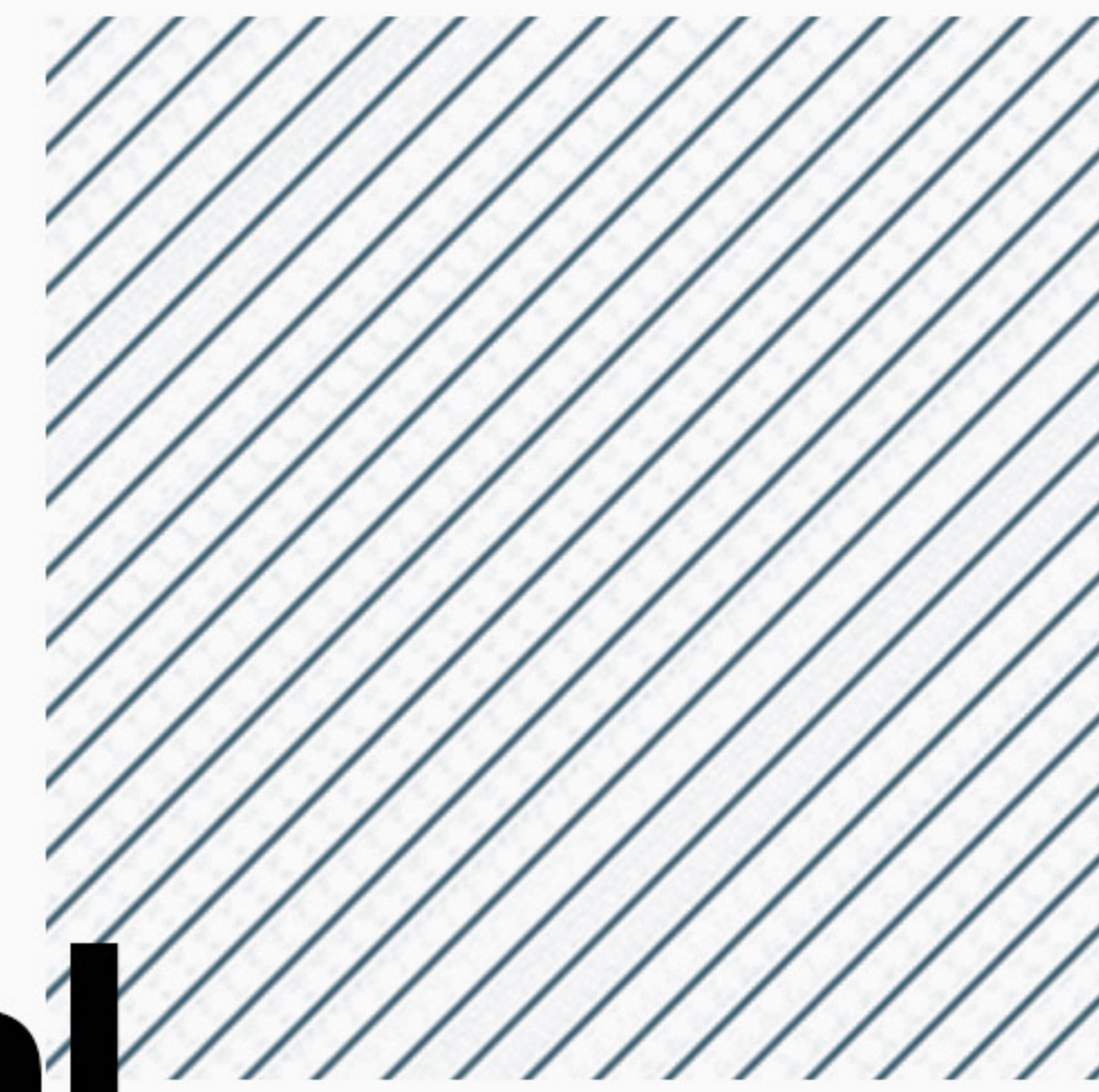


**UCLA**

**Pritzker Center**  
For Strengthening Children and Families



# Barriers to Reducing Racial Disproportionality of Black Children in Los Angeles County Child Welfare

October 31, 2022

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The study team recognizes the influence of our backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives on this research study. The authors represent a range of intersecting identities based on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, regionality, upbringing socioeconomic status, and first language. Some authors also have lived experience with childhood adversity and/or the child welfare system, either through their own interactions or through family members in the system. We represent a range of professional backgrounds, including clinical psychology, education, psychiatry, social welfare, and public policy.

## Table of Contents

<b>03</b>	Introduction
<b>03</b>	Background
<b>10</b>	Guiding Frameworks
<b>13</b>	Research Methods
<b>16</b>	Findings on Barriers to Preventing and Reducing Racial Disproportionality: Perspectives from DCFS Social Workers and Leaders in LA County
<b>44</b>	Recommendations: A Structurally Competent Approach to Reducing Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System
<b>60</b>	Conclusions
<b>63</b>	References
<b>69</b>	Appendices





In this report, the findings are guided by the research question:

## What are the barriers to implementing practices and policies that reduce racial disproportionality in the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)?

It is important to note that this study is not about DCFS alone. While some of the potential solutions may be recommended for or implemented within a shared partnership with DCFS, the narrative shaped by the findings of this study is structural and systemic, with root causes far upstream before a child or family's first contact with DCFS. The current report is an invitation and a call to action for all of us in Los Angeles County to address racial disproportionality facing Black children and their families.





01

# Introduction & Background





## Introduction

The UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families unites a multidisciplinary network across the UCLA campus and throughout Los Angeles (LA) County to identify prevention strategies that safely reduce the need for foster care while supporting equitable reform to the Los Angeles County child welfare system. Collaboration with campus and community partners, with a focus on prevention and intervention, is at the heart of the UCLA Pritzker Center. Our work comes to life through research, education, and community partnership.

This report analyzes current barriers to preventing and reducing longstanding racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, specifically focusing on Black children and families. The core of this report utilizes structural competency and anti-racist frameworks with an emphasis on dismantling racial bias and racist policies and practices. The analysis of barriers is based on the multiple perspectives of professionals working within the child welfare system and other child-serving systems and is informed by literature on the same. Based on the results of qualitative analyses from key informant interviews and focus group discussions, this report includes an overview of six key themes that highlight the barriers to preventing and reducing racial disproportionality of Black youth in the Los Angeles County child welfare system. These barriers continue to perpetuate racial disparities for Black children in the child welfare system and related systems across LA County. Finally, this report provides recommendations to overcome the barriers to reducing persistent racial disproportionality in LA County's child welfare system.

## Background

### Racial Disproportionality in Los Angeles County Child Welfare

Over the past several decades, numerous research bodies have documented the overrepresentation of Black and American Indian children in the child welfare system relative to their representation in the general population (Children's Bureau, 2023; Kim et al, 2017; Legislative Analyst's Office California, 2022).

Racial disproportionality in child welfare occurs when the proportion of children of a specific group in the child welfare population is either proportionately larger or smaller than the proportion of that group in the overall child population (Dettlaff, 2021). The current study focuses on the factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of Black children within the child welfare system, many of which have roots in historical racism, including policies that intentionally and unintentionally oppress Black families (Dettlaff, 2023; Pryce & Yelick, 2020). Furthermore, data released in 2021 from the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) indicates that in Los Angeles County, Black children are removed at a rate almost four times their share of the population (CCWIP Quarter 4, 2021). This means that while 7.6% of children in Los Angeles County are Black, they make up 27.2% of all detentions and removals (CCWIP Quarter 4, 2021).

Racial disparities refer to the unequal outcomes experienced by children of one race or ethnicity compared to those of another (Dettlaff, 2021). This contrasts with racial disproportionality, which focuses on the over- or under-representation of a specific racial or ethnic group relative to their proportion in the overall population. Data from the report on Recommendations for Reimagining Child Welfare and Safety in Los Angeles County (2021), highlight these racial disparities. It shows that the population of children ages 0 to 17



with entries to the child welfare system from January to December 2020 (incidence per 1,000 children) that Black or African American children entered care at the highest rate (11%), compared to their Latino/a/x (4%), white (2%), American Indian (2%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1%) peers (Howard et al., 2021).

It is important to note that racial disproportionality and racial disparities are not limited to out-of-home placements. Racial inequities (disproportionality and disparity) exist for Black families and children throughout various intercepts along the continuum of contact with the child welfare system; these include, but are not limited to, a disproportionate number of reports, investigations being substantiated, and removals (Children's Bureau, 2021), greater placement instability (Garcia et al., 2016), a longer length of stay within the system (Miller et al., 2014), lower likelihood of achieving permanency, and an overrepresentation of Black youth aging out of foster care (Akin et al., 2021).

While the child welfare system grapples with these persistent racial inequities, another significant aspect that influences outcomes for families, particularly those of color, is the role of mandated reporting laws. In the United States, mandated reporting laws were created with the stated intention of preventing child abuse and neglect (California Department of Social Services & California Department of Health Care Services, 2021). Yet, there is no connection between mandated reporting and its impact on abuse and neglect prevention (Itzkowitz & Olson, 2022). To our knowledge, no bodies of research demonstrate causation between mandated reporting and maltreatment prevention; however, there have been notable increases in maltreatment reports over the last few years (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Even though there has been a push for preventive practices, the surveillance nature of mandated reporting results in children and families being reported and removed from their parents and primary caregivers; this is especially true for families of color (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022); Black families are more likely to be reported for suspected maltreatment (Krase, 2013). In LA County DCFS, 19.3% of all allegations made to the Child Protection Hotline are for Black children, whereas they represent 7.6% of the population (CCWIP, 2021).

Placement stability has been lower for Black children, even when considering age and trauma symptoms (Clark et al., 2020). Black children and families in the child welfare system experience decreased access to quality services and have higher rates of placement instability when compared to white children (Garcia et al., 2016), placing them at risk of experiencing additional trauma while being placed in out-of-home care due to placement instability, less visitation with loved ones, and inadequate and/or culturally insensitive services (Pryce & Yelik, 2020). In addition, 40% of Black children in out-of-home care experience more than two placement moves compared to 32% of white children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018); unfortunately, placement instability, can have devastating effects on their longitudinal socioemotional wellbeing and health outcomes (Rubin et al., 2007).

Permanency planning is a cornerstone of child welfare. Permanency goals include reunification with a parent or other primary caregiver and when that is not possible, finding permanency with a relative caregiver, non-related extended family member, or with a foster/adoptive family thus exiting foster care and having their dependency case closed. Compared to general permanency exit trends for all children in foster care, Black youth are less likely to exit foster care by reunifying with a parent or primary caregiver or to be adopted (Miller





et al., 2014). Reunification of Black families occurs at a lower and slower rate as compared to their white counterparts in foster care (Akin et al., 2019). When comparing the proportion of Black children who are adopted to the proportion of Black children waiting to be adopted, the data is telling. According to Kids Count data from The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2018), in 2016, only 17% of Black children were adopted compared to 49% of white children. In the LA County child welfare system, Black youth make up 37.6% of children who age out of foster care (CCWIP, 2021).

The research regarding continued vulnerability for youth exiting foster care is particularly dismal, with these young people experiencing higher rates of homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2013), unemployment or underemployment (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017), early parenthood (Putman-Horstein et al., 2013), substance abuse (Siegel et al., 2016), involvement in the criminal legal system (Yi & Wildeman, 2018), and lower rates of educational attainment (California College Pathways, 2015; Frerer et al., 2013).

A study by the Children's Data Network (2017) analyzed the timing and degree of previous involvement with the Los Angeles County DCFS for a cohort of youth on probation (McCroskey et al., 2017). Eighty three percent of youth in Los Angeles Probation had received at least one referral for suspected maltreatment and 20% had been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and placed in child welfare-supervised foster care (McCroskey et al., 2017). Out of the 387 youth, 90% of the Black youth in the cohort had a past referral for maltreatment, and 43% had an open case with DCFS in the past (McCroskey et al., 2017). The results highlighted the need to adopt a structural competency approach by enhancing existing prevention and early intervention efforts. In addition, it called for supporting families with the resources they need the most, such as housing, jobs, health care, and childcare, so they do not require the attention of child protection and family separation.



## **Current Efforts in LA County**

It should be noted that for the past several years, Los Angeles County has taken steps to address racial disproportionality in child welfare, including efforts to strengthen upstream supports and resources for children and families across multiple County service areas, domains, and departments. Some key initiatives and steps that have been taken thus far include the following:

### **Eradicate Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) Committee**

Eradicate Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) is a DCFS-managed workgroup comprised of key members, community stakeholders, legal partners, and other County departments who are committed to reducing disparity and disproportionality among Black children in the child welfare system by implementing strategic initiatives and programs that promote safety and well-being, advocacy, cultural humility, family preservation, and better outcomes for Black children. Past research has shown that Black children are over-represented at most, if not all, key decision points in the child welfare system. Therefore, improving outcomes for this particular population will likely shift the outcomes in a positive direction for other children in the system as well. Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) Mission: To reduce racial disparity and disproportionality among Black children by fostering and supporting a culture of change in DCFS, courts, and communities that promotes better outcomes for Black children and all children.

### **Anti-Racism, Diversity and Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative**

Established in 2020, the Board of Supervisors established the Board Eight-Board directed priority known as the Anti-Racism, Diversity and Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative. Based in the Chief Executive Office, ARDI seeks to end structural racism and its consequences in Los Angeles County by working closely with all County departments, commissions, agencies, and advisory bodies to collaborate with all cities, unincorporated communities, school districts, state and federal agencies, community-based organizations, philanthropy and academic institutions. ARDI seeks to guide the County by offering training and capacity building, technical assistance and planning, policy analysis and development, data collection, analysis and reporting, community and stakeholder engagement, and equity infused resourcing and programs to help reach its goals.

### **Prevention Services Task Force**

Created by a September 2021 Board motion, the County of Los Angeles Prevention Services Task Force (Task Force) is composed of representatives across County departments, regional partners, community-based organizations, and community members with lived expertise. This body was charged with developing “recommended options for a governance structure designed to coordinate and effectuate a comprehensive community-based prevention services delivery system” for Los Angeles County, with the goal of delivering upstream supports and resources to increase well-being and thriving for adults, children, youth, and families.

The Task Force is currently engaged in a multi-departmental, Countywide process to reimagine LA County's prevention systems and services. This effort spans across physical and mental health, social services, housing and homelessness, aging and independence, child welfare and family services, economic opportunity, and many other essential service areas that support our communities. However, the Task Force



launched its efforts in 2022 by studying and contextualizing prior County efforts in prevention and the child welfare system, including supporting County efforts to transition to funding requirements under the Family First Prevention Services Act and uplifting efforts to address racial disproportionalities and disparities.

### Risk Stratification Pilot

The “Los Angeles County Risk Stratification Pilot” launched in three regional offices in August 2021: (1) Belvedere, (2) Lancaster, and (3) Santa Fe Springs. The pilot was oriented around a data model (i.e., “Risk Stratification Tool”) that draws upon information from the Child Welfare Services Case Management System (CWS/CMS) hosted in LA County’s Data Mart. Importantly, the model was not implemented as a stand-alone analytics tool. Rather, it was part of a data-informed effort designed to ensure enhanced support for investigations where the stakes are high, while also facilitating earlier and more consistent engagement with community partners for these investigations. The pilot had three primary objectives:

- 01** To better align and deploy supervision and management resources to ensure children are safe and families receive the services needed during a maltreatment investigation.
- 02** To increase the use of information and data by supervisors to support quality casework to reduce practice errors during investigations.
- 03** To improve the use of data to identify screening practices, and community reporting patterns, that may result in unnecessary investigations disproportionately burdening Black and African American families.

### 4DX

In 2019, DCFS launched the 4DX + Equity initiative, aimed at reducing the number of Black/African-American children entering out-of-home care. The 4 Disciplines of Execution or “4DX” concept is based on the principles of focus, leverage, engagement, and accountability. It is based on 4 principles of execution:

- |                         |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Discipline One</b>   | Focus on the Wildly Important Goal |
| <b>Discipline Two</b>   | Act on the Lead Measures           |
| <b>Discipline Three</b> | Keep a Compelling Scoreboard       |
| <b>Discipline Four</b>  | Create a Cadence of Accountability |

Preliminary data as of March 2022 showed a 46% reduction in the number of Black youth entering foster care in the eight DCFS offices chosen to participate in 4DX over the first two years of implementation. The 4DX also includes the 6-step process to roll out the 4DX, to watch ways that the 4DX principles can be used to improve organizational efficiency, goal setting, and effective teamwork. The implementation of the 4DX is not a top-down, nor is it a bottom-up process. It requires the involvement of senior leaders but at the same time gives team leaders at lower levels the freedom to define their own goals that will contribute the most to



to the overall goal. The rule is: Leaders only veto, never dictate. This will allow teams to be fully committed to their goals and therefore be accountable for their results.

**DCFS Blind Removals Pilot**

In August 2021, the Board directed DCFS to test a “blind removals” pilot across multiple DCFS regional offices, where race/ethnicity identifiers are censored when staff are determining whether a child needs to be removed from the home and placed in out-of-home care. The pilot was inspired a similar initiative in Nassau County, New York, which saw significant decreases in racial disproportionality in their child welfare system over a five-year study. The local DCFS pilot, which has been operational since Spring 2022, is continuing to gather information and data to inform decision makers on whether such policies are an effective tool to combat bias in placement determinations and should be applied permanently here in LA County.





02

# Guiding Frameworks





Three frameworks inform and guide the research approach: (1) Structural Competency, (2) Structural Intersectionality, and (3) Anti-Racism. Below we will describe each of the frameworks and explain how we used these frameworks to generate questions and collect, analyze, and interpret data.

## **Structural Competency**

In the report, we use structural competency as a theoretical framework that helps to guide and interpret our findings. Structural competency refers to the structural forces, which include the policies, institutions, infrastructure, and cultural or normative beliefs within our economic, social, and political systems that interact with families daily (Chambers & Ratliff, 2019). Put another way, structural competency refers to confronting the impact of upstream racist policies and practices in American institutions—structural competency makes us consider the systemic policies that shape these institutions (Metzl & Hansen, 2014). Researchers and child welfare practitioners have called for a focus on structural factors in the way child maltreatment is defined and responded to and to applying structural competency to child welfare, given that its studied application in medicine and public health has some similarities to child welfare practice, including assessment, treatment planning, and provider/client interactions (Chambers & Ratliff, 2019). The emerging concept of structural competency as a framework for child welfare broadens the lens from the typically prescriptive services targeting parents' behavior toward a focus inclusive of the structural issues that lead to child welfare involvement and contribute to disparities.

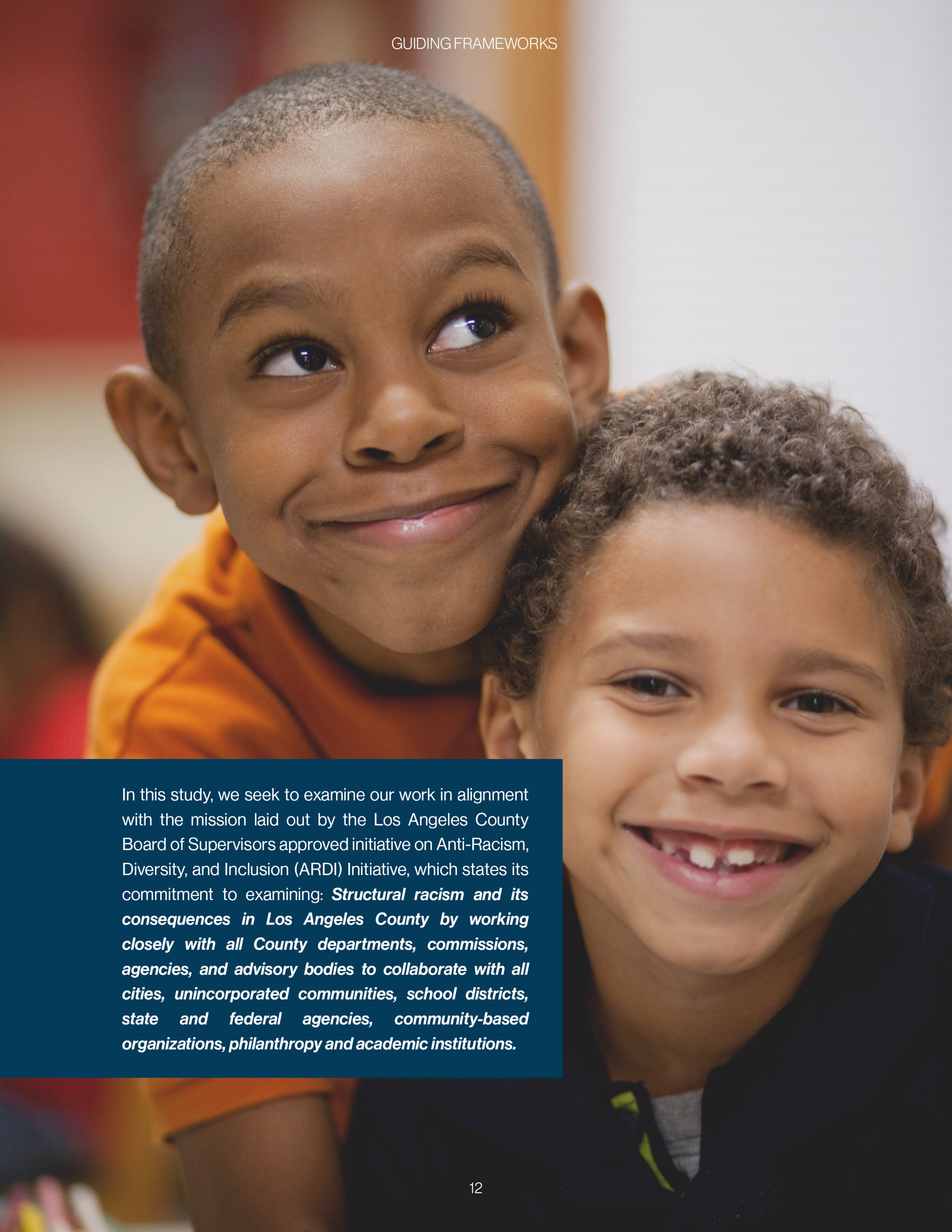
## **Structural Intersectionality**

In addition, structural intersectionality guides the report's findings. Structural intersectionality highlights how the convergence of multiple intersecting systems of oppression, such as structural racism and economic inequity, shapes social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991). Structural intersectionality emphasizes that social inequalities are not caused by individual social statuses or identities but instead stem from systems of oppression involving asymmetrical power relations (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991).

## **Anti-Racism**

Beyond structural competency and structural intersectionality, this work is also informed by an anti-racism framework. Anti-Racism is the practice of actively and persistently identifying, opposing, and dismantling racism. The goal of anti-racism is to actively change or eliminate policies, practices, behaviors, systems, structures, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions. Scholar Ibram Kendi states that anti-racism operates in direct opposition to racism. He asserts that inaction (simply being 'not racist') in the face of racism is, in fact, a form of racism, and that silence or indifference are also forms of racism. An anti-racism stance operates from the idea there is no such thing as an innocent bystander when it comes to racism; instead, there's only racism and anti-racism. An actively anti-racist stance requires us to directly confront the racial disparities and disproportionalities we see in our communities and seek to address them by employing various tools across systems, structures, culture, and society. It also compels us to explicitly state that all children and their families have a right to safety, dignity, personal autonomy, thriving, and well-being and that achieving this requires questioning and reimagining our existing systems, policies, and societal practices.



A close-up photograph of two young children. The child in the foreground is a young girl with curly hair, smiling broadly and looking slightly to the right. The child in the background is a young boy with short hair, also smiling and looking upwards and to the right. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with warm lighting.

In this study, we seek to examine our work in alignment with the mission laid out by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved initiative on Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative, which states its commitment to examining: ***Structural racism and its consequences in Los Angeles County by working closely with all County departments, commissions, agencies, and advisory bodies to collaborate with all cities, unincorporated communities, school districts, state and federal agencies, community-based organizations, philanthropy and academic institutions.***



03

# Research Methods





The data collection and analysis process proceeded in three ways. First, we utilized document analysis to understand past and extant literature that discusses race, racism, and racial disproportionality of Black children in the LA County child welfare system (CWS) and child welfare broadly. Second, we utilized geographic information systems (GIS) to develop a spatial understanding and visual representation map of where Black children in LA County's child welfare system live. Third, we utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore the perspectives of key informants from DCFS and other child-serving systems and social workers providing direct services in LA County on barriers to reducing or preventing racial disproportionality. Below, we delineate the process for each data collection and analysis method(s).

## **Document Analysis**

To conduct a crosswalk of relevant literature, we utilized document analysis to examine 11 reports written between 2014 and 2021. These reports were made by several organizations, advocacy groups, county and state municipalities, and university-based researchers to outline recommendations to improve outcomes for families and children involved in child welfare programs and receiving services (see Appendix 1 for the complete list of analyzed reports). We used a document analysis approach; three researchers analyzed the 11 documents over two months. Research team members used seven guiding questions throughout the content analysis of the previously published reports. These questions included analyzing recommendations that have been made to address race, equity, and inclusion within the child welfare system in LA County, to whom these recommendations were directed, and whether there were timelines or accountability measures put in place to achieve these goals. See Appendix 2 for a list of the guiding questions. Researchers wrote analytic memos for each analyzed report and met weekly to discuss and find overlapping and co-occurring themes. This process informed the framing of the interview and focus group discussion protocols. Notably, out of the 11 reports, only three specifically named recommendations for reducing racial disproportionality in the child welfare system.

## **Geographic Information Systems Data Collection and Analysis**

We utilized geographic information systems (GIS) to do a spatial analysis of the Service Planning Areas (SPAs) in Los Angeles County Children and Family Services to target where the highest number of Black foster children were living. We collected the data using the University of California, Los Angeles GIS open-source archives. We applied five data sets. This analysis enabled us to see in real-time where to focus our effort on which leadership and social workers we should interview (see Appendix 3). Three researchers carried out this analysis for one month.

## **Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

We utilized purposeful sampling to recruit participants for the interviews and FGDs. We spoke with DCFS high ranking officials who could recommend individuals based on three criteria: 1) they were a current caseworker or supervisor in DCFS, 2) individuals' willingness to participate in the study, and 3) interest in discussing issues connected to racial disproportionality. Through a series of conversations with the contract program officer, team members, leaders, and community members (with expertise related to racial disproportionality and child welfare), the plan for participant identification and recruitment was solidified.



Moreover, participants for key informant interviews were recruited directly via email and offered the opportunity to sign up for an interview slot. As a result, we conducted 18 key informant interviews with executive, administrative, and community leaders and experts with knowledge of child welfare across LA County. Throughout the document, key informant interview participants are referred to as administrative leaders.

In addition, we completed five FGDs centered on the study topic, totaling 23 FGD participants. FGD participants included DCFS child social workers (CSWs) and supervising CSWs with on-the-ground direct service experience. Recruitment for FGDs consisted of direct contact with DCFS interim Director, who assigned a DCFS staff member to invite CSWs and Supervising CSWs to join focus groups, and prospective participants filled all slots.

Four researchers and three UCLA faculty members (representing the UCLA School of Medicine, the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, and the UCLA School of Law) carried out the interviews and the FGDs. The interviews and FGDs lasted about one hour each and were moderated by two study team members. Interviewers/moderators recorded all data collection activities after verbal consent from participants was achieved. Research team members transcribed all recordings and uploaded them into the data analysis software Dedoose for qualitative coding. Informed by the theoretical approach, research team members utilized focus coding during the first round of analysis. After the first round of coding, the coding tree was defined and established. Using the coding tree, the second round of analysis utilized focus coding and axial coding. Once finished, the research team used the codes to build categorical themes, which are represented in the findings section (See Figure 1).





04

# Findings on Barriers to Preventing and Reducing Racial Disproportionality: Perspectives from DCFS Social Workers and Leaders in LA County





Drawing from the qualitative data collection and analysis, we identified six themes that highlight concerns regarding the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare systems across LA County and the barriers that perpetuate these racial disparities. This section defines each identified theme and provides excerpts from participants exemplifying key issues. The research question that guides the results is, what are the barriers to implementing practices and policies that reduce racial disproportionality in the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)?

Figure 1 displays the six themes representing the systemic or structural barriers that prevent the adequate and effective implementation of policies and practices that aim to reduce the number of Black children and youth in foster care: (a) Carceral Entanglements Continue to Divide Black Families, (b) Problematic Policies and Practices Reinforce Biases and Disproportionality, (c) Inconsistent Leadership Hinders Transformation, (d) Silos Hinder Cross-Departmental Coordination and Communication and Lead to Gridlock, (e) Reassessing Funding Priorities and Limitations, (f) Confronting and Conversing about Race and Racism.

**Figure 1. Qualitative Themes**

Carceral Entanglements	Problematic Policies and Practices	Leadership	Siloing	Funding	Confronting Race and Racism
Including prior arrests in SDM	Racist practices	Lack of leadership (failing)	Lack of collaborations and communication	Funding disparities	Lack of structural bias and historical racism training
Inability to place children with family members who have carceral history	"Neglect" being weaponized	Performative leadership	System gridlock for families	Money support is streamed away from families in need	Centering whiteness
	Mandated reporting	Lack of role clarity/strategic leadership		Public-private relationships	Moral distress
	Excluding paternal caregivers	Frequent leadership transitions			Overburdened staff/leadership
	Intimate partner violence and failure to protect				Race evasiveness
					Ambivalence of racism

## Carceral Entanglements Continue to Divide Black Families

Carceral entanglements reflect the ways in which people of color are more likely to experience police surveillance, arrest, lengthier jail/prison time, and interact with the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010; Hinton et al., 2018). Carceral entanglement, often overlaps with child welfare involvement. For example, when individuals are evaluated as parents, their criminal history can be used against them. This history is considered an added risk factor, potentially leading to their child being removed from their care. Additionally, it can affect the reunification process after a child has been placed in the foster care system. When this occurs, previous interactions with the criminal legal system on the part of parents and kin perpetuate the removal of children from their families, demonstrating how the child welfare system can operate alongside the carceral system as multi-institutional surveillance, with one system being used as evidence to justify the



the other. These structural factors (surveillance, social control, and punitive regulation) operate in tandem and individually, potentiating the risk for child removal and creating barriers that decrease the placement of children with next of kin due to histories of arrest or incarceration (Roberts, 2022b).

The Sentencing Project's 2018 report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System, found that Black adults are 5.9 times as likely to be incarcerated than white adults and that as of 2001, one out of three Black boys could expect to go to prison in their lifetime (Carson, 2018). Thus, the prevalence of Black families who have had some contact with the criminal legal system is significant, and policies that automatically deem otherwise suitable caregivers' homes unsuitable for placement due to prior carceral contact further aggravate the separation of Black families and entrench Black youth involvement with the child welfare system.

Indeed, numerous studies document the interrelationship between the child welfare system and the criminal legal system. According to a study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, one fifth of the incarcerated population in the United States has a history of foster care placement, and that by age 26, at least 70% of youth who exit foster care as legal adults have been arrested on at least one occasion, a phenomenon referred to as the foster care to prison pipeline (Courtney et al., 2011). As such, involvement in one system is frequently associated with subsequent connection in the other, both with and across generations. This includes when parents are incarcerated and their children are subject to child welfare investigation and the fact that child-welfare involved children are more likely to experience incarceration as adults (Baron & Gross, 2022).

Risks for reciprocal involvement in criminal legal and child welfare systems are structurally bidirectional, reflecting the entanglements of systems that cross-connect and increase intersectional marginalization and structural vulnerability (McCroskey, 2017). Cross over youth (i.e., youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems) have higher risks for mental health, educational, and vocational challenges, longer stays in detention, and poorer placement stability (Caietti, Gaines, & Heldman, 2017). Unfortunately, the quality and consistency of services provided to crossover youth leave them more vulnerable to placement in restrictive settings, such as group homes and institutional facilities, without a strong permanency plan in place (Casey Family Programs, 2022).

The theoretical framework of structural intersectionality is useful for understanding the relationship between structures of oppression and the interplay of marginalized social and personal identities that are disproportionately impacted by these structures and, thus, experience increased marginalization.

*“I don't know when the SDM [Structured Decision-Making Model] was actually put into place. I feel like it's helpful and it gives us a bigger picture of the history of the family. But I do think it's harmful when some of the questions on there ask ‘how many investigations have you had?’ Well, if Black and Brown families, you know, sometimes have multiple children, there's a possibility that they'll have multiple investigations over their lifespan. There's also a question on there in regard to criminal history. It doesn't necessarily say if you were charged with a*



*crime, it says, ‘Were you arrested?’ And I think that works negatively against, you know, the Black and Brown community because they are arrested at higher rates than other minorities. So, we’re basically punishing them for something that technically they can’t control. And then if you weren’t charged for something you were just arrested, so innocent until proven guilty, yet, in the formula, it’s calculated to heighten the risk level of, possible, you know, future risks of harm to their children.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Moreover, once a child is removed from their parents(s), the framework of structural intersectionality is operative in understanding structural barriers that limit a social worker’s options to place the child or children with relatives/kin. Structural intersectionality also permeates issues related to other systems where families may experience racial bias, including public housing and disparities in health, mental health, and substance use treatment access. Narratives from social workers who participated in focus group discussions highlight that these structural issues amplify the risk for Black families with multiple marginalized identities and entanglements with systems of oppression.

*“So with our SDM [Structured Decision-Making Model] it can be, they’ve had three or more referrals, and one person in the home has been arrested or whatever. And that can bring you to high when, you know, the risk level of that is like, is it really? So I think for me, SDM, is – I agree – it’s kinda it’s helpful and it’s not, I don’t really, honestly, really like the risk assessments. But that’s just me, I’ve always had an issue with it, I’ve always brought it up, I’ve been here almost 20 years. So that’s always been an issue. And we’ve always brought that up why doesn’t anybody change it?” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“Yeah, cause when you look at, you know, again, it goes back historically, across the board, Black people, we have the highest rates of – we’re disproportionate across the board with everything. Arrest, you know, health, you know, like anything that major that you’re looking at, more than likely, we are going to have a higher, you know, percentage. So when you look at it, you know, in those terms, it’s, it’s always, you know, more than likely, they will have a higher risk of, you know, something, so I do agree with what they’re saying, and that I was gonna say that as well, like the number of referrals, typically, people look at your history when they’re when you’re doing investigations, you’re, you’re always, which is valid to a certain extent. But if you have more kids, or, you know, the neighborhoods that you live in, you know, the poverty, those things, you know, it all kind of plays a part.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“I think the criminal background check definitely needs to be addressed. There are people that have a misdemeanor, from 20 years ago, a conviction in which they served their time, you know, there’s been no other convictions for a certain period of time, and they want their grandchild to be placed with them long term,*



*and there are barriers to that.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Moreover, social workers also mentioned that reunifications for Black families or relative placement are very challenging given issues such as criminal records or housing contracts.

*“The other issue is the criminal record. If you have a criminal record, good luck, good luck in somebody approving your home, good luck with people trusting you. Whether you got convicted or not. I mean, it goes back to the bias is sometimes you know, you could have been arrested, arrested for domestic violence, let's just say, you know, you got into an argument with your fiancé or I don't know what, and the department's gonna have a hard time, you know, approving your home, even though that allegation was unfounded, even though, you know, there's a police report or what have you, there was no conviction out of it. There's, there's a lot of stigma and red tape around all that.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“But when we do [get Black families], the likelihood of them reunifying is very slim. The likelihood of them going to relatives or being placed with relatives is also very slim. So, we still continue to have the same issue that they might not even reunify with their family. So that is still a concern. (...) Another thing regarding placement, for example, we had a lot of relatives able and willing to care for their family, for the next of kin, but they lived in the projects. So that meant that their contract was not allowing them to bring anybody else into their housing situation. So, we have all these children that could have remained with relatives or with family, friends, but they couldn't because of the housing contract. But then yet, this is the reality that we live in.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Social workers and administrative leaders discussed how families are being mistreated or punished for having a criminal record when the person has served their time. Moreover, their initial offense was not related to a child's wellbeing.

*“The uncle or the aunt, whoever has something on their record, now we can't [place the child there]. Another really big issue is that grandmother may be willing to take her grandchildren in. But she has a child that was recently released from incarceration, and their child is on probation. We cannot place a child in a home with someone that's on probation or parole. (...) So then the grandmother says to us, “we wish that you guys could do something because you're putting me in a situation where I have to decide on making my child homeless or not having my grandchildren come to the home.” So that's something else that really impacts a lot of our families. Especially when the relative was not incarcerated for an offense that was a violation against a child.*



*So that's a biggie.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Social workers speak to the carceral entanglements and the fact that it is helpful to assess the type of offense and the meaning that may or may not have for child safety decisions. They also alluded to the feelings of families, specifically Black families.

*“When [offenses] are not having anything to do with any kind of a child safety issue, I think there needs to be more of a delineation, like, here's the line (...). So, I mean, I think it's like those kinds of things that we really need to pay attention to and look at.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“I think it's also important to kind of imagine what the family must view in terms of us [social workers] and our roles, and being in a position of power, and how that might impact their tone, they [Black families] might see us as being part of a system, and really not there to support them and help them. So I think that's a part of it as well, just that, you know, some perceived imbalance of power, or maybe some past experience that they may have had with the department or other systems, such as law enforcement.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

This first finding unpacks how LA County DCFS approaches and evaluates families who the criminal system may have unfairly impacted. Policies and practices can make these families, who are disproportionately Black, feel like they are being further punished even after previous incidents have been resolved and that any history of carceral contact, no matter how small or remote, is negatively determinative, further disrupting family cohesion. It also reflects the intersectionality of their experiences with multiple potentially biased or discriminatory systems as they try to navigate caring for or reunifying with their child under the child welfare system.





## Problematic Policies and Practices Reinforce Bias and Disproportionality

*“Well I think it really starts at the entry process, you know, when we look at mandated reporting, specifically, a lot of the disproportionality starts there.” — Executive Leader*

There is significant literature on white gaze, racial bias, and structural racism and on how “neglect” is characterized, leading to increased involvement of children and families of color in the child welfare system (Children’s Bureau, 2021; Itzkowitz & Olson, 2022). In 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 2085 into effect. The act requires certain professionals, including specified health practitioners and social workers, known as “mandated reporters,” to report known or reasonably suspected child abuse or neglect to a local law enforcement agency or a county welfare or probation department, as specified. This bill would limit the definition of general neglect to only include circumstances where the child is at substantial risk of suffering serious physical harm or illness and would provide that general neglect does not include a parent’s economic disadvantage. The bill would make other technical and clarifying changes.

The issue of general neglect as it has existed to date, coupled with the ambiguity and subjectivity of policies and practices such as mandated reporting, may serve as a structural lever that amplifies inherent, implicit bias. While separate, this theme is connected to our earlier findings on carceral entanglements. Problematic policies and practices may at times stem from the family surveillance and criminalization culture embedded in public and private child welfare agencies (Copeland, 2022; Roberts, 2022a).

*“I wanted to just add one more thing, which I think is universal in this country, like Black bodies, Black families, Black people are not valued, and we are not really seen as something contributing to society or, you know, being able to be a positive model for other people in this country. We’re not valued, and we’re seen as being a throwaway. So it doesn’t matter if you have your family, your whole family is disrupted if your children are being put in their system, because who cares? But that’s racism.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

This theme names practices embedded within the child welfare system that center on white normativity where whiteness and middle to upper-class socioeconomic status are the benchmarks and standards for families to achieve and which they are measured against (Arnaud et al., 2020). This section is discussed in three ways: 1) neglect being weaponized, 2) mandated reporting bias, and 3) paternal family being left out of the family reunification process.

### The Definition of Neglect Being Weaponized

Broad and malleable definitions of abuse and neglect allow for significant subjectivity, which has shown to have adverse effects on Black families. Determinations are susceptible to conscious or unconscious bias



based on race, class, or other factors. According to a 2022 report by Human Rights Watch, in the United States, 700 children are removed from the custody of their parents every day based on allegations of abuse or neglect. The way neglect has been subject to various interpretations has raised serious concerns for child welfare advocates. Neglect is frequently defined as the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm. However, the manner in which bias, stereotyping, and deficit views of certain families come into play has led states such as California to take legislative steps to reduce the weaponizing of the term “general neglect.” AB 2085 would change the requirements for California mandated reporters of possible child neglect to reduce the number of families unnecessarily swept into the child welfare system simply based on poverty or bias.

The following narratives help us understand how neglect can be weaponized. The weaponizing of neglect has had detrimental effects on Black children and families. The use of a parent or caregiver’s economic status as a rationale to report has long been a problem that is not seen in non-Black families.

*“It’s the thing that we talked about earlier in terms of the barriers. Look at how we treat poverty, look at what we do when a family needs help, we look at it as general neglect. Let’s change all of these things because we now are aware of the unintended impacts of those policies.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Relatedly, another social worker discussed how the “vagueness” of the current definition of general neglect might drive racial disproportionality. The degree to which there is an amorphous manner in how neglect can be seen and interpreted leaves many families vulnerable when there may not be neglect, but rather families are simply in need of support and services for basic needs such as food and housing. This participant also highlights how existing policies can be coupled with racial biases negatively affecting Black families:

*“I think that it’s so vague [the definition of general neglect], and people again, place their values or their opinions of what cleanliness is and make these assumptions that there’s neglect, because it is so vague. It’s a huge area where you get a lot of over-reporting, because of bias, because of discrimination, and racism, people make these assumptions because of their own bias.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“What we were seeing in the data was that most Black kids were coming into care will come into care due to general neglect. General neglect could be housing, no food at home, truancy, blah, blah, blah. And those children were coming into care, some of them stay in care a year, two years, some of them three months. But what we were seeing in the data was that the safety risk was very low, and there was no reason for us to remove those children.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*





Each of these narratives highlights how child welfare professionals perceive policy and practice increasing the involvement of children of color in the foster care system. For example, participants described mandated reporting and the statutory definition of general neglect as potential drivers of racial disproportionality. Participants also mentioned the intersection of these policies impacting racial disproportionality within the CWS and preventing its reduction.

### **Mandated Reporting**

Mandated reporting, while benevolent in its theoretical description, leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to its practical application, and who is reported and for what reasons. Under California law, doctors, teachers, counselors, law enforcement, and other child serving professionals are mandated to report to the appropriate government entity cases of suspected child abuse or neglect. (California Department of Justice, 2020). The Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) is a California law requiring employers to identify mandated reporters, persons who are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect. In some instances, employers or departments are required to provide training to ensure employees are adequately prepared to take on this responsibility. However, research has shown Black, American Indian and Latino/a/x children and families in California are much more likely to be reported and become involved in the child welfare system than their white and Asian counterparts. Thus, the metrics used for reporting and how individual actors determine who is to be reported must be reconsidered. Data in Los Angeles County suggests that mandated reporting has a less than ideal impact on BIPOC youth and families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020).

Participants highlighted mandated reporting as one of the main drivers of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system and one of the main barriers to reducing disproportionality due to definitional ambiguity and reliance upon potential stereotypes and individual biases for decision-making. It is important to note that, similar to neglect, the role of mandated reporting is often informed by a culture of fear, wherein many individuals who have supervising duties of children or youth may report minor events out of fear of punishment if they do not report.



*“I mentioned mandated reporters before. We give a lot of weight to mandated reporters, but they also have biases, and sometimes we piggyback on their biases, as opposed to kind of jumping in the way and taking a different approach.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“I think we pigeonholed all reporting to it's either abuse or not abuse. And that works against those [African American] families because we know that the reports come in against African American families. And there's really not a good way to channel reports. And I think the system is just designed with rigidity, and it tries to force things into a report or don't report, and that's got to change.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

In a reimagined notion of mandated supporting as opposed to mandated reporting, there would be a prioritization of what are the best outcomes for a child, where questions are asked about if there is truly a substantial risk, danger, or harm to the child, and if not, what might be more adequate supports and resources to support the family. In short, reporting is not seen as the first option, but considered only after several key considerations are explored and opportunities to support the family are pursued. The primary goal should be providing supportive resources within the child's current living arrangement to address the mandated reporter's concerns about the child's environment or living conditions. Assembly Bill (AB) 2085, which went into effect on January 1, 2023, revises the definition of general neglect by narrowing it to circumstances in which the child is at substantial risk of suffering serious physical harm or illness. AB 2085 further provides that general neglect does not include a parent's economic disadvantage, a reality that has harmed disproportionate numbers of Black families. Also known as the new Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA), this law establishes procedures for the reporting and investigation of suspected child abuse or neglect. CANRA requires certain professionals, known as “mandated reporters,” to report known or reasonably suspected child abuse or neglect to a local law enforcement agency or county welfare or probation department, within certain timeframes.

The strict way mandated reporting has previously functioned across Los Angeles County and within the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was described by interviewees as creating a “culture of fear” where professionals within the system feared making mistakes and sometimes acted against their intuition and knowledge about what may better serve the families. For example, an administrative leader who participated in one of the interviews mentioned how the mandated reporter curriculum is being revised, given the fear many individuals have of risking and/or losing their licenses as social workers or other professional roles under existing reporting requirements.

*“So, we're reviewing the mandated reporter curriculum as part of our work, and the one thing you walk away with from their training is if you don't report everything you will lose your license, you will lose your credentials, you may be arrested, and then that just trickles down to the hotline. So, the culture of fear is pervasive. I think in child welfare broadly, but certainly here in LA County.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*



*“Yeah, it gives them immunity if they're wrong, but there's consequences, very scary consequences that they're threatened with, if they don't report. So what you see is everyone reporting to save their license, to save their job, to save their reputation, knowing that if I'm wrong, it's okay. I am protected. And then I'll talk about the harm and trauma imposed on children who are removed for maybe a few days.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“Now, you know, you also have these mandated reporter laws that don't give options. So if you're a teacher, for instance, in the state of California, and you come into possession of information that led you to believe a child might be maltreated, you have a lot at risk, if you don't make that report, you've got your license at risk, you've got potential for criminal charges. And so people report when in doubt, and so the other thing that I think we've got to do is to have a different set of expectations around what those reports look like.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

Following, we include a narrative from an administrative leader who spelled out how the fear of not reporting and erring on the side of over-reporting outweighs the consideration of the potential harm that reporting may cause children and families.

*“Okay. And even the training [on mandated reporting] they create around it. In those trainings, there's no mention of bias. There's no mention of racial disproportionality, you're starting to see hints of it here and there in the trainings, but they do not address oppression, they do not address white supremacy, they do not address barriers to parents having access to things like matching socks or foods or having to work multiple jobs. It just says, if you see a child that you feel, you have an inkling of a feeling that something is up or that they're being abused or neglected. You report it. You don't have to ask questions. You don't have to investigate. You report it. But if you're wrong, and you cause harm to these families and trauma to these families, it's okay, because you have immunity.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

## Excluding Paternal Families from the Process

*“I think that another barrier, if I could just add one more, please. It's just involving our Black fathers, or, you know, our fathers of color, I think that they are really discouraged in terms of being part of the process of DCFS.” — Social Worker*

Lastly, social workers and executive leaders spoke about how fathers are frequently left out of case plans and reunification strategies and the lack of effort in seeking paternal family members for relative placement. Moreover, interviewees questioned the ways in which white heteronuclear family structures are treated by



our systems as normative. They allude to similarities with the racist history of pushing Black fathers out of the home so Black mothers could receive public benefits. The point about fathers and their exclusion was raised by administrative leaders who participated in interviews and social workers who participated in focus group discussions.

*“Think about TANF, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Remember, especially when we would be in the sweeping place where you know, mothers couldn't have fathers living with them because then they couldn't get the support. Well, now you're breaking up families. And then you wonder and then you're vilifying especially African American community, dad not present. Yeah, but if dad was present when you came and did the visit, then mom wouldn't be getting no checks no more. Are you mean so it's, you know, it's those kinds of things that the layer of inherent, you know, bias and racism sits within those policies. The very nature, you know, of how they were built.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“I think another issue that, you know, that comes up is if for some reason the father is absent, or the whereabouts are unknown, for the mother or the father, I think that in, you know, sometimes that there's not as much diligence in terms of finding relatives and finding, in particular, paternal relatives, we kind of say, oh, you know, the father is, you know, you know, his whereabouts are unknown, we just need to just continue to dig and dig and dig deeper, especially on the paternal side of the family, until we're able to, you know, identify relatives, I had a particular circumstance in which an aunt was completely just unaware, this was a father's sister, that was completely unaware that her nephew was even in foster care.”* **(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)**





*“So, we do now have a policy that says DCFS, you are DCFS staff, you are to release children to their non-offending fathers when appropriate, but that's the issue. So, yes, it's wonderful that we now have it in black and white that we need to release children to their non-offending fathers. However, we are still allowing people to decide what that looks like because there isn't a guideline. (...) Many times, we say that we've looked for a paternal family member, and we have not so many times we say we don't know where the paternal family is because we haven't asked the right questions. So, it's just that sort of thing. So, I can honestly say that yes, I am the biggest advocate of Black families because I'm Black. And I'm you know; I don't believe that we should do fathers the way that we do them because I'm a mother of all boys.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

## **Intimate Partner Violence**

In the United States, it is estimated that each year 15.5 million children are exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) at home (Hamby et al., 2011). The lasting adverse effects of witnessing IPV during childhood have led some states to approach IPV as a form of child maltreatment. IPV floods the Los Angeles County foster care system. While the available data does not specifically state how many of the children in Los Angeles's foster care system have come under the supervision of DCFS because of witnessing IPV at home, from 2016 to 2019, between 10 and 18% of child abuse and neglect reports in California included allegations of IPV (Rebbe et al., 2021).

In a time where traditional systems and structures are being reexamined, strategies and efforts toward reducing involvement in foster care have become more urgent than ever. In homes where domestic violence is present, the survivor of IPV can lose custody of their child(ren) under state dependency law. Among other reasons, children may be declared dependent where the court finds the child is neglected pursuant to the survivor parent's failure to protect the child from the conditions that the abusive adult imposes on the household. Yet removing children from their homes and placing them in foster care for an isolated IPV incident can result in further trauma for both the violence survivor and the children.

While foster care is considered a protective intervention in certain child maltreatment cases, there is limited evidence to support such a drastic intervention for children witnessing IPV, especially when there is serious trauma associated with family separation and unstable foster care placement as well. Thus, professionals who are faced with the ethical challenge of serving and supporting children in circumstances where they are exposed to IPV must respond robustly due to the significant prevalence of this issue and the resulting negative health outcomes that may result from family separation (Choi et al., 2020; Fitzgerald, London-Johnson & Gallus, 2020). Administrative leaders and social workers discussed this intersection between IPV, child welfare system involvement, and barriers to reducing racial disproportionality within the system.

*“Quite frankly, domestic violence and intimate partner violence is really prevalent within our child welfare system. And I think a lot of social workers*



*check that general neglect box off because of that complexity. And, you know, there's one school of thought that says that we need to expand on what general neglect is and just like have a box in the WIC [Welfare and Institutions Code] code that says, you know, DV [domestic violence]. So, my theory has always been if we can capture that, that means we can help increase funding for prevention around domestic violence.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“But, um, you know, having more resources and supports to help in or to get people to be more, I guess, empathetic about the issue, rather than just thinking, ‘oh, these people just neglect their kids’ or, you know, there's, all these other issues, and, you know, whether it's domestic violence, substance abuse, housing, you know, I mean, those are, I guess, you know, related to economics, but it's just, there are so many issues, and rather than trying to understand the root cause, or identify challenges that could lead to any family, you know, getting to a point where they could be in a position where someone would want to report them for child abuse, you know, we need to identify those issues and identify those families early on, and provide them with support.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“I was just gonna say I think, there are some rigid pieces of policy. If there's domestic violence and the parents are living together, they can't have a voluntary case. Like some of those things are kind of rigid, where some things you know, if there's a situation where the parents like, threw a shoe at each other, that would fall in the category of domestic violence, and then we're saying they can't live in the same house to receive voluntary services. And so, if we [DCFS] want to be involved, or we feel like there's a need for us to be involved, that would either mean the court, or we have to make the decision to kind of walk away. And I think sometimes we choose to be more involved than we need to be. And so, some of those kinds of policies are in the way because they're a little bit more, like I said, rigid, and they don't allow for flexibility in different situations.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

One social worker reflected on how it can be very confusing for families to understand concerns about neglect in the context of domestic violence:

*“I'm just saying just they get really frustrated and irritated with the referrals that come in... they don't have a full understanding of domestic violence. So, they'll [Black families involved with DCFS] say, “why are we getting a referral for emotional abuse? My baby's one week old, so and she was in another room.” So, some of these are some of the things that I get that they said need to be changed because they feel like we're not really fully understanding what's going on in their household.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*



## Inconsistent Leadership Hinders Transformation

*“Everyone thinks that they know what everyone else does [within the system], and then reality is that they really don't know”*

*— Administrative Leader*

Participants described inconsistent leadership-related issues as barriers to reducing or preventing racial disproportionality of Black youth in the child welfare system. These include: (1) performative anti-racism by leadership, (2) lack of strategic leadership and role clarity, (3) frequent leadership transitions, and (4) overworked professionals. In the following subsections, we include narratives on these issues from system and community leaders within the County and social workers who participated in the interviews and focus group discussions.

### Performative Anti-Racism from Leadership

Participants described the lack of strategic and effective leadership around racial disproportionality as performative, referring to professionals within the system acting as if they are “doing the work” when in reality, from others' perspectives, this is a performance rather than an authentic effort.

*“As I think about your question, and kind of the work that I've been doing... here at DCFS, one of the major barriers that I see is that people don't really want to put the action behind what they say. They want to wrap a lot of work into what I call performative work.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“There is a need for honest talk too. I would be so frustrated if I went to a meeting and the person was just putting on a show, “well, we do this, and we do that.” And, like DCFS sometimes does that. So, stop, stop, be honest and authentic, or don't do anything. Talk about where you are failing. But yeah, this song and dance that we're doing so much. I think it's very discouraging to people on the outside who say you haven't done anything. It looks good, but it isn't. It's like smoke and mirrors.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

### Lack of Strategic Leadership and Role Clarity

Regarding the lack of strategic leadership, an administrative leader working at DCFS said:

*“But anything strategic requires an understanding of the leaders; honestly, I don't think they have any interest in long-term strategic planning. This is the first place I've ever created a strategic plan, sent it for review and approval, and never got a response.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

Additionally, participants mentioned that while there are initiatives or ideas to reduce racial disproportionality within the system that emerge, nobody is assigned to be responsible for pushing these forward. Executive



sponsorship is critical as is ownership of new initiatives, particularly those that require cultural and transformational change. Lack of clear role clarity and identifiable leadership who are responsible and accountable impacts follow-through. Having structural accountability and oversight is critical for buy-in at all levels of the organization. Participants mentioned this to be the case with specific recommendations made in previous reports. Another interviewee highlighted the specific need for role clarity to achieve results regarding reducing racial disproportionality within the system.

*“I think there could definitely be some role clarity and refinement to help executive leadership be really clear of who's responsible for what and what decision-making authority they have, so they can proceed efficiently. And, you know, not have like, everybody on everything, but rather, clarity of roles. I think that would help a lot, I think, also prioritization [of reducing racial disproportionality] at a leadership level, it'd be important.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Moreover, participants highlighted how people in charge of specific initiatives or equity efforts must fully believe these are worthwhile for them to succeed. If there is no “buy-in” or executive sponsorship from those at the top levels, then the value of the efforts will not be echoed throughout the organization and initiatives will not be effective nor sustained. An administrative leader who participated in an interview described this issue:

*“The next thing would be that to really do this work [of preventing racial disproportionality] in a way that's going to be sustainable within DCFS, in the County, and anywhere, your executive leadership is going to have to buy in. When two people on the board started this work, not all of the executive team really bought into the work. And so when you try to go to scale with doing the work within DCFS, the attitudes about the work and how the work is being done is translated to stay up by their deputy director. And if the deputy director is not about the work or into the vision, then that's going to be directly communicated to staff.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*But, you know, it really depends on that leader. Are they serious about this? And are they going to find enough time to be able to devote to it in order to adequately address it? Otherwise, you're going to have these kind of surface-level interventions that are going to allow that kind of flat trend line on this issue.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

In summary, a lack of role clarity and executive sponsorship impacts workers' belief that initiatives launched in these areas are meaningful and have traction.

## **Frequent Leadership Transition**

Participants highlighted frequent leadership transitions as a barrier to reducing disproportionality within the system, making it hard for someone to follow through with long-term initiatives. Participants emphasized that



frequent changes in leadership are problematic, especially considering the magnitude of the problem of racial disproportionality within child welfare and the strategic planning and organizational transformation required to address this disproportionality. As a result, leadership does not have continuity in driving the efforts to reduce disproportionality.

Here, an administrative leader who was interviewed discusses how leadership and the systems in LA County DCFS act as barriers to reducing racial disproportionality of children of color in foster care.

*“I mean, I think it's frankly, one of those problems that is so big [racial disproportionality in the system], that it's very easy to try just to throw up your hands and feel like nothing can be accomplished. (...) So, that is for sure just like the size of it, of course, it's a lot to swallow, obviously. I also think having a DCFS director that's there for more than a few years is really important because this is something that needs and requires many years of change, as you can imagine.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Moreover, another interviewee highlighted how the frequent changes DCFS goes through in terms of staff and leaders might be barriers to reducing racial disproportionality within the system:

*“Certainly, in DCFS, I mean, there's like constantly people being moved around and different board motions and this, that and the other. And so, I think, you know, I mean, even over the last couple months, like there was a new director of the Office of Equity, and then now they're gone. And there's a lot of turnovers, there's a lot of change, there's a lot of pressure, there's a lot of projects, and there's a lot of crises. And so, I think that's a big part of it.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

## Overworked Professionals

Similarly, participants highlighted professionals within the system, staff, and executive leaders, being overburdened and, therefore, ineffective in reducing and preventing racial disproportionality.

*“I also think this is a topic for which I feel like there's a lot of people who want to be able to sort of take a verbal stance that they support things philosophically, but not necessarily, like take it on as their role because of how much else is on their plate. So, say, “Okay, this is the piece I'm actually going to move forward.” And part of that is there's a lack of clarity or space made for clear leadership on particular pieces sometimes like, it's like everybody's overloaded and so, people are like, “yes, yes, I believe in this,” but they're being asked to do something else than their job, right? So, it takes time and intentionality to make progress on some of this work.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Moreover, social workers who participated in the focus group discussions emphasized that in certain areas



within LA County, Black social workers are called upon to do more work than their non-Black counterparts. Yet, they are not compensated for this extra work. These social workers talked about how a current initiative to reduce racial disproportionality is to have a Black family be assigned to a Black social worker. Yet, there are not enough Black social workers to fill the need to achieve these assigned referrals. Similarly, it was discussed that non-Black social workers sometimes seek advice and support from Black social workers, yet this increases the Black social workers' workload.

*“And for those of us who are non-African American, we're looking to our African American counterparts, like help me out how can I serve as this family or what have you, I'm going to have a CFT [Child and Family Team meeting], I'm going to “facilitate, can you help me out sometimes, you know, of course, they say yes. And then other times they have a workload as well. So, it's like it's an impact. So, the reality is, that we don't have enough African American workers to represent the community.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Regarding payment disparities for Black social workers doing extra work, a focus group participant responded to the moderator's question, “Do you think that places the burden on Black social workers within the County to have to do more than their non-Black counterparts?” saying:

*“Absolutely, I think so. Not only that, but the other issue, too, is that they don't get paid more either. For example, I'm a Spanish-speaking supervisor. I get paid at least 150 more a month for my bilingual service, right? Because we get a higher caseload, but you see what I'm saying, it's like, it's such a burden, no matter how it is (...) there's a lot of us [Spanish speaking social workers] compared to African American workers. And then there's some African American workers who sometimes prefer not to get an ERDD [Eliminating Racial Disparities and Disproportionality] referral because it's going to be more work to really try and be very intentional to preserve the family, to bring up the community to help these families so they don't come into the system. It's a lot of work.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Similarly, another social worker agrees there must be some extra pay for Black social workers who bring their cultural expertise to prevent and reduce racial disparities within the system:

*“If you're specifically assigning Black social workers to Black families, and they have to do this, this and this, there should be an extra stipend, the same way that Spanish speaking or any other bilingual workers get their bonus for simply, you know, knowing that language and being able to use that.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*



## Silos Hinder Cross-Departmental Coordination and Communication and Lead to Gridlock

*I mean, the wellbeing of children is not DCFS's sole responsibility. It's the responsibility of the department [DCFS] and other departments like public social services, health services, and mental health"*

*— Administrative Leader*

This theme includes issues of lack of cooperation between County departments or institutions and the extant bureaucracy and “siloing”, which are barriers to reducing racial disproportionality within the child welfare system. These silos prevent County staff from collaborating and coordinating across service areas, hindering case workers’ ability to connect families to the full breadth of County resources currently available. Achieving change will require a willingness to work together across departments and systems.

*“DCFS still works in a silo, DMH [the Department of Mental Health] works in a silo, public health works in a silo, and health services works in a silo. And it's going to take a collaborative effort [to work on racial equity] but, we can't. There are way too many silos, and we don't collaborate and work well enough. And I think we need to create more opportunities where we're all working together in support of this.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

The theme of lack of coordination between different entities in LA County working toward child welfare is the backdrop for one leader recommending the creation of a “coordinating council.” This participant also mentioned issues related to a lack of strategic leadership or will to spearhead initiatives to tackle racial disproportionality within child welfare.

*“And so, you know, there's a lack of structure. I think there needs to be a coordinating council of some sort. I don't know if that's the right word for it. But you need some sort of coordination structure, especially if you don't have a CEO's office that is very strictly focused on strategic planning, if you don't have a group of department heads that are bought into the fact that you have to have a coordinated plan across departments, that's a real problem.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

Moreover, another administrative leader who participated in an interview highlighted there is currently no central entity or “hub” to coordinate efforts on equity:

*“Each of those fields [social services, mental health, public health] now feel a little bit piecemeal. There's no central hub where we're all coming to talk. Now, the County might be doing that because I know they've gotten an equity person,*



*a DEI person for the County now. (...). But for me, there's not a hub where all of these things [efforts to achieve racial equity work] come into play.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

In addition, the board, the director of child welfare, having to report to other departments, such as the Department of Mental Health (DMH), creates an environment where new policies and initiatives die in the idea phase because there are no streamlined processes. Here, a different administrative leader describes how LA County DCFS is difficult to navigate; they highlight how the department's size makes it difficult to advance any meaningful changes.

*“I think a barrier is the vastness of our city [Los Angeles] because you don't have the ability to support the needs of patients within their micro-communities as well, because of the way LA is set up. That's what I think another thing is, is a lot of what happens in a huge, speaking specifically for DCFS, a lot of what happens in a huge bureaucracy never trickles down to the individuals that are doing the frontline work.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Similarly, another interviewee mentioned that there are many demands simultaneously, which makes achieving change challenging:

*“You got too many people from too many different directions, everything is a priority to them. Right, you got it, you got the commissioners, you got the board deputies, you've got you got you actually have the actual board of supervisors, you have, you have, you know, police chiefs, captains, everyone. And everything's a priority. And everything is in that. And you know, you have a director usually, and all they do is they just flip emails, they get something, they just flip it, handle it, right. And they want it handled quickly and fast.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Also related to this issue of the “system gridlock,” participants, in this case, an interviewee, highlight how hard it is to follow through with specific initiatives that seek to reduce racial disproportionality in the system given the lack of guidance, planning, and steps that are required to achieve a change.

*I just think we have a problem with the entire process. Like we've never oriented ourselves to the steps of what you're asking for to be piloted, the evaluation of that pilot, and what is the process by which you will determine has it been successful or not? And then what is the next steps? And like, some of this stuff is kind of basic, right? Like, what's your timeline for the pilot? Do you have an evaluation for the pilot? Like, if this is successful? Do you have the money to do this? Where's that money coming from? You just get in this weird, dysfunctional loop. Because It's pretty easy to author a motion directing a department to pilot something. Whether they've been implemented fully is always a question because LA County loves to do pilot programs that stay pilots for perpetuity.*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**



Lastly, a social worker participant described the experience of an individual who was caught in the “system’s gridlock;”

*“The mom's mental health is a major issue and the court too. She's not able to access her attorney, her attorney is not calling her back. This mom has true enough, she's had eight kids that had been removed from her. (...) However, she deserves a chance and that child deserves a chance. And it's just not happening. So she's frustrated, she calls us and says “my attorney is not calling me back.” I'll email the County counsel and say, “Hey, can you please contact mom's attorney?” or I'll contact mom's attorney myself. I don't even get a response back. And I'm like, if I'm the worker, and I'm, you know, the supervisor, and I'm asking, and you're not responding to me, I know you're not responding to the parent.  
(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

## Reassessing Funding Priorities and Limitations

*“And stop surveilling and harassing and policing our [African American] communities to the extent that we are and then utilize DCFS in the system to really focus on that 12% that actually need your help. And let the community in the village, take care of our other 88% and make sure we have the funding and resources to do it” — Administrative Leader*

Note: Participants in the current study were those working directly and indirectly with children and families involved in the child welfare system who may have had limited expertise related to funding processes. However, we document their important experiences and perceptions related to funding in their daily work.

Central to this theme, participants mentioned how specific policies and political priorities result in financial support being pulled away from biological families, which are often underserved and under-resourced, and instead directed toward other forms of spending outside of families. Participants also noted that there has historically been less funding and greater barriers to delivering upstream prevention. Some noted how money could be used for prevention before removal or as a support for families struggling economically and in need.

*“Do you know how much people get for raising somebody else's child? Anywhere from \$900 to \$4000 a month to raise someone else's child. Imagine if we gave that to the parent, a fraction of it, to address food insecurity to address childcare issues. We will be saving the County millions upon millions upon millions of dollars and then empowering our society to be successful agents of society. You'll see a reduction in crime as a result because we're not out there hustling or stealing trying to feed our kids. You will see something completely different. You will see less drug use because we're not stressed out and depressed over not being able to feed our kids or our kids being in the system.”  
(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*





*“I think that if we put some resources in place for parents that are struggling, maybe detention would not happen. And so just maybe identifying, you know, what are the family's barriers and maybe not being, you know, a case not being promoted to being a case, maybe looking at a referral and say, “how can we keep this child in the home?” “How can we preserve the family?” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

*“I think it's the biggest barrier, and I keep on going back to funding. It's like, the department [DCFS] has money when we get sued. When we get sued, there's an “oh my God, I don't know where all these millions of dollars come from.” All of a sudden we're able to pay these lawsuits, but then you ask the department for \$200 to go pay for a mini fridge or something. And we don't have the money or we're on a six month waiting list. I just don't get it. And I'm sorry. It's like you should have paid that family upfront. Before they came into the system. So then the department doesn't get sued. This is the problem. We get these families and we don't have the resources, we can't get them out. We don't know what to do and on top of that, we violate their rights, and that's why we end up being sued and now we have the money, but we didn't have the \$200 back in October or what have you.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

The theme of funding (or lack thereof) includes difficulty finding money to support new and prevention-oriented initiatives and regional politics, resulting in funding disparities. These funding challenges create barriers to reducing and preventing racial disproportionality. Because there are limited resources, oftentimes, not all major issues are equitably invested in. That can lead to tension and misgivings between stakeholders who serve various populations, as they may feel that the populations they serve are not equitably invested in despite the heightened challenges they may face. In addition, it is imperative that we consider the role of intersectionality, including whether children who hold multiple marginalized identities (e.g., a child who is both Black and trans) have their unique needs adequately served by County resources for Black children, trans children, or the general population of children, even in combination. Moreover, some administrative leaders mentioned that sometimes specific recommendations are offered to DCFS that may be effective and helpful in reducing disproportionality within the system but do not have funds to be implemented.



*“The department has an exorbitant amount of demands on it. You know, most things in the Commission were either required or not, and we did some (...), but those things take money! So you can have a Blue Ribbon Commission, but a commission doesn't give dollars. So, if there's a recommendation, but the recommendation costs \$50 million, well, the Commission didn't come with the \$50 million to do what is recommended. So, you know, it's one thing to say that this is what needs to happen. It's another thing actually to implement it.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“I mean, you know, when the Office of Equity was created, I think, in my mind, that was going to be a way to bring community partners and others together. And my impression is that they were not fully funded, this office was created, but they don't have any staff. It's just the main people over women and girls, LGBTQ, disproportionality and disparity black families, and then the head of all of those, but then they didn't have the other foundational staff to do things. So they, that is crazy-making to me.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“They [the board of supervisors] are like, “oh, cool, let's embed some domestic violence counselors at the hotline.” Yeah, great idea. Right? Great idea. So, then it became the issue, how do we fund it?”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Participants also highlighted the challenge of finding sustained funding for different initiatives. It seems most often that DCFS or LA County obtain “one-time funding” for specific initiatives. This relates to another issue elevated by participants: even when pilot programs are effective, they lack the funds to be sustained.

*“That's also an issue that sort of cuts across so many problems within LA County. It is so much like, the wonderful programs, right that we work with partners like yourselves, like the blind removal program, for example, using one-time dollars. And it's always an issue. You know, if that pilot proves successful, well, we need to find sustainable funding for that. And sometimes, it's a struggle to do that.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Moreover, additional participants highlighted how politics and power relationships have a role in influencing what does and does not get funded. For example, two different administrative leaders said:

*“ I think part of the anti-racist thing is, which might go along potentially with how you think about system change... is part of being anti-racist is really thinking about power dynamics, and whether or not you're fundamentally looking at how funds are allocated or who's involved in decision making.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**



*“I think giving every parent home visitation programs, like having those programs and making sure they have access to food, regardless of whether they're undocumented or not. I think all the things that families essentially need would be something that we would maybe do a better job of if we had funding. So if funding wasn't an issue and the political will was there for that.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

The interviewed administrative leaders also discussed how funding (or lack thereof) impacts families. One said:

*“I think that because so much of the federal and state funding turns on only once a child is in the foster care system, it's really hard to find the funding to invest prior to that. So I think we need to really restructure how things are funded. I know, there are obviously some sources of funding that we are trying to get at that... For example, funding doesn't exist to ensure quality early childhood education across the County, and early childhood education is important.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

## Confronting and Conversing about Race and Racism

*“I think they [professionals within the system] see both [the poverty and the race piece in enhancing disproportionality], but I believe that these [poverty and structural racism] are viewed as intractable and the way it's always has been and always will be. So there's a level of sort of acceptance. Yeah, I think that's part of it. It's just the way it is.”* — **Executive Leader**

This theme refers to issues such as actively denying or avoiding conversations about race and racism. For example, when blame for racial disproportionality lands exclusively on poverty, then it enables avoidance of confronting the real issue, structural racism (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). Not naming race and avoiding specific conversations to address racism and its impact impedes the reduction or the prevention of racial disproportionality within the system, as racial bias among professionals perpetuates institutional racism embedded within the CWS (Children's Bureau, 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). Many of the narratives in the qualitative data convey a sense of apathy, ambivalence, or learned helplessness around racial issues and transform racist policies.

*“And so what I found here [at DCFS] is that while disproportionality is an issue, handling issues that matter, race is at issue here. People don't want to do the active things that are going to actually to move the work. They want to bring it back to doing more training sessions, and continue to look at the data and talk about the data and have the conversation, but not really put the active steps in place to put things into place to make sure that the data that we're seeing is improving in a way that says that we are serving kids better than we're doing*



*better in our jobs on how we serve.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“And then, of course, you know, you have these ups and downs and administrations at the federal level, some recognizing that it's a problem others not and, and kind of, you know, it's kind of like a roller coaster.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“I've been working for the Department [DCFS] for about 17 years, and it's always been a problem [racial disproportionality] and it's like, “wow, now you guys are just addressing it?” And “now you guys are doing something about it when it's always been a problem?” I guess better late than never, but it's always been here, right in front of your eyes.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Moreover, this theme refers to how formal and informal conversations about race and racism propel or deter the ability to implement policies and practices that reduce the number of children of color in LA County DCFS. For example, administrative leaders mentioned that raising awareness of structural racism is valuable to achieve change regarding racial disproportionality, highlighted related issues such as the need to have direct conversations specifically about anti-black racism, talked about how whiteness appears in everyday work and described a system of falling back “into the old pattern” of working.





*“I think being able to have the conversation to raise awareness is certainly something that we can all do, right, and to bring us into awareness as to how the system can be deeply racist, right, or the system was built on prejudices that have disadvantaged communities is valuable. Raising awareness is valuable.”*

**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“Another one of the action steps that we wanted to put in place was kind of talk through the nuances of racism with the executive team. And no one wanted to have the hard conversation about what that meant and how we were to address that. Instead, we threw many things into the mixed bag where you want to talk about Black people. Let's talk about Indigenous folks. Let's talk about this person and talk about that person. The data doesn't show that other populations are disproportionately represented in care. It shows that Black kids are.”*

**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“I think that at times with our white counterparts, it's the fragility of it, you know. When they talk about white fragility, the minute the conversation gets hard. Folks want to start taking it personally. It's like, at the end of the day, if we can't have authentic conversations about the construct of race, and these issues in this country, then we're never going to be able to move forward in the way that we want to. There is this unconscious bias that we haven't even talked about with our white counterparts.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“Well, I think they're not properly institutionalized in departments, and then the culture that needs to support it isn't built. I think part of that comes from departments being forced to do things, rather than embracing and billing, and so they have some voice in it and have that buy-in, but I think a large part of it is that when the attention is off, when the focus is off, people tend to fall back into old habits.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

*“What are the barriers [to reducing racial disproportionality]? I mean, I think for sure, implicit bias culture. Uh, you know, the sort of mentality that things have always been done this way, um, these are probably the hardest things to overcome. I'm not saying that everyone is guilty of them, but I do think those are systemic issues that we would have to address.”* **(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Lastly, as part of this theme, participants mentioned racial bias embedded in decision-making by professionals within the system. Policies and procedures that allow professional's subjectivity and racial bias to enter into case decision-making further contributes to racial disproportionality within the system (Children's Bureau, 2021; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). For example, a social worker who participated in a focus





group discussion said:

*“And what I see is that it's not that we're intentionally treating families differently for the most part, because I honestly believe that most social workers come into this field because they want to make a difference. We're of a different kind of people. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to endure working, you know, with so many responsibilities that we have. But I think the problem is that, when we treat people differently, I think most of us don't even realize that we're doing it – I think we're making a lot of assumptions.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

Similarly, participants highlighted that training sessions on implicit racial bias must be accompanied by ongoing mentoring and should delve deeper into the causes of implicit biases to be effective.

*“Training [on racial bias] is great. But training a large group of people on bias and then expecting them to go out there and apply it without the coaching and mentoring pieces doesn't work.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

*“We [social workers at DCFS] had implicit bias training. It was 2019, it had to be 2019 because we were in person, and it was this huge thing for the department [DCFS]. Personally, I didn't feel like it was for Black or Native American, which was what it was supposed to be geared towards. It did not. It literally skimmed the surface, and I don't think it got to the root of the problem. It didn't for me. It was obvious they did not want to get to the root, because this can be very personal, it can get very heated and I don't think they wanted to go there.” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*



Moreover, also concerning racial biases, social workers talked about how they seek to be proactive in checking themselves and that they are aware of racial biases against Black families. For example, social workers who participated in different focus group discussions said: *“But again, it's checking yourself, checking your biases, and really, you know, really coming to terms and accepting things like, “Okay, this is a problem, a problem”* **(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)**. Another one mentioned:

*“I'll say for me, the way it plays out is I am more protective of people that look like me because I know – sometimes I hear stories. And I hear the bias in the story. I hear the way that the behavior was seen one way, and I may see it a different way”* **(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)**

Lastly, a third social worker said:

*“So one of the biggest barriers that I've seen is social worker bias, as well as supervisor but when I say social worker, I'm speaking of all of us that work in for the Department of Children and Family Services, regardless of our title. So whether we are children's services, social workers, supervisors, ARA [Assistant Regional Administrator], or RA [Regional Administrator], okay, so a lot of it has to do with biases. (...) And when it comes to the biases when you're talking about the disproportionality of Black children in foster care, lots of times, Black families are judged at a higher level than other families”* **(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)**





05

# Recommendations: A Structurally Competent Approach to Reducing Racial Disproportionality in the LA County Child Welfare System





**Table 1. The Three Recommendation Pillars and Eleven Specific Recommendations**

<b>Recognizing Structural Intersectionality and Addressing Structural Racism: Disproportionate Impact on Black Families Across Systems</b>	
1.	Remove policies and practices that continue to criminalize families
2.	Reassess LA County's definition and use of "general neglect" and mandated reporting guidelines
3.	Redirect funding to families most impacted by poverty and child welfare interactions to prevent family separation
4.	Create intentional and meaningful involvement with fathers (and paternal family members) in family intervention strategies
5.	Analyze "failure to protect" statutes to prevent further victimization of survivors of abuse
<b>Transformational Leadership and Cross-System, Culturally Responsive, Trauma- and Healing-Informed Organizational Culture</b>	
6.	Appoint and support transformational and sustained leadership
7.	Reduce siloing and build cross-system collaboration and communication
8.	Build a no shame culture and enhance feelings of psychological safety inclusive of naming racism
9.	Name anti-racism as north star and mitigate moral distress
<b>Workforce Development: Learning Communities to Address Structural Bias and Structural Competency Across Child-Serving Systems</b>	
10.	Implement critical and sustained professional development in structural bias, historical racism and trauma, and anti-racism for all staff and executive leadership
11.	Integrate a structural competency framework for BSW and MSW trainees, social workers, and leadership



The focus of the current report is to provide recommendations to address identified barriers in preventing and reducing racial disproportionality for Black Families in the LA County child welfare system. As such, these recommendations also offer insights on reducing chronic, historical, and structural barriers that have hindered the progress and implementation of strategies toward operationalizing equitable child wellbeing in Los Angeles County. We highlight three overarching recommendations pillars, each with related action items based on key themes derived from insights from the lived experiences of social workers and administrative leaders within LA County DCFS and other child and family-serving organizations.

**Figure 2. From Findings to Recommendations**

**A structurally competent approach to reducing racial disproportionality in the LA County Child Welfare System**

Carceral Entanglements	Problematic Policies and Practices	Leadership	Siloing	Funding	Confronting Race and Racism
<b>Rec 1:</b> Remove policies and practices that continue to criminalize families	<b>Rec 2:</b> Reassess LA County’s definition and use of “general neglect” and mandated reporting guidelines	<b>Rec 6:</b> Appoint and support transformational and sustained leadership	<b>Rec 7:</b> Reduce siloing and build cross-system collaboration and communication	<b>Rec 3:</b> Redirect funding to families most impacted by poverty and child welfare institutions	<b>Rec 8:</b> Build a no shame culture and enhance feelings of psychological safety, inclusive of naming racism
<b>Rec 11:</b> Integrate a structural competency framework for BSW and MSW trainees, social workers, and leadership	<b>Rec 4:</b> Create intentional and meaningful involvement with fathers (and paternal family members) in family intervention strategies	<b>Rec 8:</b> Build a no shame culture and enhance feelings of psychological safety, inclusive of naming racism			<b>Rec 9:</b> Name anti-racism as north star and mitigate moral distress
	<b>Rec 5:</b> Examine the role and complexities of intimate partner violence				<b>Rec 10:</b> Implement critical and sustained professional development in structural bias, historical racism and trauma
					<b>Rec 11:</b> Integrate a structural competency framework for BSW and MSW trainees, social workers, and leadership

**Pillar #1: Recognizing Structural Intersectionality and Addressing Structural Racism: Disproportionate Impact on Black Families Across Systems**

**1. Remove policies and practices that continue to criminalize families**

Determine and advocate to change the local, state, or federal policies that lead to the practice of 1) any previous arrests counting as an added risk factor in Structured Decision Making and 2) inability to place a child in the care of kin because of a household member’s legal history or probation status that is not related to child safety.

At present, current policies and practices that structure child welfare decisions to be made based on the parents’ and kin’s history of general carceral involvement (without nuanced consideration) will continue to perpetuate anti-Black racism and racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. Structural competency encourages movement away from individuals and carefully analyzes systems that structurally place individuals at risk for adverse outcomes. Thus, it is critical in the implementation of anti-racist practice



## RECOMMENDATIONS

to be anchored in both historical and social contexts. This necessitates recognition of structural racism, Anti-Black racism, and centering the related racial disproportionality in the criminal legal system. Structural racism in the criminal legal and carceral system leads to more Black and African Americans experiencing disproportionate contact, incarceration, and negative sanctions at every level of the criminal legal system. This includes, but is not limited to, surveillance, arrests, and inequitable times served in carceral settings (Hinton et al., 2018).

Upstream, youth and families may come to the attention of DCFS on the sole basis of parental involvement in the criminal legal system, and not because of any abuse or neglect claim, particularly if intimate partner violence is involved and/or when a parent is arrested or required to serve time and their children need to be cared for in their absence. For example, in 2009, more than 14,000 children were placed in out-of-home care due to parental incarceration (US Government Accounting Office, 2011). These children are not necessarily entering the child welfare system due to abuse or neglect (Shaw, Bright, & Sharpe, 2015). For families where a report of suspected abuse or neglect has been made, structural decision-making protocols often hold a parent's previous arrest history against them as an added risk factor in DCFS's decision on whether or not to substantiate a case and/or remove a child from their parent's care. During assessment to determine whether or not a child who has entered foster care can reunify with their parent(s), previous carceral history is also viewed as a barrier to reunification. Further, if a child is separated from their parent, previous carceral involvement of potential relative caregivers or anyone living in their home overrides a social worker's ability to place the child or children with those relatives or kin (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).





Given prevalence rates and risk for carceral entanglements, restructuring of practice and policies where removal and/or placement denial with history of carceral contact must urgently be reconsidered. Application of anti-racist frameworks that prioritize family connection must guide the development of holistic, nuanced, and structurally-informed revisions of draconian policies that criminalize family history of carceral entanglement. This means consideration of allowing children to stay with parents and relatives who were incarcerated for an offense that was not in violation against a child and/or whose offense was committed years ago.

*“If you could just put in your report, I don't know if you can but take it back to them that the SDM [Structured Decision-Making Model] really needs to be redone. You know – our tool – that really needs to be redone” (Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)*

## **2. Reassess LA County’s definition and use of “general neglect” and mandated reporting guidelines**

Advocate for legislative change around the interpretation of general neglect to align with AB 2085 and implement it thoughtfully. There is a need for greater legislative advocacy around the interpretation of general neglect. At the state level, there is a need to examine the statute on neglect. In 2022, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 2085 into law, redefining the ability of mandated reporters to make a referral to child protective services for the broad category of “general neglect.”

The new law revises the definition of general neglect by narrowing it to circumstances in which the child is at substantial risk of suffering serious physical harm or illness. AB 2085 further provides that general neglect does not include a parent’s economic disadvantage. The revision is vital because a parent or caregiver’s economic status had been used previously as a rationale for general neglect. The new law makes important strides in restricting the broad manner of how neglect has been interpreted, but there is still further clarity for what it means practically going forward for DCFS workers. Across the country, child abuse hotlines receive approximately 4.4 million referrals of alleged maltreatment each year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2020). These referrals, the majority of which are reported based primarily on suspicion of neglect, impact 7.8 million children annually. General neglect is considered the negligent failure of a parent/guardian or caretaker to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, safety, or supervision where no physical injury to the child has occurred. Severe neglect refers to situations where the child’s health is endangered, including severe malnutrition. Yet the interpretation of general neglect needs to be reconsidered. Identifying clearer and consistent interpretations of neglect is necessary to ensure that families are not criminalized for poverty-related realities. In the interim, LA County can work at a local level to convene a group of stakeholders to reimagine the concept of “neglect,” discuss its complexities and understand the ramifications of its multiple interpretations. One of the goals of such convening is the recognition that the term is overly broad, frequently criminalizes poverty, and is a key contributor to racial disproportionality.

The ambiguity of authority gives those involved in child welfare a license to practice surveillance in arbitrary ways that can be mediated by racism and structural bias (Copeland, 2022; Roberts, 2022a). Given that most





reports of neglect are often manifestations of poverty (Roberts, 2022a), structurally, County agencies need to focus more on preventative and mitigative measures, such as addressing the upstream impacts of poverty and its functional aspects. Furthermore, training for social workers and other front-line professionals with decision-making power in child protective services should include foundational training and anchoring in structural racism and the legacy of slavery (e.g., Wilkerson, 2020). This includes awareness of untenable living conditions and the structural determinants of health and racism that shape them, an understanding of social determinants of health and the relation of concentrated poverty to negative health outcomes, carceral contact, child welfare involvement, and implicit bias.

Applying structural competency frameworks would facilitate the creation of allyship between community-based organizations, families, and social workers to support and help families navigate social services so they can obtain access to housing, jobs, health care, childcare, and other vital resources. For instance, LA County could pursue strategies to redirect funds typically allocated for foster care placements and invest those funds toward preventive and promotive supports and resources (e.g., child care and after-school programs, parenting classes, community health workers, peer and health navigators/*promotoras*, increased allowance of CalFresh Benefits, housing, and job training to name a few).



**Reimagine Mandated Reporting.** The Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families recently announced the Mandated Supporting Initiative. The initiative's goal would be to ideologically and pragmatically shift the paradigm of mandated reporting to mandated supporting. The reframing would entail reconsidering how we prioritize the best outcomes for a child and the family in need, wherein there is consideration about whether there is truly a substantial risk of harm to the child, and if not, there is a substantial pivot to questions about supporting the child within their caregiving system to address the mandated reporter's concerns about the child's environment or living conditions. In essence, the goal is to identify a family's needs and connect the caregiver with the adequate support, resources, and assistance needed to provide adequate care for children. Mandated supporting would raise the threshold for reporting by ensuring that the evidence needed for family separation is high and that any such substantiation must be weighed against the risks that family separation poses.

It is also imperative to examine the role of the courts. The courts play a central role in making decisions regarding the protection of children who have been maltreated. In child abuse and neglect cases, courts must determine whether and when a child should be removed from the home, placed in out-of-home care, or returned home. DCFS workers play a pivotal role in child removal, child placement, and family reunification. However, the role of DCFS workers is only one variable in the decision-making processes, as courts play a critically important role in child safety as well. It is important to have ongoing discussions, forums, and even policy considerations about the roles that courts play in child placements, parental roles and responsibilities, and general support of families. Understanding the judicial process is important for child protection staff at all levels. Having a thorough knowledge of court processes and partnering with the courts, child protective services caseworkers and other legal and nonlegal professionals can work together to better serve children and families. Greater lines of communication and understanding from the courts about the realities of DCFS staff is vital in ensuring greater alignment in decision making for optimizing child and family safety.

### **3. Redirect funding to families most impacted by poverty and child welfare interactions to prevent family separation**

Shift funding from paying others to care for children when they are separated from parents to funding resources that ensure whole families can thrive so they may stay together and prevent separation. LA County has one of the largest budgets in the nation (Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office, 2022) and economies globally. Reimagining the County's child and family support systems must require a realignment of investment into preventative services and intentional resource allocation to address structural drivers of poverty and create community-wide conditions that enable well-being and thriving, especially in historically marginalized communities. Program and resource investment should actively ameliorate racial disparities in wellbeing and support children's basic needs in healthcare, education, food security, housing, mental health, and child care. Currently, the distribution and focus of resources in child welfare may be misaligned and skewed toward policies and practices that are often punitive, lead to disproportionately racialized surveillance, and/or do not adequately prioritize strength-based family first or anti-racist frameworks.

Furthermore, it is imperative that any new initiatives that are piloted or heralded are adequately resourced to succeed, including by allocating appropriate funding toward operational change within DCFS and other



relevant County entities. Dr. Martin Luther King stated, “budgets are moral documents.” Accordingly, establishing new but under-resourced programs is a recipe for failure and moral injury and will not result in organizational transformation. Under-resourcing anti-racist programming and initiatives undermines their impact and can aggravate particularly challenging conditions for staff assigned to carry out those initiatives. This can result in burnout and moral injury in part by spreading staff members thin who are already working beyond their capacity.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of investing financially in racial justice initiatives; without monetary support, staff members can become jaded and apathetic that change will never come and lose confidence in leadership.

*“I think that, because so much of the federal and state funding turns on only once a child is in the foster care system, it's really hard to find the funding to invest prior to that. So I think we need to really restructure how things are funded. And I know, there are obviously some sources of funding that are trying to get at that. But we're, you know, I think that we need to do that a lot more.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Participants also mentioned the lack of accessibility to funded programs for parents who are seeking preventive or court mandated services or classes from substance use and mental health treatment to parenting classes.

*“So, when you have an open case with the DCFS, a case plan is developed, and you are required to complete certain services. Many of these can be drug programs, parenting classes, anger management classes, and domestic violence, those kinds of programs. But we don't fund them. We don't pay for those services. So, if a family can't afford to pay, if a parent can't afford to pay for those services, and there's a waiting list for an indigent slot, then that's time in which these kids are languishing in care, and the family has to continue having the Department [DCFS] in their lives because they can't afford services. And again, disproportionately impacts Black families because we're disproportionately poor.”* **(Social Worker, Focus Group Discussion)**

#### **4. Create intentional and meaningful involvement with fathers (and paternal family members) in family intervention strategies**

Many existing child welfare and other social policies emphasize the role of biological mothers in how the government supports families (e.g., WIC, Medi-Cal); however, research shows that fathers play an important role in a child's development (Gordon et al. 2012). When children are removed from a family, fathers are often left out of case plans and reunification strategies. Having fathers' active participation in the case plan increases the likelihood that children may remain with the family, time in foster care will be briefer, and, if removed from one parent, they will be able to reunify with birth families (Coakley, 2008; 2013).



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Research by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) highlights how Black fathers are more likely to be involved in their children's lives than Hispanic fathers and non-Hispanic white fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). This debunks the myth that Black fathers are not involved in their children's lives, which stems from anti-Black practices and policies (Gordon et al. 2012).

To move towards healthy and healing communities and families of color, it is important to dismantle how white heteropatriarchy assumes fathers and paternal family members are only good for providing monetary support. Fathers want to show up in meaningful ways for their children and be emotional and social support systems. Lastly, heteropatriarchy assumes that a "good" family can only be one where both mother and father live together; this is false and undermines the various ways family formation happens (Cross, Fomby & Letiecq, 2022). It is important to honor how father and paternal family members engage with their children and are intentional when creating family interventions.





## 5. Analyze "failure to protect" statutes to prevent further victimization of survivors of abuse

Survivors of intimate partner violence should not experience the double trauma of abuse and separation from children. A recent report by the UCLA Pritzker Center highlighted that in October 2020, of the nearly 38,618 open cases, at least 19,937, or 51.6%, involved domestic violence allegations. Domestic violence and intimate partner violence is complex. A careful analysis must be done on the idea of "failure to protect" and ensure that the system does not further victimize survivors of abuse. Many child welfare practitioners are ill-equipped to navigate and respond to this complexity due to limited training or minimal exposure to and understanding of domestic violence (Liévano-Karim et al., 2023). Some of this complexity is due to the cultural stigma surrounding domestic violence and the co-occurring conditions that both survivors and the person who causes harm experience. Not understanding the dynamics of power and control can lead to a state or county entity blaming survivors for not leaving a domestic violence situation, an unwillingness or inability to recognize protective parenting capacities which a survivor demonstrates, and recommending services or solutions that make things worse, fall back on a quick fix of removing children from the situation, or which do not address the root causes of domestic violence.

## **Pillar #2: Transformational Leadership and Cross-System, Culturally -Responsive, Trauma- and Healing-Informed Organizational Culture**

### 6. Appoint and Support Transformational and Sustained Leadership

Participants describe a lack of strategic leadership as a barrier to reducing or preventing racial disproportionality of Black youth in the child welfare system. This lack of strategic and effective leadership has been described as performative, which means professionals within the system act as if they are "doing the work." However, from others' perspectives, it seems like a performance with no substance or commitment to real anti-racist transformation. When appointing leadership, appointees must be inspiring and intentional in making change. They must have clear goals and objectives to affect change and not fall into "old patterns." Additionally, leaders must prioritize and experience effective training sessions on racism and other forms of oppression.

*It has to start with your policies and practices. And it has to be driven by strong leadership, that are bold, that's bold enough to really address it head on and tackle it. (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

For there to be a significant shift in the nature of how barriers to racial disproportionality are removed, bold and consistent leadership is necessary. The leadership needs to be multi-faceted, transparent, and demonstrate a willingness to keep racial justice and equity in child welfare an explicit focus of the department's goals and aims. Transformational leadership is an approach that causes a change in individuals, policies, practices, and social systems. In the ideal sense, transformative leadership creates valuable and positive change in the followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders. For DCFS, transformative leadership would entail regular listening sessions with families, line workers, youth, and other administrators. Transformative leadership would also seek to identify, reduce, and eliminate layers





of bureaucracy that frequently stymie implementation of effective policies and practices. Additional recommendations for leadership based on this report would be to develop a system-wide strategic plan with clear metrics, reasonable timelines, clear duties and responsibilities for all stakeholders, and frequent feedback circles. The findings from this report also highlight that reducing the frequent transitions and changes in leadership and policy would go a long way to creating greater stability, and implementation of policies. To that end, an additional recommendation would be to identify ways to reduce what many workers feel is an excessive workload, and the physical, emotional, and psychological toll it takes on individuals.

## **7. Reduce Siloing and Build Cross-System Collaboration and Communication**

System siloing can serve as a major barrier to implementing more responsive policies dedicated to reducing racial disproportionality. Siloing also leads to families experiencing gridlock and obfuscation of accessibility to services they may need across systems domains.

One of the efforts to move systems away from siloing that has become entrenched across County departments is to build on the work situated in the Office of Child Protection (OCP) which was developed as both a comprehensive strategic and prevention plan entity, tasked with being a network convener, consensus-builder, identifier of structural problems, facilitator of improvements, clarifier of issues, aligner of operational concerns, and negotiator of multi-agency barriers. Another recent effort to enhance coordination, strategic planning, and governance across the County's social support systems is the Prevention Services Task Force, a body directed by the Board to explore how the County can effectuate a comprehensive, community-based service delivery system for prevention and promotion, including to address racial disproportionalities in child welfare.

We similarly recommend that strategic planning take place across departments and with equity and anti-racism as its NorthStar with a prevention focused, strengths-based and affirming care action plan that includes operationally defined goals, streamlined recommendations with target dates and incorporating community engagement. Essential to moving out of silos is having systems seeing shared goals, incentivizing cross sector work and streamlining of efforts to create efficient systems dedicated to building a system of child and family wellbeing, where services and funding must be connected across systems in order to maximize impact.



## 8. Build a No Shame Culture and Enhance Feelings of Psychological Safety Inclusive of Naming Racism

Given the complexities and high stakes of serving children and families who may become involved in child welfare, it is critical that all staff have the training, ongoing support and development, and space to explore the challenges of their day-to-day work including the themes of racism, marginalization, and oppression that are interwoven into their experiences with families and as a member of a public system. When staff members feel afraid of making a mistake, they tend to avoid talking about it. Building a no shame culture would involve an open policy to discuss the mistake without fear of repercussions and while it may still be addressed and not potentially cause further harm.

*“I would just stress the psychological safety of people because I think, maybe I should have lifted this earlier, I think a significant barrier is the fear, I should say fear, a culture of fear. (...) Starting at the hotline, well, starting, let's say, starting with mandated reporters (...) Everyone's afraid.” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)*

Leadership must be willing to build and sustain a culture of support, protection, and transparency. It is crucial to create a culture that allows workers to be vulnerable, to ask for help, and to know that they will not be unfairly criticized about decision-making is crucial. A culture of fear is not ideal for creating the types of support needed for working in complex systems that affect children's lives. Creating anonymous feedback opportunities, allowing workers to have input on the types of procedures, training, and policy change that they believe would be most helpful, and putting ongoing systems of support into place would be transformative for greater self-efficacy and effectiveness for workers. To make a fundamental shift away from the culture of fear that demonizes workers, the collaboration between unionized workers and management would be an important step to ensure ideal working conditions and support for workers. In addition, everything that leads to this culture of fear has to be transformed alongside necessary local, state, and federal policy reform. As one administrative leader shares: *“I think policy is what's gonna give, is what's gonna chip away at that culture of fear” (Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview).*

## 9. Name Anti-Racism as North Star and Mitigate Moral Distress

**Anti-Racism as North Star.** In our data, some line workers stated that they had never heard anything about anti-racism in their work. For those who did hear about racism being identified and named in the workplace, there were concerns about an unfair expectation to demonstrate how anti-racism frameworks shape the work that is done in DCFS in real time in order to justify time and financial investment in their application. In other words, how does decision-making change? How does reporting look different? How are cases to be analyzed through an antiracism lens? There is a sentiment that explicit directives from leadership about anti-racism are sorely needed.

Moreover, some workers believed that certain members of leadership did not have the knowledge, skills, or dispositions to engage in discussions around systemic and structural racism in child welfare. Thus, concrete steps that can be taken would be uplifting efforts such as ERDD, 4DX and Blind Removals, which look directly at pervasive issues affecting cases involving Black children and families. Additional steps could be to provide



reflective professional development and ongoing coaching to leaders at various levels about how they can understand and lead the work with anti-racism as its north star. Moving the work forward requires an intentionality around keeping anti-racism as the named north star in addressing disproportionality. While there has been an increase in diversity trainings and initiatives focused on equity and implicit bias, a more explicitly stated commitment to naming, exploring, and addressing racism is imperative.

**Moral Distress.** The concept of moral distress was raised by many of the social workers that we spoke to; wherein workers felt like they often ended up having to make decisions that they felt were not serving families well, but they had to comply with outdated or culturally inconsistent mandates and policies. Feeling as if you have no option but to proceed in a manner that is based in racist policy or practice and/or not in the best interest of the child can lead to ongoing moral injury. It has the clear potential for adding multilayered disparate stress and burden for those working in the field who are from the community they are serving and who may have lived experience with racism, discrimination, marginalization, and oppression.

*“And so something I've been trying to encourage folks to do is frame it as an institutional, systemic problem that's perpetuated through individual racism, if I come in, even as a black or brown person, and I'm showing up as a social worker, or law enforcement or whoever, I can come in with the best intentions, trying to be a cultural broker trying to help my communities restore my communities. But if I'm forced to implement racist practices, laws, and policies, I'm not doing anyone any good. You're just now saying we have a diverse group of people who are now administering racist laws and policies.”*  
**(Administrative Leader, Key Informant Interview)**

Providing ongoing listening sessions with workers about their concerns tied to moral distress would help ascertain where there is a disconnect between the letter of the law with policies and practices and the spirit of the laws and policies. Mitigating moral distress could also mean providing various types of support for line workers such as staff appreciation days, smaller caseloads, valuing and incorporating their input on policies and practices, recognition of the emotional toll the work frequently takes, pathways for professional development, promotion opportunities, and an overall appreciation of the complexities, difficulties and increasing demands of the job. A number of workers spoke about the complicated moral dilemmas they face on a day-to-day basis when making decisions.

### **Pillar #3: Workforce Development: Learning Communities to Address Structural Bias and Structural Competency Across Child-Serving Systems**

Racism is the risk, not race. The County should consider ongoing and robust coaching in understanding systemic and historical racism, structural bias, and structural competency and utilize experts in learning communities and organizational change management to implement these strategies for sustainable dissemination. While some social workers and agencies that license caregivers have provided mandatory training or classes in implicit bias, they have fallen short of providing ongoing learning spaces to explore the





role of structural bias and the ongoing impact of historical racism and trauma. Participants were not convinced that more one and done trainings would be useful without ongoing coaching and iteration about the application of these foundational frameworks in one's day to day work, including in program design, policy decisions, and case determinations. Participants desired the opportunity to discuss complexities and gray areas in their work while being afforded the opportunity to tailor and iterate within a learning community. Moreover, exploration and coaching around the essentials of raising and caring for youth of color, particularly Black youth, was named to be critical. While recognizing that not all Black youth are the same, there are core foundational elements that could be essential for learning. The forming of 'brave spaces' for discussions around race and its role in caregiving and child-serving systems would be valuable for reducing disproportionality. Participants in this work also mentioned the need for enhanced preparedness for those not familiar with cultural differences and additional insight on pragmatic ways to address racism in both its flagrant and understated forms.

#### **10. Implement critical and sustained professional development in structural bias, historical racism and trauma, and anti-racism for all staff and executive leadership in LA County DCFS, schools, DPSS, DMH, DHS, DPH, Sheriff's Department, Probation, etc.**

Participants mentioned a lack of training focusing on specific anti-Black racism, not only implicit bias but structural bias, the impact of historical and ongoing anti-Black racism, including within the development and structures of child serving systems, and how to move forward as a united anti-racist workforce. Over the past few years, significant work has been done in the County around implicit bias. However, there is a need to examine implicit bias including anti-Black racism in child welfare practices in a more concrete and applied manner. While many of the trainings have been important and needed, many have stayed at the surface level, providing key definitions, general overviews of the concept, and discussions about how bias can and does affect decision-making. If this training is to continue, there is a need for a more customized type of implicit bias training looking at how negative stereotypes about particular groups would be identified and analyzed. Such sessions would examine how notions of neglect, anger, aggression, caring, and other emotional dispositions are filtered through a lens of bias.



However, professional development must move well beyond implicit bias training. Creating ongoing learning communities and practical anti-racial bias, and anti-racist professional development for direct service staff and executive leadership to help them define and understand race, racial oppression, structural racism, and its intergenerational impact will help identify ways in which not only personal bias, but structural bias must be combatted to reduce longstanding disproportionality in child welfare and elevate child and family wellbeing. It is imperative that professional development move beyond formalized one-time didactics to include coaching and community-engaged opportunities that center on lived experience experts. Ongoing experiential training and community-building opportunities for learning and growth should also be considered. Examples may include creating book clubs and restorative justice circles for continual discussion and reflection on implementing and integrating what is being learned into everyday practice, procedures, and policies.

### **11. Integrate a structural competency framework for BSW and MSW trainees, social workers, and leadership**

The goal of integrating structural competency education as a framework for child welfare practice is to incorporate changes that will better assist families in addressing their needs given structural constraints and beginning a pivot from oversight to advocacy while ultimately striving toward larger structural changes (Downey & Manchikanti Gómez, 2018). Integrating structural competency training for BSW and MSW trainees, social workers, and leadership, calls for an expanded understanding of why families come to the attention of the child welfare system, how structural intersectionality disproportionately impacts families of color, and how to intervene with inequitable social determinants of health and system involvement. Structural competency framing would ask what local, state, or national policies might restrict the family's access to meeting their child's needs and how to address or resolve those policy barriers.







Recently, there has been a focus on implicit bias training, which is important in helping people recognize how their own beliefs and actions can cause harm to individuals. While such efforts around individual bias are important and necessary, they fall short in developing an understanding of the deep seated structural factors that create persistent disadvantages for particular families. Structural bias refers to the idea that institutional patterns and practices confer advantages to some and disadvantages to others based on identity. Education may help BSW and MSW pre-service practitioners to go beyond blaming parents, caregivers, and families for “poor choices”, “negative values”, and “less-than-ideal decision-making”. Such training can help professionals develop a more holistic understanding of historical factors that create complex challenges for many parents and families, especially those that have faced historical and intergenerational trauma due to marginalization and oppression. Furthermore, such work around structural racism would identify how laws, policies, and practices continue to disproportionately segregate communities of color from access to opportunities and upward mobility by making it more difficult for them to access quality education, affordable wages, secure housing, healthcare, and equal treatment in the criminal justice and child welfare systems.

Policies can be developed that acknowledge and address how structural and social environmental factors (including social determinants) have a sizable influence on factors beyond an individual’s control, influencing decision making and life experiences, both positive and negative. Outside of professional development focused on structural factors involved in racial disproportionalities, multi-level sub-committees (including stakeholders) could be formed wherein participants can offer strategies and policies that could be considered for effective practice and to offer healing, justice, and restoration to children and families.



06

# Conclusion





## CONCLUSION

The persistent racial disproportionality and disparities still seen and experienced in child welfare systems in Los Angeles County continues to affect thousands of children's well-being, with consequences felt across families and communities. Despite numerous reports, panels, new initiatives, leadership changes, and the creation of new offices, there remain deep challenges and disconcerting inaction to addressing these issues. In order to make change, all stakeholders must acknowledge and work vociferously toward dismantling structural racism in the County's child welfare and related systems. The location of an anti-racism approach as a north star must be an essential feature of prevention work if racial disparities are to be effectively addressed.

In our analysis of previous reports addressing inequities, we found that only a small number of studies explicitly name racism or structural racism, as explanations of current-day realities in child welfare. Such avoidance of race is a significant part of the challenge of changing systems that harm communities of color. The creation of the ARDI office provides a unique opportunity to engage in much-needed systems change work that has racism at its focus. We recommend ongoing support to both ARDI and efforts within and across departments to engage in systems transformation across the County. This work will not be easy and will create discomfort for many, but the time is now to be bold; families need it, and children deserve it. The challenges in DCFS are not solely child welfare issues. Until a more multi-systems, prevention-centered approach is taken which names race, examines the structural inequities in education, housing, medical support, mental health, access to addiction treatment, legal assistance, food, and transportation on the quality of life for minoritized families, little change will be seen.

In this report, we have lifted up the need to recognize the pervasiveness of carceral entanglements which plague many Black families, creating multilayered systems of oppression, and function by exploiting the most vulnerable citizens. Where these oppressive systems overlap, the victims are often pitted against one another, creating a relentless and seemingly never-ending set of obstacles, roadblocks, and impediments that limit people's abilities to be self-sustaining. Moreover, here we argue that until a prevention effort is taken that asks all County agencies to work collaboratively, using similar metrics, engaging in robust data sharing, and committing to ongoing communication to create more culturally responsive policies and practices, little change will be seen. Such an effort, however, cannot be left to the County alone. A significant change requires investments from elected officials at the city, county, state, and federal levels. Investments from philanthropy and higher education can also augment such efforts. Creating evaluation systems, where reliable data and various analytics provide insight into where leverage points are greatest, can move the needle forward. In addition, we argue that the type of change needed will require transformational and bold leadership. Transformational leadership that does not rest with one person but is present with leadership across systems where individuals are working in sync to remove barriers, improve lines of communication, and identify evidence-based practices that help the most under-resourced families.

Finally, it is important to consider child welfare contact and out-of-home placement as explicit public health challenges to health and well-being. Evidence of poor mental health outcomes across various domains has been documented in the research (i.e., McKenna et al., 2021). These include higher rates of suicide attempts while under child welfare supervision compared to general population peers. These adverse mental health outcomes persist into adulthood. One study found that adults with a history of out-of-home placement had



## CONCLUSION

higher rates of mental health problems, including depression and psychological morbidity (Leslie, et al., 2006). Another study found that the amount of time spent in care and age at first placement matters, such that individuals placed as teenagers faced the highest risk for mental health problems (Javakhishvili, et al., 2022). In another survey, compared to children who had not spent time in foster care, youth in foster care were seven times more likely to exhibit depression, six times more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, and five times more likely to experience anxiety (Cote, et al., 2018). Thus, careful consideration of practices and policies that increase the risk for contact (e.g., mandated reporting, the definition of neglect) and removal (e.g., structural decision-making) needs review, given the high propensity for long-term adverse health effects.





07

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08

# Appendices





## Appendix 1. Complete list of reports analyzed

- Alliance for Children's Rights, Children's Law Center of California, Los Angeles Dependency Lawyers Inc., & UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families. (2021). [\*The Path to Racial Equity in Child Welfare: Valuing Family and Community\*](#). (Policy Summit Report).
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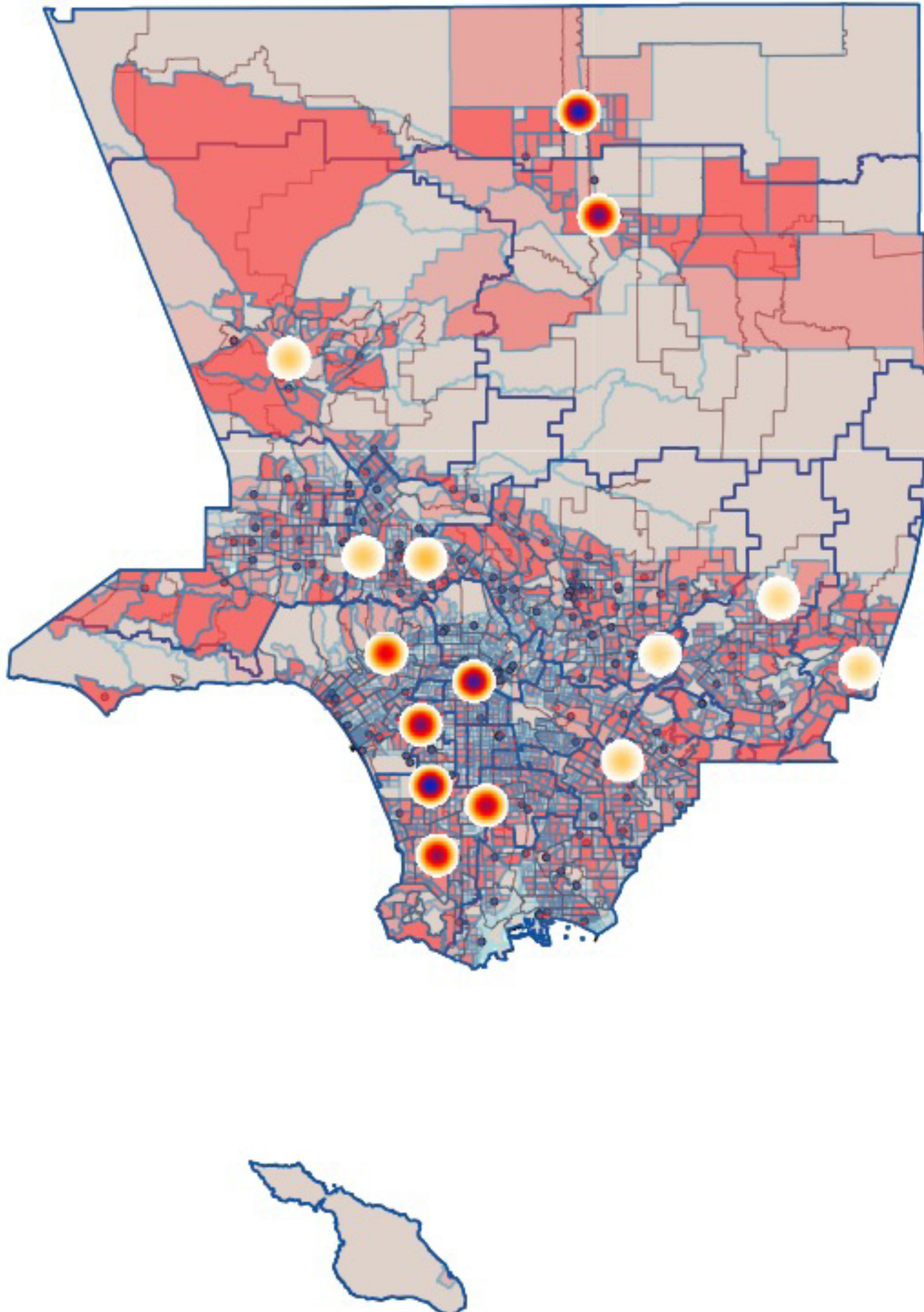
## Appendix 2. Guiding questions for the content analysis of reports

1. What recommendations have been made to address race, equity, and inclusion?
2. Were these recommendations to address racism on an individual or structural level?
3. To whom were these recommendations directed (social workers, administrators, foster parents, etc.)?
4. What individuals and/or organizations were a part of crafting the report?
5. Was there a timeline for implementing these recommendations?
6. What accountability measurements have been put in place? Are there clear instructions for following, e.g., workshops, meetings, and round tables?
7. Using the “control find” command, how many times do race, racism, equity, and inclusion appear in the report?



### Appendix 3. Map of geographic information systems (GIS) spatial analysis of the Service Planning Areas (SPAs) in Los Angeles County

The map indicates the Children and Family Service Planning Areas in LA County, where the highest number of Black foster children are living (blue dots).





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