, or if I need food, that's someplace I would go and run to. So I think that, you know, there needs to be a lot more investment into those kinds of programs. I think of, you know, having a like strong safety net of friends, of after-school programs of like, outdoor activity. I think of like the child being able to, you know, walk anywhere within their, like, at least five block radius and know that they're safe. I think it's a lot of like, "Does the child feel like they're safe?"

Another worker Heather states,

Schools need to be better funded, and have more, like, ability to create intimate and supportive relationships. Then families should have the ability to have, like, healthcare, like, insurance is something that comes up a lot, like, issues with insurance and just families that definitely qualify for MediCal and like they still struggle with navigating that, like, the healthcare system. And, um, you know, just the whole movement and like the stigmatizing mental health, like, that's also a huge problem

Specifically, some mothers discussed that it would be nice to see communities build support for single mothers:

Monica: Now, I would love to see the community of, of workmanship, um, more boarding houses and stuff, like for single mothers and stuff.

Denise: On God, we need that.

Monica: For mothers and children.

This support would give mothers peace of mind, and an ability to focus on caring for themselves and their children.

Monica: But somebody has to put their feet down and make it happen because that's all you need. What single mother can \$1,000 rent? They should have some kind of programs for new mothers of color. Called new mothers of color. Because if you put that kind of program out, people will be so happy. What woman would not want her own clean place where she can clean her baby, have a nice meal and go to sleep in peace and stuff like that?

These are things that many people in society and in the child welfare system take for granted. One mother shared with the community conversation that these material and community resources can be achieved through her vision of villages, and demanding reparations in the form of housing deeds and land from our government. Keyshia shares, and mothers agree, that they do not want reforms or a better system of punishment. Instead, they want reparations to pay for housing and care for their families and to build up communities:

Keyshia: We don't want none of that shit. We want reparations. We want 40 acres and a mule. How about that?

Monica: How 'bout that. That's what I'm talking about.

Keyshia: Because if every person had a plot of land, a place where they have to live, mothers will not be struggling with their children-

Monica: Oh, praise the lord.

Keyshia: ... for food because they can grow up potatoes...

Monica: They grow their own shit. Nobody want to stand in line. Oh, man, that is the truth.

Keyshia: No kids will be starving-

Monica: No way.

Keyshia: There'll be no household with children starving if a mother was, instead, when she was born, she was given a deed to a house... so when she got 18, she got her own house. And then if you fuck that up, then you on your own. [...] you should, you should have a deed to a house that when you get 18 and be on your own, you get this house-

Monica: Mm-hmm

Keyshia: and if you have babies, you can raise them in this house.

Monica: Exactly.

Mothers agreed that the state should be providing families with homes to live in, something that would help reverse the ramifications of organized abandonment and would allow families to become self-sustaining providers if they so choose. With this call for reparations of land, Keyshia also discussed what it would be like to create villages that look different than the communities we have now. These villages would be hubs of ancestral knowledge and care, the base of the foundation mothers said that they both wanted and needed. Keyshia explains that with the creation of villages, people would practice mutual accountability and would not have to rely on punishment systems. She explains:

Keyshia: It's like, you know, if you had a village and all the men went to go build the houses, guess who would be teaching the children? The elders and the wo- and the women

Monica: Amen.

Keyshia: And the kids would have respect for that. And everybody could be accountable for everyone else. Like, this whole thing with the jail and the prison system... if there were more villages where people came from when a person came outside of their village and went and committed a crime or did something, those people should bring that person back to the village... and say, "Hey, this person did this. We're gonna-

Monica: Right.

Keyshia: you owe us this much money." So, the village will say, "Hey, we have to pay your debt that you, you caused harm to these people. We're gonna pay your debt. You give us back our person, and now this person will work off their debt within the village however we see fit". You see what I'm saying? And that way, we don't have people stuck in jail forever, you know what I'm saying, over stupid little crimes and things like that.

People in the community conversations loved this idea, they discuss further saying:

Keyshia: ...So if people had property, once again, if people had a piece of land that was there...

Mike: Honestly, if we found a nice little patch somewhere, man, with a, found a nice little patch off in the wilderness with a waterfall, you know what I'm saying, build some like, some, some, I don't wanna, I don't wanna say huts but you know what I'm saying, something".

Monica: Yeah. Why you got to be in a doorway? Somebody else's doorway.

Keyshia: Exactly.

Monica: You should get your own damn doorway.

These powerful exchanges within the community conversation imagined a world in which knowledge production and familial bonds are inherent, not something afforded to a privileged few or taken away by powers of domination. This different pathway allows for communities, not just individuals, to practice accountability and to pay the “debts” of any person in their community who may have caused harm. It beautifully lays out what it means to rethink conflict resolution, calling people in to be accountable and still comforted by community rather than being isolated and never healing. This exchange between ideas shows the true nature of transformative justice, which means changing the context in which carcerality is made possible. It means changing how we think about space, place, relation, and harm.

Charting pathways towards a new equilibrium through a praxis of dark sousveillance included dreaming of new ways to envision community, and steps to take towards building trusting relationships. It highlighted the urgency to provide families with resources, and the importance of Black family autonomy. Although these were only a few examples of what an abolitionist future could look like without family policing, is important to note that these suggestions by mothers moves far beyond cultural competency trainings or individual band-aid reforms. Instead, community members focused on a holistic view of addressing harm, and believed that any individual problem was a matter of and for community. Organizer Joi says that when we think about abolition, we must consider the ramifications of racial capitalism and anti-Blackness, and must think beyond what current reforms are attempting to justify as sufficient.

She says:

When I think about like racial capitalism and anti-blackness like that is literally my point, like we can make as robust social safety nets as we want within this existing system, but that will not disappear anti blackness — that will not disappear capitalism. And so again, when we're thinking about what it means to build alternatives, I think that understanding you know, socialism communist movements abroad, understanding a good understanding of an analysis of anti-blackness leads us away from sort of pigeon holing into “Okay, well, if we have guaranteed basic income, like things will be okay”.

She adds,

I think we can learn a lot from like, people's revolutions abroad, has really helped my understanding of like, why it's not just this system that has to go but we really have to start over. humane capitalism, like everyone has health insurance. And like all these great things that like, at the end of the day, people are still being exploited and oppressed. So I think that like my ultimate vision is a world where kids are not waking up being asked like, what is your dream job one day because if that is the only way to meet their basic needs, I want a world where their needs are met before they have to sacrifice their labor in order to get there. And I also think of a world where anti blackness is not defining our relationships with each other and with systems.

As stated in the carceral ecosystem framework, part of moving into a new stable state or new equilibrium, is ensuring that the ecosystem is not reconstituted with the same tools and variables. Thus, thinking outside of tactics of power and carcerality can help work towards an abolitionist vision. Charting pathways towards a new equilibrium means imagining alternatives that move beyond normalizations of capital and labor, and instead makes us rethink about the ways we as

individuals relate to one another and relate to the land. It means that communities can look to global movements around abolition to think about what is possible, and what communities can create in lieu of powerful colonial structures that are inherent to western society. It is acknowledging that communities must divert from and reject ideological attachments that fuel tactics of oppression, so that they do not seep into our systems in the future.

Implications of the Research

“Abolition is presence. Which means abolition is life in rehearsal, not a recitation of rules. Much less, relentless lament. Although the surface of contradictions, the dynamics of those contradictions in their dominant meanings propose carceral displacement or spatial fix as necessary, natural, and inevitable”.

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020)

The current research study began to explore the complex entanglements between the child welfare system and the carceral state through the perspectives of system stakeholders, organizer activists, and family members impacted by the system. The themes constructed in this study show that the system has indeed been deeply connected to the carceral state. By using the carceral ecosystem framework, the current study addressed the ways in which the “child welfare” system has been rooted in a contextual matrix of domination and thus has utilized tactics of power to achieve its mission of “child protection”. Moreover, the current study problematized “child protection” thinking about it as a discourse that has not only relied on the use of tactics of power but has subsequently led to and exacerbated the systems risk-averse stance. The systems stance of risk-aversion has rationalized the proliferation of surveillance and surveillance technologies which has bolstered the resilience of the system by adding new capital. Yet despite this resilient carceral child welfare system, the current study also explored the ways that mothers and a few system stakeholders were beginning to practice dark sousveillance through charting pathways toward a different equilibrium rooted in abolition. This practice of dark sousveillance

included sharing stories and advice, and redefining child protection and prevention as community care. These pathways toward a different equilibrium relied on community and trusting relationships, and it demanded respect for mothers' autonomy and reparations.

The patterns found within the research study are significant in that they address tensions that remain unresolved for the field of social work and social welfare. The current study challenges social workers to think about the role of the "child welfare" system within society, and its claims to child protection. As seen in the study, although some caseworkers may think of the system as needed to ensure that children are not harmed, mothers and many system stakeholders contrarily say that the system has actively and violently harmed communities for decades without redress. Thus, social workers must think critically about their role in exacerbating tactics of power through social control that is inherent to the system. Further social workers must think about how working within the system may contradict certain ethical standards and values that are outlined in our code of ethics. Specifically, how might our code of ethics claim of self-determination be contradictory to the social workers role within a system that is often fueled by coercion and punishment. In other words, social workers must question if a family is able to retain self-determination and autonomy within a system of punishment, and how loopholes in the law and social policy render the opportunity for self-determination non-existent. Social workers thus might focus on how "reasonable effort" and "reasonable suspicion" clauses undermine family's true ability to remain intact and unpunished.

Furthermore, this study showed that the "child welfare" system is embedded in societal ideologies of racism, racial capitalism, and misogynoir. Due to this, social workers must grapple with the histories of social systems, specifically "child welfare", and think about if culture competency trainings and same race/ethnicity placements are truly adequately addressing the

foundational issues that are inherent to anti-Blackness and organized abandonment. Social workers might further ask through research and practice, what does a non-punishment way of addressing harm look like? What is social workers role in exacerbating issues of ownership that date back to slavery?

Alongside the paradoxical questions regarding ethical tensions with the practice of “child welfare”, social workers must also address concerns with the use of surveillance technologies. The use of technological assisted decision-making tools brings up similar questions that revolve around the existence of the system itself. As such, social workers must reflect on who we are deeming a threat and what standards we are upholding to estimate these risks. Further, we must interrogate consent processes that occur when collecting data and sharing data. For example, many mothers discussed that they are not truly able to consent when their rights as a parent are threatened against them. Similarly, they are not given legal representation at the point of investigation, or given information about what data is being collected, how it’s being shared, who it’s being shared with, and when it might be destroyed. Caseworkers also complain that they do not know how the data is being used, and even acknowledge that there are certain organizational partnerships that allow them to skip over consent processes. With the proliferation of data collection, it is extremely important to address these deeply troubling ethical issues that are indeed a social welfare problem, not just a technology problem.

This study embarked on a journey to think through what a different future could look like— one in which we do not rely on tactics of power, or harmful ideologies to address conflict. Mothers and organizers in this study chart different ways of approaching and addressing harm, often in ways that feels and seem impossible by many caseworkers in the system. Mothers and organizers utilize abolitionist praxis to think through what a new village could look like, one

where no one is left in isolation or left hungry. For social workers, the implications from this study indicate that the profession of social welfare might not be part of this new equilibrium charted out by community members. It asks social workers to listen to communities, rather than continuing attempts to control their plans. It asks social workers to take less space in determining who and what needs support, and instead nudges social workers to think through solutions that center community and not carcerality. It asks us to redetermine, renegotiate, replot out our relations to one another and the land. It will take all of us to halt the cycle of the carceral ecosystem, and to push it into a state of creative destruction. This includes interrogating where social work has been complicit and working together to diminish harm. As Joi states,

“The exciting thing about the space of abolition is it gives us a chance to rethink or remember how we're relating to each other when systems claim to be doing child protection work. Like there's also no child autonomy, no respect for children and teens as like autonomous beings but their own hopes and their own dreams. And I think that abolition opens up such a such space for us to rethink like, what does it mean to be truly in community with children? And also what does it mean to move in community with children at the center? I think that children are the collateral damage of the child welfare system. And I think abolition allows us to really center the needs of children and to rethink what it means to be in relation to them. And I think that's like a horizon of possibility”.

Appendices

Appendix A: Community conversation Impacted by System Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction Question/Role of PCWS:

1. Can you tell me about how you became involved in the public child welfare system?
 - A. Who was involved? (people, systems)
 - B. What was the process like?
2. In your opinion, what is the role of the public child welfare system?
 - There's an overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous children in the PCWS, what do you believe is it's role (if any) in protecting Black and Indigenous children?
3. How has the child welfare system impacted you as an individual?

Surveillance and Data Gathering:

4. Often times the child welfare system collects information and data from families. Can you recall some of the information/data that the workers collected from you? [ie: urine samples, or just information from interviews]
 - A. Was there a consent process for collecting this information?
5. Sometimes data collection and even the presence of child protective service workers is referred to as surveillance. What does surveillance mean to you when thinking about the child welfare system?
 - A. What are your thoughts or feelings around surveillance?
6. How does child welfare surveillance and/or efforts to collect your data or information impact you or your family?

Meaning of Child Protection:

7. What does child protection mean to you?
8. How do you find care/support outside of the child welfare system?

Abolition/Re-Imagining:

9. In discussing the child welfare system there has started to be more mention of getting rid of or abolishing the entire system. What are your perspectives on abolishing (getting rid of) the child welfare system?
 - A. How does it make you feel?
 - B. What do you believe or think abolition means for child protection?

Demographics:

1. How long have you been involved in the CW system
2. What race or ethnicity do you identify with?

Appendix B: System Stakeholder Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction Question/Role of PCWS:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your role in the public child welfare system?
2. In your opinion, what is the purpose or role of the public child welfare system?
 - There's an overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous children in the PCWS, what do you believe is it's role in protecting Black and Indigenous children?

Surveillance and Data Gathering:

3. Can you tell me about some of the ways you collect and share information or data through your job?
 - A. What are some of the databases or processes of information sharing that you utilize? (FCI, CACI...)
 - B. What sorts of data do you collect?
 - C. What are the most vital forms of data or information that you gather?
 1. Why?
4. How do you acquire the information or data you use?
 - A. How do you feel when you collect the data?
 1. Is there any data that you are worried about collecting or sharing?
 - B. How do you feel when you utilize the data?
 - C. How does this data collection impact or change your work? (decisions you make)
5. Can you tell me about the ways that you share information (data) through multiple systems?
 - A. What is the importance of sharing information through various systems?
 - B. What are some of the policies or rules around this?
6. Would you say there is a difference in data collection and tracking from surveillance?
 - A. Can you tell me more about the process of consent when collecting and utilizing data from families?
 - B. How do you think surveillance and data gathering impacts Black and Indigenous children and families within the public child welfare system?

Meaning of Child Protection:

7. What does child protection mean to you?
8. Do you believe there are supports outside of the pcws?

Abolition/Re-Imagining:

9. What are your perspectives on abolishing (getting rid of) the child welfare system?
 - What are your thoughts or feelings ?
 - What do you believe or think abolition means for child protection?

Demographics:

1. How long have you been worked for the CW system?
2. What race or ethnicity do you identify with?

Appendix C: Community Organizer/Scholar-Activist Community conversation Interview Guide

Introduction Question/Role of Organizing:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you started organizing around surveillance in the child welfare system and/or child welfare system abolition?
 - A. How has this work been significant for you or your organization?
 - B. How has this work been significant for the community you work in or other communities?
2. Can you describe some of the ways that you organize around surveillance or child welfare?
 - A. What are the most vital issues that you organize around?
 - B. What is the aim of your efforts?
 - C. What are some of the barriers that you experience in doing this work?
 - D. How do you find time for respite or self-care while doing this work?

Surveillance and Data Gathering:

3. Can you tell me about some of the most surprising or meaningful things that you are finding out about the child welfare system or surveillance through your work?
4. Some researchers refer to “Child Protection” as an ideology. What is the influence or significance of various ideological frameworks [racial capitalism, white supremacy] when it comes to the use of surveillance and/or the existence of systems like the child welfare system?
5. Can you tell me about the ways that sharing information (data) through multiple systems is either helpful or detrimental to families?
6. How do you think surveillance and data gathering impacts Black and Indigenous children and families within the public child welfare system?
7. What are some of the systems that you’ve seen work together with or within the child welfare system to surveil families?

Abolition/Re-Imagining:

8. What are your perspectives on abolishing (getting rid of) the child welfare system?
 - What are your thoughts or feelings ?
 - What do you believe or think abolition means for child protection?

Demographics:

How many years have you been doing your work [within/with child welfare, in organizing/activist spaces]

Appendix D: Public Records Act Request

August 10, 2021

Child & Family Services
425 Shatto Pl., 6th Fl.,
Los Angeles, CA 90020
AGUILJC@dcfs.lacounty.gov

VIA EMAIL

RE: CALIFORNIA PUBLIC RECORDS ACT REQUEST

To Juana Aguilera or to Whom it May Concern:

Pursuant to the California Public Records Act (CPRA), Cal. Govt. Code § 6253 et seq., we submit the following request for public records.

We request the following records for the time period from January 1, 2015 – Present:

If possible, please provide the information in an electronic format to:
vcopeland@g.ucla.edu

If it is not possible to send in electronic form, please mail the records to:
UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs
ATTN: Victoria Copeland
3250 Public Affairs Building
Box 951656
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656

I am a researcher working for the University of California Los Angeles, a public research university. I will not directly profit from, nor charge for, any of this research. As such I am requesting you waive any costs attendant to this request as provided for by § 6253(e). (*See North County Parents Organization v. Dept. of Education*, (1994) 23 Cal.App.4th 144, 148)) **If you are unwilling to waive these costs, please notify me before any copying begins with an itemized breakdown of costs.**

If I have misdescribed any public record or you desire clarification on any of my requests, please feel free to contact me.

I am requesting the following information:

1. Vendor Communications: Records reflecting any communications between any representative of the DCFS Child Protection Hotline and any representative of any vendor offering PRM or machine learning products and services such as Amazon Web Services,

Amazon Connect, and any relevant vendor. This includes sales materials and emails relating to those products.

2. Purchase Records and Agreements: Any and all records indicating an agreement for DCFS' purchase, acquisition, or licensing of, or permission to use, test, or evaluate a PRM or machine learning product including Amazon or Amazon web services for the child protection hotline. This includes but is not limited to any product or service offered by Amazon, SAS, SAP, Oracle, and IBM. Please include purchase orders, RFPs, licensing agreements, invoices, budget requests, grant applications and contracts related to any PRM or machine learning product or service including Amazon or Amazon web services.

3. Data and Research Partnerships: Records relating to DCFS' Child Protection Hotline collaboration with educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and/or philanthropic foundations for purposes of developing and researching PRM or machine learning tools including but not limited to communications, grant applications, and memoranda of understanding.

4. Policies Governing Use: Any manuals, training materials, policies, procedures and practices governing the use of PRM or machine learning tools or services or related information or databases including Amazon or Amazon web services. This includes materials intended for employees or representatives of DCFS Child Protection Hotline.

5. Data/Information Inputs: Records regarding what data may be, and/or actually is, used by or supplied to PRM, machine learning, or Amazon vendors and researchers for purposes of developing tools. This includes but is not limited to CWS data and any other external data sources, whether public or private. Please also include records regarding any weighting used and all available details about the data, and any records related to research that informed the decision to include (or exclude) PRM or machine learning tools' various data inputs.

6. How it Works: Records regarding how PRM or machine learning tools or services utilize any input data to create outputs, the algorithms or machine learning used, the possible or actual outputs, and how DCFS uses the tool to inform or make decisions. This includes Amazon Web Services and other Amazon contracted services such as sentiment analysis through Amazon Connect.

5. Data/Information Outputs: Any record or reports indicating how many calls are made to the hotline, how many calls are flagged or marked as high risk/flagged for further investigation through the algorithm, machine learning tool, or PRM tool.

I. Of calls that are flagged as high risk or flagged for further investigation, where or who were these calls from, what demographic information is available about the caller and family or child being reported (age, race)?

II. What are the outcomes of the calls (substantiation, voluntary services, filtered out/no investigation)?

7. Democratic Process: Records relating to any public process or debate about any PRM or machine learning product or service, including but not limited to meeting agendas or minutes, public notice, analyses, or communications between DCFS hotline and elected leaders or county officials.

8. Audits of Past Uses: Records related to the utilization, testing, or evaluation of PRM or machine learning tools and services, including records indicating the number of child welfare investigations in which PRM or machine learning tools or services have been used, and the number of those investigations that have resulted in DCFS interventions, including but not limited to the removal of a child from the home. Please also include records indicating the number of instances where a 'risk score' or other PRM or machine learning output erroneously resulted in an investigation or other DCFS intervention.

9. Additional Audits and Ethical Reviews: Any records related to audits not accounted for in Request #8, and internal reviews and evaluations of PRM or machine learning tools or services, including ethical reviews.

10. Nondisclosure Agreements: Any records of, or communications regarding, any agreement that creates nondisclosure or confidentiality obligations governing DCFS contact with a vendor of PRM or machine learning tools or services including Amazon or Amazon web services."

I understand that CCR § 6253(c) requires a timely reply to this request, within 10 days of receipt. I look forward to hearing from you, and I appreciate your help.

Sincerely,
Victoria Copeland

Appendix E: Supplemental Safety Assessment SRFOT Protocol

SUPPLEMENTAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT SRFOT PROTOCOL

ATTACHMENT III

The purpose of the Supplemental Safety Assessment Skid Row Family Outreach Team (SRFOT) Protocol is to structure critical decisions for children who have been encountered by the SRFOT by:

1. Routinely monitoring critical case factors obtained by an evaluator
2. Help to structure the interview with a family, and
3. Expedite a referral to the Child Abuse Hotline when appropriate.

This SRFOT Procedural is applicable to all new clients encountered by the SRFOT Children's Social Worker.

The intent of this instrument is to assist the evaluator when assessing a family that lacks adequate shelter. It is an aide to identify issues that may raise the suspicion of child abuse. It is not intended to be an in-depth assessment of the family.

Client's Name: _____ Date: _____

Children: Name _____ Age _____ DOB _____

Name _____ Age _____ DOB _____

Name _____ Age _____ DOB _____

Name _____ Age _____ DOB _____

Name _____ Age _____ DOB _____

Location of Family: _____

Family Vouchered? _____ BY: _____

Location of Motel/Shelter: _____

Referred To Family Preservation? _____ Agency? _____ Date? _____

Referral to Child Abuse Hotline? No _____ Yes _____ Date: _____

Additional Information: _____

1. Previous DCFS history- (Note: Prior DCFS referrals are the single most predictive indicator of future maltreatment.)

Parent's Self Report:

Prior death of a child as a result of maltreatment.

Prior serious harm to child(ren)

Termination of Parental Rights

Prior Removal of children

Prior or current DCFS case

CSW's Review of CWS/CMS history:

Prior serious harm to child(ren)

Prior Termination of Parental Rights

Prior Removal of children by CPS

Prior CPS substantiation for maltreatment.

Prior inconclusive CPS investigation factors to be considered

Prior domestic violence which resulted in serious harm

Prior service failure to successfully complete CPS services.

Prior or current DCFS case

Search Date: _____

RESULTS:

2. History of Community Service Refusal

Client Self Report:

CSW research: Have they been given referrals but not followed through on them?

By SROT:

By Community Service Agency:

SRFOT-2/21/06

I

SUPPLEMENTAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT SRFOT PROTOCOL

3. Domestic Violence History

Child(ren) exhibits anxiety (e.g., nightmares, and insomnia) related to situations associated with domestic violence. Child(ren) cries, cowers, cringes, trembles, or otherwise exhibits fear as a result of the domestic violence.

Use of guns, knives, or other instruments in a violent, threatening, and/or intimidating manner.

Client Self Report:

DCFS record:

4. Mental Health History

Client Self Report:

DCFS record:

DMH record: (Consult with DMH SRFOT member)

5. Inability to Provide Minimum Sufficient Level of Parenting

There are a variety of issues to be considered in assessing parenting skills; drug impairment, alcoholism, developmental disabilities, mental health and lack of knowledge. Examples:

- The client has a history of keeping child(ren) in the shelter, away from school, away from childcare for extended periods of time.
- Current disability, mental illness, or substance abuse seriously impairs his/her ability to supervise, protect, or care for the child(ren).

6. Client fails to protect child(ren). This may include physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect.

- Client(s) fails to protect child(ren) from serious harm.
- Client(s) does not provide supervision necessary to protect child(ren) from potentially serious harm by others. Parental care and supervision is needed due to the environmental factors including, but not limited to, alcohol abuse, drug use, sex offenders, and/or mental illness among the person(s) a child has contact with or who may have access if proper supervision is not provided.
- Client is not considering the child(ren)'s age and/or developmental stage as a factor in parental supervision.

7. Client(s) explanation for the lack of adequate shelter is questionable or inconsistent with the explanation, and/or the immediate plan for shelter suggests that the child(ren)'s safety may be an immediate concern.

- Client(s)' explanation for their lack of adequate shelter or the cause of the lack of adequate shelter minimizes the extent of harm to the child.
- Factors to consider include age of child, location or quality of the temporary housing, exceptional needs of child(ren), or chronicity of the lack of adequate shelter.
- Client(s) intentionally coaches or coerces child(ren), in effort to hinder the assessment about the lack of adequate shelter.

8. Inability to Access Services

- The family that lacks adequate shelter is excluded from the services traditionally available through interventions, such as vouchers or shelters as they do not meet the basic requirements.
 - Ineligible as they receive SSI or other grants
 - They cannot meet technical program requirements.

ATTACHMENT III

9. Length of time the client lacks adequate shelter

Community Agency Record:

- Child(ren) is without minimally warm clothing in cold months.
- Client does not seek treatment for child(ren)'s medical condition(s)
- Client does not follow prescribed treatment for such conditions.
- Child(ren) appears malnourished.
- Child(ren) has exceptional needs which client(s) does not or cannot meet.
- Client(s) does not attend to child (ren) to the extent that need for care goes unnoticed or unmet (e.g., client is present but child(ren) can wander outdoors alone, play with dangerous objects, play on unprotected window ledge, or be exposed to other serious hazards).
- Client leaves child(ren) alone (time period varies with age and developmental stage).
- Client(s) makes inadequate and/or inappropriate baby-sitting or child care arrangements or demonstrates very poor planning for child(ren)'s care.

- Substances or objects accessible to the child(ren) that may endanger the health and/or safety of the child(ren). Lack of utilities and no alternate or safe provisions are made.
- Excessive garbage and/or spoiled food which threatens health. Illness or injury has occurred due to living conditions.
- Evidence of human or animal waste in living quarters.

Notes:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

SUPPLEMENTAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT SRFOT PROTOCOL

3. Domestic Violence History

Child(ren) exhibits anxiety (e.g., nightmares, and insomnia) related to situations associated with domestic violence. Child(ren) cries, cowers, cringes, trembles, or otherwise exhibits fear as a result of the domestic violence. Use of guns, knives, or other instruments in a violent, threatening, and/or intimidating manner.

Client Self Report:

DCFS record:

4. Mental Health History

Client Self Report:

DCFS record:

DMH record: (Consult with DMH SRFOT member)

5. Inability to Provide Minimum Sufficient Level of Parenting

There are a variety of issues to be considered in assessing parenting skills; drug impairment, alcoholism, developmental disabilities, mental health and lack of knowledge. Examples:

- The client has a history of keeping child(ren) in the shelter, away from school, away from childcarers for extended periods of time.
- Current disability, mental illness, or substance abuse seriously impairs his/her ability to supervise, protect, or care for the child(ren).

6. Client fails to protect child(ren). This may include physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect.

- Client(s) fails to protect child(ren) from serious harm.
- Client(s) does not provide supervision necessary to protect child(ren) from potentially serious harm by others. Parental care and supervision is needed due to the environmental factors including, but not limited to, alcohol abuse, drug use, sex offenders, and/or mental illness among the person(s) a child has contact with or who may have access if proper supervision is not provided.
- Client is not considering the child(ren)'s age and/or developmental stage as a factor in parental supervision.

7. Client(s) explanation for the lack of adequate shelter is questionable or inconsistent with the explanation, and/or the immediate plan for shelter suggests that the child(ren)'s safety may be an immediate concern.

- Client(s)' explanation for their lack of adequate shelter or the cause of the lack of adequate shelter minimizes the extent of harm to the child.
- Factors to consider include age of child, location or quality of the temporary housing, exceptional needs of child(ren), or chronicity of the lack of adequate shelter.
- Client(s) intentionally coaches or coerces child(ren), in effort to hinder the assessment about the lack of adequate shelter.

8. Inability to Access Services

- The family that lacks adequate shelter is excluded from the services traditionally available through interventions, such as vouchers or shelters as they do not meet the basic requirements.
 - Ineligible as they receive SSI or other grants
 - They cannot meet technical requirements

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