



# Race Equity in Child Welfare

*Reducing Racial Biases in the System*

## Executive Summary

The Family Voices United campaign surveyed birth parents, kinship caregivers, foster/resource and adoptive parents, and young people with experience in the child welfare system across the country to compile their lived expertise on reducing racial biases in child welfare.

Six priorities were identified across all lived experience roles as essential steps in order to create a less racially biased system:

1

Biases exist in child welfare, and we all must commit to understanding personal biases and working to unlearn them

*"We need to be more cognizant of the foster care population and not be so "colorblind." That starts with acknowledging that every single person walking this planet holds biases. Biases are innate, but that doesn't mean that we cannot unlearn them."*

*-Youth in/ from care, NY*

2

We need **representation**, in both race and lived experience, at all levels of the child welfare system

*"Include professionals with lived experience who can articulate in a way that change happens through inclusion and diversity. Nothing about us without us."*

*-Kinship Caregiver/Adoptive Parent, OR*

3

**Training and education** must be mandatory and intentionally focused on historical context of racism in the child welfare system, mitigating implicit biases, and cultural humility

*"We must be transparent about the history and impact of racism on the state-sanctioned separation of children and families...and discuss the impact of public + state surveillance on families of color."*

*-Youth in/from foster care, OR*



# Race Equity in Child Welfare

*Reducing Racial Biases in the System*

## Executive Summary

4

**Culturally relevant placements** and young people maintaining **cultural ties** must be prioritized

*"Racial biases can be seen with American, Christian holidays being celebrated within the home as opposed to the child's own beliefs...to deliver justice to our youth, allow them to express pride in their heritage in their representation of identity; allow our youth to celebrate cultural holidays...foster families must understand the importance."*

**-Youth in/ from foster care, VT**

5

**Accountability** to reducing biases must be built into the processes throughout all aspects of the child welfare system

*"The courts need to be monitored strictly by someone. I have seen first hand a court system to be biased...GALs (guardian ad litem) and judges having secret backdoor meetings with workers making decisions. Who monitors the courts? Everyone fears them."*

**-Foster Parent, MO**

6

**Supporting children, young people, and families** must remain at the core of everything done in child welfare

*"Show children you care, no matter who they are...our home is a treatment home for all who need it."*

**-Birth parent, OH**

*Please continue reading for full paper content*

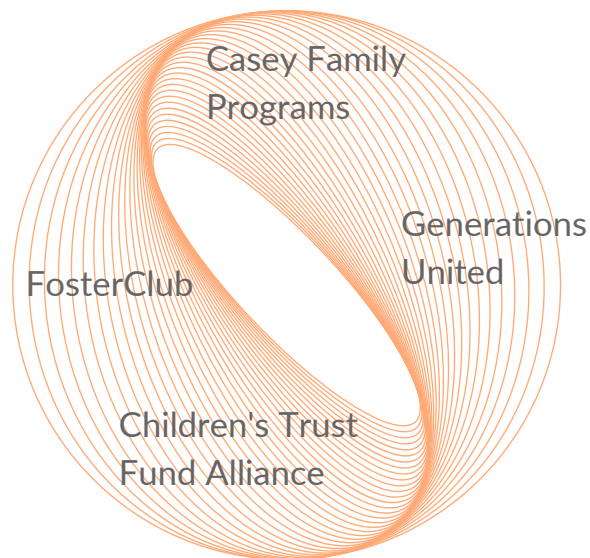


# **Race Equity in Child Welfare**

*Reducing Racial Biases in the System*

# Framing

Family Voices United is a collaborative project with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Generations United, FosterClub, and Casey Family Programs.



Together, we work to elevate the voice and perspective of **young people, birth parents, and kinship/relative caregivers** (known collectively as **constituents**), to stakeholders, partners and organizations who make decisions about the child welfare system.

In order to make informed decisions that benefit children, young people, and families, lived experience voices and expertise must be not only heard, but must be centered in decision making.

# Share Your Perspective Campaign

Family Voices United launches regular "Share Your Perspective" questions on timely topics relating to child welfare. Currently, the campaign centers these questions around 5 rotating central themes:



Race Equity in Child Welfare



Older Youth & Congregate Care



Supporting Relatives Caring for Children



Expectant and Parenting Youth



Prevention: Strengthening Families & Averting Crises



*April 2022 "Share Your Perspective" Question:*

What changes can be made to reduce racial biases in child welfare?  
(e.g. child welfare workers, families, attorneys and judges, and others involved in the child welfare system)



## Identified Priorities from Lived Experience Leaders

### *On Reducing Racial Biases in the Child Welfare System*

- #1 Biases exist in child welfare, and we all must **commit to understanding personal biases** and working to unlearn them
- #2 We need **representation**, in both race and lived experience, at all levels of the child welfare system
- #3 **Training and education** must be mandatory and intentionally focused on historical context of racism in the child welfare system, mitigating implicit biases, and cultural humility
- #4 **Culturally relevant placements** and young people maintaining **cultural ties** must be prioritized
- #5 **Accountability** to reducing biases must be built into the processes throughout all aspects of the child welfare system
- #6 **Supporting children, young people, and families** must remain at the core of everything done in child welfare





**Biases exist in child welfare, and we all must commit to understanding personal biases and working to unlearn them**

## Listening to lived experience voices

- Biases are inherent in many of our societal systems and structures
- Confronting and understanding our biases is not easy work, and can often involve conflict
- Biases can exist across all identity markers and communities
- We may not be able to eliminate biases, but we can work to be conscious of them and mitigate their impact upon others



# Commit to Understanding Biases

Quotes from lived experience voices



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

The changes do not just start with the child welfare system. Racial biases are in schools, in society, and these changes are to be made within ourselves first in order to make larger changes

–Young person in/ from care, CA

There will always be racial biases. Change involves educating others. Sometimes it means making unpopular decisions while navigating complex relationships that don't believe in change. Getting to the root of the fundamental reason for someone having racial biases is the first key

–Young person in/from care, TX

We need to be more cognizant of the foster care population and not be so "colorblind." That starts with acknowledging that every single person walking this planet holds biases. Biases are innate, but that doesn't mean that we cannot unlearn them

–Young person in/ from care, NY

Honestly speaking every household no matter the color is taught in some way shape or form to be biased...no, it's not right but truthfully it's hard to prevent

–Young person in/from care, KY

Racial biases have existed since the dawn of time, are clearly rooted in the present, and without doubt, will exist in the future. Realities does not support eradication of racial biases [but we can] diminish the stronghold of racial biases in child welfare

–Foster parent/ Adoptive parent, MD



## **We need representation, in both race and lived experience, at all levels of the system**

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Lived experience is expertise, and should be valued and integrated into all aspects of child welfare

---

- Racial representation in child welfare workers is essential to create safe spaces

---

- Racial and lived experience representation leads to more robust child welfare legislation, and hope for families

# We Need Representation

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

Solicit input from those with lived experience. Families and youth should not only be given entrance to the room, but a seat at the table. Their lived experiences, triumphs, and struggles are valuable, and can be used to create policy and legislation that provide keys that will unlock doors that lead to hope

-Foster Parent/ Adoptive Parent, MD)

We can start by making sure each kid has someone from their culture, skin color working on their case

-Youth in/from care, FL

We need more judges, attorneys and professionals to be Black, Indigenous, and people of color

-Parent/ Advocate/ Kinship caregiver, Youth in/from care, PA

Start hiring more POC [people of color]. I'm a woman of color and only worked with white officials while being in care. Having a person of color as my child welfare worker, attorney, etc. wasn't an option. How can one truly understand what it's like to be a POC navigating intersectionality while being a foster kid and not be a person of color?

-Youth in/from care, NY

Include professionals with lived experience who can articulate in a way that change happens through inclusion and diversity.

Nothing about us without us

-Kinship Caregiver/Adoptive Parent/Community partner, OR



## **Training and education must be mandatory and intentionally focused on historical context of racism in the child welfare system, mitigating implicit biases, and cultural humility**

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Racial bias training must be mandatory in child welfare

---

- Understanding the historical context of racism in the child welfare system is essential foundation to working within the system

---

- Word choice and framing of terms is very important in mitigating biases

# Training and Education

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

More cultural humility training for government officials is needed. When a referral for abuse or neglect is received, one of the first pieces of information received is race/ethnicity.

-Community Partner, VA

Educating staff on the difference between neglect/ abuse and behavior or conditions they personally do not approve of

-Kinship Caregiver/ Youth in/ from care, WI

If someone is going to be in the life of a foster child, they NEED to be required to do racial/ discrimination training...I was in one too many racist foster families, and I never want to hear of another family or worker treating a child that way

-Youth in/ from care, OH

We need to educate workers, attorneys, and others involved in how to deal with children in foster care who come from different backgrounds. Everyone who's working the case should be aware of their own bias to make sure it does not drive decisions in the case. Have access tools ready, such as interpreters, and cultural fluency, and cultural empathy

-Youth in/ from care, FL

You have to look at the historical context of the child welfare system works to see where the practices lie that might be antiquated with today's more equitable expectations. Working to examine older practices and lift them up to a racial microscope can really show you how these outdated policies might harm minority communities

-Youth in/ from care, KS

# Training and Education

Quotes from lived experience voices



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

We must be transparent about the history and impact of racism on the state-sanctioned separation of children and families...and discuss the impact of public + state surveillance on families of color  
-Youth in/from foster care, OR

The only way to reduce racial biases in child welfare is to not look at families as if they are the problem...if the system would work with families it would be less children in the system  
-Birth Parent/ Community Partner, NY

There can be more trainings within DHS led by racial minorities to discuss and teach about the different challenges people face when working with DHS as a minority. There should be intentional trainings that are mandatory for DHS and affiliated personnel to recognize personal bias  
-Youth in/ from care, OR

I would suggest having staff complete a mandatory cultural diversity workshop every quarter. I would also complete an initial assessment to see if they already hold racial biases that could negative affect them within the workplace. I suggest team work activities [so that] case manager, attorneys, judges, and any other child welfare advocate can have unity, so youth have something to connect to as well.  
-Youth in/ from care, GA

Within court records and child welfare documentation, wording can make a big difference in people's bias. Instead of saying 'meth head' or 'crack head' you could say struggling addict instead. Both words can describe the same thing, but give off two different ideas  
-Youth in/from care, WI



## Culturally relevant placements and young people maintaining cultural ties must be prioritized

### Listening to lived experience voices

- There must be systems and structures in place that protect the child/ young person's right to connect to their culture

---

- Placements should celebrate the cultural holidays and practices of the child/ young person

---

- Ensure cultural relevance in supports, resources, actions



# Culturally Relevant Placements + Ties

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

Racial biases can be seen with American, Christian holidays being celebrated within the home as opposed to the child's own beliefs...to deliver justice to our youth, allow them to express pride in their heritage in their representation of identity; allow our youth to celebrate cultural holidays...foster families must understand the importance.

-Youth in/ from foster care, VT

As a way to reduce racial biases, the child welfare system can begin to acknowledge the diverse populations they serve. Blind removal eliminates the possibility of acknowledging the culture of the families they are serving and therefore makes it impossible to consider differing cultural practices.

-Kinship Caregiver/ Youth in/from foster care, NY

I think that kids should go into foster homes with the same race background, so they can feel like they belong instead of sticking out

-Youth in/from care, MN

I think it's important to try to match children with the background they grew up in. Making sure Native youth are able to practice any rituals, that Hispanic children are able to have their quinceañeras--if that's what they want.

Cater to the children's needs.

-Youth in/from care, MT

Workers need to be educated on appropriate language, and even how to help the child connect to their ethnic background. These children deserve the most educated and open minded people in their lives

-Youth in/from care, OH



## Accountability to reducing biases must be built into the processes throughout all aspects of the child welfare system

### Listening to lived experience voices

- There must be repercussions for inappropriate behaviors, actions, or violations related to acting on biases

---
- Accountability systems must be in place, especially within the legal system, to protect young people and families

---
- Carefully consider the discourse on blind removals, and engage lived experience experts in these conversations

# Accountability

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

Proper training and seminars expected of the rest of the child welfare team must apply to the legal team as well

Kinship Caregiver/ Foster Parent/ Youth in/from Care, PA

Make policies that have stiff penalties for [actions] that could result in alienation, exclusion, or any bias that results in any more harm mentally or physically

-Kinship Caregiver/ Adoptive Parent/ Community Partner, OR

As employees, supervisors, and co-workers, we need to hold each other accountable when there types of things are happening and not turn the other cheek

-Foster Parent/Youth in/from care, FL

The courts need to be monitored strictly by someone. I have seen first hand a court system to be biased...GALs (guardian ad litem) and judges having secret backdoor meetings with workers making decisions. Who monitors the courts? Everyone fears them.

-Foster Parent, MO

Extra eyes in the “investigation” phase to pressure-test against implicit bias. Black youth are more likely to be taken out of the home than white youth.

-Youth in/ from care/ Community Partner, WA

When workers in child welfare get information about a child or any person, their race or ethnicity should be optional and not a priority; helping the person should be the priority

-Youth in Extended Foster Care, CA

There need to be more consequences for actions [based in racial bias]. Some of the employees in the child welfare system do not give their effort to the full extent and are not completely respectful of youth due to race, gender, age, identity, situation, etc. They should be more involved in getting to know these children and not judge based off their looks

-Youth in/from care, RI

Racial bias could be changed by decisions a judge makes when reuniting families or adoptions. There are disproportionately less African American children being reunited with families or being adopted, and they are staying in foster care longer in comparison to Caucasian children

-Youth in/from care, SC



**Supporting children, young people, and families must remain at the core of everything done in child welfare**

## Listening to lived experience voices

- Community supports are essential to mitigating biases

---
- Biases are unavoidable, and establishing caring connections and safe spaces for young people and families must be prioritized

---
- Listen and act upon what children, young people, and families say they need

---
- Families belong together

# Supporting Children, Young People, and Families

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



Race Equity  
in Child Welfare

Show children you care, no matter who they are...our home is a treatment home for all who need it  
-Birth parent/ Foster Parent, OH

Kids need a place to reset and feel loved! I have seen it in court where the attitude is "just another broken kid"  
-Foster/ Resource Parent, CO

If the system would work with families it would be less children in the system, and black and brown communities wouldn't have to keep looking over their back...the system needs to ask black and brown communities what the community needs...and avoid profiling the family  
-Birth Parent/ Community Partner, NY

Families need a person on call 24/7 to make sure someone is there for the child, parents, and foster parents  
-Youth in/from foster care/ Foster Parent, WI

Have an understanding of the child's background. I was 12 years old when I entered the system and was bullied for how "dark" I was and I felt people didn't want me because of something I could not change.  
My confidence was very low and I was fearful coming into a different environment. Discuss topics on self image so that youth can gain confidence and understanding of who they are  
-Youth in/from foster care, NJ

All Black children are not the problem. Sometimes kids that are taken from their families are not stable because they are taken from people they grew up with for a lifetime  
-Youth in/from foster care

More attention and time needs to be made to listen to the child. GALs (guardian ad litem) need to be required to spend more time with children. Most I have dealt with come in for 1/2 hour right before a court date. A child team needs to be a TEAM, and it starts with knowing someone is listening  
-Foster/ Resource Parent, OH

# How to Use this Report

## Share with your Networks

The themes and priorities from this report can help others gain further insight into the child welfare system from the perspective of those who have lived experience. It may also help those in your networks to better support constituents in their work.

## Elevate to Policymakers

The people making laws and decisions must hear from those who have experience with the systems they impact with their actions. Nothing about us without us.

## Highlight to Lived Experience Leaders

Creating community amongst lived experience leaders starts by sharing stories and identifying common experiences. Please share this report with constituents you work with or others in your networks with lived experience.

THANK YOU TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE, BIRTH PARENTS & KINSHIP CAREGIVERS, AND CHILD WELFARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOR ANSWERING OUR "SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE" QUESTION, AND FOR PROVIDING YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTISE TO THE FIELD OF CHILD WELFARE.

Contact us:

[www.familyvoicesunited.com](http://www.familyvoicesunited.com)

[info@familyvoicesunited.com](mailto:info@familyvoicesunited.com)



@family\_voices



@familyvoicesunited



@familyvoicesunited