

## **Why Are Mainstream Academics Writing for a Conservative Think Tank?**

Seventeen child welfare experts from places such as Harvard Law School and the Hudson Institute published [“What Child Protection is For”](#), a thoughtful response to the [abolish child welfare movement](#). It was written for the [American Enterprise Institute](#) (AEI).

The AEI has a political agenda, so we are somewhat uneasy about this arrangement.

Perhaps the authors decided to write this piece despite the Institute’s conservative bent because sound research is being overwhelmed by ideologically-formulated practices with no empirical foundation, for example a program that falsely claims to have engaged parents in child protection voluntarily.

Child welfare intellectuals are typically liberal or moderate and publish academic articles, not opinion pieces for center-right think tanks. But if this entity offers an outlet for inconvenient truths that aren’t being presented elsewhere, perhaps making the case in that forum is better than staying silent.

### **Narrative for podcast**

So as I mentioned, I’m a little uneasy about this group of well-known child welfare academics associating themselves with the American Enterprise Institute. This is not because the American Enterprise Institute doesn’t have a valid place in the conversation. We may or may not agree with their analysis of whose fault it is that the economy is heading towards a recession, or why environmental regulations have gone too far. But it’s worth reading these points of view because sometimes they bring up facts or arguments that we otherwise wouldn’t consider.

The concern of course is that writing for a conservative think tank may give people a reason to discount this article and its authors as being biased and politically motivated. I don’t know the political viewpoints of these writers but the articles and papers by them that I have read are very academic, data-based, unbiased, and don’t appear to be promoting any particular political ideology. As we have referenced in other podcasts, some of the more well-known authors have contributed extensively to the literature on racial disparities in the system. This includes Emily Putnam-Hornstein who was the chief author of the 2012 article [“Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services](#) that demonstrated racial disparities in the system are primarily due to risk factors , particularly

poverty, not to racial bias on the part of caseworkers. I put a link to this in the podcast's narrative. Brett Drake was a co-author of the article on "Research to Consider While Effectively Re-Designing Child Welfare Services", which challenged a number of assumptions made by abolitionists including that foster care harms children, his point being that it's the trauma the children experience before they get into foster care that is primarily responsible for their later difficulties in life.

Other cosigners of the article include Elizabeth Bartholet, a Harvard Law school professor who started the child welfare Institute there, and Marie Cohen who is the founder and author of the blog Child Welfare Monitor. So these are serious people who have done excellent work and want to make sure that their voices are not discounted. In that regard, we should read the AEI's publications without prejudice, we should read this article on "What Child Welfare Is For" on its own merits.

As an aside, I think it's interesting that after the four lead authors the other individuals are identified as "cosigners". This makes it sound a bit like a manifesto, reminiscent of for example the Port Huron Statement from the old SDS days. I'm wondering if that was the intent of using the term cosigner, that is, to present this as a moral statement, an ethical stance that this is a hill they are ready to die on.

Back to the purpose of this article. These authors have articulated similar viewpoints elsewhere, and their intent is to challenge the claims of those who want to abolish child welfare system. They state that the abolitionists have three major points. First is that Black children are overrepresented in CPS. That is just a statistical reality and it's not something that can be challenged. Secondly, that CPS harms children and thus disproportionately harms Black children. The idea of the child protection harms children is not self-evident, and the authors make the claim that there is really no evidence to support this. In fact they reference evidence, although they don't go into much detail about it, that child welfare correctly implemented in fact does protect children from harm. And thirdly the authors challenge the assumption that if we expand social safety nets and prevention programs we won't need child protection services. To this they first make the analogy of auto accidents. We require the use of seatbelts as a prevention strategy but we still need ambulances sometimes for car wrecks. They also say that there is limited information about the impact of prevention services on child maltreatment. We do know from the literature on Alternative Response programs that the uptake of services by

families who are in the system voluntarily is quite low. Parents are happy to take concrete services such as help with financial difficulties, but seldom volunteer to address the root problems of child maltreatment when it comes to drug abuse or mental health issues. So preventive services may not actually be used unless child protection and the courts are requiring parents to do so.

In some respects it is odd for Safe Passage to be on the side of defending child welfare system. We are usually near the front of the line in criticizing child protection and foster care, particularly for its emphasis on family preservation at the expense of child safety, but also for its lack of standards, the virtual absence of meaningful quality programs and so forth. We especially have concerns about putting so much pressure on social workers to keep families intact and to respect parents' rights that children are left in situations for long periods of time where their bodies receive insult after insult until their developmental skills have been truncated and trauma has compromised the chances for a normal life.

Another issue that the article addresses is the analysis by abolitionists that poverty and neglect are mistaken for one another or are virtually interchangeable. Neglect is not poverty. Every year in the federal child maltreatment report, the portion of child deaths from maltreatment due to neglect is right around 70%. So, neglect is deadly. It is not necessarily something that can be fixed by filling up the refrigerator. Neglect includes things like leaving children alone for long periods while the parent is seeking drugs, or leaving children with sketchy characters who sexually assault them, or leaving them in harm's way such as being outside without supervision or in a bathtub by themselves. This is such a basic point that it's hard to figure out where to get a handle on the conversation to persuade abolitionists that neglect is not just a result of caseworkers not understanding cultures that aren't white, or the systemic racism that leads to poverty. Poverty contributes strongly to child maltreatment but it's important to separate out the dangerous levels of child neglect from the impact that poverty has on people.

In an unusual closing statement the authors say that it is morally wrong to make massive changes in the system without thoroughly analyzing the potential impact and basing the moves on empirical data. Normally academic authors are very careful not to make value statements. I think this shows the degree to which they are concerned about the movement to abolish the system.

We agree with these authors that abolishing the system and leaving children defend for themselves in some sort of Hobbesian jungle is not the answer.

It will be interesting to see how far the movement to abolish child welfare gets. It seems logical that it may go in a similar direction as the movement to abolish the police, it will receive pushback from the middle to fix child protection not eliminate it. In the meantime, perhaps the biggest single problem with the abolitionist movement is that it detracts time and energy and ink from the efforts needed to actually improve the system and give children a better shot at life.

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