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KINSHIP CARE AND THE PRICE OF STATE SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

DOROTHY E. ROBERTS*

INTRODUCTION

One of the key issues raised by caregiving is determining who should be responsible for its financial support. Law and public policy in the United States assume that caregiving is primarily a private matter. Parents, for example, are supposed to bear the costs of caring for their children. Martha Fineman, Eva Feder Kittay, and other feminist scholars have shown that relying on private arrangements for inevitable dependencies has negative consequences for women. The nuclear family norm gives women the responsibility of caregiving while denying them adequate government support and vilifying those who do not depend on husbands. Mothers who are unable to rely on a male breadwinner or their own income to raise their children must pay a high price for state support. The U.S. welfare state provides stingy benefits to poor mothers, who are stigmatized and encumbered by behavioral regulations. Mothers must waive privacy rights as a


3. See, e.g., Nancy Fraser & Linda Gordon, A Genealogy of “Dependency”: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State, in NANCY FRASER, JUSTICE INTERRUPTUS: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE “POSTSOCIALIST” CONDITION 121 (1997) (explaining how relationships of dependency were removed from the market and attached to disfavored and excluded groups).
condition of receiving public aid.\(^5\) The law permits bureaucratic surveillance of clients to determine their eligibility based on both means- and morals-testing, to check their conformance to behavioral mandates, and to guarantee that they are spending benefits properly. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 ("PRWORA")\(^6\) converted welfare from a federal entitlement to a means for states to influence poor mothers’ work, marital, and childbearing decisions.\(^7\)

Less explored by feminist legal scholars is the role of the public child welfare system in caregiving by poor mothers. The child welfare system intervenes when parents are alleged to have abused or neglected their children.\(^8\) State child protective agencies may provide services to these families while keeping them intact or after removing children from the home to be placed in foster care. Although fewer families are involved with child protective services than with the welfare system, the number of children in state custody is alarming. In 1999, there were 568,000 children in foster care.\(^9\) The vast majority of these children are poor.\(^10\) Not only is child maltreatment highly correlated with poverty,\(^11\) but child neglect is also defined and interpreted in a way that subjects greater numbers of poor families to state surveillance and intervention.\(^12\) Black children are grossly overrepresented in child welfare caseloads: nearly half of all children in foster care nationwide are black, although black children are only

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seventeen percent of the nation’s youth. The child welfare system, then, is a significant means of public support of poor children, especially poor black children.

The consequences for families involved in the child welfare system are even more devastating than the burdens attached to receiving welfare. Involvement in the child welfare system entails intensive supervision by child protection agencies, which often includes losing legal custody of children to the state. This state intrusion is typically viewed as necessary to protect maltreated children from parental harm. I argue in this Article that transferring parental authority to the state is the price poor people must often pay for state support of their children. I focus on kinship foster care as an example of relinquishing legal custody of children to gain access to necessary public services. Kinship foster care replaces a traditional, private African American family arrangement with a similar structure that is regulated by state child welfare agencies. Part I describes this transformation of kinship care from a predominantly private family network to a widely used source of public foster care. Part II discusses the structure of state payments for kinship caregiving and its correlation to the level of state supervision of caregivers.

In Part III, I explore how kinship foster care often involves relinquishing custody of children in exchange for services and benefits that families need. I discuss the increasing number of “voluntary” placements of children in foster care, the impact of state supervision on families involved in kinship foster care, and the inferior services received by these families. In Part IV, I show that incorporating kinship care into the child welfare system often harms families by disrupting, rather than preserving, ties among kin. Finally, Part V contends that the extreme government supervision of these families through the child welfare system stems from the failure of more general state support for caregiving. The onerous price exacted from poor black families for public assistance demonstrates the need for fundamental change in our philosophy of care.

I. THE TRANSFORMATION OF KINSHIP CARE

Mothers have often relied on relatives and neighbors to help with child raising. Black women in particular share a rich tradition of

13. ADMIN. FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES, supra note 9, at 2.
women-centered, communal childcare. These cooperative networks have included members of the extended family (grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins), as well as nonblood kin and neighbors. Their relationship with children ranges from daily assistance to long-term care or informal adoption. Carol Stack’s classic research in the “Flats,” for example, revealed that many children there moved back and forth between households of close female relatives. Three or more women related to a child formed a cooperative domestic network, taking turns assuming parental responsibility toward the child.

Kinship care historically had a double-edged relationship to the child welfare system. Childrearing by relatives was often a response to poverty and other hardships that made it difficult for parents to raise children by themselves. Indeed, for a century black families had no recourse to the formal child welfare system. Blacks were virtually excluded from openly segregated child welfare services until the end of World War II. The late-nineteenth-century orphanages established to rescue destitute immigrant children refused to accept blacks. The few “colored orphan asylums” were woefully inferior and overcrowded. Black people relied primarily on extended family networks and community resources such as churches, women’s clubs, and benevolent societies to take care of children whose parents were unable to meet their needs.

Kinship care continued in more recent decades as an informal safety net for struggling black families. By temporarily moving children to the care of kin, parents could avoid either voluntarily relinquishing them to the state or running the risk of coercive state intervention. Kinship care, then, served as a family-preserving

alternative to foster care. Skyrocketing female incarceration rates, cutbacks in social services, the AIDS epidemic, and maternal substance abuse led to a resurgence in caregiving by relatives, especially grandmothers, in the late 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of children living with grandparents increased by forty-four percent. In 1994, nearly four million children lived in grandparent-headed households. More than one-third of these children lived in homes with no parent present. Almost half of these children being raised by grandparents were black.

Kinship care, on the other hand, also invited state intrusion. The black community’s cultural tradition of sharing parenting responsibilities among kin has been mistaken as parental neglect. Because mothers who depend on kinship care do not fit the middle-class norm of a primary caregiver supported by her husband and paid childcare, they seem to have abrogated their duty toward their children. Ironically, Illinois, a state that now relies heavily on kinship foster care, considered children who lived with relatives other than their parents to be neglected less than a decade ago.

While state child welfare agencies used to consider private kinship care neglectful, they now increasingly turn to relatives to place neglected and abused children. As a matter of definition, private kinship care is arranged by families without child welfare agency involvement; kinship foster care, meanwhile, is provided to children who are in the legal custody of the state. Between 1986 and 1990, the proportion of foster children living with relatives grew from


22. See McLeod, supra note 21, at P-3.


24. See id.


27. See Appell, supra note 12, at 585-86.


eighteen percent to thirty-one percent in twenty-five states.\textsuperscript{30} In Illinois, for example, relative placements increased 232 percent in a five-year period.\textsuperscript{31} By 1997, there were at least as many relative caregivers as traditional foster parents in California, Illinois, and New York.\textsuperscript{32} An exploding foster care population combined with a shortage of licensed nonrelative foster homes made relatives an attractive placement option.\textsuperscript{33} The passage of federal law encouraging family preservation and court decisions guaranteeing relatives the opportunity to serve as foster care providers also facilitated this development.\textsuperscript{34} In the landmark decision \textit{Miller v. Youakim}, for example, the United States Supreme Court held that otherwise eligible relatives could not be denied foster parent certification and the same financial support as nonkin providers.\textsuperscript{35}

Just as private kinship care has been especially prevalent among black families, most children placed in kinship foster care are black.\textsuperscript{36} This is both because of the overrepresentation of black children in the foster care population and because agencies are more likely to turn to relatives in the case of black children than other children. A study of foster care in suburban Baltimore County, Maryland, for example, found that forty-nine percent of relative caregivers were African American while only twenty-five percent of nonrelative foster parents were.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, a California study reported that forty-three percent of kin and twenty-two percent of nonkin foster parents were African American, while thirty-four percent of kin and sixty-three percent of nonkin foster parents were white.\textsuperscript{38} Kinship care is the main type of out-of-home placement for black children in New York City,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Kurtz} Madeleine L. Kurtz. \textit{The Purchase of Families into Foster Care: Two Case Studies and the Lessons They Teach}, 26 \textit{Conn. L. Rev.} 1453, 1454 (1994); Geen. \textit{ supra note 21. at 21-22; Gleeson. \textit{ supra note 31. at 424-25.}
\bibitem{Scannapieco2} See Maria Scannapieco et al. \textit{Kinship Care and Foster Care: A Comparison of Characteristics and Outcomes}, 78 \textit{Families Soc'y} 480, 485 (1997).
\bibitem{Berrick} See Berrick. \textit{ supra note 33. at 78 tbl.2.}
\end{thebibliography}
In fact, almost all—ninety percent—of relative caregivers in Chicago are black.39

Compared to nonkin foster care, kinship foster care has many advantages for children. It usually preserves family, community, and cultural ties. For most people, staying in the extended family is in and of itself a benefit for children. Children are more likely to maintain contact with their parents and to remain with siblings if they are living with relatives than if they are placed in nonrelative foster care.40 It is likely that children are already familiar with the kin caregiver, so the placement avoids that trauma of moving in with strangers.41 Kinship foster care usually allows children to stay in their communities and to continue the cultural traditions their parents observe. Kinship foster care is more stable: children living with relatives are less likely to be moved to multiple placements while in substitute care.42 There is also evidence that children are better cared for by relatives than by strangers: more children in kinship foster care reported that they felt loved and happy, and fewer are abused while in state custody.43

II. THE FINANCIAL STRUCTURE OF KINSHIP FOSTER CARE

Kinship foster care also provides financial support for relatives' caregiving. Public assistance is especially significant because kinship caregivers tend to have limited means and have substantially lower incomes than traditional foster parents.44 A 1996 study of foster care in a southern county found that almost sixty percent of relative caregivers earned less than $10,000 annually while only ten percent of

40. See Karp, supra note 39, at 10.
41. See Mark Testa, Kinship Foster Care in Illinois, in 2 CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH REVIEW 101, 124 (Richard P. Barth et al. eds., 1997); Jill D. Berrick et al., A Comparison of Kinship Foster Homes and Foster Family Homes: Implications for Kinship Foster Care As Family Preservation, 16 CHILD. & YOUTH SERVICES REV. 33, 36 (1994); Marla Gottlieb Zwas, Note. Kinship Foster Care: A Relatively Permanent Solution, 20 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 343, 354 (1993).
43. See Berrick et al., supra note 41, at 59; Mark E. Courtney & Barbara Needell, Outcomes of Kinship Care: Lessons from California, in 2 CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH REVIEW, supra note 41, at 130, 142-43; Alfreda P. Iglehart, Kinship Foster Care: Placement, Service, and Outcome Issues, 16 CHILD. & YOUTH SERVICES REV. 107, 112 (1994).
44. See Susan J. Zuravin et al., Child Maltreatment in Family Foster Care: Foster Home Correlates, in 2 CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH REVIEW, supra note 41, at 189, 196; Berrick. supra note 33, at 80.
45. See Berrick, supra note 33, at 77, 78 & tbl.2.
nonrelative foster parents earned so little. The median annual income of kin caregivers is only $13,000 in Toledo.

Although federal child welfare policy promotes kinship foster care, it gives states wide latitude in creating the system of financial support for kin caregivers. The level of state support for kinship caregivers is directly correlated with the level of state intrusion into their lives: the higher the payment, the greater the intensity of state supervision. The two principal sources of public financial assistance for relatives are Temporary Assistance to Needy Families ("TANF") and foster care benefits. All states offer TANF benefits to relatives caring for children as they do other needy families. Foster care stipends, however, are much larger than TANF benefits, and they are multiplied by each child in the home instead of the marginal increase per child under TANF. A relative caring for several children might receive two to four times as much in foster care payments as she would in welfare benefits. In the early 1990s, Illinois paid foster parents an average of $350 per child, while Aid for Families with Dependent Children ("AFDC"), TANF’s predecessor, benefits were $102 for one child and less for each additional child. A California foster parent of siblings ages eight and sixteen received a foster care stipend of $859 per month in 1996, compared to only $479 in AFDC benefits.

This difference in levels of support reflects the government’s perverse willingness to give more financial aid to children in state custody than to children in the custody of their parents. Relatives can take advantage of the higher benefit level of foster care only by becoming involved in the child protection system. As Jill Duerr Berrick, director of the Berkeley Center for Social Services Research,
observes, “This disparity spawns concerns that the foster care payment system may act as an incentive for a troubled family to seek a formal agency-supervised placement with kin rather than sharing child-rearing responsibilities informally with the same relatives.”55 In addition to a stipend, kin foster parents are entitled to Medicaid, clothing allowances, and other assistance to meet the children’s needs. Moreover, child welfare agencies make available services that address the parents’ problems, such as drug treatment, mental health counseling, and housing assistance, only to families under their supervision.

The amount of kinship foster care payments, in turn, depends on whether or not the kin caregiver is licensed by the state child welfare agency. Most states require relatives to meet the same licensing requirements as nonrelative foster parents to receive foster care payments.56 The licensing process involves another layer of intrusion into relatives’ lives. The agency inspects relatives’ homes, including sleeping arrangements, the number of bedrooms, and square footage, and investigates relatives’ backgrounds to check for compliance with strict licensing requirements.57 If relatives are not licensed, they are paid less than licensed foster parents. In some states, unlicensed kin caregivers receive only the TANF child-only benefit; in others, they receive a lower foster care payment.58 The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, for example, pays licensed foster parents about $100 more per month than unlicensed relatives.

Finally, several states have implemented an intermediate arrangement called subsidized guardianship. Guardianship gives legal custody to relative caretakers, thus permitting children to stay with relatives on a long-term basis while avoiding the need to terminate parental rights to “free” children for adoption.59 It addresses the situation of children in kinship foster care who have little chance of either being adopted by the relative or being reunited with their parents. Kin caregivers often reject adoption as both unnecessary for and disruptive of family ties. Many have already made a lifetime commitment to the children in their care, while terminating parental rights to permit adoption would create an

55. Id. at 75-76.
56. See Geen, supra note 21 at 23.
57. See Note, supra note 52 at 1052.
58. See Geen, supra note 21 at 23; Berrick, supra note 33, at 76 & tbl.1.
59. See Gleeson et al., supra note 32, at 814; Berrick, supra note 33, at 82-83.
adversarial relationship with relatives.\textsuperscript{60} Guardians are given a level
of state support that reflects the extent of their authority over the
children in their care: they typically receive stipends that are less than
foster care stipends, but more than TANF benefits.\textsuperscript{61}

Thus, families involved in kinship care must exchange a degree
of autonomy and independence in childrearing that is in proportion to
the amount of financial support they receive from the government.
The price of the highest amount of aid—foster care benefits—is
relinquishing custodv of children to the state and submitting to foster
care regulations and supervision by the child welfare system.

Welfare reform makes foster care even more attractive for
relative caretakers, despite the burdens it entails. The federal welfare
law's policies designed to modify the behavior of poor parents exact a
harsh penalty on kin who are forced to rely on TANF benefits to
support the children in their care.\textsuperscript{62} Under the PRWORA, relatives
can be required to participate in work, community service, and
training programs even if it is unlikely they will ever return to the job
market because they are too old or too sick.\textsuperscript{63} Those who are not
working at the end of the two-year time limit could lose TANF cash
assistance and related benefits. The federal law also imposes a five­
year lifetime cap on receiving TANF benefits.\textsuperscript{64} Relatives thus run
the risk of depleting their lifetime TANF allotment to receive aid for
children in their care.\textsuperscript{65} The federal law permits states to offer
exemptions from work requirements and time limits, but leaves their
determination to state discretion.\textsuperscript{66} “For example,” writes Faith
Mullen,

absent a hardship waiver, a 64-year-old grandmother who assumed
care of her three-year-old grandson because of his mother's death
will receive aid at most until the child reaches age eight. At that
time, the grandmother will be in the impossible position of finding
work, living on an inadequate income, or giving up custody of the
child.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{60} See Berrick, supra note 33, at 82.
\textsuperscript{61} See Note, supra note 52, at 1063.
\textsuperscript{62} See id. at 1060.
\textsuperscript{63} Faith Mullen, \textit{Welcome to Procrustes' House: Welfare Reform and Grandparents
Raising Grandchildren}. 30 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 511, 516 (1996); Note, supra note 52, at 1089.
\textsuperscript{65} See Note, supra note 52, at 1059.
\textsuperscript{66} See id. at 1060.
\textsuperscript{67} Mullen, supra note 63, at 517.
Many people may find that the TANF requirements make it too burdensome to care for their relatives' children.

III. RELINQUISHING CUSTODY OF CHILDREN

Making kinship care part of the child welfare system has a dramatic impact on the relationships of family members and on their relationship to the state. Foster care assistance is only available to state wards. The family must therefore transfer legal custody of the children to the state child welfare agency. In addition, relatives must be approved by the child welfare agency to care for children in its custody. The kin network is transformed from a "natural family" to a "foster family." In Smith v. Organization of Foster Families for Equality and Reform, the United States Supreme Court upheld limitations on the rights of foster parents on the grounds that a foster family has "its source in state law and contractual arrangements." In the case of kinship care, the extended family exchanges its autonomy over child raising for financial support and services needed to raise its children.

A. "Voluntary" Placements

Relatives may become foster parents when the family seeks assistance from child welfare agencies or when agencies seek relatives to provide foster care for children removed from their parents. Increasingly, parents "voluntarily" place their children in foster care to gain access to financial assistance and services needed for caregiving. The number of children in private kinship care has decreased since 1994, while the number in kinship foster care has increased, suggesting that many extended families are turning to the child welfare system for support. Voluntary placement agreements may entail a temporary stay away from home or the transfer of legal custody to the state. In New York City, the share of voluntary placements among all children in foster care has increased in recent years. The number of parents giving up their children rose forty-one

69. Id. at 845.
70. See Geen, supra note 21, at 21.
percent in 1997.71 One in ten children admitted to the city’s foster care system in 1999 was voluntarily placed.72

When a parent turns a child over to foster care it is rarely truly voluntary. In some cases, desperate parents reluctantly approach the child welfare agency only when they can find no other source of government support. The parents may be too ill or stressed out to care for their children, or their children may need services they cannot afford. The AIDS epidemic has caused an explosion of poor minority mothers who need state assistance for both reasons. A few states have passed statutes that allow disabled parents to share custody of their children with a “standby guardian” who helps with child raising without usurping all parental authority. Unfortunately, most families coping with AIDS or other serious illnesses do not have this option. The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals reversed a judge’s decision to sever the bonds between a mother, Ada R., who was dying from AIDS, and her HIV-positive son, Micah.73 Leaving Micah in foster care, the court lamented the mother’s “heartbreaking struggle to deal with her disease, while, at the same time, not turning her back on her child.”74 “By doing what she felt was best and voluntarily placing Micah with the Department,” the court said, “Ada R. has ended up not only fighting to remain alive, but also fighting to remain a parent.”75

The shortage of mental health care for children is especially acute. Limits in private health care plans and lack of access to public services make it tough for even middle-class parents to get treatment for their children.76 Although Medicaid-eligible children are entitled to mental health care, this provision is not consistently enforced. In some states, residential treatment centers refuse to accept children on Medicaid unless they are wards of the state. Many state and local officials mistakenly believe that federal reimbursement for out-of-home care is available only if the state has legal custody of children.

73. See In re Micah, 504 S.E.2d 635 (1998).
74. Id. at 642.
75. Id.
For many children, then, the only way to qualify for publicly funded mental health services is to enter the child welfare system.

A report by the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law in Washington, D.C., describes the dilemma faced by the parents of a girl with a serious emotional disturbance and developmental disabilities. The only treatment center in their area refused to accept Medicaid. The parents could not afford to pay its private fee of $99.25 per day. The child welfare agency told the mother that she should file a “willful neglect and abandonment” petition in juvenile court so the state could place her daughter in a mental health facility. According to the Bazelon Center, in half of the states almost one-quarter of families seeking mental health care for a child must choose between treatment and retaining legal custody of the child. Only eleven states prohibit the child welfare agency from requiring parents to relinquish custody to access mental health services.

Other parents agree to short-term placement or surrender custody as a way of avoiding abuse or neglect proceedings. Some parents believe it is better to voluntarily place their child in foster care for a brief period than to risk child protective authorities taking the child for a long time. Giving up custody to the state has become the price of public support for poor and low-income children. The state then provides to foster parents the very services it denied to the parents. Respite care, for example, is often subsidized by the state for foster parents—but not parents—of children with serious mental health problems.

Parents who turn to child protective services for help quickly find themselves in an adversarial relationship. Once child welfare agencies have custody of children, they take control of childrearing and place conditions on parents’ involvement. Parents have no say over where their children are placed or in important decisions about their children’s health, education, and religious and cultural upbringing or even how often they can see them. The child welfare agency may require parents to complete training courses and therapy sessions as a condition of reunification. Most devastating, it may refuse to return children when parents are ready to take them back.

77. See id. at 8.
78. See id. at 1.
79. See id. at 3.
80. See id. at 13-14.
81. See Katherine C. Pearson, Cooperate or We’ll Take Your Child: The Parents’ Fictional
B. The Impact of State Supervision

As noted above, transferring custody to the state means losing control over important child-rearing decisions. Kinship foster care also requires waiver of protections against state intrusion in family life. Thus, although the children are cared for by kin, it is the state that has authority over them. The parents and kin caregivers must submit to surveillance by caseworkers and requirements that the agency prescribes. Kin foster parents must comply with agency rules specifying the type of home and care they provide, and they must allow periodic visits by caseworkers to check compliance. They must give the agency access to personal information and may have to undergo psychological evaluations. The child may be represented by a guardian ad litem, adding another outsider who has a voice in family affairs. The family also runs the risk that the agency will move the children to another foster home if the relatives fail to comply with agency demands.

The transformation of kinship care from a private to a state-run arrangement suppresses the historical strengths of this family form. Social scientists have remarked at the success of black kin networks in meeting the challenges of raising children under conditions of poverty and racial discrimination. Some have called for policymakers to “affirm a black family kinship system that was historically strong, intact, resilient and adaptive.” Yet research shows that many caseworkers devalue the important role that kin traditionally have had in helping to raise children. A study of caseworkers serving children in kinship care in Illinois, for example, revealed that caseworkers failed to involve kin caregivers or the rest of the extended family in making long-term plans for the children. According to the study’s authors, “[p]ermanency plans appear to be made primarily by child welfare caseworkers, their supervisors, and

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82. Hanson & Opsahl, supra note 49, at 498.
83. See supra notes 15-17.
84. Scannapieco & Jackson, supra note 20, at 194 (quoting SADYE M.L. LOGAN ET AL., SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH BLACK FAMILIES 71 (1990)); see also Ramona Denby & Nolan Rindfleisch, African Americans’ Foster Parenting Experiences: Research Findings and Implications for Policy and Practice, 18 CHILD. & YOUTH SERVICES REV. 523, 545 (1996) (discussing the importance of building on African American foster parents’ strengths, including family orientation, religious obligation, community responsibility, and the interconnection of family, religion, and community).
85. See Gleeson et al., supra note 32, at 819; Denby & Rindfleisch, supra note 84, at 545.
86. See Gleeson et al., supra note 32, at 818-19.
other service providers rather than by the persons who will have to live with the consequences of these decisions. 87 They attributed the lack of involvement by kin both to the bureaucratic nature of child welfare practice and to caseworkers’ lack of understanding of kin participation in childrearing as a cultural strength of African American families. 88 To a large extent, the suppression of kin involvement in decision making is an inherent feature of foster care because it requires relinquishing legal custody of children.

C. Inferior Services

The child welfare system also devalues relative caregivers in its distribution of services. Agencies tend to devote fewer resources to reunification of children in kinship foster care with their parents. 89 Caseworkers have less contact with relatives and the children in their care and are less likely to offer them services. 90 In the Baltimore study, for example, twice as many foster care families received two or more services as families involved in kinship care. 91 A lawsuit filed in 1986 by the Legal Aid Society on behalf of children in kinship foster care in New York City charged that the child welfare agency delayed paying relatives their stipends and issuing children their Medicaid cards and failed to provide families with necessities such as beds, clothes, and school supplies. 92

Of particular concern is the inferior health care received by children in kinship foster care. According to a 1995 federal report, children placed with relatives were less likely to receive health-related services than children in traditional foster care; they were three times as likely to get no routine health care at all. 93 Only fifteen percent of premature, low birth weight infants in kinship care followed in a study received appropriate health care. 94 Most of the

87. Id. at 818.
88. See id. at 818-19.
89. See Kurtz, supra note 34, at 1472 (citing TASK FORCE ON PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR FOSTER CHILDREN, KINSHIP FOSTER CARE: THE DOUBLE EDGED DILEMMA (1990)).
90. See Gebel, supra note 46; Berrick et al., supra note 41 at 58; Gleeson et al., supra note 32 at 803.
91. See Scannapieco et al., supra note 37, at 487.
92. See Zwas. supra note 41 at 355-56.
children did not receive adequate well-baby visits or immunizations, and many used emergency rooms for primary care.

It seems that some agencies view placing children with relatives as a way of cutting costs. Perhaps they believe that children need fewer services if they are being cared for by a grandmother or an aunt. But many kinship caregivers come from poor or low-income families like the grandchildren, nieces, and nephews placed in their homes. They are more likely to be single females and to have less income, more health problems, and more children to take care of than nonrelative foster parents.95 A study of foster parents in Ohio found that, although African American foster parents reported more satisfaction with fostering than whites, they experienced more economic barriers to providing foster care.96 Kinship caregivers are therefore in greater need of state assistance. Because black children are the most likely to be placed with relatives, these policies systematically provide inferior financial support and services for black children in state custody.97

IV. DISRUPTING FAMILY TIES

Kinship foster care not only gives insufficient support to families, but it often affirmatively harms them. One of the most perplexing discoveries from recent empirical research is that children placed with relatives remain in state custody longer.98 According to University of Chicago social work professor James P. Gleeson, “[s]tudies in several states have demonstrated lower return home and lower adoption rates for children in formal kinship care than for those in nonrelative care.”99 Although researchers have no definitive explanation, the increased time spent in foster care may result from the inadequacy of reunification and other services provided to families involved in kinship care. The incentives for families themselves to prefer children to remain longer with kin foster caregivers probably also plays a role in delaying reunification. Parents whose children are living with relatives rather than strangers may be less anxious to regain custody because the entire family is comfortable with the living

95. See Gleeson, supra note 31, at 442; Gleeson et al., supra note 32, at 803; Berrick et al., supra note 41, at 36, 57.
96. See Denby & Rindfleisch, supra note 84, at 544, 547.
97. See Gleeson, supra note 31, at 442.
98. See, e.g., Berrick et al., supra note 41, at 38; Scannapieco et al., supra note 37, at 486; Courtney & Needell, supra note 43, at 137; Testa, supra note 41, at 112.
arrangement and because the higher level of financial support foster care provides is needed. Total family income may drop precipitously if children leave grandmother’s care to return home. In California, children in kinship homes receiving foster care benefits were half as likely to be reunited with their parents after four years as were children in kinship homes receiving lower welfare benefits. This financial disparity appears to have the greatest impact on black families: “African American children in kinship homes supported by the foster care subsidy remained in care approximately twice as long as all other children.”

All of these reasons suggest that kinship foster care imposes powerful incentives on poor black families and caseworkers to keep children in state custody. Even with inadequate services and loss of family autonomy, kinship foster care offers the only avenue for needed public support for many children.

Kinship care, which historically kept black families together, sometimes disrupts family relationships when incorporated in the public child welfare system. Madeleine Kurtz, a clinical professor at New York University School of Law, argues that because traditional foster care rules are based on the nuclear family model they “frustrate the extent to which children might be maintained by extended family.” Kurtz examines two cases from the New York child welfare system to show that kinship foster care encourages the unnecessary severance of family ties. In one case, Marcus, the father of a girl living in kinship foster care with her great-grandmother, did not realize his daughter was technically in foster care. Marcus visited and maintained a relationship with his daughter for several years without arranging the contacts through the agency. The agency sent letters to Marcus in care of his mother, but failed to make meaningful efforts to strengthen his relationship with his daughter.

Marcus was taken by surprise when the agency petitioned to terminate his parental rights on grounds of abandonment. He thought that because his daughter was living with family, he had satisfied his parental obligation to his daughter by keeping in touch with her. The court, however, treated the case as an ordinary nonkin

100. See supra notes 41, 51 and accompanying text.
101. See Berrick, supra note 33, at 82.
102. Id.
103. Kurtz, supra note 34, at 1457. For a similar argument that the foster care system was not designed to meet the needs of kinship caregivers, see Mandelbaum, supra note 52, *passim*.
104. See Kurtz, supra note 34, at 1476.
105. See id. at 1476-78.
foster care arrangement: Marcus was held “to the standard of behavior expected and required of a parent with a child in a traditional foster care setting, where a parent’s failure to actively pursue custody is a critical failure indicative of inability or disinterest.”

The court suspended judgment, imposing a number of conditions on the family as well as continued court supervision. If this family had been able to maintain a private kinship care arrangement, Marcus’s legal status as father would not have been jeopardized. Instead, by involving the state in their family life, “[t]he legal and permanent dissolution of this family was and continues to be a very real possibility.”

Marcus’s experience of exclusion is typical of black fathers with children in kinship foster care. A secondary analysis of the study of Illinois caseworkers discussed above focused on casework with African American fathers. Few of the fathers participated in family assessments, case planning, or service delivery. Most of the fathers had not participated in a single case-planning activity and only five percent of the fathers were receiving any services to assist them in playing a greater role in their children’s lives. Caseworkers simply were not interested in what fathers could offer. In most cases, caseworkers had incomplete information that would be essential in assessing fathers’ caregiving ability, and they reported no communication with fathers or with their supervisors about the fathers during the previous six months. “The extensive absence of and silence about fathers in these cases,” the study’s author concludes, “suggest systemic deterrents to paternal involvement.”

It appears that the exclusion of fathers from kinship foster care results from “mutual avoidance between the caseworkers and fathers.” On the one hand, black fathers tend to view child welfare agencies as demeaning and coercive institutions that have targeted them for child support enforcement without appreciating the obstacles they face in providing financially for their children. Dealing

106. id. at 1482.
107. id. at 1484.
109. See id.
110. See id. at 434.
111. See id.
112. See id. at 433.
113. id. at 436.
114. id. at 437.
with a caseworker only intensifies the emotional stress many poor and unemployed black fathers experience about their inability to live up to the middle-class breadwinner ideal. On the other hand, caseworkers view black fathers as a particularly hostile and perplexing clientele whom it is easiest to ignore. While placing kinship care in the child welfare system diminishes the autonomy of black mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, it erases the already limited role of black fathers.

The second case Kurtz discusses involves a woman, Nora, who became the kinship foster caregiver for her infant granddaughter, Evelyn, who was born exposed to crack cocaine. When Evelyn was three years old, the agency obtained an order terminating Nora’s daughter’s parental rights and Evelyn became a ward of the state. Ending the mother’s legal status meant that Nora was only a foster parent—an employee of the state hired to take care of Evelyn; she was no longer Evelyn’s legal grandmother. The family lost all of the protections against state disruption that kinship bonds ordinarily afford. So when the agency determined that Nora had a drinking problem and was not an appropriate adoptive parent for Evelyn, it had virtually complete discretion to move Evelyn to a more suitable family. As Kurtz puts it, because Nora had broken the agency’s rules, the agency was permitted to “fire a bad foster parent and find a better home for its foster child.” No longer a grandmother or a foster parent, Nora—and the rest of Evelyn’s family—lacked standing to challenge the agency’s plan for Evelyn. As in the case of Marcus, transforming a private kinship care arrangement into a formal one put the family at a disadvantage in its relationship to the state. If Nora had never become a foster parent, her alleged drinking problem could not so easily have justified the destruction of her bonds with her granddaughter.

Recent changes in federal child welfare policy may further threaten the integrity of families in kinship foster care. The Adoption

117. See Kurtz, supra note 34, at 1499-1500.
118. See id. at 1502.
119. See id. at 1503.
120. See id. at 1507.
and Safe Families Act of 1997 (“ASFA”) encourages states to increase adoptions of children in foster care by mandating swifter timetables for terminating parental rights, providing technical assistance to states to facilitate adoptions, and awarding financial bonuses to states that succeed in placing more children in adoptive homes. As suggested above, the traditional permanency goals of reunification or adoption often do not fit kinship caregiving. It is often in the best interests of children to remain on a long-term basis in stable kin homes while maintaining legal ties to their parents. Recognizing that typical permanency goals may not be applicable, ASFA exempts kinship foster care from its deadlines for petitioning for termination of parental rights. But ASFA’s incentives for adoption may nevertheless encourage agencies to prefer adoptive parents outside the family to relative guardians and foster caregivers who do not wish to adopt. Caseworkers may be pressured to disband kin networks, terminating parental rights and moving children from loving relatives’ homes, to boost the adoption numbers.

Harvard law professor Elizabeth Bartholet advocates precisely such a preference for adoption over kinship foster care in her recent book, Nobody’s Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative. Bartholet characterizes kinship foster care as a devious way of avoiding federal prohibitions against race-matching in placement decision making. “Private foundations and nonprofit child welfare groups have joined forces with public agencies to promote kinship care,” she claims, “in part to help ensure that children in need of homes remain within their racial group.” Bartholet also doubts the qualifications of relative caretakers. She subscribes to the theory that abuse and neglect is transmitted inter-generationally within families and the product of deprived and dangerous communities. Relatives of maltreated children are suspect both because they are related to the abusive parents and because they come from the same community that generated the abuse. “Often the

123. See id. § 673b(i).
124. See id. § 673b(d)(1).
125. See supra notes 51-61 and accompanying text.
128. Id. at 26.
blood kin are plagued by the same problems and victims of the same circumstances as the child’s parents,” Bartholet writes. “The extended kinship group has to be seen as a high-risk group for parenting purposes.” Bartholet advocates adoption by people in more privileged communities as a way to avoid foster care placement with incapable relatives. This kind of thinking threatens to make poor black families involved in kinship foster care even more vulnerable to state disruption.

V. THE FLAWED PHILOSOPHY OF CHILD WELFARE

The state justifies its intrusion into families that receive public support through the child welfare system on the grounds that it is necessary to protect children. Parents referred to child protective services have maltreated their children and must be rehabilitated to ensure it is safe to return their children to them. Foster parents must be carefully regulated to guarantee that they are using subsidies for the benefit of the state wards in their care. Professor Bartholet, for example, begrudges relatives the stipends they receive to care for foster children, especially if, in the case of subsidized guardianship, they are not “subject to the state supervision that goes with foster parenting.” She questions relatives’ motives: “For extended family members at the poverty level, as many relatives of victims of maltreatment will be, these stipends may make it worthwhile to agree to foster whether or not they have any capacity or motivation to parent.” The transformation of kinship care, however, shows that many families must relinquish custody of children to the state and submit to government supervision because of their poverty more than their maltreatment.

The price the child welfare system exacts for its support stems from its underlying philosophy. The child welfare system is built upon the presumption that children’s basic needs for sustenance and development will and can be met solely by parents. The state intervenes to provide special institutionalized services—primarily placing children in foster care—only when parents fail to fulfill their child-rearing obligations. The child protection approach is

129. id. at 3.
130. id. at 91.
131. id. at 28.
132. id. at 92.
133. See BILLINGSLEY & GIOVANNONI, supra note 18, at 4.
inextricably tied to our society’s refusal to see a collective responsibility for children’s welfare. It is a society willing to pay billions of dollars a year on maintaining poor children as state wards outside their homes, but only a fraction of that on child welfare services to intact families.

This approach to child welfare is defective in three related ways. First, it places all responsibility for taking care of children on their parents, without taking into account the economic, political, and social constraints that prevent many parents from doing so. Most single mothers, for example, face numerous barriers to providing for their children, including a segregated job market, inadequate wages, and a dearth of affordable child care. The child welfare system hides the systemic reasons for families’ hardships by laying the blame on individual parents’ failings. “The underlying philosophy of the present child welfare system is that all families should be able to function adequately without the assistance of society,” explain Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne Giovannoni, “and that failure to perform the parental role without such assistance is indicative of individual pathology.”

A second defect is that child protection is activated only when families are already in crisis. The role of government is limited to rescuing children who have been mistreated by deficient parents, rather than ensuring the health and welfare of all families. Duncan Lindsey calls this the “residual approach” to child welfare because state intervention is treated as a last resort to be invoked only after the family has exhausted all resources at its disposal. “[T]he child welfare agency becomes the site of triage, a battlefront hospital where casualties are sorted and only the most seriously wounded receive attention,” Lindsey writes. “But because the damage to children is so great by the time they enter the system, the number who survive and benefit is minimal.”

Under this approach, caseworkers perceive families’ problems as those amenable to social work intervention; they have at their disposal only limited tools to treat the immediate crisis. Caseworkers are discouraged from dealing with the systemic problems many must realize are the causes of child neglect. Ann Hartman, a University of

134. See Fineman, supra note 1, at 102-11; Mink, Welfare’s End, supra note 4, at 119.
135. Billingsley & Giovannoni, supra note 18, at viii.
136. See Lindsey, supra note 10, at 4-5; see also Billingsley & Giovannoni, supra note 18, at 5.
Michigan professor of social work, honestly confesses caseworkers’ reluctance to confront systemic inequities: “[T]he minute we turn around to attempt to address the system that is victimizing people, rather than making the victimization palatable, which is what our profession has done, we will have our heads in a noose.” 137 It is inevitable that agencies’ solutions for family problems will be inadequate, if not damaging to families.

Finally, because the system perceives the resulting harm to children as parental rather than societal failures, state intervention to protect children is punitive in nature. The state’s solutions to children’s deprivation involve intrusive meddling by social workers, behavioral requirements, and temporary or permanent removal of children from their homes. Child protection proceedings are more akin to criminal trials than most civil adjudications because they pit individuals against the state and issue moral condemnation of parents.138

The child welfare system has become less service-oriented in recent decades, focusing more on placing children in foster care than on providing families with needed support. In the last thirty years, the number of children receiving child welfare services has dropped dramatically while the foster care population has skyrocketed. Between 1977 and 1994, there was a sixty percent decline in the number of children receiving services in their homes.139 These seemingly contradictory observations reflect the transformation of the child welfare system from a social service system that tried (albeit inadequately) to help needy families to a child protection system that investigates allegations of abuse and neglect.140 Black families, who dominate foster care caseloads, are the main casualties of this shift away from service provision toward coercive state intervention, which

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138. The U.S. Supreme Court recognized similarities between proceedings to terminate parental rights and criminal trials. See Lassiter v. Dep’t of Soc. Serv., 452 U.S. 18 (1981) (holding that parents have a due process right to counsel in complex proceedings to terminate parental rights); Santosky v. Kramer, 455 U.S. 745 (1982) (holding that termination of parental rights must be justified by clear and convincing evidence).


includes the requirement to relinquish custody of children as a condition of financial assistance.

CONCLUSION

Kinship foster care, promoted as a way of keeping black families together, exacts a high price for state assistance that may include tearing families apart. The child welfare system provides foster care only to state wards and gives higher benefits to foster parents. As a result, families involved in kinship foster care must relinquish custody of children and submit to government supervision to receive needed support. The transformation of kinship care from a private family arrangement to a type of public foster care illustrates a deeper flaw in the philosophy underlying the child welfare system—the assumption that parents are solely responsible for the care of children and that their inability to provide for them warrants coercive state intervention. The onerous price the child welfare system demands for needed benefits and services provides further proof of the need for more generous state support of caregiving.