



# International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics

Volume 21, Number 1 (2024)

ISSN: [2790-6345](https://doi.org/10.55521/10-021-100)

DOI: [10.55521/10-021-100](https://doi.org/10.55521/10-021-100)

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## Book Review

Roberts, D. (2022). [Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families—and how abolition can build a safer world.](#) Basic Books.

DOI: [10.55521/10-021-113](#)

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The American child welfare system was purportedly designed with the intention of helping families by providing safety and permanency. However, in her latest book, *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*, author Dorothy Roberts makes the case that in practice, the child welfare system is structured to harm more than help because it functions as a tyrannical system and extension of the carceral state, where racial disproportionality thrives. As a result, Roberts reports that Black children make up half of the U.S. foster care population while accounting for less than one-fourth of the nation's children. This carceral extension is rooted in longstanding American traditions of genocide, racialized capitalism, and forced familial separation through slavery, murder, and the systematic removal of children from their families and from their homelands. What's worse, Roberts cites landmark research by economist Joseph Doyle that shows that children placed in the child welfare system fared worse on every outcome measure when compared to children who remained at home.

In this book, Roberts argues that the child welfare system is rooted in tactics to surveil and inhumanely regulate families. We the authors stand in agreement with the usage of the term, “family policing system” used by the upEND Movement which “accurately captures the roles this system plays in the lives of families, which include surveillance, regulation, and punishment, all roles associated with policing rather than children’s welfare” (upEND Movement, 2024, Glossary, Para. 1). Throughout history, Roberts asserts that community members and various “helping professionals” like social workers have misguidedly relied on and bought into the family policing system’s perpetual system of harm. Roberts refers to these helpers as agents of the foster-industrial complex, professional kidnapers, and instruments of state-sanctioned, benevolent terrorism. The celebrated beginnings of the social work profession in the 1880s, established by affluent white women such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, are often applauded throughout schools of social work. According to Roberts, this celebration is often absent of the mention of racist programming, forced assimilation, and promotion of eugenics as a form of policy reform or “helping.” Roberts makes the case that the Eurocentric foundations and classist approach of social work as a “charity” based profession have led the profession to perpetuate a racial caste system that refuses to meet the basic needs of individuals and families while actively ignoring the root problem of hundreds of years of systemic oppression. As a result, Roberts notes that nearly one in ten Black children in America will be forcibly separated from their parents and placed in foster care by the time they reach the age of eighteen.

In the 1960s, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics was written to serve as a foundation of ethical principles for social workers and outline professional commitments for ethical practice. Unfortunately, we as social workers exist in a professional contradiction where we vow commitment to fight against multiple systems of oppression and inequality while at the same time perpetuating its agenda—especially through the carceral state (child welfare, jails/prisons, detention, etc.). After reading Roberts’ latest work, we were left with questions such as why do we as social workers perpetuate harm? Are we afraid of change? Do we as social workers

profit too much from the suffering of others? Was the profession of social work built by design to harm Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) individuals and communities? As a profession, are we confident that we can even be a part of or orchestrate real change in this lifetime?

Robert provides an assessment of the system's history and what she asserts are intended futuristic tactics utilized to ensure the continued destruction of the Black family. Roberts introduces ideas regarding the undue power that the child welfare system wields to invade homes and remove children, especially when that power is misused. Roberts explores document-based coercion where families are expected to agree to goals and plans to regain or remain intact although they may sometimes be unrealistic or non-pertinent. She argues that although there is a large amount of research regarding the generational biopsychosocial-spiritual impact of parental separation on families and children, these harsh realities are devalued at best, and ignored at worst.

Roberts goes on to illustrate how the method of removing Black children from their families as a method of social control, exploitation, and the lack of human-centered care, has strong roots in chattel slavery. For too long, the systemic and generational pathologizing of Black families as dysfunctional, poor, uneducated, and incapable of raising their children perpetuates itself through service delivery and policy. In brave consistency with her past works (*Shattered Bonds and Killing the Black Body*), Roberts moves through a historical timeline analysis of social policies from chattel slavery, forcible removal, settler colonialism, Elizabethan Poor Laws, orphan trains, Jim Crow Laws, welfare reform, forced sterilization, adoption, etc. through the Black feminist and Reproductive Justice Frameworks.

Throughout the book, Roberts continues to address the impact of the systemic and systematic audacity of the carceral state to value profit over people and the criminalization and pathologizing of poverty, children, and Black families. She then explains the intersectional relationships to the long history of the oppression of Black people in America and the construction of systems of oppression by intentional design. Finally, Roberts provides an antidote to the failing system by engaging the reader in proposing an

abolitionist solution, where there can be no reform, only a total replacement that involves the end of family policing and the intentional focus on caring for children and families in a radical way.

This book is an excellent analysis tool for social workers across micro, mezzo, and macro settings to reevaluate the perpetuation of harm through the carceral state and examine our profession, personal identities, and positionality. In this analysis, we can begin to reimagine true change through an abolitionist policy agenda. This book is useful for social work education because it promotes the uplift that is needed to reimagine a better way to care for children and families in our professional care. It is a critical resource with applications for academia, accreditation/licensing boards and professional organizations, policy practitioners, and decision-makers.

In this book, Roberts illuminates the practice of family policing through the sharing of stories of impacted families. In addition, Roberts lays out a road map of reforms to end the destruction caused by the child welfare system while building a safer and more caring society. We suggest that applying critical analysis of how these proposed reforms could have supported the families highlighted in the book is one potential area for Roberts to explore in the future. In addition, future areas of opportunity for Roberts include addressing niche areas of child welfare such as forced family separation through non-kinship, domestic, infant adoptions, the connection to reproductive rights and freedom, and the growing representation and needs of LGBTIA2S+ young people within the child welfare system.

## References

upEND Movement. (2024). Glossary. Retrieved January 9, 2024, from <https://upendmovement.org/family-policing-definition/>