

# **Where Were the Social Workers?**

A Historical Overview  
of the Social Work  
Profession's Complicity  
in the Family Policing  
System

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, segments of the social work profession have highlighted the ways that social workers are complicit with carceral systems, including the foster care system. Following the advocacy of impacted families and communities, social workers have increasingly called for the re-examination of standard social work practices such as mandated reporting. This paper seeks to strengthen the historical understanding of the social work profession's complicity in the creation of the modern family policing system, commonly known as the child welfare system. In particular, this paper explores the impacts of the anti-communist movements on social work advocacy and practice during crucial periods of racial and economic reckoning, with an emphasis on the profession's complicity with the 1960s-era criminalization of the Black family structure.

Understanding the confluence of social work's stances on child well-being, racial dynamics, poverty, and crime in the 1960s can strengthen the future of social work. The family policing system, commonly known as the child welfare system, disproportionately impacts Black families. The social work profession played an important role in perpetuating anti-Black beliefs about Black families that contributed to the construction of the modern family policing system. As the profession grapples with its role in the carceral apparatus, understanding can guide practice by informing social workers of the legacy of resistance, confronting unjust practices, and activating the profession towards political advocacy.

The social work profession's role in the carceral apparatus is apparent through the family policing system's criminalization of poverty. The majority of family policing investigations and family separations are for charges of parental neglect, which include the inability to provide food, clothing, housing, medical care, and childcare (Burton & Montauban, 2021). Instead of being met with basic needs assistance and other anti-poverty measures, social workers often report families to Child Protective Services (CPS). Implicit and explicit racial biases impact social service workers' perceptions of families and contribute to the racial disparities visible at every stage of child welfare decision-making: reports, investigations, substantiations, family separation, court supervision, and termination of parental rights (Hill, 2006; Roberts & Sangoi, 2018).

Indeed, over fifty percent of Black children in the U.S. will experience a child welfare investigation before their eighteenth birthday (Kim et al., 2017). In addition, Black families are disproportionately separated by the foster system and kept in the system for longer periods of time than their white counterparts (Roberts & Sangoi, 2018). Black parents also experience termination of parental rights at higher rates than white parents (Song, 2006).

Families interact with social workers throughout the entire family court process—through mandated reporters, caseworkers, family defense social workers, and court-mandated service providers. However, social work educators have largely ignored the profession's complicity in creating and upholding the modern family policing system, specifically ignoring the impact that anti-communism and McCarthyism have played in the profession's shaping (Andrews & Reisch, 1997). The wave of McCarthyism in the mid-1900s, a period of fear-mongering in which individuals and communities who were accused of having ties or ideology sympathetic to communism or socialism were viewed as treasonous and subversive, shaped social work research and scholarship for a generation, as the civil rights movement and backlash to it were in full swing. Moreover, the complicity of the profession helped to popularize and perpetuate notions of individual and family diagnoses as the root of societal ills. These themes resonated in public discourse, amidst backlash to the civil rights movement, and guided the creation of the family policing system.

In the decades of advocacy for the families and communities the family policing system has since impacted, social workers have grappled with the tension inherent in their roles as advocates and simultaneously participants in the larger carceral web of policing. This tension is visible in standard practices like mandated reporting, which legally requires all social workers to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect. Deepening the understanding of social work's history, which includes forms of resistance employed by individual social workers, will further crystalize the profession's obligations to advocate for families and will provide a roadmap for resisting harmful practices.

## SHIFTING SOCIAL WORK BACK TOWARDS THE INDIVIDUAL

Although the early social work profession used charitable models that focused on “fixing” poor communities, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed several social workers to cabinet positions to help him shape and draft New Deal legislation, representing a shift in domestic policy and social work advocacy toward basic government support for its

citizens. The New Deal was actively supported by many social workers and professional social work organizations (Finn, 2016). A key piece of the New Deal was the Social Security Act of 1935, which created the Aid to Dependent Children program (ADC), later renamed Aid Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which provided welfare benefits primarily to white widows who were not expected to work (Roberts, 2017). The Social Security Act also created a number of other social safety net programs to help elderly and unemployed citizens. This change within the social work profession paved the way for more robust debates and the rise of radical advocacy. Radical and progressive social workers typically regarded the political-economic, social, and ideological structures of society as the root causes of individual, family, and community problems; their focus included critiques of capitalism as a social-economic system (Andrews & Reisch, 1997).

However, “progressive” soon became a coded term for individuals linked to or sympathetic to the Communist Party (Andrews & Reisch, 1997). In 1938, Smith College School of Social Work fired its Associate Dean, Bertha Capen Reynolds, a leading social work radical and the most published social work scholar of that decade, because of her Marxist political views. In her work, she reframed beliefs about the causes of poverty from individual failings to structural deficits, and critiqued New Deal social reforms for failing to address structural inequalities (Finn, 2016). Following her forced resignation, Reynolds was frequently the target of government investigation and intrusion and was unable to obtain a position at another school of social work (Reisch, 2018).

By the 1950s, McCarthyism was at its peak. The infamous McCarthy “blacklists” of individuals and communities accused of holding “communist” beliefs, including Reynolds and other scholars, impacted the profession of social work (Abramovitz, 1998). Even books that simply articulated the connection between human behavior and the administration of social welfare programs by explaining how psychological needs were connected to social forces were attacked for promoting a socialist agenda (Finn, 2016). Labor unions were labeled as communist and social work unions were crushed (Abramovitz, 1998).

Without the protection of unions and progressive leadership, social work faculty were dismissed at a number of universities, as well as public and private agencies (Reisch, 2018). To avoid accusations by anti-communists, many white, liberal social workers distanced themselves from their radical colleagues. The profession as a whole experienced collective anxiety over its tenuous occupational status (Andrews & Reisch, 1997).

Black activists, freedom fighters, and social workers, whose work is now acknowledged as foundational to the profession, were tied to communism: while some chose to publicly support the Communist Party, others were labeled communists by government officials because they criticized racial capitalism, or because they were Black and advocated for community support and investment from the government (Shepherd & Pritzker, 2021). In the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement climate of the 1950s and 1960s, government departments and officials used these accusations against Black liberation movements, whether real or not, to criminalize and surveil Black social workers and activists (Stanford, 2020).

Thus, for a generation, the organized social work profession, which consisted primarily of white women, largely withdrew from its previous advocacy efforts for marginalized groups. The social work profession became increasingly passive on social issues, because “to propose a measure to relieve poverty or to combat racism was to risk being called ‘communist’” (Ehrenreich, 1985, p. 142; Andrews & Reisch, 1997). Instead, the profession redirected its research to safe issues like family dynamics, and focused internally on professionalization (Reisch, 2018). Textbooks written during and after the McCarthy era, which shaped a generation of practitioners, emphasized the “acquisition of expertise” and omitted “discussions of the ideological bases of practice” (Andrews & Reisch, 1997).

This shift away from advocacy had a number of policy implications. The decline of social activism by the profession during the McCarthy period slowed the development of the welfare state, particularly regarding

public assistance and health insurance, and facilitated government efforts to tighten restrictions and eligibility requirements of existing programs (Andrews & Reisch, 1997). Throughout the 1950s, social workers and policymakers placed less emphasis on offering material support to low income families and increasingly emphasized individually targeted rehabilitation services designed to encourage “independence” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2017).

Even during the height of the civil rights movement, leading social work publications made little reference to racism or racial inequality (Simon, 1994). In fact, most social work research and policy advocacy focused, explicitly or implicitly, on the supposed deviant features of communities of color, thus providing the intellectual foundation for policies that focused more on “fixing” alleged cultural deficiencies than on addressing the structural root of people’s problems (Reisch, 2018).

## THE “WELFARE CRISIS”

The social work profession’s shift from viewing the impacts of racism and poverty as social phenomena to viewing them as a reflection of cultural deficiency resonated in public spheres in the early 1960s. States had largely restricted Black, Latine, and other immigrant families from accessing the anti-poverty programs established by The New Deal (Kohler-Hausmann, 2017). They specifically blocked Black families from obtaining ADC through a number of attacks on family structure: children born out-of-wedlock were deemed ineligible; in Mississippi, common law marriages, which many Black families obtained (Perry, 1999), were outlawed as illicit marriages, thus dropping over 8,000 mostly Black children from welfare rolls (Perry, 1999; Roberts, 2022). States also implemented “man-in-the-house” rules to deny benefits to Black mothers suspected of living with or having a sexual relationship with a man who would then be expected to financially support the family as a “substitute father” (Roberts, 2022).

Social workers were used to implement some of these policies: in 1963, Alameda County implemented “Operation Bedcheck,” deploying pairs

of social workers and welfare investigators to search homes of families on welfare for men in the home (Kornbluh, 2007). The profession of social work, which had shifted to casework and professionalization in the 1950s, was so heavily associated with harming poor families on welfare that the National Welfare Rights Organization, a leading group advocating for the rights of public welfare clients, targeted some of their advocacy towards social workers in administrative positions in the public welfare bureaucracy (Marx, 2011).

Despite states' efforts to block Black families, ADC grew substantially over the 1960s, from 3.1 million in 1960 to 10.8 million in 1974 (Nadasen et al., 2009). This growth can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including federal oversight to ensure state compliance with racial protections, economic dislocations, increases in single-parent families, the mass migration of Black families to the North and West, and poverty lawyers' and activists' efforts to help eligible families obtain their entitlements (Kohler-Hausmann, 2017). Indeed, in the early 1960s, about one-third of eligible families were enrolled in ADC; by 1971, about 90 percent were receiving benefits (Reese, 2005). However, critics across the political spectrum interpreted this growth as a "welfare crisis" symptomatic of the pathology and laziness of the parents it served. Barry Goldwater's campaign for presidency in 1964 shaped the welfare debate on a national stage. Goldwater stated that the welfare state destroyed individualism and supported the growth of collectivism. Many of his themes would later form the multiple bases for the New Right's attack on welfare. Right-wing publications attacked the welfare state for undermining rugged individualism and private property, fostering immorality and non-productivity, contributing to crime—pointing to urban protests and the civil rights movement—and ultimately leading to communism (Williams, 1997).

ADC became a lightning rod for frustration as white populations were confronted with the visibility of racial injustices highlighted by the Civil Rights Movement, increased media attention to drugs and crime (and its racialized depictions), and a reckoning of women's sexuality and role in the labor market (Kohler-Hausmann, 2017). Journalists in mainstream



news outlets such as The New York Times charged that Black and Puerto Rican families saw welfare as a “bank,” playing on deep-seated fears about a changing country (Horowitz, 1969). Debates about welfare dominated the media and political spheres.

Seeking to persuade the Johnson Administration to move swiftly to improve the plight of poor Black families through federally financed anti-poverty programs, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, commonly known as the Moynihan Report. While Moynihan discusses the role of systemic racism in creating and upholding wealth inequality, he also argues that the increase in welfare dependency can be “taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure.” He writes about Black families:

[T]he family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable... The combined impact of poverty, failure, and isolation among Negro youth has had the predictable outcome in a disastrous delinquency and crime rate... [A] national effort towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure (Moynihan, 1965).

The Moynihan Report cemented the issue of race to welfare and single-parent families in a way that made it difficult to talk about one without the others, and in doing so inadvertently fueled popular fixation on Black women’s sexuality and welfare receipt (Nadasen, 2007). This report was an influential response in a critical moment to the hysteria around welfare and public demand for changes to ADC and shaped how politicians and media portrayed and understood Black children and Black parenting.

*The Saturday Evening Post* commented, “Today’s welfare child, raised in hopelessness and dependency, becomes tomorrow’s welfare adult, pauperized and helpless” (Nadasen, 2007). *U.S. News and World Report* declared in 1965 that the increasing number of “welfare babies” would “breed more criminals, more mental defectives, more unemployables of almost every type,” and profiled a typical ADC recipient in Chicago as “A poor Negro girl:...She is insecure, uneducated, unsophisticated, and

frightened” (Nadasen, 2007). The concerns about ADC were shaped and portrayed to the public by racial ideology and existing racial stereotypes about Black parents and children, and raised concerns around the alleged impact that Black children would have on white America.

## THE PATHOLOGY OF CHILD ABUSE

Amidst the unfounded charges of an inherent pathology in the Black family structure, concerns about child abuse were taking shape in the public. In 1962, pediatrician C. Henry Kempe and several colleagues published *The Battered Child Syndrome* report.

Similar terms were used to describe Black parents in the Moynihan Report as parents who physically abuse their children in the *Battered Child Syndrome*. Children in the reports were characterized as “illegitimate” or “unwanted.” Substance abuse in the reports was described as “drunkenness” or “alcoholism.” Parents were diagnosed as “pathologic” or “psychopathic and sociopathic.” Dysfunctional families were characterized by “divorce, separation, and desertion, female family head, children in broken homes...family disorganization, juvenile delinquency,” or “sexual promiscuity, unstable marriages, and juvenile delinquency” (Wali, 2023).

The authors of the *Battered Child Syndrome* stated that there were no reports of successful psychotherapy, and thus the only safe remedy at the time of publication was the separation of children from their parents (Kempe et al., 1962). They did, however, introduce the empirically unsupported idea of parental violence against children as a diagnosable and treatable medical condition or mental illness (Burton & Montauban, 2021). The individual-centered psychological and medical construction of the problem turned policymakers away from considering its structural causes and allowed for physicians to maintain ownership and guide interventions for child abuse (Nelson, 1984; Hacking, 1991).

Following the publication of *The Battered Child Syndrome*, academics and popular media rushed to popularize the issue of child abuse. In

the decade prior to the article's appearance, doctors, lawyers, social workers, educators, and other researchers and practitioners published only a combined nine articles specifically focusing on cruelty to children; in the decade after its publication, the professions produced 260 articles (Nelson, 1984). Mass-circulation magazines carried twenty-eight articles in the decade after Kempe's article, compared to only three in the decade before. Television saw a similar trend: child abuse was virtually absent from early television scripts, whereas after *BCS*, soap operas and prime-time series alike created dramas based on the problem (Nelson, 1984).

The public embraced the individualized idea of the pathological and psychopathic parent who physically abused their children, as opposed to the parent whose capacity to nurture was limited by social factors (Newberger, 1983). Most seasoned professionals tasked with working with these families, who had experienced the anti-communist era's push towards family dynamics and psychotherapy and away from social justice, embraced these individualized views (Finn, 2016).

For nearly a decade, lawmakers and the public had been inundated with messages about the supposed looming impacts of welfare babies, the Black family structure, and physical child abuse, specifically these children's supposed propensity to commit crimes and drain government resources. Racist depictions of the War on Drugs and crime, attributed to drugs and civil rights protests, found its way to white Americans' dinner table discussions (Kohler-Hausmann, 2017). All of this helped to place a public outcry for child wellbeing interventions on the mainstream agenda as the 1970s approached.

## REMOVING BLACK CHILDREN

In 1961, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued a directive that states could not deny ADC based on suitable-home tests unless they took steps to rehabilitate the family. For families that could not be rehabilitated, federal funds were allocated to put the child in foster care. That year, Congress amended Title IV of the Social Security

Act to provide federal funding to maintain these children apart from their families. Instead of denying families benefits, state ADC eligibility workers began taking Black children away from mothers deemed unsuitable: in 1961, 150,000 children were placed in out-of-home care (Roberts, 2022).

Beyond the federal financial incentive for family separation, policies around child well-being and welfare were also shifting. For example, in response to the increase in Black and Latina women receiving welfare benefits, policymakers instituted work requirements (Nadasen, 2007): a task difficult for single mothers with no childcare options. But a 1971 bipartisan childcare bill was vetoed by President Nixon, who called it “the most radical piece of legislation” to have ever crossed his desk, and charged that the bill represented a “communal approach to child-rearing” and had “family-weakening implications” (Rosenberg, 1992), echoing anti-communist terms and themes to describe and demonize a social welfare program. This intentional defunding of meso- and community-level support represented the prevailing conservative themes of the previous decades, and placed the onus for overcoming poverty and obtaining stability on the nuclear family, thereby detaching the state from financial responsibility for children and families (NPR, 2016; *The Economist*, 2021; Rosenberg, 1992).

The bill’s sponsor, Senator Mondale, understood that child well-being could not be tied to anti-poverty programs, but still felt the public demand for interventions for children. In response, Mondale pursued the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, or CAPTA (Wexler, 2018), which passed in 1974. Narratives of parental responsibility and treating social issues as individual pathologic concerns had been promoted by the medical and social work communities over the previous few decades. This resonated in the 1970s. CAPTA’s initial scope was broad and vague, and combined intentional acts and acts of omission into a singular phenomenon: child abuse and neglect. This created a false equivalence between intentional physical harm to children by their parents and conditions of poverty, effectively transforming

child poverty from a social, economic, and racial justice issue into a problem of individual parental pathology and deviant behavior. Thus, the government was absolved from addressing structural, economic, and racial inequities that shaped children's wellbeing (Burton & Montauban, 2021).

## **CAPTA: A FOUNDATION**

CAPTA is the foundation of the modern family policing system. CAPTA requires each state to have mandatory reporting provisions, which train social workers and other medical, educational, and childcare professionals to report any suspicion of vague definitions of child abuse or neglect and institutes legal and professional consequences for failure to report. The practice is wrought with implicit and racial biases, resulting in disproportionate reporting of Black families (Inguanta & Sciolla, 2021). The "Prevention and Treatment" of child abuse and neglect builds on the theoretical framework offered by the social work and medical communities from the 1950s through the 1970s by identifying risk factors in personalities and developing a treatment plan. Mental health evaluations are used to this day when a family is investigated by CPS, even though "searches for distinctive behavioral syndromes have proven elusive" (Melton, 2005) after decades of government and foundation-funded research (Burton & Montauban, 2021). These mental health evaluations continue to be used in court proceedings and as grounds to separate families and terminate parental rights. Instead of providing families with more resources, CAPTA funds investigations into families and "treatment" services administered by social workers, and sets the status quo for the way we address families ensnared in the family policing system.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

An appreciation of history has been largely marginalized in U.S. social work (Finn, 2016). Social work scholar Michael Reisch claims that we are an ahistorical culture that has become accustomed to fragments of information, instead of the connective tissue (Reisch, 1988). Our current

cultural and political institutions, including the social work profession, perpetuate ignorance of the past in order to sustain the perception of the present as a given; this limits the range of societal choices for the future (Reisch, 1993). The Council on Social Work Education must address social work history, for which there is currently no requirement for competency (Finn, 2016).

There is an inherent tension in the social work profession. The majority of the labor sector is still middle-class white women, while the clientele is largely Black, Indigenous, people of color, and low-income; these racial and class dynamics inform the implicit and explicit biases that impact communities. There is tension in the social worker's power over families because of social workers' participation in the family policing system through requirements such as mandated reporting such as mandated reporting, case notes that impact court proceedings, and visitation supervision between parents and children.

Nevertheless, there are examples of resistance in the history of social work that show individual social workers refusing to participate in harmful practices and using their positionality to end them, and of students changing the path and the education of the profession. For example, "Operation Bedcheck" was deemed unconstitutional after a social worker refused to participate in a mass morning raid on the homes of Alameda County's welfare recipients and was dismissed from his job. In *Parrish v. Civil Service Commission*, the plaintiff argued that such participation would have involved him in multiple violations of rights secured by the federal and state Constitutions and that his superiors could not properly direct him to participate in illegal activity. Following the lawsuit initiated by an individual social worker, the county subsequently abandoned mass morning raids to determine welfare eligibility and determined that such operations were forbidden by the applicable state and federal regulations. This raises room for envisioning other ways that social workers can push back against daily practices encouraged by their superiors and licensing boards and challenge their constitutionality and legality.

For example, the 2020 protests for racial equity prompted the creation of a group called Mandated Reporters Against Mandated Reporting. They work to end the practice of mandated reporting that families have called the “stop-and-frisk of caretaking” (Meiners & Schenwar, 2017) by providing case processing spaces for peer feedback and informal supervision that they do not receive from their agencies. In addition, calls to abolish mandated reporting have strengthened within the social work profession (Inguanta & Sciolla, 2021; upEND, n.d.).

Following 2020, CPS caseworkers also saw the way that they were trained to coerce their way into homes without a court order, thus subjecting the family to an invasive process that was heavily influenced by bias, and recommended that “Miranda warning” practices be instituted to require that parents be immediately notified of their constitutional rights (Newman, 2022). Social workers must fearlessly advocate from within the profession to challenge long-standing and harmful standards.

Student activism is crucial to the social work profession. After decades of social workers’ movement away from activism, the 1960s and the civil rights movement reinvigorated the profession’s social action—not of seasoned, white professionals, but of students and Black social workers. Students and Black social workers organized for change by critiquing their organizations, welfare bureaucracies, and school curricula, and protested social work’s lack of response to Black liberation movements (Abramovitz, 1998). This led to the emergence of a systems perspective, which is now the foundation of a generalist approach to social work (Finn, 2016). In the present day, students are continuing the legacy of activism. Social work students rewrote and replaced the mandated reporting training with a “Mandated Supporting” curriculum that Columbia School of Social Work students now receive (JMACforFamilies, 2022). Students at UIC Jane Addams College of Social Work developed an “Alternatives to Calling DCFS” guide for Illinois social workers (Shriver, 2021).

Social workers have also increased their academic advocacy around robust anti-poverty programs through peer-reviewed research that countered narratives of personal responsibility and promoted the idea that governments should support families. These studies have found that the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, childcare subsidies, medicaid expansion, and an increased minimum wage all reduce reports of child maltreatment (Biehl & Hill, 2018; Kovski et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017).

Most importantly, what social workers can do to end harmful practices in the profession is to listen and follow the lead of communities who have been most impacted by the profession and overlapping systems, using positionality to ensure their experiences and leadership are centered, finding resources to ensure that communities are invested in and compensated for their labor, and being active in the community, not just working in it.

The anti-communist movements impacted generations of social work practice and training and shaped the conditions under which the modern family policing system was formed. Much of the profession was complicit in promoting ideas of personal responsibility and individual pathology, positing the profession as a solution to rectify deviant individuals, families, and communities amidst intentional policy choices that defunded family and community support. As social work continues to evolve, particularly in this crucial time period of the post-2020 racial reckoning, social workers must resist agency status quo when it is damaging and engage with macro-level advocacy to promote anti-poverty programs that strengthen community well-being and keep families safe and together.

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