

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Policing Not Protecting Families: The Child Welfare System as Poverty Governance

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kr932n1>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 49(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Schafer-Morgan, Destany

Publication Date

2026-04-02

DOI

10.17953/A3.61355

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Policing Not Protecting Families: The Child Welfare System as Poverty Governance.

Edited by Jennifer Randles and Kerry Woodward. New York: New York University Press, 2025. 307 pages. \$99.00 hardcover; \$35.00 paperback; \$35.00 e-book.

In *Policing Not Protecting Families: The Child Welfare System as Poverty Governance*, editors Jennifer Randles and Kerry Woodward skillfully sew together the chapters that form this text. Their proficient interlinking of disparate topics leaves the reader with a strong understanding of the how the current child welfare system, aimed at being a protective institution, instead acts as a family policing system, targeting the most vulnerable subsets of our population. Randles and Woodward are well paired to tie together the multiple concepts presented in this edited work, including how systemic racism, personal biases, and neoliberal thinking ultimately lead to poverty governance within the child welfare system. Randles is an interim dean and professor with research experience in policies and community-based organizations, as well as how a variety of intersecting inequalities affect parenting experiences; Woodward is a professor of sociology with research experience in the child welfare system, poverty and public policy, and a variety of social injustices. By delving into important aspects associated with child welfare, such as substance use, housing insecurity, intimate partner violence, and immigration, this book explains how the system utilizes its power to surveil and discipline families experiencing poverty, especially those who are of Black or Indigenous origin, while simultaneously failing to address or offer meaningful assistance. Overall, this collection offers an important new perspective on the child welfare system.

Policing not Protecting Families is organized into five parts: theoretical approach and historical contexts; the child welfare system as poverty governance; the child welfare system and the left hand of the state; the child welfare system and the right hand of the state; and future directions for child and family well-being. Together, these parts create important discourse surrounding the purpose of the child welfare system. The editors argue that, both historically and currently, this system serves as an institution of racialized and gendered poverty governance, forcibly separating families based on neoliberal, white, middle-class parenting standards. They also draw attention to how child welfare interacts with other state systems, further harming the children and families in which they were designed to protect.

This volume offers a crucial and timely contribution to scholarly and policy debates about child welfare, poverty, and state governance. Its chapters address gaps in knowledge about society's most vulnerable families by providing vital information on "racialized poverty governance, the inner workings of the child welfare system, and child and family well-being" (28). These chapters push readers to confront previously held beliefs about the outcomes of forced family separation at the hands of the child

welfare system. *Policing Not Protecting Families* challenges the notion that child removal has less to do with parental failings and more to do with systemic inequalities that disproportionality effect low-income families, Black and Indigenous people, and other marginalized populations.

This book also contributes significantly to racial justice scholarship, with several chapters documenting how child welfare mimics racialized family separation, particularly among Black and Indigenous families. The authors highlight parallels between historical state projects and contemporary child welfare, including the ideologies that underpinned Indian residential boarding schools and the exploitation of Black Americans, both of which underline modern practices. In Chapter 2, contributing author Amy Casselman-Hontalas reminds readers that “the United States was founded on American Indian genocide and the enslavement of Africans, both of which were structured by the logic of family annihilation” (53). By situating child welfare within this lineage, this work deepens understandings of institutional racism and state-sanctioned family separation, serving as a reminder that many modern practices were born as a result of colonization and slavery.

The editors’ ability to bring together scholars from across disciplines including sociology, law, social work, public policy, and anthropology serve as another strength of this book. Offering an interdisciplinary view, this collection gives voice to authors who typically may not appear in the same scholarly conversations. Equally, this work integrates historical, quantitative, and qualitative analyses to provide a comprehensive depiction of the issue at hand.

While all chapters in this work offer a strong argument, some discrepancies exist in the data presented. Some contributing authors present robust empirical evidence; others rely more heavily on theoretical or conceptual arguments. This book concludes with a discussion of reorientation—or complete abolition—of the current child welfare system. Despite this, no tangible plans of how to accomplish this task are addressed. The arguments for complete abolition are compelling, however no alternative strategies are offered for how to deal with situations of severe abuse or chronic neglect of children. Additional nuances in these areas might have strengthened the book. Nevertheless, these critiques do not undercut the volume’s contributions; rather, they highlight areas ripe for further scholarship.

This work, the authors, and the editors draw attention to the institution of child welfare as a system of poverty governance, historically built on racism and discrimination, utilized to manage and discipline the poor. As author Casselman-Hontalas states, “Poverty does not equal neglect” (65). As pointed out by authors Alan J. Dettlaff and Maya Pendleton, families involved with the child welfare system receive no financial support to help them alleviate financial uncertainty, the root cause of the majority of “neglect” cases within the system. Yet, “when children are removed from their families and placed into foster care, foster families receive monthly payment in order to care for additional children in their home” (256), which highlights the duality within the system.

This book is a must-read for those serving in the child welfare field. It would also be of particular relevance to those interested in social work, sociology, family

studies, public policy, law, and racial justice. In addition, it is well suited for graduate courses on child welfare, social inequality, poverty policy, critical sociology, and social work ethics. Although topics presented in this work may cause discomfort, that discomfort can be a powerful motivator to readers, encouraging civil discourse and positive change.

Destany Schafer-Morgan
East Central University