

OPINION

It's Time to Call Out the Systemic Racism in Foster Care | Opinion

CHARELL STAR, FOSTER CARE ALUMNI AND NATIONAL ADVOCATE

ON 5/20/21 AT 3:46 PM EDT



SHARE



OPINION

FOSTER CARE

RACISM

As more and more Americans get vaccinated and life begins to return to a semblance of normalcy, many will remember the pandemic as a time synonymous with home—the space we curate, the items we collect, the people we share our day to day with, the walls that provide us security from storms.

But too many American children just do not have these associations. And it is precisely now, with the importance of home is so front and center, that we should be thinking about those without a home who need one so desperately: children in foster care. Most importantly, it is long past time that we reevaluate *how* we send children to foster care, which may be the biggest problem of all.

Every day, more than 720 young people are removed from their homes and placed into foster care due to allegations of abuse and/or neglect by a parent or guardian. Substantiated claims of abuse are a logical reason for removing a child from potential danger, but it is neglect that is most often cited for shattering a youth's connection to their home life.

And that's a problem. Because in cases of neglect, two factors overdetermine if the state will upend a child's life: their parent's income level and their race.

Of the more than 420,000 youth in foster care across the nation right now, fewer than 18 percent were removed due to allegations of physical or sexual abuse. Of the remainder, the vast majority were based on some form of alleged neglect. And there are big problems with this statistic.

Take, for example, not providing regular meals to a child. This may seem like a clear-cut case of neglect. But what if there are more factors at play? What if a parent lost their job, or there was a sudden reduction or freezing of their SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits? Depending on where they live, this could constitute neglect. And it could be grounds for a child's removal from their home, even though providing financial support directly to the parent would be a far more humane and reasonable solution.

Too easily, the term of neglect has become a way to penalize a specific set of people—the poor—rather than addressing the factors contributing to their hardships.

The answer to a parent struggling to keep their household afloat should not be rip their kid from their home; it should be to provide their family with the resources they need to alleviate the challenges in their path.

Doing that could include providing parents legal representation to motivate a negligent landlord to make needed repairs to an unsafe home. Or it could mean providing adequate health insurance for the child, so the parent isn't forced to make an impossible choice between paying rent or providing medical care. Or it could mean supplementing moving or deposit fees to ensure families can move out of untenable situations more quickly.

Another key factor determining the removal of child from their home is race. Here, too, data tells the story: Even though Black kids represent only 14 percent of the nation's total child population, they make up 25 percent of youth in foster care. In places like New York City, that number jumps to 53 percent, even though Black youth only make up around 25 percent of the total under-18 population in the city.



Like all cases of institutional racism, the overrepresentation of Black youth within foster care reveals that disenfranchisement and punishment of Black and brown bodies exist at the heart of the system. And it's this that allows suburban landlords to retaliate against parents who demand repairs and allows private employers to menace and underpay workers on the edge and spiteful exes to wreak havoc on the lives of those who choose self-preservation over pain.

Is this how every neglect case in foster care starts? No. But, these are just a few of the stories I experienced or were shared with me by foster youth from across the country whose home lives were destroyed because the term of neglect is so inequitably applied and easily exploited, especially against poor and Black communities.

Just being in foster care has a detrimental impact on their lives. By age 17, more than half of foster care youth experienced an arrest, conviction, or overnight stay in a correctional facility. And only 16.2 percent of Black foster care youth in NYC graduate from high school within four years, compared with 70 percent of non-foster care Black youth.

Less than three percent of all foster care youth graduate college by the age of 26.

With such negative effects, we should be actively seeking out ways to reduce the number of young people wrongfully removed from their homes and placed into foster care.

One way is eliminating the opportunity for economic and racial disenfranchisement by setting a national, non-ambiguous standard for neglect claims that all states follow. Another way is to support organizations like CASA-NYC (Court Appointed Special Advocates of New York City), a non-profit that advocates for the rights and needs of youth in foster care and their parents. Children with a CASA volunteer spend an average of eight months less in foster care compared to youth without one, meaning kids from families who are properly supported are able to return to safe and stable homes faster.

This month happens to be National Foster Care Awareness Month. In addition to promoting the many loving families who do give their best to the system, there is no better time to remind ourselves that foster care isn't a solution; it's a symptom of the problem.

No child should ever be taken from their home simply because they are poor or Black.

Charell Star is a TV host, foster care alumna and national advocate. She volunteers on the boards of Court Appointed Special Advocates NYC (CASA-NYC) and City Living NY and was a 2018 National Angels in Adoption Honoree.

The views in this article are the writer's own.

[REQUEST REPRINT & LICENSING](#), [SUBMIT CORRECTION](#) OR [VIEW EDITORIAL GUIDELINES](#)