



## **The Racial Geography of State Child Protection**

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## **Abstract**

Dorothy Roberts examines an understudied aspect of the gross overrepresentation of black children in the U.S. child welfare system, in which a black child is four times more likely than a white child to be in foster care. She argues that such statistics conceal a disturbing racial geography, in which child protection cases are concentrated in communities of color in the nation's cities. To investigate the sociopolitical impact of such overrepresentation on black communities, she conducted a small case study in the black Chicago neighborhood of Woodlawn, where there are high rates of foster-care placement.

Analyzing in-depth interviews with 27 black women, Roberts uncovered many ways in which the intense agency involvement in Woodlawn negatively affected both family and community relationships. Yet surprisingly most of the women did not believe that the agency was overly involved in their neighborhood, and in fact, called for greater state involvement.

Roberts surmises that the residents of such neighborhoods are forced to rely on more punitive state institutions to meet their needs because of the growing dearth of social programs in these neighborhoods, caused by the government's shift to market solutions for poverty. She concludes that the racial geography of state child protection also illustrates the critical role that institutional racism plays in the neoliberal state's new forms of punitive governance.

## **The Racial Geography of State Child Protection**

**Dorothy Roberts**

The US child welfare system has always been an instrument for regulating the poor. State child “protection” is rooted in the philosophy of child saving -- rescuing children from the ills of poverty, typically by taking them away from their parents (Gordon 1999; Lindsey 1994). Most cases of child maltreatment involve parental neglect, which is usually difficult to disentangle from the conditions of poverty. The child welfare system hides the systemic reasons for poor families’ hardships by attributing them to parental deficits and pathologies that require therapeutic remedies instead of social change. Child welfare practice overly relies on coercive intervention and child removal rather than supports families to avoid child abuse and neglect.

Although black children were virtually excluded from openly segregated child welfare services until the end of World War II, the system has since evolved into one of the state’s chief means of supervising poor black families (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972; Roberts 2002). As the child welfare system began to serve fewer white children and more black children, state and federal governments spent much more money on foster care and less on in-home services to families (US DHHS 1997). Today, black children are grossly overrepresented in the US child welfare system: they make up about one-third of the nation’s foster care population yet represent only 15 percent of the nation’s children (Perez 2003; US DHHS 2006). A black child is four times as likely as a white child to be in foster care (Child Welfare League of America 2000).

Although alarming, these statistics do not reveal the spatial dynamics of the child welfare system's racial disparities. State custody of children has a racial geography. In the nation's cities, child protection cases are concentrated in communities of color. Many poor black neighborhoods, in particular, have extremely high rates of involvement by public child welfare agencies, especially placement in foster care. For example, in 1997 one out of ten children in central Harlem had been placed in foster care (Katz 2000). In Chicago, most child protection cases are clustered in a few zip code areas, which are almost exclusively African American (Children and Family Research Center 2006; Testa and Furstenberg 2002). The overrepresentation of black children in the foster care population, then, represents massive state supervision and dissolution of families concentrated in black neighborhoods.

What is the sociopolitical impact of this on poor black neighborhoods? Although researchers are investigating the reasons for racial disparities in the child welfare system, the community impact of these disparities remains obscure (Courtney et al. 1998; Goerge and Bong 2001; Lane et al. 2002). I began to explore this question in 2005 in a small case study of Woodlawn, a black neighborhood in Chicago with high rates of foster care placement (Roberts 2006). By conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews of twenty-five black women who lived in Woodlawn, the study aimed at better understanding how child welfare agency involvement affects community and civic life and shapes residents' attitudes about government and self-governance. I use neighborhood to signify the geographical site of study and community to signify the social relations that neighbors engage in with one another, such as pooling resources or joining together for civic projects. In short, my study focused on the impact of concentrated state child protection

in the geographical space of a neighborhood on the community relationships within that neighborhood.

At first, what I discovered surprised me. The women I interviewed identified numerous ways in which the intense agency involvement in Woodlawn damaged both family and community relationships. Yet, contrary to what I expected, most did not believe that the agency was overly involved in their neighborhood. Rather, they called for greater state supervision of financially motivated foster parents, as well as greater financial assistance for needy caregivers. I came to realize that this apparent paradox reflects the consequences of neoliberal social reforms. As these neighborhoods are stripped of social programs in the government's shift to market solutions for poverty, residents must increasingly rely on more punitive state institutions to meet their needs. The racial geography of state child protection also illustrates the critical role that institutional racism plays in the neoliberal state's new forms of punitive governance.

*The Geography of Child Welfare, Neoliberalism, and Racial Injustice*

In Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare (2002), I hypothesized that intense levels of state supervision of children and their families have negative consequences for family and community networks, which are supposed to prepare children for civic life and self-governance. By fostering citizens' moral development free from state control, families play a vital role in a democratic political system (McClain 2006). Placing large numbers of children in state custody -- even if some are ultimately reunited with their families or transferred to adoptive homes -- interferes with a group's ability to form healthy connections among its members and to participate fully in the democratic process. The child welfare system's racial disparity also reinforces the

quintessential racist stereotype: that black people are incapable of governing themselves and need state supervision. The intense involvement of these state agencies in black neighborhoods can therefore be viewed as a means by which the public child welfare system helps to maintain the subordinated status of black people in the United States.

The concentration of child welfare agency supervision in inner-city neighborhoods also plays a significant role in the intensifying shift toward neoliberal governance. Federal child welfare policy looks to a private remedy for family poverty-- adoption-- rather than curtails the flow of poor, minority children into foster care by providing needed resources to their families (Roberts 2002). In the past decade, federal and state policies have shifted away from preserving families and toward “freeing” children in foster care for adoption by terminating parental rights. Most notably, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), passed by Congress in 1997, promotes adoption through a set of mandates and incentives to state child welfare departments. As a result of ASFA, most state agencies shortened time frames for achieving permanency, increased emphasis on adoption, and implemented concurrent planning that prepares adoptive homes for foster children while providing the children’s parents with services aimed at family reunification (US DHHS 2005). ASFA also imposed arbitrary timelines that shorten the time within which agencies should petition for termination of parental rights.

The overlap of ASFA and the 1996 federal welfare adjustment law marked the first time in US history that the federal government mandated state protection of children from abuse and neglect without a corresponding mandate to provide basic economic support to poor families (Courtney 1998). Like welfare policy’s promotion of marriage,

the reliance on adoption furthers the neoliberal agenda to replace state support for families with private remedies for social and economic inequality.

At the same time that government has reduced support for families, there has been a parallel increase in state intervention in poor people's lives. Over the past two decades, the welfare, prison, and foster care systems have clamped down on poor minority communities, especially inner-city black neighborhoods, increasing many families' experiences of insecurity and surveillance. Welfare reform is no longer a system of aid. Rather, it is a system of behavior modification that attempts to regulate the sexual, marital, and childbearing decisions of poor unmarried mothers by placing conditions on the receipt of state assistance (Smith 2007; Mink 2001).

The contraction of the US welfare state paralleled the expansion of prisons that stigmatizes inner-city communities and isolates them further from the privileges of mainstream society (Davis 2003). Social scientists have used sociological theories about neighborhoods to study the community-level impact of high incarceration rates in African American neighborhoods (Braman 2004; Clear et al. 2003; Fagan et al. 2003). Poor African American communities have suffered the brunt of the staggering buildup of the prison population over the past thirty years. Research in several cities reveals that the exit and reentry of inmates, like that of children in foster care, is geographically concentrated in the poorest, minority neighborhoods. A host of empirical studies conducted in the past decade has found that incarceration has become a systematic aspect of neighborhood residents' family affairs, economic prospects, political engagement, social norms, and childhood expectations for the future (Roberts 2004). The mounting evidence of neighborhood-wide devastation caused by mass imprisonment suggests that the

concentration of child welfare agency involvement in the same African American neighborhoods also has widespread repercussions.

*The Community-Level Effects of Child Welfare Supervision*

In the past decade, there has been an explosion of social science research on how neighborhood characteristics such as poverty, joblessness, and residential stability, as well as community-level social dynamics, affect children and families (Sampson 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). William Julius Wilson pioneered this type of research in his 1987 book The Truly Disadvantaged, in which he argued that the deindustrialization of central cities resulted in the extreme concentration of poverty and unemployment in African American neighborhoods. Residents of these neighborhoods, he claimed, experienced “concentration effects” that imposed burdens on them above and beyond those caused by their individual and family characteristics.

Since then, numerous researchers have theorized and measured how the concentration of social and economic disadvantage in urban neighborhoods affects residents. The ecological context of neighborhoods became as important a focus of investigation as the demographic features of the people who live in them. Noting that child-related problems “tend to come bundled together at the neighborhood level” (Sampson 2001:6), a significant segment of these studies examine how neighborhood social composition and processes influence the well-being of children and adolescents (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993). These neighborhood-oriented approaches to child welfare, however, overlook the role of state institutions in mediating the effects of concentrated poverty on the well-being of children and other residents. I am interested in the impact on

neighborhoods of the concentration of both disadvantage and intense involvement by state child welfare agencies.

I began to investigate the community impact of child protection services in one of the black neighborhoods on Chicago's south side that Wilson wrote about in The Truly Disadvantaged. Bordered on the north by the University of Chicago, Woodlawn has been a frequent site of sociological research and battles over encroachment by university buildings. The 2000 census shows that more than 95 percent of the neighborhood's twenty-seven thousand residents were African American (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission 2002). Woodlawn is also one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. The median annual family income was \$24,500, with one-quarter of families earning less than \$10,000. Half of the female-headed households with children in Woodlawn lived in poverty.

In 1937, when Chicago businessman Carl Hansberry, the father of playwright Lorraine Hansberry, purchased a home in Woodlawn, a white signatory to a restrictive covenant on the property challenged him in court. The US Supreme Court eventually ruled in favor of Hansberry on a legal technicality (Hansberry v. Lee 311 US 32 [1940]). Racial covenants had effectively kept Woodlawn a white area: in 1940 African Americans made up only 17 percent of the population (Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1995). The US Supreme Court's 1948 landmark decision in Shelley v. Kraemer declared racially restrictive covenants unconstitutional, officially opening the gates of Chicago neighborhoods to thousands of blacks migrating from the South in search of employment.

In the following decades, Woodlawn saw a massive demographic transformation in both the size and the complexion of its population. "Between 1930 and 1960,

Woodlawn's population increased 23 percent to an all-time high of more than 81,000" (Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1995:138). As blacks moved into the neighborhood, Woodlawn's housing stock became grossly overextended, and whites fled to better and more homogenous housing. By 1960, 90 percent of the neighborhood's residents were black and crowded almost exclusively into renter-occupied apartment buildings. Woodlawn experienced a steady decline in subsequent decades as deindustrialization brought staggering unemployment, depopulation, and disinvestment.

Woodlawn has one of the highest rates of foster care placement in Chicago. At the end of 2005, almost two hundred of approximately nine thousand children in the neighborhood were in state-supervised substitute care, living either with relatives or with strangers (CFRC Fact Book 2006). The vast majority of Chicago neighborhoods experience less than half of Woodlawn's placement rate of twenty-one per one thousand children. A few other poor African American neighborhoods, such as Grand Boulevard and the Near West Side, have double Woodlawn's rate. In no white neighborhood in Chicago are children placed in foster care at a level even approaching that of these black neighborhoods. Figures for any given year provide only a fraction of all the neighborhood children who were in foster care in prior years; they do not reveal the number of residents who spent some part of their lives in foster care. Thus, the total number of Woodlawn families who have experienced state supervision is even greater than the available statistics show.

During the summer of 2005, with the help of a research assistant, I interviewed twenty-five black women who lived in Woodlawn. Many of the women, ages twenty-four to fifty-six, were residents of a housing project in Woodlawn, and half the interviews

took place at a community center located in the housing project. Most of the women had some personal involvement with child welfare agencies: as foster children and foster parents and as siblings or cousins of those placed in foster care. None of the respondents reported being investigated by child protective services or having their own children placed in foster care.

The women interviewed were aware of intense involvement by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) with families in their neighborhood. Indeed, most estimated the number of Woodlawn families under DCFS supervision to be at least half:

Over half of the community, I would say. Yeah, it's a lot.

*My God, probably thousands.*

*I'm gonna say 90 percent.*

*It's common because people always getting their children taken away. So, yeah, it's common.*

*From 60th to 67th, State to Stoney Island, even with it being 150 cases just in that little vicinity, 150 apartments or families or whatever, or everybody in the whole three-flat.*

*I think everyone in Woodlawn knows someone in the system.*

Most of the women understood the function of DCFS to center on removing children from their homes and placing them in foster care. Tiara, a twenty-four-year-old whose friend was investigated by DCFS, stated, "I try not to know what the initials stand for, but I do know that in this neighborhood, to me, DCFS is the people that take your kids if you are not taking care of them correctly." Christina, also twenty-four years old, with a friend involved with DCFS, agreed: "It just seems like they're all about taking the child out of

the home. You know, I've never really known of a situation where if someone told on the family and they let the child stay and deal with the problem."

The women identified significant effects of agency involvement in Woodlawn on both family and neighborhood social relationships. They reported that DCFS supervision of parents interfered with parental authority and caused family conflicts over agency placement of children in the care of relatives. Many felt that placing children in foster care damaged the children's ability to form social relationships and that the agency's constant surveillance created distrust among neighbors. Not only did DCFS cause children to disrespect their parents, the women reported, but also the agency bullied parents into relinquishing their authority over their own children. Some felt that parents who do not have the fortitude to withstand DCFS regulation simply give up. Twenty-four-year-old Aisha, whose cousins had been placed in foster care, told me, "That's what I say about DCFS. They will come right in and snatch your children.... Some people fight for their children. That's why they end up getting the children back. But if you don't know much about DCFS and you don't know how to go about doing this thing, you'll probably lose your children to the system."

Pearl, a counselor who provided services for DCFS but also had relatives and neighbors involved with the agency, explained:

*I believe when DCFS is involved in the situation, I believe that a sense of disconnection returns. But when you have to have supervised visits to see the natural family, not to mention, you know, aunts, grandparents, and relatives, supervised visits, I mean, the family has now become even more disconnected with the fact that maybe a*

*grandparent could have come over and took the kids for a week or two weeks but now they have to have permission from the state....I believe it's another form of slavery.*

Tiara elaborated how the multiple requirements imposed on mothers by DCFS caseworkers can break down their will to regain custody of their children:

*So if you drop dirty [fail a drug test] because you been hanging with your buddy, you gotta go through the whole procedure. Now this could be a twelve-month case. Now if you one of those people that ain't strong enough and now time's gone past, you don't even want your kids back. Now adoption papers coming up in like ten months because the court wanna know why you ain't doing your service plans right, so to speak.*

Some women believed that the psychological injuries caused by foster care placement hamper children's ability to form healthy social relationships later in life.

Aisha stated:

*The child's gotta go through all this ridicule, being tossed about, your mother is nothing, your family is nothing, you been taken away. And it kinda makes the child feel like unwanted. And that why we have a lot of men and women growing up today very rebellious and very hurt and doing a lot of things out of their hurt because of the suffering and ridicule that they dealt with as a child.*

Because so many Woodlawn residents have been involved with the foster care system, it is likely that the social disabilities the women described have a considerable impact on neighborhood relationships.

Another effect on neighborhood relationships that the women discussed is the distrust among neighbors created by pervasive DCFS surveillance of families. As one resident put it, “[DCFS] disrupts the community....I would say it’s a trust thing.” Many observed that it is common for residents to call DCFS to report their neighbors for child maltreatment, destroying a sense of trust among them. Residents must look over their shoulders for fear that a neighbor is noting a parental misstep or that an observant stranger is a DCFS caseworker. Twenty-seven-year-old Cassie observed:

*I mean, [DCFS] shouldn't cause a problem, but if somebody calling DCFS on you and they come knocking at your door and you wondering why they at your door and you wondering who called them, then that's a problem. That's a big problem....That's why you got to watch what you do and what you say and all this, 'cause you don't know who you could be talking to. Out on the street you don't know who you could be talking to. She could be DCFS, writing down stuff, taking notes, all of that, and you don't know who she is. So you have to be careful. You have to be very careful. Because, like I say, you don't know. You don't know.*

Heightening the sense of suspicion among neighbors is the perception that DCFS is commonly used as a means of retribution. Some respondents believed that frequently residents falsely accused others of child abuse in order to seek retribution against them. “I

think, personally, that people are using DCFS as revenge now. They're revenging," Tiara stated. "You can argue with somebody. They call DCFS on you." The use of DCFS as a common means of problem solving and recrimination is a compelling sign of the agency's entrenchment in neighborhood culture. It suggests that intensive state supervision damages neighborhood relationships not only by creating distrust among neighbors but also by encouraging a destructive alternative to productive mechanisms for resolving neighborhood conflict.

Like Pearl, quoted above, several women described DCFS as a form of slavery or prison and placed it in a broader system of coercive neighborhood regulation. Early in the interview, Whitney, a twenty-three-year-old who was in foster care as a child, described DCFS as "jail for kids, basically." Later she characterized the housing project where she lived in the same terms: "This is a hazard to people's lives. I'm serious. They have a camera now, a police camera, and it's just like I'm in jail, girl. I am." Aisha described the impact of family disruption on the neighborhood's civic life in especially powerful terms. She believed that people who are separated from their families by state child welfare workers have difficulty joining with other residents on neighborhood projects:

*When you are taken away from your family, that is a form of separation, and they learn from that, growing up to be separated. You know, like to be separate. I can't really explain it, but it's not really set in them to be united, or to be one, or to come together to do anything. Because they've been separated, I guess. Yeah, like we can never come together to do anything over here....It definitely has an effect on the community because bringing separation like that, I don't know what it*

*does, but we cannot as a people and as a community come together.*

*No, we have not come together on anything. That's why nothing is accomplished here.*

#### *Tying Economic Support to Child Removal*

One of the most powerful discoveries I made in Woodlawn is the tension created by the child welfare agency's role as both investigator of and provider for neighborhood families. The child welfare system is staffed by social workers who are supposed to provide services to families. Yet, these same service providers investigate parents alleged to have maltreated their children and coerce parents to comply with rehabilitative measures by threatening to take away their children permanently. Social work professor Leroy Pelton emphasizes the threat to family integrity created by the child welfare system's dual function:

*The investigative/coercive/child-removal role diminishes, hampers, and overwhelms the helping role within the dual-role structure of public child-welfare agencies as huge and increasingly larger portions of their budgets are devoted to investigation and foster care, with little money left over for preventive and supportive services to combat the impermanency of children's living arrangements. [Pelton 1993:271]*

Although the women I interviewed criticized the agency's damage to neighborhood relationships, most nevertheless expressed a desire for continued or greater DCFS involvement in Woodlawn to meet the material needs of its struggling families. The child welfare system exacts an onerous price: it requires poor mothers to relinquish custody of their children in exchange for state support needed to care for them (Roberts

2001). If social disruption is the price residents must pay for needed financial support, then most respondents were willing to pay it. They made it clear, however, that they preferred more financial support with less disruption of family relationships and criticized the necessary linkage of family financial assistance with investigation and child removal.

The women saw a need for more DCFS involvement in their neighborhood for two reasons: to supply additional financial resources to families and to monitor foster homes better, mainly because of the negative effects of financial incentives for taking in foster children. Many respondents understood the agency's role as a chief financial resource for families. Positive comments about DCFS often concerned its financial support for mothers, foster parents, or foster children but not its protection of children from abuse and neglect. Twenty-seven-year-old Angela, who had been in foster care, explained:

*They're doing a good job [in Woodlawn]....Because it does help them out with their, you know, financial-wise, pay bills and stuff like that. They help them out. They do give them money for keeping the kids too....Because I know the caseworkers are so nice because, like I said, my husband, his mom had adoptive kids, and she get \$2,500 to the kids, a month alone.*

Whitney pointed to DCFS's financial role in less positive terms:

*I would say only people that's probably benefiting the most out of DCFS is the foster parents. That's it. And that's only because they*

*getting a little financials that they do get, because they don't get anything.*

Most of the children DCFS removes from parents are placed with relatives. Kinship foster care is a significant source of financial support for relatives' care giving, because foster care stipends are much larger than Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits. As Wanda observed, "The only [positive impact of DCFS] that I can think about is the resources that they do provide children or grandparents or other family members who take in their family members." The level of state support for kinship caregivers, however, directly correlates with the level of state intrusion into their families. Most states, including Illinois, require that relatives meet the same licensing requirements as nonrelative foster parents to receive foster care payments. The extended family must exchange its autonomy over child rearing for financial support and services needed to raise its children.

Despite their gratitude for caseworkers' financial assistance for their families, many of the women in Woodlawn also commented on the negative impact of financial incentives to become a foster parent. A common criticism of foster care was that foster parents often took poor care of children because they were in the business "just for the money." Forty-five-year-old child care worker Estelle complained:

*I know people who... just used the children, you know, just 'cause they get paid, you know. I mean, you know, if you want a child, you take care of the child, and you should want it from the heart instead of just because you get the money. I know it's a lot of people who are just using the children.*

Aisha similarly observed:

*A lot of people do it just for the money. A lot of people are taking these people's children for the money, not that they care anything about the child. I know from my grandmother that sometimes that people do not care about the child. As long as that check is rolling in every month, they will let the child stay there.*

Francis, forty-eight, whose daughter was the subject of a DCFS investigation, also questioned foster parents' motives:

*Because foster people, they don't give a care about them kids. All they want is the money, you know. And then a lot of times you see foster kids with foster parents and the kids look like some thrift store reject, you know. And you get money for these kids. Ain't no way they should look like they look, you know.*

Paradoxically, some women believed that DCFS should be more involved in foster homes because some foster parents were interested only in the money and because the agency did not support foster parents enough. Beverly, who was involved with DCFS as a foster child and as the adoptive mother of her niece, expressed both sentiments about the agency:

*I don't think they're involved enough. Why? Because I believe that what they need to do before they even put children in other people's homes, relative or whoever, my thing is, I think they need to observe the person's house, the person whose house they're going to put the children in, at least a month before. Why I say that, because a lot of*

*people get these kids, they start this, for the money. The kids are still being neglected, and I don't think DCFS is going out checking on them enough.*

*There's another lady over here, she got her nephew, and she was complaining about how they weren't sending her no money, like eighty dollars she got. First, she had one baby. She wasn't getting nothing for that baby.... You need money to take care of these kids. I'm not asking for a million dollars, but give me something to work with. And that kind of thing people have problems with, with the DCFS. The money thing.*

Perhaps the tension women expressed involves distrusting other foster parents' motives while wanting greater remuneration for their own foster parenting. It also reflects the perverse tradeoff created when foster care constitutes one of the neighborhood's few remaining means for addressing parental poverty. The state's reliance on substitute care of children creates financial incentives for bad caregivers and insufficient support for good ones.

The women's concerns also stem from the child welfare system's preference for paying foster parents to care for children over providing adequate supports directly to poor mothers. Although Congress restructured welfare in 1996 by abolishing the federal entitlement to public assistance for children, foster care remains a well-funded entitlement program. The stipends paid to foster parents far exceed welfare benefits, the only public assistance available to poor mothers outside the child welfare system (Urbina 2006). Moreover, the monthly foster-care payment is multiplied by the number of

children in the foster parent's care, instead of the marginal increase per child under TANF.

Although most of the women wanted greater DCFS presence in Woodlawn, they did not uncritically accept the terms of its current involvement. Many condemned the agency's narrow role rooted in investigating families rather than helping them. Michelle, thirty-four, who helped to raise her nephew when her sister was investigated by DCFS, poignantly observed that the agency responded only to allegations of child abuse rather than to family need:

*The way I see it is that [people in Woodlawn] don't look like DCFS can really help them. Like I said, the advertisement, it just says abuse. If you being abused, this is the number you call. This is the only way you gonna get help. It doesn't say if I'm in need of counseling, or if I'm in need of my children don't have shoes, if I just can't provide groceries even though I may have seven kids but I only get a hundred something dollars food stamps and my work check only goes to bills. I can't feed eight of us all off a hundred-something-dollar food stamps. So I'm saying, they don't know that DCFS can help them in a positive way. They only do negative things. They only take my children away. I think that is the big issue. I don't want to lose my children, so I'm not going to call DCFS for help because I only see them take away children.*

Having stripped Woodlawn, like other inner-city neighborhoods, of social programs, low-income housing, and guaranteed public assistance, the state uses the

punitive system of foster care to deal with struggling mothers who lack the resources they need to care for their children. Poor families are left in the bind of resenting child welfare agencies' surveillance and interference yet wanting the agencies' continued presence as one of the few remaining sources of public aid. The child welfare system's racial geography shows that neoliberalism's harshest effects will be felt in poor communities of color. Woodlawn is a site of this tension not only because it is a poor neighborhood, but also because it is predominantly black. The disproportionate involvement of African American children in the nation's foster care population stems, in part, from their high rates of poverty. But it is also caused by a racist model of the ideal family and stereotypes about black family dysfunction, as well as the political choice to treat black families' problems in an especially punitive way. The punitive governance that accompanies the neoliberal shrinking of public programs is inextricably tied to racial subordination that makes this trend seem desirable.

### *Conclusion*

The women's accounts of child welfare agency involvement in Woodlawn were marked by a striking tension. The women reported that intensive state supervision had damaging consequences for family and community relationships but that they relied on this same state involvement for needed financial support. Most respondents viewed DCFS as both a chief threat to families and a chief family resource. I expected the concerns expressed by most of the women about DCFS's disruptive social impact to support calls to evict the agency from the neighborhood. Most of the women, however, saw a need for greater DCFS involvement in Woodlawn.

This finding is perhaps the most telling evidence of the powerful community impact of intense child welfare agency involvement in neighborhoods. Although the residents recognized the corrosive effects of DCFS on their community, most recognized their community's reliance on the agency to meet its needs. Many also criticized, however, the link between state investigation and support of families. Neoliberalism's distinctive union of privatization with punitive governance is reflected in the disruptive formula of "child protection" that makes family assistance hinge on state custody of children.

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