

What is Child Welfare Redesign?

A Summary of Perspectives and Current Approaches

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Child welfare practitioners, policymakers, and people with lived experience in child welfare systems have long recognized the need for changes in child welfare systems. Poor outcomes across many different indicators of well-being in state child welfare systems have not improved significantly for decades, especially for American Indian and Alaska Native children and families (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020). The continuing poor outcomes for many children, advocacy for equitable treatment of children and families of color and diminishing returns on federal and state investment in child welfare have increased the calls for fundamental structural change in the United States child welfare system.

What is Child Welfare Redesign?

Child welfare redesign is a term that the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and others are using to describe fundamental changes to the child welfare system in the United States. This includes, but is not limited to, the financing, structure, and approaches to delivering services, and engagement of communities served by the child welfare system. Within each of these primary system elements, there are a number of sub-elements, such as levels of funding provided, process for obtaining the funds, location of services, types of services that funding can support, and opportunities for community engagement regarding the development and operation of programs and services. Child welfare redesign, as NICWA uses the term, goes beyond more conventional, bureaucratic reform efforts where individual policies or components of the child welfare system are addressed through incremental change. Instead, child welfare redesign implies a fundamental redesign or restructuring of the entire child welfare system and related services, like housing, financial support, and substance abuse treatment.

What Are People Saying About Child Welfare Redesign?

Child welfare redesign is not a new concept. Advocates for children and families, tribes, states, researchers, and many others have been discussing child welfare redesign for decades. Many of the same issues being discussed today were part of the national conversation on child welfare redesign twenty years ago. These include issues like:

- Overrepresentation of children of color in state foster care systems.
- Limited access to community-based and culturally appropriate services.
- Inequities in access to funding and services for underserved

- communities, including rural, remote, and tribal communities.
- Lack of opportunities for community engagement in programs and services.
- Negative impacts of punitive models of child protection on children, families, and communities.
- Limited help for families in the child welfare system struggling with structural barriers, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and childcare.

Historically, there have been periodic larger policy reform efforts in child welfare. Federal policy reform examples include the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351), and the Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123). However, these reform efforts stopped short of a fundamental restructuring of the child welfare system and instead focused on connected groups of child welfare services (i.e., foster care or prevention services). This incremental approach to child welfare redesign has not worked well in addressing the critical needs of children and families in the child welfare system, as key child welfare outcome data continues to show limited improvements or even worsening outcomes for some children.

Today, the conversations regarding child welfare redesign have taken on a greater sense of urgency and importance. The larger social context of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color and the racial reckoning are part of the foundation of these conversations. As social justice advocates fought for changes in treatment by law enforcement agencies and transforming other public institutions, child welfare systems have gained attention and come under greater scrutiny for the disparate treatment and disproportionate numbers of children and families from communities of color, including American Indian and Alaska Native communities, in the child welfare system. This has spurred a number of child and family advocacy organizations, community advocates, and researchers to call for sweeping changes to the child welfare system. At the center of these calls for child welfare redesign is the need to address numerous inequities and structural barriers that children and families of color often face in their attempts to receive help from the child welfare system.

What Are Some of the Different Child Welfare Redesign Approaches Being Discussed?

The [upEND Movement](#) is a partnership between the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work. Their approach to child welfare redesign strives to "create a society in which the forcible separation of children from their parents is no longer an acceptable solution for families in need" (Center for Study of Social Policy and University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work, n.d.). They accomplish this goal by working in partnership with others and promoting anti-racist structures and practices to keep children safe in their homes and communities. The movement is also known by its call to abolish the current child welfare system so a new, more effective and compassionate system can be put in place. It does not require services such as

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child protection and foster care to be eliminated, but a complete rethinking and restructuring of the existing child welfare system is required. The upEND Movement also focuses on removing structural barriers to families that have long been impediments to their ability to keep children safe within their homes, such as inadequate housing, affordable childcare, paid sick leave, quality education, guaranteed minimum income, and meaningful access to food. They focus on increased social and economic supports as a major component of helping families, and they view child abuse and neglect as a societal failing that can be effectively addressed through additional supports to families rather than a family's failing. A new policy structure that relies on anti-racist policies to address inequities within the current system is required to support a redesigned child welfare system.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) established the National Committee on Equity, a committee of child and family advocacy organizations, public and private providers of child welfare services, youth and parents with lived experience in child welfare, and researchers to identify issues and strategies for promoting a more just and equitable child welfare system. The national committee is specifically looking at the root causes of racial inequities in the child welfare system and how the system can be fundamentally restructured to promote racial justice. One of the core tasks of the national committee will be to review CWLA's [National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare](#) to ensure it more intentionally advances racial equity. CWLA has been facilitating a national conversation amongst its members to highlight public and private agencies that are taking on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. These examples inform and inspire other agencies and provide concrete examples of child welfare redesign, including steps agencies have taken and how they've implemented their strategies.

[Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-Being](#). The Children's Bureau, under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, launched a multi-year initiative in 2020 to "rethink child welfare by creating the conditions for a just, equitable, and humane system and strong, thriving families where children are free from harm" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020). This initiative is a partnership between Casey Family Programs, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Prevent Child Abuse America and the Children's Bureau. The initiative is based in the belief that all families need help sometimes and focusing on how to help keep children safe while staying in their home is a primary goal. The initiative will have three phases starting with 1) demonstration sites that will create child and family well-being systems, 2) focus on policy and systemic reforms at the state, tribal, and territorial level, and 3) sharing lessons from the demonstration sites with other jurisdictions to help them launch their own child and family well-being systems.

Many other efforts to redesign child welfare are being seeded, and there are lots of ideas for what needs to change and how the child welfare system could operate differently. In August 2020, the Children's Bureau invited a handful of authors to contribute to "a call to action across public, private, philanthropic, and faith-based sectors to chart a different course to strengthen families through

primary prevention and create a more just and equitable system focused on child and family well-being" (Children's Bureau Express, 2020). Entitled [The Moment is Now](#), this publication includes more than two dozen essays that describe visions for a different child welfare system and what we can be doing now to bring it about.

How Do Tribal Communities Fit Into Child Welfare Redesign Efforts?

Tribal nations have a unique history, political status, and relationship with the United States government that must be considered and accounted for in discussions on child welfare redesign. While many of the proposed child welfare redesign approaches focus on racial equity and justice, which can be helpful to some extent, it cannot be the complete framework for understanding the needs of Native children and families. For any child welfare redesign framework to truly benefit Native children and families, it must be rooted in an understanding of their unique political status as members of sovereign tribal nations and the inherent sovereignty of tribal nations. It must recognize that tribal governments play a significant role in ensuring the well-being of their citizen families and children and have a specific responsibility to promote family integrity and stability and to keep children safe. This requires enhancing tribal nation child welfare capacity and ensuring they can exercise their rights to be involved in child welfare matters whether children are in tribal or state systems. Tribal nations have long been engaged in child welfare redesign within their own communities utilizing cultural teachings, traditions, beliefs, and healing practices. This decolonization of tribal child welfare is growing in tribal communities, and in order for child welfare redesign at the state and federal level to be successful for Native children and families, it will need to plan for and engage Native people and communities in a meaningful way.

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